

THEOPHILUS

Dear Theophilus,

I am setting the following down for you because you and I have the same questions in life and the same intense desire for their answers, for the truth. I am no more thrilled with what I have found than you will be. I could hardly have been more a Christian of the Christians than Paul had been a Pharisee of the Pharisees. I had a devout upbringing: My mother went to high school at Prairie Bible Institute and my father was ordained a Baptist minister after attending Prophetic Bible Institute. They served at a couple of churches before becoming missionaries to the Cree in northern Alberta. And though they returned and settled down in Calgary before I was born, my father continued in the ministry, working part-time in the small communities of the Kootenay valley for the next three decades. I took to the beliefs instilled in me: In childhood and youth I participated in no end of church activities, from Sunday school and boys' club to camp, youth group and daily vacation Bible school, taking part both as a participant and, as I grew older, at times in leadership roles such as teacher, counsellor and song leader. It was on my initiative, not theirs, that my parents enrolled me in a Christian school for my high school years. I attended Bible college for a year, and even though I left that for university, my disillusionment at the time was not with Christianity, but with the worldliness I was seeing in its expression. I spent my early adult years hungering and thirsting after truth and righteousness, the kernel of which I always resolutely considered to be Christianity. Whatever occupation I had, my real occupation had been thought, figuring it all out, approaching God; and my preoccupation had been entirely otherworldly. My disputatiousness was never anticlerical in nature, but rather a quest for perfection and the demand for unsullied sincerity. When I felt disgust, it was not disgust with our bedrock beliefs, but rather with those who cheapened them and dragged them through the gutter. I often felt like Martin Luther in Rome.

Many people would view my adoption of agnosticism in my mid-twenties as the first step in my discarding of Christianity. This may have been necessary to allow the later steps, but I have never seen any fundamental discord, properly-speaking, between agnosticism and Christianity. To me, agnosticism is simply the acceptance of one's inability to know anything for sure, anything. I see agnosticism not as a system of thought in and of itself, but rather merely as a first premise, the basis of any and all systems of thought. I view those self-described agnostics who say that because we can know nothing there is nothing to know as being misled in their understanding of agnosticism. As for Christianity, it always seemed clear to me that its calls for faith, Jesus' consistent calls for faith, carried the assumption that knowledge was ultimately beyond human reach, so that faith was necessary, faith being the next best thing. I saw Christianity as being implicitly based on the agnostic premise, and in fact, as being the first religion honest enough to be so. In all the years I considered myself a Christian agnostic I considered myself to be every bit as much Christian as I was agnostic.

Ironically, my first real step toward discarding Christianity came when I wrote for my own edification a necessary argument in its defence, 'Reconciling Christianity and Science.' Through my youth and early adulthood I had staunchly defended creationism; and then later I had modified my stance to the more ambivalent, yet more defensible, either/or school of thought, that being that God was perfectly capable of creating the universe using any method and so it really did not matter which He chose to use. We exist: that is indisputable and it is enough. However, the more I read and learned, the clearer it became to me that the evolution model was closer to, and pursuing, the truth while the Biblical account was nothing but an old Mesopotamian myth. This jarred me terribly and eventually forced me to construct that new doctrine of divine revelation which I enunciated in Reconciling. I was entering some of the same territory that liberal theology occupied, but the difference was that, whereas the liberals (in my view) aimed to gut Christianity entirely of what made it Christian, leaving only what was secular humanism in all but name, my aim was to retain everything I could and only remove – as surgically as possible – that which was entirely indefensible and embarrassingly so. I saw my effort as necessary to the survival of Christianity: either remove the fundamental article of faith that creationism had developed into, or eventually see its discrediting attain widespread critical mass and result in the collapse of the entire edifice. My refined doctrine of divine revelation did for me what it was meant to do: it provided a sound rational basis for the belief in divine revelation (as well as intervention) without requiring the believer to

approach the Bible as an all-or-nothing proposition. Clear-cut guidelines were laid down for the discerning of divine inspiration in any passage of Scripture, and these guidelines applied equally to all parts of Scripture. A sincere Christian, I could now look at the Bible with new eyes, accepting it (most of it) as the Word of God without having to lie to myself about the veracity of certain passages.

My main emphasis in *Reconciling* was the Old Testament, even though the New Testament is the core of Christianity. This is because the truly problematic parts of the Bible are to be found mostly in the Old Testament, and primarily in the Book of Genesis. Miraculous phenomena may occur frequently throughout the Bible, but most of it is of a nature that is not clearly refutable by science. Not so the Genesis material concerning creation, the flood and the tower of Babel. That had to be addressed, and address it I did. With that then out of the way, the reconciliation was already complete and I had only to run through the other books and make what observations were pertinent to demonstrate the global application of the doctrine. Subsequently, the only part of the New Testament which received much criticism was the Book of Revelation. The rest, and particularly the four gospels, which are the very heart of Christianity, was left in relative peace under this doctrine, or so I thought at the time.

Let me be really clear at this point: Neither when I wrote *Reconciling*, nor for some years afterward, had I discarded, or even really doubted, Christianity; in fact, the very opposite is the truth, for I considered my efforts to be a necessary defence of a worthy system of belief, a system comprising the very essence of all truth.

As ironic as it is that my defence of Christianity was my first step in ultimately rejecting it, even more ironic is that the decisive step came when I set out to compose a comprehensive and authoritative 'Life of Christ' amalgamating the four gospels and including any other reliable material I could find (and I knew there would be almost nothing apart from cultural and geographical information to help in setting the scene). I commenced with this convinced that Jesus was God, the Son of God; and that the gospel accounts of his ministry were highly accurate, both as to the natural and the supernatural phenomena described. I commenced a true believer.

I won't describe to you the depth of my familiarity with the gospels, other than to say that I was steeped in them from birth onward. I will mention, though, that my favourite was John; I have always considered it the height both of beauty and of erudition. Notwithstanding my previous conversance with the gospels, I immersed myself in a study of them now from the perspective of my new doctrine. I was aware of those inconsistencies here and there that had led certain branches of theology to reject them as unreliable. However, having been exposed to a fair amount of courtroom witness testimony (and, I like to think, having gained the ability to discern what is generally true out of multiple accounts of the same incident), not only did I not view such inconsistencies as grounds for condemnation, but on the contrary I considered them strong evidence as to the honesty of the writers. Witnesses whose stories match too well altogether have almost certainly been comparing notes prior to testifying, and are therefore of dubious integrity.

One of my first preliminary conclusions was that Luke was particularly amenable to my type of criticism (which I think of as "witness criticism"). The writer Luke openly acknowledged that he based his gospel on information derived from numerous sources. That admission alone demonstrates that he approached the task conscious of the importance of employing a meticulous methodology. We can see his ability throughout the gospel in his attention to detail and his judicious use of the two sources we are able to consult first-hand, those being Mark and Quelle. Luke acknowledged that he was not an eyewitness, but he researched the whole matter the best he could with those who were and it is clear that he fully believes all that he reports.

Another of my preliminary conclusions was that Mark was written first of all and therefore has a heightened reliability due to the factor of pristineness. That is to say that whatever development of Christian theology may have occurred by the time Mark was written, more had occurred by the time the following gospels were written and so those later accounts were accordingly tinged to a greater degree by doctrinal considerations than was Mark. This conclusion is hardly original, as even the most conservative of theologians accept it.

The most startling – to me – of my early findings was that there is another good source of material

on Jesus himself outside the four gospels. We all know that there were numerous apocryphal gospels written, some of which, or parts of which, still exist. We also know what the perception of their credibility is. All the same, I set out to track down and analyze all of these I could find. If nothing else I might glean the odd detail reliable enough to include in my composition. However, as it turned out, I discovered more than “the odd detail:” I discovered the Gospel of Thomas, the only non-Biblical gospel that I concluded contained reliable material, and a lot of it at that. (I should also note having run across a very few scraps of Jesus’ words handed down via Church fathers which I believe to be reliable too.) The Gospel of Thomas is a logia rather than a gospel per se; it is a collection of Jesus’ sayings with almost no accompanying narrative. In my estimation, of its hundred-odd sayings, only three are definitely later Gnostic interpolations, while about a dozen more are questionable in origin and a half-dozen are merely nonsensical (the latter perhaps for lack of context or completeness). The bulk of Thomas is reliably Jesuine, some of it paralleling Biblical material in full and the rest more completely expressing thoughts whose echoes can still be found in the Biblical gospels. Not only did I come to accept Thomas as primarily authentic material, but I even came to the conclusion that it pre-dated at least the three later Biblical gospels, and perhaps Mark as well. Finding such a new source was astounding to me, yet as far as its impact went, whether on my beliefs or my ‘Life of Christ,’ the overall effect looked to me to be of an expansive, rather than a disruptive, nature.

At this point in my studies I still considered myself a Christian and Christianity the wellspring of truth. My opinion of the gospels was that Mark was the most reliable; Luke was almost equally reliable and provided far more extensive information; Matthew was problematic in certain areas, particularly where it contradicted Luke, but was essentially reliable; and John, though extremely difficult to analyze for reliability on account of being so very different, was also essentially reliable. Thomas I saw as supplemental to the Biblical four, even if somewhat divergent: just because the early church did not understand all Jesus’ ideas and subsequently suppressed some of them, that did not mean they were any less the words of the Son of God than the retained material. I accepted each gospel as being written by the writer tradition has attached it to, while acknowledging that it really didn’t matter anyway.

For the next four months I studied my five gospels diligently. I can’t say at what point during this time I lost my faith. The transition was a continuum with no clear break. A bit of evidence would appear here, another bit there. The hint of a shadow in one gospel would become more distinct in light of another gospel. Mine was an apostasy by accumulation, drop by drop by drop. It’s difficult for me to pin down the development of even the smallest thing here: I might analyze some tentative conclusion for weeks, mulling it over and double-checking for other possible conclusions, before finally internalizing it for what it was. I can hardly begin to describe my thought process because there were so many threads that I was following simultaneously at any one time. What I can tell you, though, is that at the end of four months I recorded my “decipherment principles” and the very first one stated: “Natural phenomena fully explain everything.” I was no longer a Christian.

I will now go through the various evidences that resulted in my new view of Jesus and Christianity, but first I will set down my revised decipherment principles, which I recorded six weeks after the original ones:

Basic principle: Everything about Jesus can be explained without reference to the supernatural.

1. The most reliable sources are Thomas, Mark and Quelle.
2. The writer Luke was a careful reporter and believed everything he reported.
3. Matthew is questionable but useful.
4. John likely contains bona fide material, but is entirely unreliable. The writer likely believed that what he wrote would focus others on the truth, even if it wasn’t the truth itself.
5. The oldest texts of each gospel are the most reliable.
6. Interpolations are unreliable.
7. Discordant details are particularly reliable, as the writer likely included them with reluctance.
8. Discrepancies from Mark to Luke/Matthew are very telling.
9. Necessary prophecy fulfillments are unreliable.
10. Bogus prophecy fulfillments are, ironically, very reliable.

11. Unnecessary arguments are revealing.

12. Various important things have been recorded as minor details.

Although I viewed Mark as the best material source, I focussed more on Luke as the basic framework for my 'Life of Christ.' Luke followed Mark's order in all the essentials, yet was a fuller account. I was intrigued by Luke's nativity material. It was clear that he had either spoken directly to Mary, Jesus' mother, or to someone who had relayed her own words. (Remember that Jesus was his mother's eldest child, and that both Joseph and Elizabeth likely died prior to his ministry.) Contrast this with Matthew's impersonal account: here we get the barest details with little sense at all of any trail to a possible eyewitness, though we are given some of Joseph's thinking on Mary's pregnant condition. While it is possible to reconcile these two accounts, such reconciliation requires either gullibility or lack of experience or suspension of disbelief on the part of the reviewer. Had there been a visit by Magi, Mary certainly would have recalled and reported it. Had there been a massacre of infants, Mary certainly would have recalled and reported that too. And had there been a night-time flight to Egypt, Mary certainly would have recalled and reported that as well. These are not trifling details. Instead, Luke has Joseph and Mary freely taking Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem when he was eight days old and then returning to their own town of Nazareth in Galilee where Jesus "grew and became strong."

My purpose was not to discredit Matthew, but simply to discover the truth of the matter. Luke's material had a much better trail, or potential trail, than Matthew's. Both had the two faith-demanding elements of virgin birth and pedigree to David and Abraham. What sealed my tendency toward Luke over Matthew here were two of Matthew's prophecy fulfillments in this section: "Out of Egypt I called my son," and "Rachel weeping for her children." These two are clearly bogus. What is then interesting is to consider where Matthew may have gotten his material on this. Perhaps Jesus' family did live briefly in Egypt for Matthew to want to dig up some totally inappropriate "prophecy" to attach to it. As for the massacre of the infants (and "Rachel weeping"), perhaps Matthew seized on distorted accounts still in circulation of Herod's killing some of his own sons and fitted these into his nativity story. This leads us to consider the origin of the star and Magi elements, and here we have of course Halley's Comet that appeared around 7 BC. This may have been up to a decade out of synch with Jesus' birth, but by the time Matthew was writing this time disparity would have been merely a forgotten detail of an event that obviously must attach to the birth of God's son. Even the visit of the Magi to Herod's court in search of direction to Bethlehem could have actually occurred in response to such a dramatic phenomenon.

The episode in Jesus' life that is most amenable to witness criticism is his baptism. In fact, from a critical perspective, this brief episode is the most important part of the Biblical gospel accounts; it encapsulates quite clearly the perspective and approach of each of the four writers. As such, it is the Rosetta Stone of the gospels. At first glance the four versions mesh nicely – there are no clear contradictions. However, on closer inspection they do differ, and differ in telling ways.

Mark: "As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my son whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"

Luke: "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"

Matthew: "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'" (Note that Matthew precludes with an argument from John the Baptist that he is not worthy to baptize Jesus, which argument Jesus overrules.)

John: "Then John gave this testimony: 'I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, "The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit." I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.'" (And note that John – the writer – does not actually describe Jesus being baptized and, on close reading, seems to indicate that

the divine endorsement occurred without an accompanying baptism.)

What is the eyewitness source of this baptism event? John, the writer, credits John the Baptist as the one who saw the Spirit descend from heaven onto Jesus in the form of a dove; he describes no voice from heaven and specifically quotes John the Baptist as stating that he would not have recognized Jesus' divinity without this sign and a previous instruction from God as to its significance, all of which puts the focus source-wise onto John the Baptist virtually to the exclusion of others who may have been present. Luke emphasizes that Jesus was baptized in the presence of numerous witnesses. He describes heaven opening and the Spirit descending like a dove onto Jesus as if witnessed from a group perspective; and he records the divine voice addressing Jesus (using the pronoun "you"), yet presumably heard by the entire group. Matthew is like a mirror image of Luke here, reversing the two basic witness sources: he has Jesus himself seeing heaven open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove, while the divine voice presumably addresses and is witnessed by the entire group present as it uses the third person ("this" and "him"). Mark alone presents both critical aspects of the baptism solely from Jesus' point of view. He has Jesus seeing heaven torn open and the Spirit descending on him in the form of a dove; and the divine voice is addressed to Jesus rather than to others present.

Who then is the eyewitness source of this baptism event? Jesus. He related this meaningful experience of his to his followers and one of them (tradition says Peter) relayed it in simple, unembellished terms to Mark who put it down on paper. Luke takes Mark's account and shifts the focus subtly to transform it from a personal account of Jesus' to a group account from a body of witnesses; and Matthew does the same, only in a different way. Both Luke and Matthew likely did this in good faith, whether thinking it a more appropriate expression of the matter or being influenced by the talk then in circulation treating the baptism as if it was a very public divine endorsement event. Matthew exhibits evidence of yet further developed doctrinal considerations in that he sees it necessary to justify the baptism of the perfect Jesus by the imperfect John the Baptist. John is the most developed of all: he makes the authoritative John the Baptist the divinely-informed source of what is now no longer a personal experience of Jesus' but rather nothing more nor less than a divine endorsement event inaugurating Jesus' ministry; and as to the Son of God being baptized by merely mortal hands, John sidesteps this issue adeptly by avoiding any reference to the actual baptism while neither specifically denying that it took place.

Once Jesus' public ministry begins, it is difficult to isolate and identify any single source of material out of an amorphous mass of potential witnesses – apart from the odd incident like Peter's denial of association with Jesus. The last good event for this that we have is the temptation of Jesus. It is obvious by the very solitary nature of Jesus' retreat that he himself could be the only source for this. We have less to work with here than we had with the baptism. John relates nothing at all. Mark states simply that Jesus was in the wilderness forty days tempted by Satan and attended by angels and wild animals – no specific mention even of fasting. It is only Luke and Matthew who have the more involved temptation account (similar enough in the two to presumably be derived from Quelle).

The question is not whether or not Jesus retired to the wilderness and later related the event to his followers, but rather what to make of the Quelle account of his temptation by Satan. Did Jesus relate this? Or did someone else fabricate it? Mark may have no mention of it, but there is no contradiction – nor even any inherent inconsistency – between Mark and these fuller accounts. My conclusion was that either Jesus related this temptation account to his followers as an event he experienced or he told his followers a parable that eventually evolved into it. In either case Jesus himself was the likely source, and I found myself tending toward the parable theory in light of what I had discovered regarding the baptism.

It must have been around this time that I set out to determine how much of Jesus' ministry could be explained in natural, as opposed to supernatural, terms. It has for years been as clear to me as to most everyone else that certain afflictions he combated, afflictions described in the gospels as demon possession, were not at all of any such supernatural nature, but were various mental illnesses easily diagnosed today. Most Christians already accept this, even if they avoid confronting the matter head on. My purpose now was to investigate the other miraculous phenomena and my methodology for this can be divided into two categories: that which I initially followed and which rated the gospels, particularly Mark

and Luke, as essentially reliable; and that which I later followed and which rated the gospels as tending more toward sincerity than actual reliability.

Jesus' miracles fall into different categories: some, the majority by far, are healing; a couple are full-fledged resurrections (his own included); and some are simply wondrous acts. Besides Jesus' miracles, the Biblical gospels record angelic visitations and various minor supernatural phenomena such as the conceptions of Jesus and John the Baptist, the healings at the Pool of Siloam, the rending of the veil, the earthquake at Jesus' death and the appearance then too of numbers of dead. I have already touched on the exorcisms; some of the other healings can be seen in the same light – the mind, inspired and empowered by faith (genuine faith, as opposed to mere hope), super-activating the healing process in the body. Remember that there is much even today that modern medicine cannot explain in the interaction of mind and body resulting in healing. Certain healings may have been nothing more than Jesus telling charlatans to quit cheating people: when he tells some street beggar that his sins are forgiven and then says this is synonymous with telling him to get up and walk, could this not be his clever way – later misinterpreted as supernatural – of pointing out a scam? There are still a few healings left unexplained, ones like giving sight to a man blind from birth.

Jesus' wondrous acts are less easily addressed, and to do so thoroughly one would almost have to consider each and every one individually. Some can be seen simply as natural phenomena misinterpreted, things like calming the sea and the cursing of the fig tree. Some, like the Ascension, which is reported only by Luke (Mark's interpolation doesn't count), lack strong evidence. There is one I consider an excellent candidate for alteration by miscommunication, this being Jesus' walking on the water (which I suspect to have been swimming – still a wondrous act considering that a storm was raging); and this one, though otherwise backed by strong evidence, interestingly is excluded by Luke who presumably rejected it after his further investigation. The only one that I ultimately found no way of explaining via natural means was Jesus' feeding of the five thousand; to this day I have come up with no satisfying explanation for this one other than that it did not occur as described – yet the witness evidence in support of it is particularly strong and credible.

I'm not going to go into even the slightest detail addressing all the minor supernatural phenomena, other than Jesus' conception. Human perception at the time of Jesus' ministry was very different from what it is today. Science has given us a different foundation of perspective from that the ancients had, as well as a far higher threshold for credulity in any supernaturally-oriented account or the possibility of a supernatural explanation for any particular event. However, before I look at the virgin conception I am going to tackle the granddaddy of all miracles: Jesus' resurrection. It had become increasingly clear to me that this one event, along with the apostles' and gospel-writers' belief in its veracity, had created the context for acceptance of all Jesus' other reputed miracles and generated an atmosphere in which not only was the supernatural explanation preferred over the natural, but even scepticism toward supposedly supernatural aspects was discouraged to the point of being disallowed.

The resurrection is the centerpiece of Christianity. No resurrection, no Christianity. Simple as that. The resurrection has always been Christianity's greatest argument. Nothing else, absolutely nothing else, adequately explains why a disheartened, frightened, leaderless and half-scattered band of followers such as were Jesus' would regroup in the teeth of certain persecution to enunciate a new religion which did not reflect the aspirations they felt and saw themselves as pursuing even to the very eve of their leader's crucifixion. Whatever else may have happened during Jesus' ministry, I will guarantee you this: he was crucified and then certified dead by a Roman soldier; he was laid out in a tomb by a few devoted followers; and a couple days later he got up out of that tomb on his own two feet. Jesus believed that he had died and was resurrected from the dead. His followers believed that he had died and was resurrected from the dead. And the gospel writers believed that he had died and was resurrected from the dead. Nothing but this belief, which was backed and strengthened by the evidence of their own eyes, ears and even hands, could have motivated Jesus' followers to pull themselves together and go on to found the Christian religion.

This is not to say that Jesus died and was resurrected. He did die, but it was not on the cross. And when he did die, he stayed dead just like everyone else does. Jesus didn't die on the cross; rather, he came

about as close to death there as a person can come without actually dying. The centurion who certified his death made a mistake. Jesus was still alive, comatose perhaps, but still alive. He may have been at death's door when he was buried, but he was still barely in the land of the living. So when he was "resurrected from the dead," he was not actually resurrected; instead he revived, returned from a near-death experience. Why do I say all this? Let's look at the evidence:

1. Mark describes Jesus being placed on the cross at the third hour of the day and dying at the ninth hour, and the other Biblical gospels support this time scheme. Mark states that when Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for permission to bury Jesus' body, Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Contrast this statement of Mark's with Matthew's and Luke's silence regarding Pilate's surprise. The two latter writers were both clearly sensitive to the argument that Jesus had not actually died on the cross and they accordingly sanitized, slightly, this material taken from Mark. Such sensitivity proves nothing at all; however, it is evidence that both Matthew and Luke were aware that Jesus' crucifixion came to a quick enough conclusion that the perception that he did not actually die on the cross existed and was not unreasonable.

2. For what it's worth, seeing as how unreliable I finally determined John to be in general, it should be pointed out that he clearly states that the crucifixion was brought to a hurried conclusion because of the impending Sabbath and furthermore that, while the legs of the two men flanking Jesus were broken, his legs were left unbroken. Although John uses these two facts (if they are that) in an explanation demonstrating that Jesus actually died and especially that the manner of his death fulfilled prophecies, they are nevertheless evidence (if they are true) that can be used in contending that he survived crucifixion. That Jesus' unbroken bones and his pierced side are both bogus prophecy fulfillments tells in favour of their veracity.

3. Mark gives Jesus' last words as, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" Matthew reproduces this. However, Luke replaces it with, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." And John's version is, "It is finished." Neither of these two latter sanitizations of a confusing, if not blasphemous, statement (when coming from the purported perfect Son of God) is evidence of Jesus' condition. Rather, they are evidence of how doctrinal considerations had a bearing on gospel composition.

4. Neither Mark nor Luke nor John reports the posting of a guard at Jesus' tomb. Only Matthew does. This is a highly suspect assertion and only made worse by the claim that the Jews paid off the guards to spread the rumour that they fell asleep while on duty. It seems clear that this material was manufactured to combat false rumours circulating in Jerusalem concerning the disposition of Jesus' body. While in a technical sense one could make it fit with the other gospel accounts, in essence it contradicts them and if Matthew could be put on the witness stand he would be torn to pieces on it in cross-examination. If there was any truth to it (and it was likely a counter-rumour that Matthew set down, not his own fabrication), Luke would certainly have recorded it, as would have the Jerusalem-wise John. Again, this gives no evidence of Jesus' condition; it only serves to impeach Matthew to some degree and expose what happens when doctrinal considerations are at stake.

5. Mark, excluding the final twelve verses of the book as a later interpolation, has an empty tomb and an angelically-relayed message from a risen Jesus to meet him in Galilee, but no Jesus and subsequently no ascension. This is the most pristine, most credible, account. Matthew has Jesus meeting the eleven remaining disciples in Galilee and commissioning them; also no ascension. Luke has a very questionable meeting on the road to Emmaus and then a much more credible meeting with all eleven disciples in Jerusalem; he finishes with the ascension, the only gospel account (also includes Acts) suggesting such a departure. John gives a considerable and questionable post-resurrection fellowship, but no ascension.

It seems clear that there was an empty tomb, and that this was no doing of the disciples because it alone had such a great impact on them. It also would appear that Jesus did meet again with them. Though Mark concludes before recording such a meeting, it obviously suggests that this did take place. All three other gospels clearly relate such a meeting. But then what happened? Did Jesus ascend to heaven, die or simply disappear? Only Luke records an ascension, and he undoubtedly believed it too. The fact that the interpolated conclusion to Mark is a summary of Luke's conclusion shows that a hallowed ending was

becoming ever more necessary as the years went by and doctrine developed. That Jesus lived much longer is belied by the disciples' decision to proceed on their own seven weeks or so after his crucifixion, as well as their choosing of a replacement for Judas, something far more properly done by Jesus himself, had he been alive, available and capable, than left to the drawing of lots. That Jesus died and the disciples had knowledge of his death is refuted by their intense belief in the second coming. In fact, it is this belief in his second coming, developed undoubtedly from the simple expectation of his imminent return, which reveals the mystery of his departure. Jesus did not ascend to heaven, he did not die surrounded by his disciples and he did not go off somewhere to live out his days: he received mortal wounds during his crucifixion experience and after a short period of revival he succumbed and died, likely alone, perhaps even having gone off to the wilderness.

Is my accounting of Jesus' crucifixion and "resurrection" correct? It certainly explains the strength of the disciples' faith, which resulted in the genesis of Christianity. It also gives a reasonable theory and outline of post-"resurrection" events, clearly a weak point of Christianity. The fact is that a thoroughly definitive answer is probably forever out of reach barring significant scholarly or archaeological discoveries. The Biblical gospel-writers did not hold the view I now espouse and those who followed them eventually eradicated virtually all evidence that did not cleave to the orthodox line. However, a re-evaluation of the various gospels in light of the decipherment principles I have recorded does result in a perception of them that no longer requires the suspension of either one's disbelief or one's adherence to a scientific interpretation of reality.

Let's return now to the beginning, or more precisely, the virgin birth. Mark records nothing earlier than the ministry of John the Baptist. We have already seen that I discount Matthew almost entirely in his nativity material. The only significant thing about Matthew's account is its very existence. Why did Matthew include this material that Mark had seen no need to address? There could be both a positive reason and a negative reason. The positive reason is that as doctrine developed and Jesus was elevated ever higher, it seemed appropriate that he was the actual offspring of God. This would mesh nicely with his utterances concerning the fatherhood of God, utterances which I contend that he applied to all people (as in "Our Father which art in heaven") and to himself in the singular only as one of many children of God, yet which could easily be morphed into a retro-application solely to himself and later to include the rest of mankind only because of his undertaking on our behalf. The negative reason is that rumours were circulating that Jesus was illegitimate, and this situation was not helped by the identification in Mark of Jesus while at Nazareth as the son of Mary. As late as the Church Fathers this identification resonated embarrassingly. Were it not for the reaction out of Matthew – and Luke – the possibility of Jesus' illegitimacy may have remained essentially under the horizon. In and of itself, this reaction gives the possibility credibility; then, completely without their intention, and even against their intention, both these writers give the strongest evidence available of such illegitimacy: they both state that Joseph was not the natural father of Jesus and furthermore, that Mary became pregnant with Jesus prior to her being married to Joseph. Let's see how Luke looks in light of this illegitimacy theory.

Luke's nativity material has considerable credibility. It has an immediate, personal ring to it, as if he is recording Mary's words after interviewing her himself. It is possible he did this; however, that is somewhat unlikely. Luke composed his gospel in about 60 AD. By that time Mary would have been around seventy years old, quite an old age for those times. More likely is that Luke got his material from one of Mary's children, perhaps James. This could mean one of two things: being so directly relayed, it could be a faithful representation of Mary's words; or it could be that both doctrinal considerations and familial pride or loyalty aligned to compel James to fabricate an account that could never have been suggested while Mary herself still lived. Even if Mary herself was the source for this material it is possible (but I'd say unlikely) that she consciously fabricated it; far more likely, in my opinion, would be a scenario where, in response to the shame she felt and the condemnation she experienced from society, she initially fantasized various alternate realities that resulted in her first pregnancy, and then after Jesus' crucifixion, "resurrection" and disappearance she allowed one of these to become fixed and develop in her mind to the point that she herself basically believed it. People will believe, actually believe for all means and purposes, the most incredible things when they fit their inclinations and interests. As for me

and the virgin birth, I am inclined to believe that Jesus was in fact merely illegitimate: if there is one thing about witness testimony, it is that those details coming from a witness which conflict with his interests are the very ones that most likely contain the truth. For what it's worth – virtually zilch – there is record of an ancient Jewish assertion that Jesus was illegitimate and his father was a Roman soldier named Pantera.

I have touched a couple times on my new thinking toward John. Why have I become so disillusioned with this dear old friend of mine? The baptism issue is harder on John than on the other writers who reflected doctrinal development. That led me to re-examine this gospel with a very critical eye. There are two particularly problematic miracles in John: the turning water into wine and the resurrecting of Lazarus. Neither of these is mentioned in the other gospels; perhaps the water into wine could be thus overlooked, but certainly not Lazarus, especially coming just before the passion. Furthermore, Jesus' miracles were almost exclusively of a nature to meet people's needs, rather than wants; the water into wine, as a grudging response on Jesus' part to make up for a shortfall in the beverage supply for a wedding celebration, is jarringly out of key with the general tone of Jesus' miracles. Another thing about John is the timeline: theologians have greedily and gratefully seized on this as welcome enlightenment on the chronology of Jesus' ministry – which it may be, but which it may also distort terribly. Only John has Jesus driving money-changers from the temple early in his ministry: is this accurate, or is it an erroneous insertion? Only John has Jesus in Jerusalem numerous times during his ministry: why? Only John provides information that leads us to conclude that Jesus' ministry lasted three years: should we trust it? While it is not impossible to reconcile these things with the basic scheme of the other three Biblical gospels, such reconciliation requires more creativity than credibility should allow. I get the impression reading John that it was written by a Jerusalemite, not a Galilean; yet I am also convinced that it truly was written by John. Many people have wondered, reading the words of Jesus as recorded by John, whether we are hearing Jesus speak or John himself. There are numerous similarities in this area to the other gospels, but significant differences as well. I think that a little of both views comes closest to the truth here. Paul's expression of Christian thought is close enough to John's that, unless Paul got his exclusively from John (which I doubt), both are derived from Jesus. Yet it seems clear to me that John has put words into Jesus' mouth in numerous instances, whether completely unintentionally (false memory) or to fill what he later saw as gaps that would be confusing or misleading. Overall, I am left unable to determine what in John to trust. I believe that in many, perhaps most, ways it reflects Jesus' thinking, where his thinking is shown – though this obviously excludes those aspects, like Jesus' divinity, which are almost certainly later doctrinal developments. I also believe that many of the events in John occurred; but the problem here is to know which ones, because I believe equally that many are fabrications. It is easy enough to go through and redact everything that is either miraculous or supportive of John's agenda – and maybe this would result in an accurate residue – but the problem with this approach is separating “John's agenda” from the rest of John, which necessitates the imposition of one's own perspective (or agenda?). For instance, I believe that Jesus began as John the Baptist's disciple and that after John's imprisonment by Herod many of his (John's) disciples coalesced around Jesus and became the core of his (Jesus') own following. Since this view diminishes Jesus' uniqueness (divinity), I accordingly see it as part of the apostle John's agenda to downplay the continuity of this group that has looked to both Jesus and John the Baptist for leadership (and especially John the Baptist's seniority in this regard) on the one hand, and on the other to magnify (by lengthening) Jesus' ministry. I am eternally intrigued by the apostle John's numerous placements of Jesus in Jerusalem: could this be wholesale fabrication, or could it be entirely true and overlooked in the other gospels, or could it represent some of Jesus' pre-ministry travels, perhaps in the company only of the apostle John or one or two more friends? It may be impossible to learn the truth.

I could go on ad infinitum picking out a thread here, a detail there, to further illustrate why my thinking has now become what it is on Jesus. I think I've shared enough with you for you to form an opinion – either way – as to my reasoning. I reiterate that, whereas I am thrilled to discover truth, this particular truth I find bittersweet. I wish that I did not believe it, could avoid believing it. Unfortunately, my analysis of the subject precludes such a response. I no longer intend to write a ‘Life of Christ,’ authoritatively orthodox or otherwise (“otherwise,” in this case, likely being synonymous for “reviled”). I

would write a 'Life of Jesus,' but I could hardly bear to follow the time-honoured tradition of having "my" Jesus fit into – indeed, exemplify – the prevailing ideals and prejudices of society, especially the ideals and prejudices of our society today. This letter to you may in fact be the sum total of my expression on the topic. So let me conclude now with what may be my most fascinating discovery of all here.

Jesus was passionate, sacrificing himself entirely for his passion, and knowing full well what he was doing. And what was this passion of his? Theology. Jesus lived and breathed God, the study of God, the pursuit after God. He knew the Jewish Scriptures like a Supreme Court justice knows the constitution. And what he had discerned, along with his identification of the pre-eminence of love ("God is love" may be the words of John, but the sentiment certainly originated with Jesus), was the logical culmination of Jewish religious ritual, specifically animal sacrifice, in one climactic act of human sacrifice. Jesus saw this all-fulfilling act as signalling the end of history, as ushering in the kingdom of God on earth for all eternity. "Greater love hath no man than that he lay down his life for his friends," said Jesus, and likely wondered if he would pass the test when the time came. Throughout the Biblical gospels we find references to Jesus' coming death, often with the remark that the disciples did not comprehend him when he talked about this. Probably some of these references are fabricated, and certainly some of them were enhanced to match events after the fact; all the same, there is a kernel of truth here: Jesus was a man on a mission, a mission to sacrifice himself at least for the "children of God," if not for all of mankind as well. Did he consider himself perfect, a sinless sacrifice? I doubt it. I expect this was a later doctrinal development. I expect that he made every effort to be perfect, particularly once he fully enunciated to himself his mission. However, I also expect he kept the fact of his own human-ness in mind and would have considered himself to be an acceptable sacrifice to God on the basis of both his pursuit after purity and his conscious willingness to surrender his life. His standard, as applied to himself, would be similar to what the priests would apply to sacrificial lambs: in using terms like 'spotless' and 'without blemish,' they were, for practical purposes, meaning the best available, because nothing is perfect, absolutely perfect.

Jesus' determination to sacrifice himself, out of love for his people or all of mankind, explains a couple otherwise confusing things. What was the role of Judas, the forever-reviled Judas? The other disciples obviously did not suspect him to be a traitor; they were in the dark even when Jesus revealed that he would be betrayed. If Jesus was not divine, and so divinely-enlightened, he would not have been so on-top-of-things during the last supper and in Gethsemane as the Biblical gospels portray him. And if Judas was such a backstabber, why would he commit suicide upon Jesus' seeming death when all the other disciples were scattering and denying association with their leader? The solution to the enigma is that Jesus orchestrated Judas' actions to ensure his own sacrifice would come about; and Judas, likely with reservations, went along with it in the hope he was helping to usher in God's kingdom. Then when he saw the only outcome was his friend-and-master's death and humiliation, it was more than he could bear and he committed suicide.

Also explained are Jesus' words: 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' Though Jesus was willing to sacrifice himself, and did in fact do so, he likely had a sneaking hunch too that once he had finally and certainly proved himself to God (and to himself, for that matter), God would then intervene a la Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac. As Jesus hung there on the cross and felt himself finally slipping away, he uttered the words that had been weighing ever more heavily on his mind as the hours lengthened through the afternoon, words at once plaintive and indignant, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

Imagine, now, with this perspective on Jesus, what his reaction would have been to waking after his crucifixion to find himself in a tomb, alive in a tomb. Would he not think that his sacrifice was thus certified by his resulting resurrection? What other explanation could he possibly gravitate to? When he came up out of that tomb of course it was his immediate goal to rejoin his disciples and reinforce to them the things he had said to them before, things he had probably said somewhat tentatively. It was also natural for him to think in terms of going to Galilee; business in Jerusalem was complete and it was time to head home. What an extraordinary end to an extraordinary quest by a most extraordinary man!

My dear Theophilus, whatever the truth may be concerning Jesus, I share my thoughts with you knowing that you will wish to investigate the matter yourself. I will be happy for you if you are able to

refute in your own mind my line of thinking. As for me, all the theologians in the world could not budge me now from this point of view. I have seen too much of witnesses to deny the words they mean, and mean not, to say.

Your friend,
Gary

