

## Seeing Through the Hays

Several weeks ago Triabooger Steve Hays attempt to respond to my blog [Jason and the Halluci-Nots](#), in which I voiced some criticism of various efforts on the part of Steve and his fellow Triaboogers to dismiss the hallucination theory. I was not surprised with the overall "you're so stupid" tenor of their responses, as this is a hallmark of a worldview mired in its own perpetual self-defeat. What surprised me was the extent to which Christians get their own bible wrong. In addition, it was amusing to see how rashly the Triaboogers assume that I was writing to defend the hallucination theory as such, when in fact I had pointed out in my initial paragraph that I am not an advocate of the hallucination theory. Apparently the Triaboogers have a habit of reading things that were not written as they scurry to dogpile their critics.

So let's jump in and see just how strong a response Mr. Hays can offer.

I wrote:

Naturally the apologist does not want it to be considered subjective, but in the cartoon universe of theism, everything is ultimately subjective anyway.

Steve responded:

I haven't see any cartoons since I was a little boy. So, to judge by his standard of comparison, Dawson must either be a precocious four-year old or a retarded adult.

Here Steve seems to have picked up the bad habit, gratuitously [modeled in the writings of J.P. Holding](#), of slandering Christianity's critics by smearing them as sufferers of a mental disability. Perhaps this is an expression of Christian charity. At any rate, Steve can learn more about the cartoon universe premise of the Christian worldview [here](#). The point behind my identification of Christianity's commitment to the cartoon universe premise, is that a cartoon and its illustrator, the cartoonist, are more fitting analogues to the relationship between creature and creator, than are Paul's pot and potter of Romans 9:21. Christians should see this as an improvement on Paul's own analogy, for back in Paul's day there were no cartoons like we have today. The art of graphic animation allows creators to go well beyond the constraints they face in nature, just as the miracle-working Jesus of the gospel narratives does. The improvement over Paul's analogy in Romans 9:21 is illustrated quite vividly by the fact that a potter cannot make chrysanthemums which recite 16th century Chinese poetry, while a cartoonist can. And what Christian would say that his god cannot create flowers which speak human language? What Christian would say that a mortal, fallible and non-omnipotent human being can do something that the Christian god cannot do? All that apologists can offer in response to this are superficial excuses and, ultimately, insults which exploit actual disabilities. And yet, the analogy remains impervious to such resentment and hostility.

I wrote:

Steve may say to me that, since I am persuaded that, like the gospels, Acts is more legend than history in the first place, that I therefore cannot rely on Acts 26:19 to support the visionary proposal. But if Acts is more legend than history, then the stories of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus are brought into serious doubt anyway.

In response to this, Steve asserted:

This is a dilemma for Dawson, not for me.

Correction: it's not a dilemma for me because a) I'm not arguing to defend the hallucination theory (as I made clear already), and b) I do not accept the claim that the portraits found either in Acts or in the gospels are historical. There's only a dilemma here if one chooses to take these documents as actual histories and hopes to defend them against the contention that hallucinations played a role in their development. Since I do neither, there's no dilemma for me. As I have pointed out so many times in the past, these are not my problems. Ultimately, they're the Christians problems, for he wants to take the New Testament documents as actual histories, and they have a really tough time conclusively ruling out the possibility that hallucination played a part in their development.

I wrote:

As Earl Doherty points out in response to Gary Habermas' statements to Lee Strobel on page 234 of *The Case for*

*Christ*, we actually have in the New Testament "a wealth of invention" (Doherty) where Habermas chooses to see "a wealth of sightings of Jesus."

Each writer sat down to provide 'proofs' of Jesus' rising in the flesh," explains Doherty, "and they all quite naturally come up with anecdotes of their own, which best explains their incompatible variety. (*Challenging the Verdict: A Cross-Examination of Lee Strobel's "The Case for Christ,"* pp. 203-204.)

Steve responded:

All he's done here is to give us Doherty's opinion. No supporting argument or corroborating evidence is brought forward to substantiate this claim.

Of course, Steve's assertion that "no supporting argument or corroborating evidence is brought forward to substantiate this claim" overlooks the fact that the quote I cited was taken from an entire book which critically examines claims in defense of the literalist Christian view of the New Testament. The source I quoted is packed with arguments and rebuttals to Christian 'scholars'. But Steve's concern here is not to take those seriously, but rather to defuse any criticism without actually engaging it or showing it to be wrong. I suppose that, if one has nothing more intelligent to say in response to points that are made, the apologist can always pull out the canned rejoinder that a contrary position is just someone's 'opinion'. Of course, anyone can do this as it is the easiest route to take. Should we say of the New Testament that it's just the opinion of a band of primitive mystics? Christians typically want us to take the stories of Jesus' post-resurrection sightings as more than mere opinion.

I wrote:

Anxious to dispel the subjective implications of phrases such as "heavenly vision" used by Acts to describe Paul's sighting of Jesus, Steve exclaims...

Steve responded:

This is a prejudicial and tendentious characterization of the phrase. It's "heavenly" because Jesus ascended to heaven. So, in order for him to appear to Paul on earth, he must leave heaven. That would actually imply the objective character of the "vision." Likewise, the Greek word doesn't carry any specialized sense of a "subjective" vision as over against an "objective" vision. We could easily use another synonym, like "sighting."

Steve responds to my pointing out of Acts' own use of 'heavenly vision' and the subjective implications such a phrase conveys as "a prejudicial and tendentious characterization," only to offer his own prejudicial and tendentious characterization of the same. The reasoning Steve offers here does nothing to overcome the subjective implications I pointed out, for nothing he says undoes what Acts itself says. The reasoning he offers here is that the 'vision' Paul is made to talk about in Acts 26:19 is 'heavenly' because Jesus had already gone up ("ascended") to heaven, and had to "leave heaven" in order "to appear to Paul on earth." Of course, if Jesus were physical, this is the kind of interpretation one might apply here. But heaven is typically characterized as non-physical in the first place (otherwise we could ask Christians to explain where it is located physically), and whether the Jesus that Paul saw was physical or something else is precisely what is in question, so it is unhelpful. Besides, Paul is said, according to Acts, to have seen "a light from heaven," not a person. So in order to undo the subjective implications of Acts 26:19, Steve has to ignore what Acts 9:3 and 22:6 say. Steve's butchering of the accounts in Acts 9 and 22 is, in turn, then used to downplay any subjective implications of the term 'vision', which, according to Steve, are not implied by the Greek and therefore the term is compatible with "an 'objective' vision," more along the lines of a 'sighting'. The Greek word translated as 'vision' in Acts 26:19 is 'optasia', for which Thayer's, according to the [Blue Letter Bible](#) offers two definitions:

- the act of exhibiting oneself to view
- a sight, a vision, an appearance presented to one whether asleep or awake

To determine the best meaning here, we would have to look at the event that the author of Acts had in mind. Acts gives two accounts of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, in chapters 9 and 22. In neither account is Paul said to have seen a person. This is significant because a 'sighting' which carried the connotation of "an 'objective' sighting" would presumably be one in which an actual person were seen, whereas in Acts' two accounts of Paul encountering Jesus, no appearance of a person is indicated. Both Acts 9:3 and 22:6 speak of a "light from heaven" (apparently heaven has flood lamps that can reach the earth), and Acts 9:7 specifically says that Paul's companions saw "no man," which suggests that the fullness of Paul's experience was private, not public, thereby lending more weight to a subjective experience on the part of Paul rather than an objective event which anyone present would have perceived the same thing. According to the story, Paul was overcome by a light from overhead and heard a

voice. (I wonder if Marshall Applewhite saw a light and heard a voice in his near-death experience.) Nothing in either account of Paul's encounter with Jesus offers any substance that can be used to rule out a subjective vision, and only by "a prejudicial and tendentious characterization" - such as one motivated by the concern to protect a confessional investment - can one suppose that "an 'objective' vision" is intended in Acts. Apologists want to give weight to the view that Jesus' appearance to Paul was "a public event," but even this is not unambiguously indicated in Acts' two accounts. For although Acts has Paul accompanied by an unspecified number of unnamed fellow-travelers, neither account suggests that any of them were converted by the experience, and the two accounts give conflicting information about what they would have witnessed. Consider:

**Acts 9:7** And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man.

**Acts 22:9** And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me.

Both accounts have Paul being overcome by "a light shown from heaven" and hearing a voice. But the two accounts conflict on whether Paul's traveling companions heard a voice. I've seen attempts to harmonize these passages, but they've always impressed me as rather desperate and incongruous with each other. Moreover, apologists sometimes attempt to use the statement that Paul's traveling companions saw "no man" as implying that Paul was conversing with a man, but neither account makes this claim. Others will say that Paul's men seeing a light indicates what Steve has called "an 'objective' vision", but this in itself is not sufficient to suppose that Paul's companions shared in Paul's own experience, which is what we would expect to be the case if in fact Paul's vision had an objective (in this case, publicly verifiable) basis. Going by Acts' accounts, it is incumbent upon apologists who want to view this as "an 'objective' vision" for Paul to support this interpretation somehow, preferably without interpolating extraneous material into the accounts in question. But since the accounts we have in the New Testament are so barren of detail, it seems at best that the question will only remain open, even though the accounts themselves, in my view, lean far more heavily to a private experience which resulted in only Paul's conversion, not the conversion of Paul's companions (for surely this would have been mentioned if the author of Luke thought Paul's companions were converted as well). In fact, it seems that Acts gives Paul traveling companions specifically to ward off the charge that he was hallucinating. As such, it turns out to be rather clumsy since even Paul's companions are not converted by the experience.

I asked:

But does Paul ever distinguish between the nature of his sighting of Jesus and the sighting of Jesus he says these others enjoyed?

Steve responded:

As I said before, he describes his encounter as a public event.

Then we should find some other witnesses to corroborate the claim. But the source which gives details about what allegedly happened comes to us at best as a secondhand story, conflicts with itself, and is not corroborated by other sources. The story in Acts reads as an attempt by an author who had learned a tradition of Paul's aggrandized conversion tale, either adding details himself or including details which the tradition itself, told over and over in preceding decades, had acquired, resulting in legend, not accurate history. The woman that I mentioned in [Jason and the Halluci-Nots](#), who took the stand in defense of her husband and testified that a vampire had killed the murder victim, also claimed that this was a public event. Thus the mere claim that some fantastical event was public, is not sufficient to make it true. Meanwhile, the possibility of invention and fabrication is not ruled out in any convincing way.

I wrote:

On the contrary, it remains ambiguous and unspecified, thus allowing believers to uncritically read gospel details into what they read in Paul.

Steve wrote:

i) Again, if true, this undercuts Dagood.

Unless [Dagoods](#) is a Christian, it's unlikely that he's confessionally invested in one outcome as opposed to another on this issue. The same is the case with myself. If the preponderance of the evidence points toward the supposition that Paul believed that he encountered Christ as a heavenly light while believing that those mentioned in I Cor. 15

saw Jesus as a human-like figure, so be it. My question above - "does Paul ever distinguish between the nature of his sighting of Jesus and the sighting of Jesus he says these others enjoyed?" - is intended to bring our attention to what Paul does and does not say in terms of the details of what he and the others allegedly saw. All that Steve can say is that Paul "describes his encounter as a public event." But where and how does Paul describe his encounter with Jesus as a "public event"? I Cor. 15:8 has Paul say "last of all he was seen of me also," which suggests a private viewing. It certainly does not indicate a public event. At any rate, the other encounters that are listed in I Cor. 15 appear to be more or less public, but incontestably come to us secondhand and with no informative detail. So did the 500 mentioned in I Cor. 15:6 see a "light from heaven" and "hear a voice"? Or, did they see a man walking around in a manner like other men? Paul does not say.

Steve wrote:

ii) In addition, the reasoning is reversible. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that this is what Christians do, dubitantes do the exact same thing, only in reverse order. They (mis-) interpret Paul as reducing the Resurrection to a spiritual (i.e. ethereal body), and classify his Damascus Road encounter as a subjective vision, then they uncritically read the "Pauline" details back into Luke and John.

I don't think I've ever seen a critic of the New Testament propose that the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus found in the gospels were intended to be taken as subjective or vision-like encounters, as suggested by Paul of his encounter with Jesus. I don't think an apparition, for instance, would need the stone in front of the tomb to be rolled away in order for those outside the tomb to be confronted by it. On the contrary, the post-resurrection scenes in the gospels seem to have been written, in spite of their conflicting accounts, for the express purpose of giving 'proof' of a physical resurrection. Of course, this would not have been necessary had the vision and hallucination hypotheses had at least some measure of backing in the epistolary traditions which predated the gospels. What's interesting, however, is that many thinkers, including even many Christian apologists, think that the passage about the appearances in I Cor. 15 is a creed that Paul was repeating. And though this seems to contradict what Paul himself tells us, this view is offered by Craig Blomberg who calls vs. 3-7 a "most important *creed* in terms of the historical Jesus," and claims that

Paul uses technical language to indicate he was passing along an *oral tradition* in relatively fixed form... If the Crucifixion was as early as A.D. 30, Paul's conversion was about 32. Immediately Paul was ushered into Damascus... His first meeting with the apostles would have been about 35. At some point along there, Paul was given this *creed*, which had already been formulated and was being used by the early church. (*Strobel, The Case for Christ*, pp. 43-44, emphasis added.)

There are numerous problems with this view, but I'll just focus on two. First of all, if it were the case that Paul was reciting a creed "which had already been formulated and was being used by the early church," then this seriously calls into question whether Paul knew any of the 500 brothers he mentions in vs. 6 personally. This effectually serves to remove Paul's testimony even further from firsthand witness, and thus diminishes any reliability that can be claimed for it all the more. Also, as I mention above, the view that Blomberg gives here is contrary to what Paul himself states. For Paul tells us in Gal. 1:11-12 that "the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ." In I Cor. 15 he begins by declaring that what follows is the gospel as he preached it, thus linking it to the revelation he mentions in Galatians. Paul clearly indicates that the gospel he preaches is not something he learned from other people (as would be the case if he "was given this creed, which had already been formulated and was being used by the early church"), but something that came to him "by the revelation of Jesus Christ," which suggests a direct pipeline to the supernatural source itself. (One wonders how someone who has such access to transmissions from invisible spirits distinguishes those messages from the products of his own imagination...) Furthermore, it should not surprise us that the reasoning that Blomberg and others will give for dating Paul's conversion to A.D. 32 is based at least partly on taking the gospels as historical, which is one of the points in contention. Thus to the extent that the case for such dating relies on taking the gospel narratives as actually historical, it begs the question. Besides, what data can be gleaned from Paul's letters to indicate the date of his conversion? What data can be gleaned from his letters to indicate when he thinks Jesus was crucified? What data can be gleaned from his letters to indicate when Jesus appeared to Peter, James and the 500 brothers? I think these are legitimate questions for Christians to consider, but I'm supposing they'll fetch me more attitude than answers. A final point about the passage in I Cor. 15 is that some scholars suspect that it is a later insertion. See for instance R. M. Price's [Apocryphal Apparitions: 1 Corinthians 15:3-11 As a Post-Pauline Interpolation](#).

I wrote:

Apologists need to understand that, while they want to put the onus on the New Testament's critics, the onus is really on the New Testament itself to shore up the very areas where they claim its critics habitually default.

Steve writes:

No, both sides assume a burden of proof.

I don't think so, in fact, not by a long shot. Disputes such as the one we have been engaging could have been averted had the New Testament been more carefully written. We come to the New Testament as it is - vaguely and ambiguously written throughout much of it, open to wide interpretation and ripe for a broad range of speculation. Indeed, had the New Testament been more carefully written, a lot of the conflicts and schisms that have rippled throughout the history of Christendom could easily have been prevented as well. At any rate, if it is admitted that the New Testament assumes a burden of proof, as Steve does here, a burden which would not be have surfaced in the first place had the New Testament already met it, then what more can be said on its behalf? Paul could have told us the specifics of the appearance-encounters he lists in 1 Cor. 15. But the fact that he leaves these completely unspecified in no way puts a burden on me as a non-believer.

I wrote (quoting Steve):

"The whole point of this chapter is to repeatedly stress the physicality of the glorified body" even though the chapter nowhere uses the word 'physical' (at least not in any of my translations)

Steve responded:

i) So Bethrick is dependent on English translations. He can't read 1 Cor 15 in the original?

Steve speaks too soon on the basis of unexamined assumptions. Perhaps Steve has a translation in some language which actually uses the word 'physical' (or its English equivalent) to refer to what appeared to the 500? I just checked one of my non-English translations of the New Testament, and it did not use a word which translates to the English word 'physical'. But his statement here is most curious. Is he saying that translators of English versions have left out a word that is in the original language of 1 Cor. 15? If so, that's very interesting. Perhaps Steve has missed his calling and should hammer out his own translation since he obviously thinks he can do better than what's already available on the market. Should I wait for it? One commentator had written ([12 May 06](#)):

As a Christian from a mainline Protestant denomination, I hadn't been aware that there are churches that teach that Jesus appeared physically to Paul. Frankly, I'm surprised that anyone could read 1 Corinthians 15:8 as referring to anything other than a vision, given -- as you have shown -- the context of the rest of the New Testament.

This person identifies himself as "a Christian from a mainline Protestant denomination," and yet is surprised to learn that some churches "teach that Jesus appeared physically to Paul." How can "a Christian of a mainline Protestant church" be surprised by this, unless of course the assumption that Jesus paid a physical visit to Paul is read into the NT text by only a portion of today's Christians? At any rate, this is a dispute within Christianity, since as an atheist, I don't put any faith on either side of the debate; I think both are equally fanciful. (I.e., it's not my problem.) I merely point out that what is stated in 1 Cor. 15 is compatible with the view that its author had a visionary as opposed to corporeal experience in mind.

Steve writes:

ii) He is also confusing words with concepts. A concept can be present without a particular word to designate the concept.

I do agree that a concept can be implicit while the word which represents it is not expressly used. But one should be careful in asserting the presence of a concept so implied, especially in matters as nebulous as this. We'll see below, when we get to the comparison of Marian appearances to Acts' accounts of Paul's conversion, that Steve has a tendency to read more into a passage than the passage itself gives, and suggesting that "a concept can be present without a particular word to designate the concept" in question, is not sufficient to justify the interpolation, especially in the context of statements which rule out that concept. Besides, if it is admitted that the word is not there and that the concept is only implied, then what's the issue about being dependent on English translations? Is the concept in question equally implied across translations and languages? How would one show this? And what specifically in the text implies the concept which is not explicitly employed?

Steve writes:

1 Cor 15 has been extensively exegeted by the likes of Thiselton and Wright. It isn't necessary for an apologist to reinvent the wheel each time.

No doubt, one can cite the opinion of many who affirm that Paul intended the appearances listed in I Cor. 15 to be physical. Steve's statement here, however, in fact underscores my point: if it requires piles of exegesis to massage the meaning of the passage to confirm the gospels, then it is performatively conceded that the passage in question does not do this on its own, and thus may actually not be what its author intended after all. Hence the need for it to be "extensively exegeted." Recall that, according to Acts 9:3, Paul only saw "a light from heaven," not a physical being with head, face, arms, legs, etc. So if one portion of the NT text says that Paul saw a physical person on the road to Damascus, this would seem to contradict the accounts of this story we find in Acts.

I wrote:

Not to mention the fact that this position needs to be reconciled with what we read in I Peter 3:18, which speaks of Jesus as "being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit." It is hard to read this statement as coming from one of Jesus' own disciples who, according to the gospels, met face to face with a physically resurrected Jesus.

Steve responded:

If he spent anytime with the standard commentaries he'd see that this verse has reference to the fact that the corpse of Christ was reanimated by the Holy Spirit. It refers to the agent of the Resurrection, not the composition of the body.

If this is what the author of I Peter meant by this statement, why would we need to go to "the standard commentaries" to find this out? Though it may be entertaining, I'm not interested per se in what confessionally invested commentators opine; I am more interested in looking at what the bible actually says than in counting all the ways that apologists can twist a verse to make it seem harmonious with other passages. With a measure of ingenuity, some translations could be interpreted according to what Steve contends here, namely that the resurrection body is also physical. But other translations resist this. For instance, the New Living Translation renders 3:18 "He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life in the Spirit" which indicates a contrast between the physicality of Jesus' death and the spirituality of his resurrection. Similarly other translations of this verse clearly indicate a specific contrast between "the flesh" on the one hand (associated with Jesus' death), and "the spirit" on the other (associated with Jesus' resurrection). There is nothing in the passage which stipulates that the resurrection was physical. In fact, the passage by its very intention seems to indicate otherwise. This explains why the piles of exegesis to which Steve alludes are needed to tilt the passage in the direction of the gospels, with which the author seems entirely unfamiliar (see my blog [Did the Author of I Peter See the Risen Jesus of the Gospels?](#)).

I wrote:

Steve may counter that Paul spoke of Jesus having been resurrected in the flesh, but Paul himself indicates that there are different kinds of flesh, that "all flesh is not the same flesh" (I Cor. 15:39), which leaves open the possibility that Paul may have reserved the use of the term 'flesh' in some circumstances to refer to some spiritual, non-physical "substance" which is to be distinguished from the tissue, bone and organs of living organisms. So this is at best inconclusive.

Steve wrote:

i) And the examples given by Paul are all of material entities.

When speaking of natural bodies, yes. But Paul also has in mind what he calls a "spiritual body" (I Cor. 15:44). There probably are no examples of "spiritual bodies" other than "spiritual bodies," so I wouldn't expect Paul to list any here. Besides, I Cor. 15:44 makes it pretty clear what Paul is teaching: "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a *spiritual* body. There is a natural body, and there is a *spiritual* body." On this Wells points out:

Finally, [Paul] responds to the question "with what manner of body" the dead will be raised, and answers: as "spiritual", not as "natural" bodies: "We shall bear the image of the heavenly" (verses 44-49). But he does not appeal to Jesus's authoritative ruling: "When they shall rise from the dead, they ... are as angels in heaven" (Mk. 12:25). Instead he, characteristically, quotes the OT in support, and relies also on a few spurious analogies, saying, for instance: a perishable human body is duly buried like a seed, and just as the seed will be "raised" as a plan, so the body will be raised as imperishable. (*The Jesus Myth*, p. 61.)

Of course, it seems odd for Paul to say "we shall bear the image of the heavenly," as this suggests that at the present time we do not bear this image. Paul says in I Cor. 15:49 "we have borne the image of the earthy." But Genesis 1:27 says that we were created in the image of God, not in the image of something "earthy." Is not God heavenly?

Steve wrote:

ii) Moreover, Paul is not saying that one kind of flesh is another kind of flesh. Just the opposite.

No one that I know of is saying that Paul meant, for instance, that fish flesh is also mosquito flesh. So he's pretty safe here.

Steve wrote:

He merely draws our attention to both the continuities and discontinuities between the mortal body and the glorified body—the chief of which being that the glorified body is immortal.

And along with this, he is stressing that the mortal body is a natural body, and the immortal body is a spiritual body. Paul is clearly emphasizing the contrasting natures of the mortal vs. immortal bodies, the mortal being a natural body, the immortal being a spiritual body. I don't see where it says that the spiritual body is physical. Craig thinks physicality is entailed in the use of the term 'soma'. If it is, it is quite ambiguous to say the least. Couldn't Paul have been a little more explicit? I quoted above the Christian who claims to have never encountered the view that Paul meant physical body. So perhaps after all, the concept implicit here is "non-physical" and not "physical."

I wrote:

Moreover, Paul insists that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 15:50), which suggests that the physical bodies we have are not analogous to the resurrected bodies that believers should expect to awaken in once they are resurrected.

Steve responded:

This is an oft-refuted canard. Only someone wholly ignorant of the exegetical and apologetic literature would continue to exhume this objection.

So, contrary to what is written in I Cor. 15:50, flesh and blood can inherit the kingdom of God? At any rate, it seems that if the New Testament clearly stated its teachings, recourse to exegetical and apologetic literature intended to massage the text in preference for literalist Christianity would not be necessary. There are, no doubt, many cheap apologetic paperbacks preoccupied expressly with harmonizing these accounts with each other. Perhaps the Triaboogers have found them convincing.

Steve wrote:

Paul is merely using a Hebraic idiom to express the fact that morality cannot inherit immortality.

Did he mean to write 'mortality' here? Or is this a Freudian admission?

I wrote:

All these issues point to just some of the many serious ambiguities that plague the New Testament record, thus inviting endless contests between conflicting interpretations and wide-ranging speculations. (I'm glad these aren't my problems.)

Steve wrote:

They're only ambiguous if, like Bethrick, you don't know NT Greek or basic linguistics or the standard exegetical literature.

It is often not long until apologists who are impressed with themselves pull out the 'does this fellow know Greek?' card, as if all the 'secrets of scripture' could be opened with the turn of such a key. However, I'd say the preponderance of the evidence would not be to fault me for such shortcomings, if indeed one could call lack of knowledge of NT Greek a shortcoming. I suppose what Steve is saying here is that, if I learn to read the New Testament in Greek (quotations from the Septuagint which distort the OT originals notwithstanding), I'll magically "see the light" and be similarly persuaded. Unfortunately, this is unlikely. On the contrary, this is simply another cheap dodge that apologists have learned to unpocket in order to put an end to discussion. Regardless, the ambiguities which I've touched on have run deep throughout the history of Christendom, and have lead to a wellspring of schisms and internal disputes which have never been so out of control as they are today. And the situation continues to get

worse literally by the day as new interpretations are put forward and new denominations spring up after them. As I said, I'm glad these aren't my problems.

I wrote:

To be sure, there have been many efforts over the centuries to codify an authorized interpretation, but this endeavor is about as effective as trying to harvest wheat on the dark side of the moon; and no matter how much effort is applied to this ambition, the early record is still what it is: laden with incompatible variances and unyielding ambiguities.

Steve wrote:

This is a backhanded admission of defeat on Dawson's part. He attempts a preemptory dismissal of the existing answers to his objections without bothering to actually argue them down. Not a one.

How is noting that the NT record is full of internal problems an "admission of defeat"? If a set of records contains incompatible variances and unyielding ambiguities (none of which either Steve or any of his cronies on Triablogue have been able to wipe away), then what reasonable answers are possible? And if it's established that the set of records in question are full of such problems, why would anyone have to 'bother' to "argue them down"? At some point one can reasonably come to a stopping point and realize that the patient has expired, and no further effort will bring it back to life. The promise that the patient will be resurrected to live another day, eventually wears out.

I wrote:

Concerning reported sightings of the Virgin Mary, Steve hedges when considering the question "Do we reject Marian sightings?" giving no firm answer one way or another.

Steve responded:

"Hedging" is another prejudicial and tendentious characterization. I don't go beyond the evidence I have. That's a rational precaution.

What evidence would Steve provide to secure, for instance, the assumption that the Jesus that Paul's 500 brothers allegedly saw, was a physical Jesus rather than a spiritual Jesus (e.g., "a light from heaven" a la Acts 9:3 or a "heavenly vision" a la Acts. 26:19)? Remember: you're not supposed to "go beyond the evidence" here. The literalist view is that the accounts of Paul's conversion in Acts are legitimately historical. According to those accounts Paul saw "a light" (9:3, 22:6, 26:13); neither account says he saw a man. In I Cor. 15:6 where Paul writes of Jesus appearing to "above five hundred brethren at once," does Paul indicate that those anonymous persons saw something different than what Paul himself is said by Acts to have seen?

I wrote:

I agree: some reports are more credible than others, and some reporters are more credible than others. But here we might inquire as to what criteria Steve consults in determining whether a report is "more credible than others," or in determining when one reporter is "more credible than others." Obviously the writers of the New Testament meet his criteria, while what he has written strongly suggests that his contemporaries (or near contemporaries) who have claimed to have been visited by the Virgin Mary, do not meet his criteria. What are those criteria? Heaven knows! But he does give some indication here:

Steve wrote:

He devotes several sentences to the claim that I offer no criteria, only to admit, in the concluding sentence, that I do. Apparently, Bethrick doesn't know where he's going. He sits down at his keyboard and starts writing and keeps on writing without thinking through what he's going to say before he says it.

Not so fast. As you see, I nowhere say that Steve "offers no criteria"; in fact, I make it quite clear that Steve "does give some indication" of what his criteria are, and the criteria that he does list is put to the test. Does Steve list out all his criteria? Not that I am aware of. As I went through what he did say, it was clear that there was something still serving to guide his determination of the legitimacy of claimed appearances by the Virgin Mary, which he did not make clear. Hence my statement above.

I wrote:



If it is valid to ask how those who claim to have experienced a visit from the Virgin Mary "know what Mary looks like," we should also ask: How did Saul of Tarsus know what Jesus looked like?

Steve responded:

Several problems with this question:

i) It does nothing to validate Marian apparitions.

ii) Even if it were valid, it would do nothing to invalidate Luke or John.

iii) Odds are, Paul did know what Jesus looked like. On a standard chronology of the NT they were probably in Jerusalem at the same time of year. Jesus and Paul were contemporaries. Paul studied in Jerusalem. His sister lived in Jerusalem. Even if he wasn't living in Jerusalem year round, he would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for all the major feast days. And Jesus came to Jerusalem for major feasts days as well. Jerusalem was a small town, centered on the Temple. Jesus was a public speaker and a celebrity. His visits to Jerusalem were centered on the Temple. If Paul was living in Jerusalem at the time, he'd visited the Temple at least daily. If he was in town for a feast day, he'd visit the Temple at least daily. Jesus drew a crowd. Jesus was controversial. It's almost inevitable that Paul would have seen and heard Jesus preach.

iv) This is reinforced by that fact that Paul was involved with the initial persecution of the Jerusalem church.

v) Of course, at the time, Paul thought that Jesus was a Messianic pretender. It took a Christophany to turn him around.

All of these are the wrong answer to the question I posed. For one thing, the question "How did Saul of Tarsus know what Jesus looked like?" is not expected to validate Marian apparitions. (Did Steve really think that's what I was trying to do?) Also, I would not say that the fact that such a question is valid is sufficient to invalidate Luke or John. (Where did he get that?) Moreover, as an apologist for Christianity, Steve should be more on his toes than to let himself be chased through such rabbit trails as to whether or not it was likely that Paul had the opportunity see Jesus while he was alive. (I'll not belabor the fact that the claim that Paul and Jesus were contemporaries begs the question against one of the major points that I've raised, as it should be obvious that an appeal to "a standard chronology of the NT" assumes the gospel narratives as actual histories, which is what has been called into question.)

All of Steve's points intending to tilt the odds in favor of Paul having seen Jesus in Jerusalem before his crucifixion are irrelevant, for face recognition was not the means by which Paul, according to the details given in Acts, would have known that what was appearing to him was Jesus. Remember that according to Acts, Paul encountered "a light from heaven," not a physical figure which had a face to be recognized. The proper answer to the question, "How did Saul of Tarsus know what Jesus looked like?" is not to assess the odds of whether Paul had seen Jesus in Jerusalem, for this misconstrues the tale told in Acts (indeed, Paul's letters never put Jesus in Jerusalem in the first place). Rather, the proper answer, on the view that all the NT documents are historical, would be: Paul didn't need to know what Jesus looked like, and even if he did, it wouldn't have mattered anyway. Since, according to the tale, the "light from heaven" that threw Paul to the ground and blinded him spoke to him and identified itself as Jesus, there was no need for face recognition here. Paul's means of identifying was through the hearing of voices. But I will ask, since it's been proposed, if Paul saw Jesus in Jerusalem before the Easter events, why doesn't Paul ever mention this? If a) Paul had the opportunity to go watch Jesus at public speaking events (even long enough to get a good look at his face) but b) "thought that Jesus was a Messianic pretender," would Paul have taken such an opportunity? Again, we have only speculation here, and since Paul's letters nowhere place his Jesus in Jerusalem, and in fact Paul nowhere suggests that he had seen Jesus before he had been crucified, we can see the development of a legend from apologetic need right before our eyes (and Christians say that it is "unlikely" that the gospel stories are legendary). It all started with the wish to make Paul's conversion seem more "believable." Now we have an 'account' of Paul attending Jesus' speaking engagements in and around Jerusalem, and soon we'll have stories of Paul buying hotdogs and popcorn after waiting in line all morning for tickets.

I wrote:

Steve says that "Jesus was seen by his contemporaries," but this may be read as saying far too much. That one is a contemporary of another, does not indicate that either has seen the other or knows what the other looks like.

Steve responded:

The historical record of Christ contained in the NT consists of either eyewitness observation or eyewitness testimony. That's the point.

And it's the claim to eyewitness observation and testimony that I am examining. It doesn't seem to be holding up very well. Most of the 'eyewitness testimony' found in the early epistolary strata of the New Testament comes to us as secondhand or further removed accounts. Indeed, if I Cor. 15:3-8 is, as many apologists themselves have characterized it, a creed passed down as a tradition predating Paul ([Matt Slick](#) is persuaded that, if I Cor. 15:3-4 is "an extremely early creed of the Christian church," then it is "less likely" that "error and legend would have crept into the story"), what we have is no better than an inestimable series of 'he said-she said-he said' oral transmission finally winding up in a written document. Wells utterly demolishes the claim to eyewitnesses in the early Christian literature in 'The Futile Appeal to Eyewitness Testimony', in his book *Can We Trust the New Testament? Thoughts on the Reliability of Early Christian Testimony*, pp. 58-68.

[As I have pointed out](#), even I Peter, purporting to have been written by one of Jesus' closest disciples (thus making him a prime eyewitness to Jesus' ministry, miracles and post-resurrection appearances), makes no mention of any of the events recorded in the gospels. Such conspicuous silence characterizes the entire early epistolary strata of the New Testament, making the gospels read like later legends which arose as various Christian communities sought to fill in the blanks left wide open by the early letter-writers. Suppose you were a member of the early Corinthian church, for instance, and had only some oral teaching and a letter or two from the traveling missionary named Paul. Wouldn't you be curious about the details of Jesus' life on earth? How would you discover them? Just ask around? In Corinth? Whom would you ask? And suppose someone came along said "I know about Jesus in Jerusalem! Listen to my story!" How would believers know whether the story that they were being told is true or simply a fabrication? Those who were deemed holy and wise could have spun any yarn, and the laity would have no idea whether they were being enlightened or misled. In the church setting, where believers come eager to learn and be nourished on 'the Word', uncritical acceptance of what is taught is encouraged. This is evident in today's churches if nothing else.

Even many believers think that the later apocryphal writings, including several gospels, all sprang up in this manner, by invention, fabrication and posthumous attribution. What would make us suppose that the canonical gospels are any different? Christians can point to little more than "tradition" to link the authorship of the canonical gospels to individuals purported to have been eyewitnesses of Jesus. We should remember that tradition is not history. We have from the days of Paul a traceable course of increasing legend, and at an arbitrary point the later church decided where to draw the line, and the result includes the gospels attributed to Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, but excludes those attributed to Thomas, Peter, Mary, Judas, the Ebionites, the Nazoreans, etc.

Steve wrote:

This assumes, of course, the traditional authorship and dating of the NT documents. Others have made that case, and I've made it myself in other venues, so I needn't repeat myself here.

Again, tradition is not the same thing as history. And if resting on prior argumentation is allowed, then I can do the same. Professor of the New Testament W.G. Kümmel disputes the tradition that names the Jerusalemite John Mark of Acts chapters 12 and 15 as the author of the gospel bearing his name:

The author [of the gospel narrative] obviously has no personal knowledge of Palestinian geography, as the numerous geographical errors show. He writes for Gentile Christians, with sharp polemic against the unbelieving Jews. He does not know that the account of the death of the Baptist (6:17ff.) contradicts Palestinian customs. Could a Jewish Christian from Jerusalem miss the fact that 6:35ff. and 8:1ff. are two variants of the same feeding story? ... What we can learn from the material that lies behind Mark and his composing of it in no way leads us back to eyewitnesses as the chief bearers of the tradition... Mark is probably based on no extensive written sources. ...More likely the evangelist has woven together small collections of individual traditions and detaild bits of tradition into a more or less coherent presentation. (*Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 97, 94, 85; quoted in Wells, op cit. p. 59.)

I wrote:

For instance, both Steve and I are contemporaries, but I would never be able to pick him out from a crowd. Nor would he be able to do the same with me. Today we have cameras which record faithful images of our physical features, such that I could pass my picture to Steve via e-mail, and then he very well might be able to pick me out of a crowd. But cameras were not around in 1st century Palestine, so Jesus' "contemporaries" (an expression which takes the gospels as history) didn't even have this benefit.

Steve wrote:

i) Photography is beneficial if you haven't seen someone for yourself. But that overlooks my point.

No more than his laboring response has overlooked mine.

Steve wrote:

ii) In addition, we will often accept someone else's testimony. The police will have a friend or relative ID a body for them. Or a detective will show the photo of a missing person to various individuals, to see if they recognize the picture. Here a second party takes the word of a witness for purposes of identification.

Yes, it is certainly true that "we will often accept someone else's testimony." But this also indicates that there are times when we would *not* accept someone else's testimony. I would accept my co-worker's testimony that our boss is not in his office because he's in a meeting on another floor, as this does not contradict things that I already know and it is not an unlikely situation that my boss will be in a meeting in another part of the building. But I would not accept my co-worker's testimony if he said that our boss is not in his office because he walked through the wall and outside the building (we're on the 18th floor) and levitated his way to a Starbucks down the street. Perhaps Christians suppose I should accept that kind of testimony without further evidence. Or, perhaps they think I am wrong for not accepting it without proving that it's false.

I wrote:

The 'no one knows what she used to look like' approach is certainly applicable in considering claims involving inanimate objects, such as that the burnt markings on a tortilla are the image of Mary. But a sighting of the Virgin Mary is usually claimed to involve an encounter with the real McCoy, though perhaps only in spirit form, which can enable direct communication, sometimes even dialogue (such as we find in Acts' versions of Paul's firsthand encounter with Jesus). And if the apparition identifies itself as the Virgin Mary (just as whatever it was that appeared to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus allegedly identified itself as Jesus), then there's no need for face recognition based on prior knowledge of "what she used to look like when she was walking the earth two thousand years ago" in the first place. The apparition could very well have introduced itself as the Virgin Mary, and the person experiencing the vision, whether subjective or otherwise, might very well be prone to believing it.

Steve responded:

This line of argument poses a dilemma for Bethrick. If he uses one objection, he can't use another, for they cancel each other out.

I think Steve has, again, missed my point. My point was in response to his intimation that a person claiming a visit by the Virgin Mary wouldn't know that it was the Virgin Mary who was appearing to him on the account of the fact that he had no idea what Mary looked like way back when. As I pointed out above, this is a legitimate concern to raise in response to images on inanimate objects which are said to belong to Mary and the like. But if an apparition is capable of holding a dialogue (like the "light from heaven" that Paul supposedly encountered on the road to Damascus) and identifies itself as the Virgin Mary, then the question "how do you know what Mary looked like?" is pretty much moot. That person who really believes Mary appeared to him and told him that she's in fact the Virgin Mary, will likely admit quite openly that he had no idea what Mary looked like before she appeared to him.

Steve wrote:

i) If it's sufficient for the apparition to identify itself to the eyewitness, then this will suffice for the Damascus Road encounter.

There, he finally gets it! That's my point in regard to Marian apparitions as well. So much for the question "What did Mary look like?"

Steve wrote:

If) If facial recognition is needed, then this will also suffice for the Damascus Road encounter (for reasons given above), but not for Marian apparitions.

My point was that facial recognition is NOT necessary in EITHER the Damascus road encounter OR Marian apparitions in which the apparition communicates to the witness. Steve appears to have gotten caught up in the run-up to my point for nothing. What's more is that facial recognition would only apply *if there was a face to look at*. According to

Acts, Paul only saw a “light from heaven,” *not a figure with a face*. It appears that this detail has slid by Steve.

Steve wrote:

iii) Let us also remember that while the absence of genuine dominical apparitions is a defeater for Christianity, the presence of genuine Marian apparitions is not a defeater for Christianity.

This is so far afield from my point that I again suspect it's been lost on Steve. The point is that Protestants reject claims that their own criteria substantiate far more than they substantiate the New Testament. This is in no way restricted only to sightings of the Virgin Mary.

Steve wrote:

So these are not symmetrical propositions. If Mary did appear to Bernadette or Lucia Santos, that does not falsify the Christian faith.

This is typical for an apologist - so worried about his faith. Steve should know that he's welcome to all the faith he wants. As we've seen, he'll certainly need it if he wants to believe the New Testament.

Steve wrote:

iv) At the same time, the lack of facial recognition is not the only undercutter for Marian apparitions. I mentioned others, which he conveniently ignores.

As I pointed out, if the apparition identifies itself as Mary, then who can challenge this insofar as what the witness believes he or she has seen? In the case of an apparition which identifies itself as Mary, facial recognition is moot either way. Perhaps Steve is just sore that I would put alleged sightings of the Virgin Mary by Catholics on the same par with the stories in the NT. Meanwhile he gets bogged down with something completely irrelevant for both. Throughout all of this, has Steve conclusively shown that Paul knew what Jesus looked like while the latter was allegedly walking around the earth? No. All he's done is point to certain woulda-coulda factors that might be supposed to tilt “the odds” in his favor. What's humorous is that he got caught up in trying to substantiate the odds that Paul would have known what Jesus looked like rather than simply pointing to the dialogue that's recorded in the book of Acts, which I have had to remind him about! My basic point about face recognition was that concern for this is irrelevant if the apparition identifies itself; furthermore, facial recognition would only be possible if there's a face to look at (whereas according to Acts, there was only “a light from heaven!”). Steve seems to have a habit of missing his critics' points as well as the bible's own storyline.

I wrote:

Regardless, Steve makes it clear that he is committed to taking the New Testament - including significantly the gospels - as historically accurate on its say so...How these apologists' belief in the bible amounts to anything better than ‘it's true because I want it to be true,’ is not at all clear.

Steve wrote:

i) To begin with, I, like many other Christians, am an adult converts to the faith. We don't believe it's true because we want it to be true.

The desire to extend one's life beyond his natural lifetime can be extremely seductive if one puts any stock in the idea to begin with, as Christians obviously do. So may the desire to find in the fantasy of make-believe and imagination a fictitious surrogate for earned self-esteem, which is either stifled or snuffed out by the proclivity which mysticism induces in its adherents to assume that another's consciousness is somehow superior to his own, just as we find in the cult of Jesus-worship. If the believer has deceived himself, he might not be allowing himself to be honest on this point. Paul did intimate that every man is a liar, and self-deception seems to be an inherent element of the human condition according to at least some versions of Christianity. At this point, Steve and other apologists have so much invested in the god-belief they've been defending so vigorously that they don't want to be wrong. Steve should know that I understand firsthand what this compulsion to “defend the faith” is like. After all, I did the same in my younger days (though this was well before the internet - back when evangelism was done the old fashioned way: out on the street, face to face). I've grown up since then.

Steve wrote:

a) Many of us did not want to be true.

One might very well not start out with an explicit desire for it to be true, for in the beginning the new convert has not yet invested himself very deeply in Christianity's devotional program. At that time, belief is often motivated by the fear that its teachings are true, or the hope that what it offers (resolution to life's problems, answers to prayers, eternal life, etc.) is real. Christianity dangles many carrots before impressionable converts. Frequently it is a combination of these two factors which compels the new believer to come into the faith (of course, prior conditioning in some form of mysticism always helps). However, after a believer has invested himself in the silliness that Christianity is true, he will come to want it to be true no matter what (for he's got so much riding on it now), which is why believers (especially apologists) try so hard to find ways of making it seem true to themselves. This silliness is taken to new heights when apologists actually think that their apologetic attempts are somehow persuasive to those who simply know better.

Steve wrote:

b) And if wishful thinking were the operative motive, then many of us would have converted at a much earlier age.

I don't know what age Steve may have in mind (indeed, what could be an earlier age than Steve's?), but many embrace Christian teachings at a very early age - take Cornelius Van Til for example. In his dismally unpersuasive [Why I Believe in God](#), Van Til seems to have had it all settled in his mind when he was an impressionable little child who had already been indoctrinated into Christian god-belief and got scared one night when he stayed alone in a barn. He then spent his adult life trying desperately to convince himself that it was all true, just as today's apologists do.

Steve wrote:

ii) Wanting something to be true and believing it to be true are two very different things.

And I don't think I ever intimated otherwise. However, in my dialogue with Christians, I have noticed a strong tendency to blur any distinction they profess exists between themselves and the god they claim to worship, such that their own desires lie in uncanny alignment with those they attribute to their god.

Steve wrote:

I want it to be true that I'll see my dead father again. This doesn't make me believe that I'll be seeing him again. I want it to be true that I have a Swiss bank account with a few billion dollars tucked away for a rainy day. That doesn't make me believe it. I want it to be true that my favorite movie star will show up at my doorstep tomorrow with a marriage proposal. That doesn't make me believe it.

This is simplistic as these examples are certainly not analogous to religious belief, since religious belief deals with invisible spirits as well as confessional investment - the investment of faith. It's pretty hard to do this with actual things for very long. But in the fake environment of religious imagination, it is very possible; in fact, for many people who grant a religion's basic premises, this is most seductive. Look at Islam if you don't want to look at Christianity. When Muslims encourage each other with statements like "Allah be with you!" what in objective reality is going to disconfirm the belief that Allah can be with someone? Sure, Christians can point to differences between their religion and that of the Muslims that they think are important, but that's all part of the package: in the believer's mind, his position is correct, and all others are inferior. I've met Muslims who think the same way. I've met Buddhists who think both Muslims and Christians are off their rockers. Being a former believer gives one quite a perspective on these matters.

Steve wrote:

iii) There are many considerations which evidence the Bible. Part of this is psychological realism. All writing has an autobiographical dimension, even biographical writing. A biographer reveals a good deal about himself in the course of writing about others. That's at the narrator's level. Then there's also the narrative level. Do the figures within the narrative speak and act in a way that's realistic?

Let's see here. "Do the figures within the narrative speak and act in a way that's realistic?" This of course will depend on which portion of which narrative one has in mind and, more importantly, what passes for "realistic." It is where the biblical record is *not* realistic that seems to be the most important when it comes to the dogma of Christian faith beliefs, and yet the least attested ("blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" Jn. 20:29). That Jesus was born in a barn is not important to Christian belief; but that he was born of a *virgin* is. Is being born from a

virgin mother “realistic”? That Jesus walked around and preached is not unique and thus not in and of itself important; but that Jesus performed miracles is important. But it is “realistic”? Is turning water into wine as recorded in the second chapter of the gospel according to John “realistic”? Is Jesus walking on water or calming a storm by commanding it “realistic”? Are the feeding stories (of 4,000 and 5,000) “realistic”? Is the part about the graves opening and an untold number of dead people reanimating and showing themselves to many (Mt. 27:52-53) “realistic”? Is the story of Cleopas and another disciple, both of whom were close to Jesus during his life and recent ministry, not recognizing the risen Jesus because their eyes were “holden” by a magic force such that they should not recognize him (Luke 24) “realistic”? What about the activity of the imagination of the reader? Perhaps if the figures in the narrative speak and act in a way that might seem “realistic” under the circumstances, the reader in his imagination of the scene has an easier time of latching onto to the narrative as a whole, and, as one invests himself more and more into the faith that it is true, he begins to believe it is true. Then, after he’s made this sizeable investment, he no doubt *wants* it to be true; he certainly doesn’t want to be wrong. “A person with a wish to be fulfilled is often on the road to belief.” (John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, p. 37.)

Steve wrote:

This is not something we can quantify, but we have no need of doing so. If you’re a good judge of character, you can size someone up. We are human. So we know what it means to be human. We understand human motives and passions from the inside out.

Well, how should I size up someone who titles his blog “[Hillbilly atheism](#)”? How should I size up someone who claims that an invisible magic being created reality? How should I size up someone who essentially likens the universe to a cartoon? I live in a universe whose objects do not conform to my conscious intentions; I can wish that my mobile phone has better service, but no matter how hard I wish my service will not improve because of my wishing. And yet, I am told to accept a worldview according to which the universe of objects does conform to someone’s wishing, even though this is nowhere demonstrated. Instead of empirical demonstration, I am told to believe it on someone’s say so (or else I’ll get dogpiled). The gospel stories allow today’s believers to say “they believed it, so I am in my rights to believe it as well.” But do they govern their intellect in this manner consistently? I do not deny a believer his right to govern his consciousness as he chooses and sees fit; but does being in one’s rights to believe something, make what is believed true?

Steve wrote:

The capacity to identify with another, to relate to his situation, to sniff out blinding bias or mendacity, is something without which a social life would be impossible.

The NT writers were clearly more concerned with theology than with history. This is evident in the early epistolary strata: Paul, for instance, makes no attempt to fix a date to his Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection; his concern is for its soteriological implications. It is also evident in the later narratives. Matthew takes Mark’s model and elaborates a highly embellished tale on top of it, giving Jesus a virgin birth and adding new effects to the passion (such as an untold number of ‘saints’ rising from the dead, going into the city and appeared to many in 27:52-53). The book of Acts, in its attempt to paint a ‘golden age’ picture of post-passion Christian beginnings, bears the indelible markings of theological composition, with numerous cookie-cutter speeches quoting the Septuagint (Greek translation of the OT) flooring Jerusalem Jews where it distorts the Hebrew text, portrays the remaining disciples as being led around by “the Spirit,” ignores the bitter disputes between Peter and Paul in its attempt to prop up the view that the early Christians were “with one accord,” and even has the Christian message receiving serious attention in high places so as to show that not only is Christianity no hole-and-corner movement, but also unthreatening to the establishment. If Christians want to believe this is historically accurate, I have a bridge for sale.

Steve continued:

iv) If we assume Markan priority, then there’s also the exceedingly conservative use made of him by Matthew and Luke, which shows their highly reliable handling of dominical tradition. This is irrelevant since faithfulness to a tradition does not prove the content of that tradition. And if you’re a Matthean priorist, you can easily adapt the very same argument.

Yes, adding a virgin birth, visitation by traveling noblemen guided by a star, a slaughter of the innocents story complete with an escape to Egypt (as with Moses), an earthquake, a darkness over the land, and an unspecified number of zombies rising out of their graves and appearing to many, are examples of “exceedingly conservative” additions to Mark’s prototype.

Steve wrote:

v) There's also the way in which an account does or does not dovetail with our other sources of information about that time and place—although those sources are subject to the same assessments and adjustments.

How does the claim that there were 500 witnesses of the risen Jesus “dovetail with our other sources of information about that time and place” - when the mentioning of the 500 witnesses doesn't even provide any “information about that time and place”?

I wrote:

But what the witnesses that Paul speaks about in I Cor. 15? For instance, what "biographical material" do we have in the case of the 500 who Paul claims saw the risen Jesus? Even though this is among the earliest post-resurrection sightings of Jesus reported in the New Testament, Paul mentions it only in passing, not even telling us who any of these 500 might have been or where the sighting may have occurred. Apparently this doesn't matter, because the gospel details are read into the accounts we read in Paul's and other early letters, such that "by the time we arrive at the Resurrection, we know a good deal about the character and quality of the reporters." Were I to take so much for granted in my criticism of Christianity, apologists would try to make a field day of me.

Steve replied:

This is a model of confused reasoning:

i) Dawson is the one who's reading into my statement certain things I never said or implied. I made no attempt to correlate the 500 witnesses in 1 Cor 15 with the Gospels. There's a way to do that, but that's hardly germane to my immediate point.

ii) Dawson is also reading into my statement a popular apologetic strategy which begins with 1 Cor 15:5-8, plus a redacted pre-Markan passion narrative. I never used that argument.

iii) As far as Paul's appeal is concerned, the salient point is not whether we are in a position to know who the 500 were, but whether the Corinthians were. Paul is deliberately staking out a claim which would leave himself exposed to falsification if untrue.

Perhaps Steve's confusion here was caused by the missing 'about' in my question above. When Steve says that he "made no attempt to correlate the 500 witnesses in 1 Cor 15 with the Gospels," is he suggesting that questions about the 500 alleged witnesses are off limits? Obviously, the only answer to my question regarding what kind of "biographical material" we have in the case of the 500 whom Paul mentions, is "we don't have any." But notice the shifting criteria in operation here. When there's some information available about the alleged eyewitness, we are told that hints of "blinding bias or mendacity" would be detectable if they were there, suggesting of course that they are not there (which is probably why the evangelists felt the need to make their Jesus a name-caller). But when there's no information about alleged eyewitnesses, we're supposed to take it on the basis of the writer's say so that they in fact were good witnesses through and through. Here faith is at the wheel; critical thinking need not apply. That we do not know anything specific about any of the 500 brethren mentioned by Paul doesn't matter, for "the salient point," we are told, "is not whether we are in a position to know who the 500 were, but whether the Corinthians were." The suggestion here is that members of the Corinthian church were in a position to know anything more about the 500 alleged witnesses, and that they could have followed up with them at any time or at least inquired further. I have already weighed in on this most tiresome set of claims [here](#).

But to pursue this for the moment, we would start by asking what details Paul gave to his Corinthian readers so that they could follow up on his claim to such a mass sighting of Jesus. Remember that this was a *letter*, not a face to face dialogue that Paul was having with the Corinthians. And who would have been present at the letter's reading but those gathered for a *religious* purpose? Since Christianity puts so much emphasis on *belief*, it is more likely that congregants would be more given to gleeful credulity than to questioning and interrogating. Would the Corinthians have assembled a delegation to go somewhere to track down any of the surviving 500 witnesses? Perhaps apologists want to hold such a card in their hand, but it seems quite a stretch if the alleged event would have taken place a decade or two earlier. But even then, what details would they have had to follow up on Paul's claim here? Where would they go? He doesn't give a time or place, and doesn't give any names. He doesn't indicate whether it was day or night, or any detail of the circumstances involved. Based on what they were given, they wouldn't even know where to start. At the very least, they'd have to go back to Paul for more details. And suppose someone did do this.

There's no record that anyone did or did not. There's certainly no record of anyone researching Paul's claims and disconfirming them; apologists can satisfy themselves with this. But there's also no record of anyone researching Paul's claims and confirming them, too (for if there were, Christians wouldn't stop trumpeting this). What we have here is an unattested claim, simple as that.

Steve continued:

iv) Then there's the matter of Paul himself. Is he a credible character?

Someone who has visions, speaks with invisible magic beings, and believes he's going to rise after the grave? Was Marshall Applewhite a "credible character"? We can certainly judge a man by what he claims. If his claims are nonsensical, then he will likely fail the character test. If his claims are sensible, then he has a better chance of passing the grade. So far, I've not seen any Christian give any good reasons why I should consider Paul of the New Testament a credible character, while not doing so in the case of someone like Marshall Applewhite. Instead, what we get from the apologists is the regurgitated garbage that they have swallowed and called tasty and edifying, only to spit and stammer in their tantrums when the more sensible among us call their bluff.

As I had stated in my [blog](#):

A mind inebriated on religious faith has already stepped onto the wild-card grounds of make-believe. Surely if apologists had something more substantial than special pleading and rash dismissals, they'd be screaming it instead of these paltry offerings.

by Dawson Bethrick

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

#### 6 Comments:

[Aaron Kinney](#) said...

Wow. That took awhile to read, but I'm glad I stuck with it, because you really outdid yourself. What a thorough and terrific response.

Well done!

[June 07, 2006 10:34 AM](#)

[openlyatheist](#) said...

I concur. This was well worth an evening's reading. :)

[June 07, 2006 11:26 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

And here I thought only Christians read my blog!

There was another point I want to include here. Steve wants to understand Acts' use of "heavenly vision" (26:19) as confirming the alleged objectivity of Jesus' appearance to Paul. He says that the vision that Acts has Paul speak of is "heavenly" because Jesus ascended to heaven. So, in order for him to appear to Paul on earth, he must leave heaven." But this explanation conflicts with Acts 3:21, which indicates that Jesus "must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets." Had God restored everything by the time Saul made his journey on the road to Damascus, his ministry to the gentiles would have been too late. What we have here is ad hoc apology, asserted without thorough knowledge of what the 'good book' itself says. Besides, as I pointed out in my blog, Acts' account of Paul's encounter with Jesus has him see "a light from heaven," not a *person* from heaven. Instead of strengthening his claim that Paul's vision was 'objective', Steve simply makes his own case all the worse.

Regards,  
Dawson



[June 08, 2006 6:59 PM](#)

[Frank Walton](#) said...

Steve Hays still blew your argument away. Your inability to respond to it cogently proves that.

[June 16, 2006 4:29 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Actually, Frank, if you read Hays' hazy response, you'll see that it is miserably weak. Even you should see his obvious reliance on fallacy. Some examples: "[Bethrick's] an ignoramus," as if this is sufficient to serve as a rebuttal. He writes "Wells is a retired German teacher" and "Kümmel is a student of Bultmann" as if this were sufficient to discredit their points. The resemblance between Hays' "No serious scholar uses Thayer's any more" and "No true Scotsman..." is more than skin-deep; he says that "Only a bantamweight like Bethrick would appeal to Thayer's," when in fact it's the Blue Letter Bible which quotes Thayer's (I guess a nobody like Steve Hays knows better than those folks?). Some of the more humorous points were when Hays quotes a whiny review of Doherty's book from Amazon.com to which Doherty himself responds on his site, and when he offers nothing but that he's insulted in response to the cartoon universe analogy. (In fact, if the cartoon universe analogy is unassailable, that's enough to validate my position.) The list goes on, too numerous to detail given my time priorities. He's going to need more than one-liners and ridicule to overcome the points I've raised, and still Hays nowhere proves that anyone actually saw a resurrected god-man in 1st century Palestine. At most he can appeal to tradition and rely on obfuscation, just as Christians have been doing for 2,000 years. It's not my fault that he's been duped.

You do realize why they call Christianity a 'faith', don't you?

Regards,  
Dawson

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[Steven Carr](#) said...

Is it true that Wright has 'exegeted' 1 Corinthians 15 to show a physical body?

In his 700 plus page book, 'The Resurrection of the Son of God', Wright can't find a little bit of space to once quote in full Paul saying 'The last Adam became a life-giving spirit' Paul calling Jesus 'Adam' here, is obvious typology that we too will share in this second Adam's nature and also become life-giving spirits.

Similarly, Wright just cannot find space to quote 1 Peter 1 writing 'All flesh is grass'. All Wright can manage is a footnote claiming that 1 Peter 1:24-27 is a 'positive passage'. Wright dare not quote 1 Peter saying 'All flesh is grass', let alone 'exegete it'. How can somebody whose world has been supposedly turned upside down by the news that flesh would be made permanent still think that the best metaphor for something temporary and perishable was flesh.

Let us not forget that 2 churches of converted Jesus-worshippers, in Thessalonica and Corinth, believed that the dead were lost, and scoffed at the idea that God would choose to breathe life into a dead corpse. (The Corinthians did not join in baptism for the dead, a sign that they thought there was no reward for the dead)

How can early Jesus-worshippers scoff at the idea of a dead corpse rising? That makes no sense on the standard Christian view, but it makes perfect sense when we realise that Paul wrote 'Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God.'

One wonders why Paul never rubs the noses of these Jesus-worshippers in the fact that their very Lord and Saviour had supposedly spoken on the very subject they scoffed at....

I have more on this at <http://stevencarrwork.blogspot.com/2006/03/resurrection-of-jesus.html>

[June 26, 2006 1:14 PM](#)