

# The Gospels as Myths

In providing background to how I began to understand the Bible once I realized that it was not an inerrant revelation from God, I have been giving a kind of history of scholarship on the Gospels, explaining how it was that, before the Enlightenment, virtually everyone understood the Gospels to be Supernatural Histories, and that during the Enlightenment there were scholars who maintained they were Natural Histories. Now I can complete this short survey by talking about a significant development, one of the most significant in the history of the entire discipline of New Testament studies, in which the Gospels came to be understood as Myths. Let me stress that I am not saying that everyone started accepting this new view or, more germane to this series of posts, that I agree with this view as I'm presenting it: I'm simply indicating what happened in the field of New Testament studies. Later I'll explain its relevance for my views. This, again, is taken from my book Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium.

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## The Gospels As Myths

Prior to the 1830s, just about everyone understood the Gospels as either supernatural histories or natural histories. All that was to change in 1835-36 with the earthshattering publication of a two-volume book called The Life of Jesus Critically Examined (the German title was Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet) by the famous German theologian David Friedrich Strauss. This was an amazing book: nearly 1500 pages of detailed and meticulous argumentation involving every story in the Gospels. It completely stood the field on its head: a remarkable feat, considering that the author was only 27 years old. (Its English translation was done by none other than Mary Ann Evans – a.k.a. the novelist George Eliot –

herself at a ripe young age of 26. This was before she teamed up, so to say, with George Lewes and started her own writing career, which was no less brilliant than Strauss's, though markedly less germane to the subject at hand!).

Strauss disagreed with both of the prevailing ways of understanding the Gospels in his time. On the one hand, he agreed ...

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## The Gospels as Natural Histories

I indicated in my last post that, to my surprise, I had never written about the history of the scholarship on the Gospels in terms of the major shift from seeing them as Supernatural Histories to Natural Histories to Myths. And just as I was preparing to write about the move to see them as Natural Histories, in today's post, I read a comment from a reader (Bless his soul, as we used to say!) who pointed out that I did indeed have a detailed discussion of the matter in my first trade book Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium. I looked it up, and lo and behold, I absolutely did – and in precisely the terms I wanted to discuss the matter here on the blog. For some reason none of my search engines picked it up when looked through all my files.

So, today I will talk about The Gospels as Natural Histories, as lifted from that treatment in my book. As I hope you'll agree, this shift in understanding the Gospels was both significant and incredibly interesting.

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### The Gospel Accounts As Natural Histories

The Enlightenment that swept through Europe in the eighteenth century involved a whole new way of thinking and looking at the world. Such intellectuals of the Enlightenment as Descartes, Locke, Newton, and Hume had come to distrust traditional sources of authority and started to insist on the power of human reason to understand the world and the human's place in it. This was an age of science and the development of modern technology. Scholars began to assert the "logic" and importance of cause-effect relationships. They developed scientific notions of "natural law," i.e., highly predictable ways that nature worked, along with the concomitant view that these "laws" could not be broken by any outside agency (for example, a divine being). They modified the grounds of human knowledge – away, for example, from the traditional teachings and dogmas of the church to such "objective" processes as rational observation, empirical verification, and logical inference.

In terms of religious belief, scholars of the Enlightenment recognized that ...

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# The Gospels as Supernatural Histories

In order to explain the view I started having about the Bible after I had come to realize that it was filled with discrepancies, contradictions, historical errors, and other mistakes – and yet remained a committed Christian – I have to set out my understanding at the time of the Bible as “myth.” And to do that I have to give a very brief (though this will take a few posts) history of scholarship on the New Testament itself, specifically the Gospels. (What I say about the Gospels can be applied more broadly to the Bible, as I’ll explain).

When I was preparing to write this post I \*thought\* I was simply going to be able to copy and paste this explanation from something I had written before. But I’ve looked everywhere, and I can’t find that I’ve ever written about it in any context whatsoever, books, articles, blog posts, nada. How strange. I lecture on this all the time.

The history of Gospel scholarship is, of course, extraordinarily complex. There are hundreds of scholarly books and articles written on the Gospel of John every year probably. If you wanted to read literally everything on John written since, say, 1975, it would probably take you until 2025. Assuming you had nothing else to do. A \*complete\* history of scholarship would be impossible. But there have been major trends in the field, and what I want to do is explain in the most broad and basic terms possible the major shifts that happened in the field. Two major shifts, in a field that has experienced lots of shifts.

I will do so by explaining three major views of what the Gospels are. Are they historically accurate biographies of Jesus? Are they fairy tales? Are they something in between? What exactly? The three major views I'll sketch, as it turns out, can be traced chronologically: first there was this view, then there was that view, and then there was this other view. BUT I have to give a proviso. I do NOT mean ...

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## [How Does A Book Become A Bestseller? Readers' Mailbag](#) [April 21, 2017](#)

In this week's Mailbag I deal with a question about how a book written for a popular audience becomes a bestseller, specifically with regard to [Misquoting Jesus](#), my book that has sold the best of all by far.

### QUESTION:

In your previous answer to me you indicated that what makes a bestseller, in the end of the day, is massive media attention. My question now is what sparks this attention. In other words, why, out of all your books, did [Misquoting Jesus](#) receive a great attention from the media?

## **RESPONSE:**

Ha! It's a great question. I'll start by saying that if there were a sure-fire formula for how to get media attention, every author in the planet would do it and we would \*all\* be on the NY Times Bestseller list! But the reality is that there are hundreds of books sold every day in English (I was told some years ago that it's about 600 per day, but I have no way of knowing if that is right or not; maybe someone else on the blog knows). Every one of those authors wants to be on Fresh Air with Terry Gross and on TV talk shows giving interviews. But well, do the numbers. It almost never happens, since most of the big radio and TV venues happen just four or five times a week.

It happened with me on Misquoting Jesus, and as it turns out, it was almost purely a fluke, an accident of scheduling.

For those of you who are interview-radio aficionados, I don't need to tell you that two of the biggest national venues are Fresh Air and The Diane Rehm Show. These two seem to compete with one another – one normally playing during the day (Diane Rehm) and the other (at least everywhere I've ever listened) in the late afternoon/early evening. I have been told that because they are in competition they mutually refuse to interview the same person for the same publication. But I ended up being interviewed for both, within ten days of each other. One of the schedulers simply made a mistake and didn't realize I was on the other show. That made a huge difference to my life.

My book Misquoting Jesus came out in the fall of 2005. As you probably have noticed, publishers tend to publish their important books on religion either in the fall leading up to Christmas or in the spring leading up to Easter. They judge that those are the most auspicious time for such books. The

media attention, if it is going to happen, almost always happens right away.

I was interviewed by Diane Rehm for an hour in her Washington Studio in early December, and taped another hour-long interview with Terry Gross long-distance at about the same time (I've been on Fresh Air six times and have never met her face-to-face; she does all of her interviews with the interviewee being in a different radio station in a different city, hooked up via cable). The two interviews aired within ten days of each other. That almost never happens, and as I said, it was a fluke.

Someone at the Washington Post saw that this had happened and took an immediate interest in the book. It's a good thing they did. It ended up making my career. Misquoting Jesus, after those two interviews and a bunch of appearances on other much smaller radio venues, was on the NY Times Bestseller list, but only at #16. The deal is that there are, every week, 25 books on "the list." But only the top 15 get printed in the Sunday edition of the NY Times. What every author desperately wants is to be on the printed list, not the extended list. They want to see their name in the Sunday paper! And for weeks I was just barely missing it. Erg.

The Post decided that the topic of the book was interesting enough that they wanted to do a feature article on me. I got a call from one of their reporters, Neely Tucker, asking if he could come to Chapel Hill to meet with me. I was reluctant at first – it sounded like a bit of an imposition on my hard-to-schedule time. But I ended up agreeing, and oh boy am I glad I did.

Neely came and shadowed me for a couple of days. We met in my office, he came to one of my lectures, he came to my home to look at my home study where I research and write and to talk to Sarah a bit, we had a few nice meals together. He was a nice and very interesting fellow, and I had a good time. But

I wasn't really prepared for what came of it. What came of it was a longish article, in the Washington Post, on March 5, 2006, called "The Book of Bart." You can read it online. It was very positive.

And it brought more attention to the book. In a very big way. The producers of the Daily Show with Jon Stewart saw it. They called my publisher. They wanted me to do the Daily Show. Ai yai yai. This was getting serious.

My publisher immediately arranged for me to get media coaching for the interview with an expert in such things in D.C. I'll talk about that in a later post (pretty funny story). I went on the Daily Show. Met Jon Stewart ahead of time in the Green Room. We had a really nice chat. And then live in front of an audience for the interview. You can see that too on line. I thought it went really well. Jon Stewart \*loved\* the book and was unusually enthusiastic about it.

And that made all the difference. For the next four days, the book shot up to be the #1 bestselling book on Amazon.com. That is, it was the bestselling book in the world for four days. It also shot up the NY Times Bestseller list, ending up, finally, at #5. Stayed on the list for months. And really launched my career as a trade-book author. The rest, as they say, is history. And in one sense it was all because of a scheduling fluke. Go figure. It's all about the media attention.

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# Can Myths Be True and Meaningful?

Yesterday I received this interesting comment on my most recent post. It embodies a view that a lot of other members of the Blog have, and so I thought I should respond to it. It is about whether there can be meaningful myths in the Bible. Here is what the reader says.

Imaginative stories by definition are false. To say something is myth and by extension imaginative, is asserting that it is false. For us to say something is a myth, we have to be sure that it is entirely false. Or is it not the case?

I addressed a similar issue in the conclusion of my most recent book Jesus Before the Gospels. There I take a different stance on whether non-historical accounts (which would include myths) can be meaningful to us or not, whether they can be "true" in any sense. Here is what I say there (with respect more to the NT than the OT, but the same reasoning applies).

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Like most authors, I get a lot of email from people who have read my books. One of the comments I repeatedly receive is that if there is something in the Gospels that is not historical, then it cannot be true (in any respect), and if it is not true, then it is not worth reading. I myself do not agree with this view.

It is true that to do the work of the historian requires one to be extremely critical about the sources of information available from, and about, the past. Some readers seem to think this approach to sources is taken only by atheistic,

hard-headed, liberal historians with anti-supernaturalist biases who are out to destroy religion. But in fact, it is the approach all historians take to all of their materials. The reason some readers find this approach to the Gospels objectionable is that they simply aren't accustomed to dealing with the Bible as history.

But even though I do deal with the Bible as a historian, I do not personally think that is the only way to deal with the Bible, and I find it unsettling when readers think that once the Gospels are shown to have discrepancies, implausibilities, and historical mistakes, we should just get rid of them and move on to other things.

I do understand that Christianity is widely seen as a "historical" religion, and that if there are historical problems with Christianity, then Christianity has problems. I understand that very well indeed. But ...

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## [Appreciating the Myths of the Bible](#)

When I came to see that there are mistakes in the Bible, I did not jettison it all as a waste of time. Not at all. On the contrary, I continued to value and cherish it, as a book that could reveal truths about God. Yes it had discrepancies, contradictions, historical errors, glaring scientific

mistakes, and so on. Of course it did. But that for me was not the ultimate point. The Bible It was a product of its own time, a very human book. Even so, it was a book through which God continued to speak.

I came to think that the Bible was more important for the valuable lessons it conveyed than for the factual (or problematic) information it contained. This view worked on two levels. For one thing, I came to see it was important to realize that even for ancient readers what mattered about the Bible was not its factual accuracy in its details, but for the ideas that it was trying to present. And for me personally, it was important to see how the Bible could speak to the issues of my own day, as those ideas could be translated to my own life and time.

To get a sense of how the first point works, I lift here a section from my book The Bible: A Historical and Literary Introduction, where I explain to my readers how the Bible's opening chapters (Genesis 1-11), called the Primeval History, can be understood not as a lesson in history or science, but as a meaningful set of myths.

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### The Primeval History as Myth

From a literary perspective, it should be clear that it is a real challenge to consider the Primeval History either as science or as history, in the normally accepted meanings of the terms. But that is not to denigrate the narrative. Not in the least! These are terrific, moving, and powerful stories. But they are probably best understood to be stories, not scientific explanations or historical accounts. More specifically, these stories can be best appreciated when they are recognized as "myths."

The term myth should not be taken in a negative sense. It can

be used in a very positive sense. A brief working definition of **myth** would be...

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## Becoming a Non-Fundamentalist Christian

After realizing that the Bible does in fact contain mistakes, I became a non-fundamentalist Christian and remained one for many years. It is not easy to describe exactly what I believed "at the time," only because it was a good expanse of time and there was a kind of transition period in which I evolved into the kind of open-minded, reflective believer that I became and remained, again for some years.

At the early stages I suppose you could describe me as a fairly liberal evangelical. There are lots of Christians like that in the world, and most of my friends at Princeton Seminary were in that mold. How does one describe that kind of Christian?

Such Christians very much, and wholeheartedly, think that God speaks through the Bible. He uses it to communicate to his people. Not in order to give them science lessons (what really happened on the third day of creation?) but in order to instruct them about how they should live and be. God wants his people to show love to one another and to all people, to work for justice, to strive for peace, to do good in the

world, to love him above all things, and so on. Many liberal evangelicals are social activists, believing that God has called them to be beacons of light to this world, which requires political and social activity that leads to improved living conditions and lives for all people.

Others are really more about a personal relationship with God that he has provided through Christ. Far more important than the question of whether there can be a mistake in the Bible is ...

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## Fundamentalism and the Truth of the Bible

I have recently received a number of inquiries about why realizing there may be mistakes in the Bible might lead someone to become an agnostic. Here is one that came a few days ago:

### **QUESTION:**

I want to thank you for your extensive work in explaining ... your journey from believing that the bible contained no errors to proving the bible is not inerrant and simply the work of human writers. What I would like to be explained is the necessary logic to go from believing that the bible is not inerrant or the "word of God" to believing there is no God.

## **RESPONSE**

My view of the matter may seem odd to a lot of people, but it is nonetheless held by most critical scholars of the Bible and trained theologians. What is the “necessary logic to go from believing that the bible is not inerrant ... to believing there is no God? There is no necessary logic at all.

I have never thought that ...

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## **Eyewitnesses and the Gospels: A Blast From the Past**

Five years ago today I received and answered this question on the blog. I thought it would make a nice break from my current discussion of my change of faith, a topic to which I'll return tomorrow. For now, here's a blast from the past.

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## **QUESTION**

One of the major points of your work (if I understand

correctly) is that the contents of the New Testament are at a vast remove in time, place, and source from any eyewitness account of Jesus' life. But when I consider this point in my ignorance, and simply from the perspective of chronology (from the time of Jesus to the accounts in the earliest gospels), it seems to me that at least one very old eyewitness of Jesus' life might have been able to report a significant amount of information about Jesus and his teachings directly to, say, Mark. In view of this, I wonder how scholars know that no New Testament account of Jesus could have been received directly from any eyewitness.

## RESPONSE

It's a very good question, and one that I get asked, in a variety of ways, a lot. My view is this: when Mark was writing his Gospel (the first to be written) in say 65 or 70 CE, there probably were indeed people still living who were familiar with Jesus. At least I would assume that Mark himself thought so. Otherwise it is hard to explain why he included what is now Mark 9:1, where Jesus tells his disciples "Truly I tell you, some of you standing here will not taste death before they see that the Kingdom of God has come in power." If everyone from the first generation had already died, then it seems implausible that Mark would leave a saying of Jesus indicating that the End would come before they all died. (I do not, by the way, think that Mark's Jesus was referring to the day of Pentecost, to the coming of the church, or even to his own Transfiguration, as some interpreters claim, in order to get around the fact that Jesus declared that the end would come before all the disciples died when, in fact, it did not).

But onto my point. Even though there may well have been eyewitnesses alive some 35-40 years after Jesus' death, there is no guarantee – or, I would argue, no reason to think – that any of them were consulted by the authors of the Gospels when writing their accounts. The eyewitnesses would have been Aramaic speaking peasants almost entirely from rural Galilee.

Mark was a highly educated, Greek speaking Christian living in an urban area outside of Palestine (Rome?), who never traveled, probably, to Galilee. So the existence of eyewitnesses would not have much if any effect on his Gospel.

The same is true, even more so, with the later Gospels. Luke begins his Gospel by saying that eyewitnesses started passing along the oral traditions he had heard (Luke 1:1-4), but he never indicates that he had ever talked to one. He has simply heard stories that had been around from the days of the eyewitnesses. And if the standard dating of his Gospel – and Matthew's – is correct, they were writing about 50 years or more after Jesus' death. John's Gospel was even later.

My sense is that most of the eyewitnesses (and who knows how many there were?! Hundreds? Probably not. Dozens?) had died before the Gospels were written; those that survived were carrying on their lives in rural Galilee or Jerusalem. And the Gospel writers, who never say they consulted any of them, probably never did consult with any of them. The Gospels are based on oral traditions that had been in circulation – and changed as a result – for decades before the Gospel writers had even heard them.

And as anyone knows who has been subject to oral traditions – this would include all of us – the stories told about a person can change absolutely overnight! It happens all the time. What happens, then, to stories in circulation for 40 or 50 years, in different countries, told in different languages, among people who never laid an eye on an eyewitness or on anyone else who had? My sense is that the stories get changed, often a lot; and many of the stories simply get made up. It's just the way it happens. And it can be shown to have happened with the Gospels, since the same story is often told in very different ways. Every historian will tell you: evidence matters!



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# Finding More Problems in the Old Testament

Yesterday I started detailing some of the contradictions and historical or scientific problems with the Old Testament that I started to find when I was a graduate at Princeton Seminary, starting to examine the Bible not as the inerrant revelation from God Almighty but as a more human book that could indeed have mistakes in it. The account I gave of these problems was lifted straight from my textbook: The Bible: A Historical and Literary Introduction. There's a reason for that. The problems I found early on in my more scholarly investigation of the Bible have stuck with me and continue to strike me as some of the truly most important ones, and therefore the ones most appropriate to introduce to college students themselves reading the Bible critically for the first time.

This is a second and final post on the same topic: a few more comments on a few more problems that strike me as completely irreconcilable, once a person admits that there can indeed be problems in the Bible. Again, this is excerpted from my textbook. Afterward I have a few reflections on how such problems affected my Christian faith.

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These kinds of differences suggested to scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that Genesis 1-3 was not providing one account composed by one author at one time, but two different accounts composed by two different authors at two different times – with different interests, understandings of the deity, and views about what happened when humans were

created.

Moreover, and just as important, the literary inconsistencies of Genesis are not unique to these two chapters. On the contrary, there are such problems scattered throughout the book. You can see this for yourself simply by ...

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