

My Newsweek article this week has generated a lot of response. I have no idea what kind of comments they typically get for their stories, but so far, as of now, there have been 559 on mine; and most of them are negative - to no one's surprise - written by people (conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists for the most part, from what I can tell) who think that the Gospels are perfectly accurate in what they have to say about Jesus - not just at his birth but for his entire life. A lot of these respondents think that anyone who thinks that the New Testament contains discrepancies is too smart for his or her own good and blind at the same time (not sure how it can go both ways, but there it is).

I've also been getting a lot of email from incensed readers, including a sixteen-year old girl who tells me that she is a Pentecostal Christian who has read the Bible 160 times and is now starting her 161st; she was very upset with me and is praying for my soul.

I appreciate the animosity that people feel: I would have felt the same way in my late teens and early twenties when I too was a Bible believing, born-again, conservative evangelical who thought that Scripture was the inerrantly inspired Word of God. But education sometimes has its effect, and it certainly did on me.

What I told this earnest 16 year old was that I appreciated her concerns and that I hoped she would continue to seek the truth, and be willing to follow the truth wherever it leads her, even if it leads her away from what she now thinks is true. If truth is from God, then there is nothing to fear from it. And if following the truth means rejecting your former beliefs, that's the price you have to pay for being true both to the truth and to yourself.

I've gotten more feisty emails as well, as you might imagine. Here's a typical extract:

I have to say, I've read and heard a lot of your viewpoints...I find them ridiculous and not well thought out. I feel your "contradictions" and misconceptions are ill informing young people...it's heart breaking to see a man so utterly bewildered and worse, sharing this "ignorance" with his students.

My response to this person (I think he was a middle-aged believer in the Bible without a lot of knowledge, needless to say, of scholarship) was of a different order, and it is the point that I want to emphasize in this post. Which is this.

I get criticized a lot for my views, but people (not knowing any better?) act as if my views are highly idiosyncratic and weird and unique to my twisted mind. But the truth is, my basic views about the Bible are the views that just about every bona fide scholar of the Bible in the Western hemisphere shares, with the exception of very, very conservative evangelicals, fundamentalists, and, I suppose, (extremely conservative) Roman Catholics. But if you were to survey the leading biblical scholars of our time, they would virtually to a person (again, apart from the religious conservatives who have theological reasons for wanting the Bible to be infallible) agree with the basic views I have - for example, that there are discrepancies, that many of these cannot be reconciled, and that it's difficult, as a result, to know what really happened historically in the life of Jesus.

Just to belabor the point, these views are those of every biblical scholar teaching at every major research university in North America that I'm aware of. Just take your pick. Ivy League schools: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, Cornell, etc. Other outstanding private colleges and universities: Mount Holyoke to Stanford to ... choose any geographically between these two. And all the major state research universities (at least the ones I know of), whether West Coast - UC Berkeley, University of Washington, University of Oregon;

Midwest - Kansas, Texas, Nebraska, Ohio State, Michigan; East Coast - North Carolina State, Florida State, Florida, Virginia. And on and on and on. I don't know of a biblical scholar teaching at a major research university in the country that thinks the Gospel narratives - or the infancy narratives, to be more specific - are free of discrepancies and historically accurate.

Of course - let me stress the point -OF COURSE this does not mean that these views are right. But it does mean that if I'm wrong (as the populace at large seems to think ☐), then we're all wrong. All the major scholars at all the major universities — and virtually all the other non-major colleges and universities as well (apart from Christian evangelical schools) — all of us are wrong. It could be. I suppose stranger things have happened.

In case anyone wonders, I'm not in a particularly defensive mood just now. I'm actually enjoying this kind of exchange. But I do think that it's important to be clear. Nothing that I've said about the infancy narratives either in Newsweek or on this blog would be a revelation or "news" to a single scholar on the planet. It's all old news - the sort of thing we all know, because all of us have studied the material. The point of the article, and the blog, is to make this scholarly knowledge available to those who have other (arguably much better) things to do with their lives.



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