

The Imaginative Basis of Vytautas' God-Belief, Part 2

Continued from [Part 1](#).

In regard to the bible, I had written: **It's a storybook. The stories it contains are no more historical than the stories we read in a Harry Potter novel.**

Vytautas responded: "J. K. Rowling does not claim that Harry Potter is real, but the authors of the gospels claim Jesus is real."

I then wrote: **That's irrelevant and misses the point. A storybook is still a storybook, regardless of whether or not its author claims its contents are historical.**

Vytautas then replied: "The point of a storybook is to say that the characters and events are not real. If the author claims that the events are real, then the book is not fiction, since the purpose of fiction is to tell a story that is not real in order to reflect the values of the author."

And then I wrote: **I don't believe she does. But that would be irrelevant. Someone reading it and thinking it's true could claim Harry Potter is a real person. Someone who invests his imagination in what he reads in a Harry Potter novel, and operates, as Christians do, on an epistemology which fails to provide the necessary mental tools needed to distinguish between the actual and the imaginary, the real and the fictitious, could easily succumb to the impression that what he is reading is "historical." All the more if he *wants* it to be true, and even more if he's fallen for various psychological sanctions (which are present in the bible, but absent in the case of Harry Potter books) which manipulate one into being afraid to recognize it's all fiction. It wouldn't be the first time (Christians and Muslims have been doing this for centuries), and it wouldn't be the last time.**

Vytautas: "Show me were people claim what they read in the Harry Potter novel is real."

I don't know any who do. But perhaps there are some who do think what they have read in a Harry Potter novel is true. To the extent that young people reading Harry Potter novels recognize that those novels are fictitious, they are indeed philosophically more mature than adult Christians who think that the stories they read in the bible are true.

Vytautas: "If you cannot, then I do not see the relevance of your claim."

It's very simple. I'll explain it below.

Vytautas: "You posit people that claim the Harry Potter is real, but would it not be better to deal with the truth claims of the New Testament, since the difference is that Harry Potter does not claim to be true, and the New Testament claims to be true."

But the New Testament's claims have been dealt with: its stories are legends, and its philosophy is irrational. Moreover, taking it seriously requires one to ignore the distinction between reality and imagination, as I have pointed out numerous times, and as you are unable to defuse. It's silly to take the bible's stories as if they were truthful, and in fact heartless to boot. Imagine saying to someone who's dying of cancer, "Oh, don't worry. After you die, you'll wake up in paradise. Your life is no big deal, besides, you'll wake up in eternity." But this is essentially what the religious view of the world teaches. And we see this modeled in the gospel stories themselves, when Jesus is made to have a conversation with the two malefactors who were crucified beside him.

Vytautas wrote: "If Harry Potter is either real or fantasy, then that does not say anything if the New Testament

is historical.”

I responded: **It doesn't have to in order for my point to stick.**

Vytautas: “You point is people could claim Harry Potter is true, but they don't, since it is a modern fiction novel.”

My point has several layers to it. For one, it is the content of the Harry Potter novel ([supernaturalism](#)) which decisively puts it in the category of fiction; and similarly it is the content of the bible ([supernaturalism](#)) which decisively puts it in the category of fiction. Also, the reader of a Harry Potter book engages his imagination as he contemplates to understand what he is reading, just as readers of the bible do when they read the bible. Only the readers of the bible deny the fact that what they're reading is fantasy. But the process for both is very much similar. Both require the believer to imagine things that he does not observe in the actual world. We don't observe men walking on unfrozen water, just as we don't observe adolescent boys flying on broomsticks. But as we read the stories and the persons and events they describe, we imagine them, and in our imagination the stories take on a kind of life which we invest in them as we envision what we read.

I asked: **So what are these other criteria which the New Testament has going for it that Harry Potter novels do not have going for them? Is it simply the part about the author of one storybook claiming his storybook is true, while the author of the other acknowledges hers to be fiction?**

Vytautas: “If it is not true that historical works don't have to claim to be true, but that people can write history and think it is fiction at the same time, then that person is not writing history but fiction. The book's claims are the first step to seeing if it is history or fiction. If this is not the first step, then I am not sure where to begin. Our criterions for history should allow for historical works and disallow for fictional works.”

I agree with the point that a “book's claims are the first step in seeing if it is history or fiction.” The bible is full of stories which claim all kinds of supernatural events have taken place. This puts it squarely into the category of fiction, just as the content of a Harry Potter novel puts it into the category of fiction as well. That the bible says its events are true does not make the events it describes factual. Believing it on such frail basis would be utterly silly. But there are a lot of silly adults out there. So I do agree with your point that “our criterions for history should allow for historical works and disallow for fictional works,” except to point out that fictional works produced by a community and held by that community to be actually true (when in fact they are obviously fictional) can indicate for historians what at least some members of that community believed. But their belief in fiction does not make the fiction in question reality.

Vytautas wrote: “When I give a single criterion for history, then that does not mean it is the only criterion for history, but all the criterions work together to give a method for history.”

I responded: **Understood. But you see how weak this one criterion is, don't you? It is so weak that it does not work in concert with others. It would be silly to think it does.**

Vytautas: “You are saying that the criterion of understanding what the book is claiming is incompatible with another criterion.”

It's not a question of compatibility, but of sufficiency to the task at hand. The criterion that you had given was that the fact that the places where the events in question took place were in fact real, e.g., Jerusalem. Your argument at this point seemed to be that, since the places where the events described in the bible are real (and were real at the time), then the stories that the bible purports to have taken place in those real places must have actually happened. This is so weak that it amazes me anyone would put any stock in it.

In response to this, I wrote:

I now write a story about my encounter with a magic leprechaun in my garage. In my story about my encounter with the magic leprechaun I describe what he was wearing, how he climbed on top of my

washing machine and started talking to me about a pot of gold he hid in my neighborhood. Is my story about the leprechaun true because it takes place in a place that is in the real world? Are you going to start looking for this hidden pot of gold now?

My garage is a real place - it actually exists. Does the fact that the setting of my story is a real place, indicate that the story I set in that real place is true? Of course not. Have you acknowledged this? No, you haven't. You still hide in the closet on this, claiming to have other criteria by which the content of the bible can be validated as actual history. What are those criteria? Let's see.

Vytautas: "For example another criterion is that the book gives real times and places. If the book says that it was written 710 A.E. in Enroth, then we would not know when and where these times and places are, and this would be a work of fiction for all we are concerned. The former and latter criterions are compatible, since they do not contradict each other."

I was hoping you were going to divulge another criterion by which the historicity of the bible could be established. It's disappointing that you do not come through on this.

I wrote: How many witnesses are testifying of the event which Paul records in I Cor. 15, which claims that the resurrected Jesus was seen by some 500 or so brethren? How many people have stepped forward to corroborate this event? What are the names of the 500 brethren? Where is their testimony? What exactly did they see? Did they see an apparition? That could be a mass hallucination. Did they see an actual human being? It could be a case of mistaken identification. Did it really even happen? We only have Paul saying in passing that it happened. Was Paul there? He does not claim to have been there. In fact, the way the passage reads as a whole suggests very strongly that Paul himself was not there. Also, if Paul is simply reciting a creedal formulation, as many have suggested, then he's simply repeating hearsay. Robert Price argues quite persuasively that [I Cor. 15:3-11 is an interpolation](#), and is not even authentic to Paul's original letter.

Vytautas: "The citation would be more meaningful to the Corinthians at the church who could ask the 500 witnesses to the event at the time."

For one, this doesn't do us any good. But would it have done the Corinthians that you have in mind any good? I'm persuaded that it wouldn't have. The passage gives no names of any of the 500 brethren to whom it alludes in passing, so how would the Corinthians reading Paul's letter know whom to ask? The passage does not even indicate a time or place of the alleged event. For all we know it could have taken place 20 years earlier in a location 500 miles or more away. So how would a member of the Corinthian church follow up on the claim in Paul's letter about 500 people seeing Jesus? Indeed, what exactly does the passage say they saw? Did they see an actual human being, or did they have an experience like [Canon Michael Cole](#)? The passage gives far too little information for it to be considered reliable in any way.

As for this passage being a creedal formulation that Paul is simply repeating in his letter, this is the position of none other than Christian apologist Craig Blomberg, who tells Lee Strobel on p. 34 of the latter author's book *The Case for Christ*, that "Paul incorporated some creeds, confessions of faith, or hymns from the earliest Christian church" in his letters. On p. 35 Blomberg quotes I Cor. 15:3-7 and then says that "Paul was given this creed, which had already been formulated and was being used in the early church." So if this is true, Paul was not even recounting something he had firsthand knowledge of. He was essentially reciting hearsay, so it is of no value (even if it could be said to be of value given its dearth of detail). But what's interesting is that this position which Blomberg endorses conflicts directly with what Paul himself tells us in Galatians 1:11-12, that he received his gospel, not from men (including other believers), but directly from Jesus. He states:

But I certify you, brethren, 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.

Why does Blomberg want I Cor. 15:3-7 to be an early creed? So that he can claim that Paul was incorporating an early tradition in his letter to the Corinthian church. The rationale here is that the earlier the tradition, the more credible it is as factually historical. But this goes directly against what Paul himself tells us. For Paul, his gospel was not a tradition that he picked up from other believers, such as in the form of early creeds.

Vytautas: "A mass hallucination could not have happened, since a hallucination is an individual experience."

So more than one person cannot have an hallucination? That's interesting. Where is the science to support this? At any rate, I don't see any need to posit a mass hallucination anyway. They could have had what I have come to call a *waking fantasy*, like what [Canon Michael Cole](#) describes, and like what I have observed many individuals in church experiencing when they are at the height of their ecstasy in worship. I have watched a church full of more than 100 persons become ravished with their "experience" of Jesus. Ask every one of them, and they'll tell you that they're experiencing Jesus, feeling him in their lives, "seeing" him next to them. There's no indication in the passage in Paul's letter suggesting that the 500 brethren he mentions experienced anything more than this. I don't think it's hallucination what the churchgoers I've witnessed experienced. It is a self-induced and communally encouraged emotional frenzy which they artificially attribute to their Jesus. In other words, a waking fantasy.

Vytautas: "Paul knew about some the people because he says some have fallen asleep, so that Paul knew that some have died from the group of 500 witnesses."

That Paul tells us that some of the 500 brethren had died is not sufficient to indicate that he actually knew some of them. If he were reporting hearsay (which would be the case if he were merely reciting a creedal formulation, as apologists like Blomberg insist), then Paul would have no firsthand knowledge of anything contained in that report. But let's say Paul did know some of the people he mentions in I Corinthians 15. Then all the more we should ask why he didn't give the Corinthian church any more details. This is one of the earliest reports in the New Testament of a sighting of the post-resurrection Jesus. Why does Paul breeze over it in passing like this, as if it were so insignificant? He never mentions it again in any of his letters, and no other writer mentions it, either. Paul devotes far more attention to matters like marriage and communion dinners than he does to sightings of Jesus.

Again, as I pointed out above, he does not give anything near sufficient information for his Corinthian readers to follow up on his claims; indeed, it is likely that the suggestion of following up on them would be slapped down as too distrusting of a venerated source. Christians then as now are supposed to believe indiscriminately and unquestioningly, to waver not, to doubt not, and accept what they are told by the powers that be without hesitation, even if they don't understand it, even if it seems utterly incredible. That's why you indicate that you have already strayed from the proper Christian mindset in seeking to uncover evidence in support of the biblical record to help establish its claim to truth. The Christian is supposed to treat the bible as "God's word," as if it were coming directly from his god's mouth (supposing it had a mouth in the first place). Does a Christian go up to his god and say, "Well, gee, Lord, what's your evidence for this?" And yet you treat the demand for evidence seriously, even try to satisfy it (although very weakly), and act as if you were convinced by what you propose as evidence. Meanwhile you can produce no evidence to support the claim that what we read in I Corinthians 15 is historically bankable, just as you fail to explain how we can reliably distinguish between what you call "God" and what you may merely be imagining.

Vytautas: "If there are early manuscripts where it contains I Cor. 15, but they are missing verses 3-11, then we would have evidence of interpolation."

Yes, that would be evidence of interpolation. Other things can indicate interpolation as well. Again, see [the Price article](#).

I wrote: That's more than you've offered in response to my challenge. But it's moot anyway: if the gospels are fiction, then we cannot accept the claim that they are "testifying to [actual] historical events of Jesus." It's a storybook, just like Harry Potter.

Vytautas: "John writes that these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

So they're written with a religious agenda in mind, not with actual historical value in mind. But we already knew this. Certainly it does not follow from what John writes that it is truly historical. The bible is clear in its urging readers to *believe* rather than *know*. You can believe all you want. I want to know, and as one pastor once told me, "You know too much." He was right.

Vytautas: "The purpose of the Gospel that John wrote was to record the life of Jesus so that you may believe that they are true. If that was John's purpose, then he has simply failed at it. For here I am, I've studied the

New Testament many times, and I'm less convinced every time I examine it. Vytautas: "In other words, he is saying that these historical events that he wrote about are true. Is this another interpolation?"

There is evidence of interpolation in the gospel of John. For instance, the very last chapter of John has been widely regarded as tacked on by another writer. Burton Mack sums it up quite nicely:

Since chapter 20 provides a clear and appropriate conclusion to the gospel (especially in light of John 20:30-31, which states the purpose for the gospel as a whole), many scholars have noted that chapter 21 must have been tacked on at a later time... This means that the person who added chapter 21 also invented the fiction of authorship for the whole gospel. The author was now understood to be one of the disciples. (*Who Wrote the New Testament?*, p. 218)

But I'm confident that the author of the gospel of John, the latest of the canonical gospels, wanted his community of readers to believe every word he wrote in it. However, just because someone slaps the label "historical" on a fictitious account does not make it genuinely historical.

I wrote: **It would be very easy for someone putting his imaginary story into writing to create characters who "witnessed" the events of the story. If he wanted readers to believe the story was actually historical, he would probably not hesitate to insert characters who are said to have witnessed the events in that story. So if the witnesses themselves are fiction, then they're worthless as witnesses of an actual historical event.**

Vytautas: "It would be easy also to write down an actual historical event as well."

I don't think so. Francois Tremblay makes an excellent point in this regard when [he states](#):

The disadvantage of following reality is that you also need to follow its complexity. Fictional positions are not bound to this restriction.

Fiction is easier than truth, especially when there's an overt religious agenda. By its very nature religion is prone to fantasy, hyperbole, a striving to express superlatives which transcend natural possibilities. So the motive to subvert reality is not only present, but also strong. At any rate, apologists have struggled since Christianity's earliest days to show that their stories about Jesus are historical. Unfortunately, they conflict with each other, are preciously thin on detail (as we saw in the case of Paul's account of early Jesus sightings), and read like fictional inventions (most apparent when comparing the different accounts side by side and noting the pattern of elaboration with each iteration). What we have is a legend that grows with each retelling. When there is little or no concern for actual history, and the guidance of a worldview which blurs the distinction between what is real and what is imaginary, the writing of fiction becomes far easier than the writing of actual historical events. Writing fiction does not require, for instance, the gathering of evidence and interviews with witnesses that reporting of actual historical events requires. To report on actual history requires a lot of effort and a lot of homework, which can't be faked. We find none of this in the storybook of the bible; there is no indication of a carefully methodical effort to ensure historical accuracy. Instead, what we find in the bible is a pervasive attitude of "believe on my say so." If what is recorded is actual history, such an attitude would not be needed; it would simply get in the way and undermine its credibility, just as it does in the case of the bible.

Vytautas: "If some one wants people to believe a historical story, then that person does not write fiction."

He would if he does not know how to distinguish between reality and fiction. I have shown this to be the case with the biblical worldview. From its very foundations, the biblical worldview reverses the orientation between subject and object and blurs the distinction between fact and fantasy.

Vytautas: "If a person wants someone to believe a fiction story as true, then that person would not cite people who you can go talk to in order to tell a story as if it were true, since the witness would not be in agreement with your fiction story."

So whom does Paul cite that his contemporaries could go talk to? He doesn't give one name of the alleged 500 brethren. Not a single detail. How could anyone reading Paul's letter to the Corinthians know who they could "go talk to" in order to verify what Paul wrote?

Vytautas: "Conspiracies seem unlikely, since people have no motive in to believe Jesus rose from the dead if

Jesus did not really rise from the dead.”

If they *believed* Jesus rose from the dead, as they were taught by their elders to believe, they would certainly have the basis for such motivation in place. Though I would suggest that “conspiracy” is too heavy for what went on in the early church. I suspect they were much more innocent than this, that they were simply duped. Much like today’s youngsters who go around handing out tickets for their god.

Vytautas: “If you say money and power was the motive, you must understand that the early Christians were persecuted for their faith.”

Many early Christians were persecuted, but by outsiders. Within the church, however, their leaders held instant sway over their adherents. For some people, especially those who are willing to sacrifice their own integrity, such authoritative power could be intoxicating. And as for the adherents who subordinated themselves to early Christian leadership, they were propagandized into believing they were doing “God’s will,” just as today’s Muslim suicide bombers believe in the context of their religious views. The belief that a supernatural, omnipotent, omniscient and sovereign deity is pleased with a person’s actions and life, can be a powerful aphrodisiac for religious conformity.

I wrote: **So why accept the claim that there are witnesses to the events described in the bible? Who witnessed Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus as recorded in the book of Acts for instance? Paul does not describe his own conversion in the same manner that Acts does in his own letters. So who witnessed this? The author Luke? Was he present then? Would you claim that he was reporting what Paul had told him? Where’s your proof? How do you know that Luke was infallibly reporting firsthand reports, especially when Paul himself, when he takes the opportunity to describe his own conversion, fails to corroborate what we read in Acts?**

Vytautas: “The reason we can trust the Bible is because it is reliable because it depends on God who is truth itself.”

Do you recall what you had stated about numbers? You stated:

Consider the natural numbers. They do not have the property of love, since love requires a will, but the natural numbers do not have a will, since they are not a person.

My response to this was to point out that numbers are conceptual. I stated that numbers “are the form in which we understand the fundamental values of measurement,” and that they “do not possess consciousness.” The fact that numbers do not possess consciousness accounts for the fact that “they do not have the property of love.”

But now you want to say that your god “is truth itself.” But just as numbers are conceptual, and thus do not possess consciousness, truth is a property of concepts, and similarly does not possess consciousness. If concepts themselves do not possess consciousness, why suppose that a property of concepts possesses consciousness? Truth is not an entity which possesses a will of its own. Truth is not even an entity. To assert an invisible magic being, call it “God,” and then equate that being with truth as such, is to confess a most desperate ignorance of the nature of concepts and how the mind works. Indeed, I don’t think you affirm the Christian adage “God.. is truth” because you really think this to be the case, but because “it is written” and, as a Christian, you are supposed to affirm whatever is written in the sacred storybook. It’s all part of the robotic reflex that has been cultivated in your psyche as a result of Christian propagandizing.

Vytautas: “If we need the witness to write about the event themselves in order to for us to accept their witness, then we can only accept first-hand accounts of what actually happened in history.”

If the event in question is something quite fantastic, then I look for the reliability of the witness reporting it. If the person reporting it did not in fact witness the event in question, then it’s quite possible that what he has reported is misinformed, mistaken, garbled, exaggerated, or simply false. If the report is not corroborated by other individuals whom we would expect to corroborate it, that’s another big strike against it. And if the report conflicts with other reports, that’s another big strike. But this is what we find all over in the New Testament - a series of major strike-outs.

Vytautas: “That is, we can only accept the experience of the person writing and not the experience of people that the person writes about.”

If Jane writes about Melissa’s experience of Drodt’l, how do we really know what Melissa actually experienced? If it turns out that Jane wrote about Melissa’s experience decades after the time when Melissa is said to have experienced what she experienced, then how reliable should we assume Jane’s account about Melissa’s experience of Drodt’l to be? And if we have Melissa’s own writings, and in her own writings she fails to corroborate what Jane says she experienced in her writings decades later, how reliable is Jane’s account? I’d say not at all reliable. There are just too many holes in it.

Vytautas: “But the person’s first-hand account of the experience of the people he writes about is only as good as the people he writes about.”

What if it turns out that Jane never even knew Melissa? Perhaps Jane does not even mention a person named Melissa, but simply refers to someone anonymously. For instance, Jane refers to Melissa as “a sister,” where “sister” is supposed to indicate relationship by sorority affiliation rather than by bloodline, familial or biological relationship. Is Jane’s account of this anonymous sister’s experience of Drodt’l still credible at this point? And what if Jane just mentions this event in passing, giving no details about what this anonymous sister supposedly experienced? Again, more holes.

Vytautas: “So if we accept an historical account, then we also accept the persons and events that the historian writes about.”

Note the camouflaged circularity here: to accept the one, you must first accept the other; and to accept the other, you must first accept the one. Meanwhile, where’s the corroboration? Is there any other mention of the 500 brethren that Paul mentions but fails to identify in I Cor. 15?

Vytautas: “The people who witnessed Paul’s conversion were Jesus, Paul, and the men who were traveling with Paul.”

Is this Paul’s conversion as related in the book of Acts? The conversion account which Paul himself, when he mentions his conversion (cf. Galatians 1), nowhere corroborates? So, the author of Acts was surely not there. So where did he get the story if he didn’t make it up? Apologists like to say that he “would have” gotten it from Paul himself. If we had any corroboration of the event from Paul’s own hand, I would say this position might have at least some credibility (though it would not be enough to show that the author of Acts was actually a traveling companion of Paul; many scholars have shown reasons why this is quite unlikely). And it would still be possible for someone who knew Paul personally to exaggerate about what he supposedly experienced. The imagination of the believer is a wild beast that is hard to tame. I know this, I’m a former believer.

But not only does Paul fail to corroborate what Acts says about his conversion, Acts’ account further conflicts with things that Paul does say in his letters. For instance, Acts portrays Paul immediately subordinating himself to the Jerusalem church upon his conversion. But in his letters Paul indicates quite clearly that he operated independently of the Jerusalem church, and didn’t even contact them until three years after his conversion, and even then for only a fortnight. While Acts wants to portray Paul and the Jerusalem apostles as working with one accord (one big happy family of apostles), Paul’s letters shows that there were some major conflicts between him and the Jerusalem elders.

Vytautas: “The purpose of Paul’s letters was not to give another historical account of his conversion experience on the road to Damascus.”

This is a classic post hoc. Since Paul in his own letters does not corroborate the story of his conversion as we find it in the book of Acts, it must be the case that his purpose was not to do so. This approach could be used to explain away any failure to corroborate legendary intrusions. But even this objection misses an important fact: Acts was written well after Paul had written his letters. If Paul describes his conversion in his letters, he would not be giving “another historical account of his conversion experience on the road to Damascus,” for the book of Acts was not yet written. Similarly with the virgin birth: many apologists have told me that Paul was not interested in repeating the account of Jesus’ virgin birth that we find in Matthew, and this is supposed to be taken as sufficient reason for Paul’s silence on the matter. However, this kind of dodge misses the fact that the gospel of Matthew was written well after Paul had written his letters, so if Paul did mention Jesus’ virgin birth, he would not have been “repeating” it. And it seems extremely unlikely that, had Paul known the tradition that

Jesus was born of a virgin, he would have failed to mention it. Paul was eager to tell people about his Jesus, not suppress important details about him.

In fact, Paul's letters are not written with just one purpose in mind. He set out to accomplish many things in a single letter. But one thing that was at the forefront of his mind in each letter, as we can tell by reading them, is that he wanted his readers to believe that he was deliberating on whatever matter he touches in his letters with the authority of Jesus. At many points in his letters he is anxious to establish his credentials as an apostle. Had he had the kind of conversion experience which Acts gives him, he would have not hesitated to cite it, for Acts characterizes Paul as being handpicked by Jesus himself to carry out his missionary work. Indeed, it is because Paul was so determined to establish his apostleship to the budding churches he founded that the silence of this important detail is all the more deafening. It cannot be dismissed by the canned excuse that you give here, that it was not Paul's purpose "to give another historical account of his conversion experience on the road to Damascus." Had Paul told about his conversion experience in his letters, it would have been the first time it was put down in writing. It would not have been a repeat of something that was already circulating in written form.

Besides, if Paul's conversion happened the way it did, what keeps Jesus from appearing to all men in the same manner? I have raised this question in my blog [The Problem of Saul](#). So the apologist hoping to validate Acts' account of Paul's conversion may think he's won the battle, but at that point he loses the war itself.

Vytautas: "The author of Acts is Luke, since if you compare the opening paragraphs to Luke and Acts, then you will note that they are of the same author."

I understand that the author of the gospel of Luke and the author of the book of Acts are most likely the same individual. I'm open to the possibility that the author of these texts did not actually have the name Luke as well, but that a known companion of Paul was later ascribed as the author of both.

While you suggest that I "compare the opening paragraphs to Luke and Acts" in order to "note that they are of the same author," what I have always found most curious is the comparison between the end of the gospel of Luke and the beginning of Acts. In the last chapter of Luke we read how the resurrected Jesus met with his disciples on the day of his rising, and on that same day, after evening, Jesus ascends to heaven (see Lk. 24:51). But according to Acts (1:1-9), Jesus lingers around with his disciples for some forty days, and only after this span of time is he taken up by a cloud into heaven. Apologists like to say that the author, who wrote both Luke and Acts, would not have contradicted himself like this. But if he were writing stories which were to be understood for their allegory and symbolism, this would not be a contradiction in their minds. But today's believers are overcome with hard literalism, and want all this to be historically true. But this forces the contradiction.

Vytautas: "Luke joined up with Paul when he met him at Assos, then sailed to Mitylene (Acts 20:14). So Paul would be the main source for Luke's information."

For specifically which information? For Paul's conversion? Again, why would we expect more detail about Paul's conversion from a text purportedly written by a companion of Paul, than from the hand of Paul himself? And why the many contradictions between Acts and Paul's letters?

I asked: **Who witnessed Jesus' resurrection? It took place in a sealed tomb. You might say that people who knew Jesus saw him after he died on the cross and therefore must have been resurrected. Sounds like a made up story to me, and you've given nothing substantial to counter otherwise.**

Vytautas: "The apostles are some witnesses to Jesus resurrection."

Which apostles were in the tomb where Jesus allegedly came back to life, such that they could be "witnesses to Jesus' resurrection"? And where does any gospel account put any apostles in the sealed tomb with Jesus when he allegedly came back to life? According to the stories themselves, no one witnessed Jesus' resurrection. I defy you to show me where anyone in the canonical gospels is portrayed as having watched Jesus' incarnated body come back to life.

Vytautas: "If the story was made up, then the Jews and the Romans could just point to the tomb with the body

of Jesus in it to show the Jesus did not rise from the dead.”

This response assumes historical reliability of the gospels by supposing that the events they portray up to and including Jesus’ crucifixion are true, which is what you are called to prove in the first place. Thus your objection begs the question. In tandem with this error, it constitutes an argument from ignorance: why suppose that contemporary Jews and Romans did not “point to the tomb with Jesus when he allegedly came back to life”? Perhaps many people did, but their testimony was never recorded, or if it were recorded, it was censored by later Christians.

Vytautas: “If the body was stolen, then the 11 of the 12 original apostles would not have seen Jesus,”

Even if the body were stolen, the eleven remaining apostles could have claimed to have experienced Jesus, just as [Canon Michael Cole](#) claimed, just as hundreds of thousands of Christians today claim. Even in Luke (24:37), the apostles are made to wonder whether or not they saw a spirit when they allegedly interacted with the risen Jesus. Also, the earliest accounts, as I have pointed out, are preciously thin on detail, giving no indication of what exactly the earliest “witnesses” supposedly saw or experienced. Furthermore, a later writer could come along and pen a fictional narrative portraying 11 of the 12 apostles as seeing the resurrected Jesus. Given what he sought to portray, such a writer would be motivated to ignore the fact that the body was stolen. Readers coming along later, not realizing that the body was stolen, might be prone to believing the fictional portrayal they read about the 11 of the 12 apostles. At any rate, I do not argue that Jesus’ body was stolen. Indeed, that would presuppose that Jesus actually existed, and I think there are many very good reasons to suppose that the Jesus we read about in the gospels is a mere legend.

It’s interesting, incidentally, that you specify “11 of the 12 original apostles.” For in I Cor. 15, Paul specifies that Jesus was seen by “the twelve.” This is the only instance in any of his letters where he mentions “the twelve,” and it’s noteworthy that he does so only in passing. Many commentators have tried to explain this nearly complete absence of mention of “the twelve” as being part of a credal formulation which Paul was reciting. But if “the twelve” were an important leading body in the early church, why does Paul mention it only once, and only in passing? Acts likes to portray Paul as having subordinated himself to the Jerusalem elders. Why don’t his letters reflect this? Again, more holes in the holy storybook.

Vytautas: “and the apostle Paul would not hear the voice of Jesus at the Road of Damascus.”

Where does Paul tell us that he heard any voice on the Road to Damascus?

Vytautas: “It sounds made up to say Matthew was on drugs, the witness had mass-hallucinations, or the witnesses of the resurrected Jesus were all mistaken who saw someone look like Jesus.”

Let me get this straight: Stories about a god-man coming to earth, being born of a virgin, receiving baptism from a mere mortal human being, performing miracles and miraculously curing individuals suffering congenital afflictions, being crucified by the Romans and resurrected three days later in a sealed tomb, do *not* sound “made up,” and yet the proposal that the authors of such stories (even though they conflict at many points, and fail to corroborate each other where we would expect them to) may have been under the influence of narcotics which were readily available at the time and often incorporated into religious practice in the areas where these writings are thought to have been written, “sounds made up”?

Vytautas: “Historical accounts are better than possible delusions of the witnesses to the events.”

Historical accounts are quite valuable. I grant this. Nothing I have stated indicates that historical accounts are worthless. But if you assume that the gospels are historical accounts, then you beg the question. It’s your call, Vytautas.

Stay tuned for Part 3!

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [imagination](#), [Invisible Magic Being](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [12:00 PM](#)

4 Comments:

[Craig Blomberg](#) said...

Obviously, I am joining a conversation midstream, but it was surprising to see an evidentialist like me being attacked by someone apparently similarly critical of presuppositionalism!

A couple of corrections. I don't WANT 1 Corinthians 15 to be a creed for any particular reason. It may not be. What's intriguing is that the strongest argument for it being a creed comes from atheist historian Gerd Ludemann, who then argues that resurrection belief cannot have originated any later than a year or two after Jesus' death and probably began earlier!

The tension between Gal 1 and 1 Cor 15 is not limited to those two passages. Paul refers to tradition in 1 Cor. 11 as well, when he quotes teachings of Jesus from the Last Supper in language at times verbally parallel to that of Luke's Gospel before Luke was ever written. In fact there are dozens of places in the epistles where Paul, James and Peter quote or (more commonly) allude to teachings of Jesus before they were ever written down elsewhere. So it is far more than hearsay, it is oral tradition, which in all known ancient Mediterranean cultures exhibited great feats of care in preservation in predominantly oral cultures. What Galatians alludes to is that Paul recognized the gospel was true from his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road and from that could quickly infer the basic doctrines of the faith: Jesus and no one else is Lord, therefore worship him, therefore salvation is by faith in him not by legal works, therefore the end times have broken into human history, therefore God's people are his followers, etc. Paul does not mean that Jesus gave him a catechism on the road teaching him every detail about his earthly life. This would come through all the normal means that everybody else learned about him.

Lee Strobel's works are excellent starting points for novices to the conversations they initiate. But if you want to have an accurate representation and analysis in any depth of the views of the people he quotes, you'll need to go to their actual published works. Otherwise it's too easy to wind up with misrepresentation, mistaken imputation of motives, and simplistic overgeneralizations.

Blessings on your ongoing quest for truth. A little more care and humility in your interaction with those with whom you disagree will stand you in much better stead.

[January 13, 2008 1:18 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Blomberg: "Obviously, I am joining a conversation midstream, but it was surprising to see an evidentialist like me being attacked by someone apparently similarly critical of presuppositionalism!"

Why suppose that you were "being attacked"? I simply quoted your own words in the interest of making your own point, namely that Paul was reciting a creed in I Cor. 15. I don't see how this can be interpreted as an "attack."

Blomberg: "A couple of corrections. I don't WANT 1 Corinthians 15 to be a creed for any particular reason. It may not be. What's intriguing is that the strongest argument for it being a creed comes from atheist historian Gerd Ludemann, who then argues that resurrection belief cannot have originated any later than a year or two after Jesus' death and probably began earlier!"

Is Ludemann's argument why you think I Cor. 15 contains a recitation of a creed? Or, are there other reasons?

Blomberg: "The tension between Gal 1 and 1 Cor 15 is not limited to those two passages. Paul refers to tradition in 1 Cor. 11 as well, when he quotes teachings of Jesus from the Last Supper in language at times verbally parallel to that of Luke's Gospel before Luke was ever written."

Agreed. There is more than one point in Paul's letters where he undermines his statement in Gal. 1. I Cor. 15 is only one of these, as you point out.

Blomberg: "In fact there are dozens of places in the epistles where Paul, James and Peter quote or (more commonly) allude to teachings of Jesus before they were ever written down elsewhere. So it is far more than hearsay, it is oral tradition, which in all known ancient Mediterranean cultures exhibited great feats of care in

preservation in predominantly oral cultures.”

So it's a matter of recited oral tradition vs. hearsay. Okay. If people think that's historically reliable, go ahead.

Blomberg: “What Galatians alludes to is that Paul recognized the gospel was true from his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road and from that could quickly infer the basic doctrines of the faith: Jesus and no one else is Lord, therefore worship him, therefore salvation is by faith in him not by legal works, therefore the end times have broken into human history, therefore God's people are his followers, etc.”

These points are “inferred”? If so, who's doing the inferring, if not Paul himself? This counteracts the claim that Paul got these doctrines from a revelation. It suggests that what Paul is teaching in his letters is his own speculation and that he is pawing it off as “revelation.”

Blomberg: “Paul does not mean that Jesus gave him a catechism on the road teaching him every detail about his earthly life.”

Does Paul even suggest in his own letters, that he encountered Jesus while traveling on a road to Damascus? This is a story element which we find in Acts. But where does Paul, who wrote much earlier than Acts, make any indication to such an event? Outside of the book of Acts, there is only one mention of Damascus in the entire New Testament (see [here](#)). And this is Paul's own reference to Damascus as a destination to which he returned after journeying to Arabia.

Blomberg: “This would come through all the normal means that everybody else learned about him.”

Can you elaborate on this point?

Blomberg: “Lee Strobel's works are excellent starting points for novices to the conversations they initiate. But if you want to have an accurate representation and analysis in any depth of the views of the people he quotes, you'll need to go to their actual published works. Otherwise it's too easy to wind up with misrepresentation, mistaken imputation of motives, and simplistic overgeneralizations.”

I'm not sure what this is supposed to mean in the context of your designation of I Cor. 15:3-7 as an early creed, which is why I cited you in the first place. Either Paul was reciting an early creed, or he wasn't. If he was, I'd say (as you seem to agree) that this conflicts with Paul's claim (in Gal. 1) to have received his knowledge of the gospel from Jesus himself, as opposed to “from no man.”

Blomberg: “Blessings on your ongoing quest for truth. A little more care and humility in your interaction with those with whom you disagree will stand you in much better stead.”

Thank you, Dr. Blomberg, for your comments and your time. I'm happy to take your advice here to heart. I just wish some of Jesus' followers would.

Regards,
Dawson

[January 13, 2008 3:11 PM](#)

[Craig Blomberg](#) said...

When people insinuate motives for others' views that they can't possibly know, it can easily feel like an attack. I'm glad that wasn't your intention.

Ludemann is not the first to have developed the argument that he did, which I haven't spelled out here, so other writers had made me think this view probable years ago. But his is now the most detailed and convincing version that I've seen.

You don't have to assume that a writer was inspired to give them the benefit of the doubt that if they talk about receiving a certain message by a revelation in one place and elsewhere flesh out specific details of that message by talking to other people they aren't contradicting themselves or being incoherent.

OK, I will go ahead. . . :)

Jews had centuries of prophets and apocalypticists believing they had heard "revelation" from God and speaking of the things they inferred from that as part of the revelation if they believed that those items necessarily followed. The point is still that these bits didn't come from talking to the apostles or other earlier Christians.

No, he doesn't refer to a road to Damascus. He just speaks of a revelation from God. What's interesting in Galatians 1 is that he goes on to talk about how he didn't immediately consult the apostles in Jerusalem; that came 3 and 17 years later. But the most likely chronology of Paul's life and letters, even without taking Acts into account, puts Galatians in 49. Jesus' death was most likely 30, so this "revelation" was probably 32, about the earliest possible date for the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. So there is really nothing else he is likely to be talking about.

Talking to other people, interviewing eyewitnesses or other official oral tradents, attending Christian worship services, re-reading the Hebrew Scriptures and reflecting on them through fresh lenses, and possibly even accessing some of the shorter written sources (that predated the final form of the Gospels.

It was an apparently too guarded way of saying that Strobel, for the sake of writing an introductory primer, overly simplifies many issues and thus is an easy target for more sophisticated opponents. But, as in any speech and debate team, we have to take on the most nuanced and strongest arguments of those with whom we disagree. Or, at the risk of sounding self-serving, I'd like to think that if you read my recently revised Historical Reliability of the Gospels, you'd recognize the case is much stronger (whether or not you ultimately accepted it) than it might appear just from the two opening chapters of Case for Christ.

Yes, this distresses me too. I can assure you that there are countless Christians out there, a majority in fact, who do behave this way. But almost by definition, therefore, they tend not to be the ones who read and write on blogs or are the most high profile apologists for the faith in other contexts. I'd love to introduce you to my Christian friends who are a far cry from the average "outraged" Christian posting on a skeptical blogsite. The latter are not doing anyone a service.

[January 13, 2008 3:56 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Blomberg: "When people insinuate motives for others' views that they can't possibly know, it can easily feel like an attack. I'm glad that wasn't your intention."

If I wanted to "attack" you, I would have devoted much more internet ink than I did in my blog when I simply cited you as a source which holds that I Cor. 15 contains a creed. That is still your position, is it not?

Blomberg: "Ludemann is not the first to have developed the argument that he did, which I haven't spelled out here, so other writers had made me think this view probable years ago. But his is now the most detailed and convincing version that I've seen."

Okay, so in other words, you're not the only one who thinks Paul was reciting a creed in I Cor. 15. That's good news for me! Thank you! I can put Ludemann's and your name to this. Who else? I'd love some more names to put to this thesis.

Blomberg: "You don't have to assume that a writer was inspired to give them the benefit of the doubt that if they talk about receiving a certain message by a revelation in one place and elsewhere flesh out specific details of that message by talking to other people they aren't contradicting themselves or being incoherent."

In fact, I don't assume that any writer is (divinely) "inspired." But if he says on the one hand that he received the message he is publicizing from a divine source, and on the other hand appears to be "inferring" his conclusions on his own assumption, then I would take this as a direct conflict to such claim.

Blomberg: "Jews had centuries of prophets and apocalypticists believing they had heard "revelation" from God and speaking of the things they inferred from that as part of the revelation if they believed that those items necessarily followed. The point is still that these bits didn't come from talking to the apostles or other earlier Christians."

It would be quite easy for someone who believes he is guided by a divine source to suppose that his inferences are divinely guided. But it would not follow from this that his conclusions are in fact divinely inspired or even soundly drawn. People can believe all kinds of things, but in the end they still have only their own fallible minds by which to draw their conclusions. It matters not if they were drawing from a tradition of self-proclaimed prophets or apostles who claimed to be divinely led. It could have been speculation, it could have been reasonable inference from questionable premises which they accepted as truthful, it could have been hearsay that they took as divine truth. Either way, their conclusions are open to question, and we would be wrong to accept them unquestionably. Many, however, disagree with me on this, and suppose that we should accept certain claims as unquestionably true, depending on their sources.

Blomberg: "No, he doesn't refer to a road to Damascus. He just speaks of a revelation from God."

Right. Paul nowhere mentions a "road to Damascus," but he does speak of "a revelation from God." And yet, he undermines the claim to having received his knowledge from "a revelation from God" if he falls back on an oral tradition to make his case or inform his position. If he had truly received his gospel from a divine revelation, he wouldn't need to appeal to oral tradition, or incorporate it into his case. Perhaps you disagree with this.

Blomberg: "What's interesting in Galatians 1 is that he goes on to talk about how he didn't immediately consult the apostles in Jerusalem; that came 3 and 17 years later."

Right - and I raise this point in my Part 3 of this series, which I probably will not publish until tomorrow or Tuesday at the earliest. Acts portrays Paul as immediately subordinating himself to the Jerusalem elders, even though by Paul's own hand we read that it was several years before he even met with them, and even then there were conflicts. So the NT record is definitely at odds with itself.

Blomberg: "But the most likely chronology of Paul's life and letters, even without taking Acts into account, puts Galatians in 49. Jesus' death was most likely 30, so this 'revelation' was probably 32, about the earliest possible date for the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. So there is really nothing else he is likely to be talking about."

Can Jesus' death be put at AD 30 by anything that Paul, the earliest writer in the NT, states? Or, is the only indication for AD 30 (or thereabouts) found only in the gospels, which post-date Paul's letters by at least a decade, if not more?

Blomberg: "Talking to other people, interviewing eyewitnesses or other official oral tradents, attending Christian worship services, re-reading the Hebrew Scriptures and reflecting on them through fresh lenses, and possibly even accessing some of the shorter written sources (that predated the final form of the Gospels."

That's quite a hodgepodge you describe here. What's it all supposed to add up to? Reliable historical accounts?

Blomberg: "It was an apparently too guarded way of saying that Strobel, for the sake of writing an introductory primer, overly simplifies many issues and thus is an easy target for more sophisticated opponents."

I see. It's Strobel's fault then. Got it.

Blomberg: "But, as in any speech and debate team, we have to take on the most nuanced and strongest arguments of those with whom we disagree. Or, at the risk of sounding self-serving, I'd like to think that if you read my recently revised *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, you'd recognize the case is much stronger (whether or not you ultimately accepted it) than it might appear just from the two opening chapters of *Case for Christ*."

To be honest, Dr. Blomberg, if your statements in Strobel's *The Case for Christ* are any indication, I would most likely be prone not to invest either the time or the money in something you've written. But, you want to sell books, and I don't blame you for this. So I have put your newly revised book into my queue at Amazon.com. It will be a while before I make my next purchase; I recently ordered Beversluis' book on Lewis, and it still hasn't arrived. I'm not very happy with Amazon.com right now. But as soon as your book is available (and I have the funds), I'll put the order through and check out your book. I'll be happy to post my responses to your book on my blog, even though you apparently do not take the presuppositionalist approach to apologetics.

Blomberg: "Yes, this distresses me too. I can assure you that there are countless Christians out there, a majority

in fact, who do behave this way. But almost by definition, therefore, they tend not to be the ones who read and write on blogs or are the most high profile apologists for the faith in other contexts.”

I have not conducted a survey on this, so I don't know the numbers. I do know, however, that in my personal dealings with Christians, most assume I am Christian unless and until I indicate to them in one way or another that I am an atheist. Before this point, they treat me as one of their own. In fact, they laud me with all kinds of compliments and tell me what a good person I am. However, as soon as they learn that I am a non-believer, they are taken aback, stricken with this discovery as if they have encountered a supernatural antithesis of some sort, wondering what to think of me. At first, they seem to be offended in some indescribable way. But soon they relax and seem to make peace with the fact that I don't believe in any invisible magic beings, that prayer is nonsensical to me, that there is no cosmic cartoonist controlling and shaping the course of reality and human history. Eventually they come back to reality, realizing that I'm simply the same person I always was, and make peace with the fact that I am a fellow human being, as moral as I ever was before they learned that I don't believe the tales in the sacred storybook.

Blomberg: “I'd love to introduce you to my Christian friends who are a far cry from the average “outraged” Christian posting on a skeptical blogsite. The latter are not doing anyone a service.”

There is a noteworthy presence of Christians on the internet who are, I'd like to think, not like those whom I have known personally. On the internet, one can hide behind an anonymous moniker and make all kinds of aggressive claims. They point to the example of Jesus we read about in the gospels to justify their condescending behavior. I don't know what the Christians I know personally (“offline”) would act like on the internet. Perhaps they would be like the individuals I know and love. But perhaps they enjoy the anonymity of the internet, and take out their frustrations on spoilsports on me. I don't know. It probably varies from individual to individual. We each make our own choices.

Regards,
Dawson

[January 13, 2008 5:43 PM](#)