I’ll address two questions on this week’s readers’ mailbag, one about what we can say about the resurrection of Jesus (a specific question about it) and one about whether my (one-time) faith was based on the Bible or on spiritual experiences I had. (The answer is apparently not what the questioner expected.)

**QUESTION:**

How do you separate the fact from fiction on the risen Jesus? You accept, as historical, that the disciples believed they had visions of the risen Jesus – so how do you reject, as legendary, the physical interactions with the risen Jesus as they are drawn from the same accounts?

**RESPONSE:**

Ah, this is a good question: it gets to the heart of what it means to engage in a historical analysis of our early Christian traditions. Each and every tradition (e.g.: the followers of Jesus came to believe he was raised from the dead because they saw him alive afterward; or Jesus ate some fish in their presence after he had died) has to be evaluated on its own merits weighing the factors that might show whether it is historical or not. Doing history is not a matter of simply choosing some traditions one likes and accepting them, and rejecting the ones one doesn’t like. It’s a matter of evaluating each and every one of them.

So how does one evaluate these two traditions in particular? With respect to the first, that Jesus’ disciples believed they saw him alive after his death, leading them to conclude he had been raised from the dead, the most important thing to stress is that there are two historical realities that simply cannot be denied. The followers of Jesus did claim that Jesus came back to life. If they had not claimed that, we would not have Christianity. So they did claim it. Moreover, they did claim that they knew he rose precisely because some of them saw him alive again afterward. No one can doubt that. It is the tradition found in Matthew, Mark, and John and it is the tradition given us by an actual eyewitness, Paul. It is multiply attested in independent traditions. And as important, nothing else is ever cited in our early sources for being any other reason for people to believe he was raised from the dead (e.g., the empty tomb never convinces anyone).

So that’s the reality: the followers did believe he came to be raised, and there must have been something to make them think so. Moreover, the one thing that they said made them think so (including one of the people who wrote about coming to think so) is that they saw Jesus alive again afterward. As a historian I conclude that it is likely it was because the followers saw, or thought they saw, Jesus alive after his execution that led to the belief he had been raised from the dead. One virtue of this conclusion is that it “works” historically, whether a person is a Christian or not. Christians would say Jesus really was raised and appeared to his followers; non-Christians would say that the followers were just seein’ things.

What about the other tradition, about Jesus eating fish? What historical realities does *it* explain? Well, none actually. Nothing makes it necessary. There is nothing about early Christianity that requires this tradition to be historically true. I’m not saying the disciples must not have seen any such thing. I’m just ambivalent on it. Maybe they did, maybe they didn’t — nothing requires me to think they did. You get stories about Jesus eating something in several accounts, yes, but nothing else hinges on it, unlike the first instance.
Moreover, I can think of very good reasons indeed why some Christians might want to invent the idea that Jesus ate some fish (or honey or whatever) in the disciples’ presence after his resurrection. We know of Christians who were insisting that Jesus was not *physically* raised from the dead, but only spiritually. How can one prove that the resurrection was physical, not just spiritual? Well, if Jesus engaged in bodily, physical activities, that would show that he was raised in an actual, physical body. The tradition, in other words, serves a particular polemical function within the early Christian tradition. That makes it suspicious (of course the “appearances” of Jesus perform a function too, of showing that Jesus was raised: but they are “necessary” for other reasons – and there do not appear to be other reasons for his fish-eating).

And so I think one of the two claims has a strong case for being historical, and the other, well, not so much. It’s not just a matter of picking the one that I personally like. History has to work this way, evaluating each and every tradition carefully, one at a time.

**QUESTION:**

During your evangelical years, was your faith based solely upon the bible, or did you also draw upon personal spiritual experiences with God? From what I’ve heard about the time you turned away from your faith, it seems you lost faith in the credibility of the biblical texts and this led you to losing your faith in God. As a liberal Christian who is skeptical of several parts of the NT (for many of the reasons you argue), I find this curious because I maintained my faith and communion with God through the personal experiences I have. You could say I never found it necessary to chuck the divine baby out with the scriptural bathwater. I am curious if these spiritual experiences were lacking in your time as an evangelical, as most seem to have experienced them.

**RESPONSE:**

Yes, I can see why people have said this about me, that since my belief was completely based on the Bible, and on nothing else, that once I realized there were problems with the Bible, I left the faith and became an agnostic. But, as it turns out, that’s not at all true. The most important point, and in direct response to the question, is that my faith was not solely based on the Bible. My faith as a born-again evangelical Christian was, instead, based directly on the spiritual experiences I had. When I “accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior” and “asked Jesus into my heart,” the Bible was not directly involved. I came to believe that this is what I needed to do for salvation, and so I did it, and I experienced a kind of emotional/spiritual ecstasy as a result of it.

My faith was in Christ, not in the Bible. The Bible came along only at a second stage, as I wanted to learn more and more (and more and more) about my faith. The Bible was my source. But I continued to have (sometimes quite intense) spiritual experiences, quite apart from the Bible.

I did come to place a high value on the Bible indeed. And I was seriously deflated when I came to realize the Bible was not an inerrant revelation from on high. But that didn’t lead me away from the faith. It made me more thoughtful about my faith, and helped develop my
sense that the Bible, while a valuable book, could not be the be-all and end-all of faith.

I left the faith for completely other reasons. I came to realize, after years of struggle, that I no longer could believe there was a God who was active and involved in this world, where there is so much pain and misery: famine, drought, epidemics, natural disasters, birth defects, and on and on and on. I just got to a point where I didn’t believe there really was a god who answers prayer who works to improve people’s lives. It was then that I realize I no longer could consider myself a believer.

If you don’t belong to the blog yet, C’MON!!! JOIN!!! It won’t cost you much — less per month than that Diet Coke I just bought! And just as sweet. But better for you (and me). The blog raises money for important charities. So Join!

Bart Ehrman & Robert Price Debate – Did Jesus Exist?
Another Gory Account of the Afterlife: The Apocalypse of Paul