

Why the Gospels are Not Myth

The Standard Model utterly fails to explain why we must exchange a stereoscopic Apostolic Christ for a modern zoo of psychologically determined christs. The Standard Model insists that the Apostolic Christ is nothing but a psychological projection and that the *real*, historical Jesus has simply dropped out of historical view. It insists that all that is left to the historian is the certain knowledge that Jesus cannot be the *Apostolic* Christ. This is a very suspicious historical perspective.¹ As before, Protestantism has wearied the world with who Jesus cannot be. What the world needs now is a convincing idea of who Jesus is. One thing is for certain: whatever sort of ordinary historical Jesus we assume as the starting point of our modern theory, we must also end with an ordinary psychological and literary theory of how the Apostles all evolved such an extraordinarily unified, "non-historical" Jesus. At first the Standard Model seems to work pretty well. The idea that the gospels projected their *own* personalities and religious "holy man" ideals upon Christ, such that we have a Matthean Christ and a Johannine Christ, could account for the distinctive differences in perspectives of each Gospel. The problem comes in when the Standard Model fails to extract a lowest common denominator Jesus from these four psychological projections - despite the fact that we live in a literary age in which men pride themselves on their ability to make critical psychological evaluations. These evaluations should yield comprehensive insights on what motivated individual Gospels and their formative communities. But so far, we have nothing - except a statement of denial: 'we have not found the historical Jesus. We know not from whence he is.'²

The Standard Model assumes a theological evolution which has been projected upon the memory of the historical Christ. This projection is alleged to have begun with the Gospels and elaborately continued by the Apostle Paul. But this model has produced no comprehensive and credible theory about where such a theology could have come from, nor has it been able to extract a credible "historical" Jesus from this process of projection and elaboration. How could Paul have invented a complex, lawless religion in the face of his Pharisaical training? There are no circumstantial motives present in the text. What happened to Paul does not look like a theological evolution. One day he is killing Christians. The next he is arguing in the Synagogues that Jesus is the Christ. It will not do to say that he had an epiphany about a lawless religion on the one hand and then to accuse him of an excessively legalistic Christianity on the other. And if Paul *did* dream up this vast theological system in the depths of his own, tortured psychology, how did he single-handedly win over Peter, Matthew and Mark, proud, but bigoted Jews - and so many of the other Apostles?

¹ When one begins looking into such claims, one is immediately confronted with a profound skepticism about all of history, and not just about the historical Christ.

² John 9:29b

Nevertheless, let us ignore for the moment that the Standard Model does not know what the true historical Jesus looks like. Let us assume, for the moment, that the Jesus of history is some variant of the "good liberal", preaching some variant of modern existentialism far ahead of his time. The question now is: how did such an ordinary religious existentialist of history become the miracle-working, only-begotten son of God in the minds of the Apostles? If the Apostolic accounts cannot be taken at face value, the ordinary historical researcher seems to be limited to the following two alternatives in explaining such a disjuncture:

The Apostles foisted a community myth upon the data: that is, everyone knew that Christ's body was eaten by dogs, but that the "spiritual" Christ was raised in some metaphysically parallel universe. Even though the accounts all seem to say, in the most restrictive and ordinary sense, that Jesus fed 5000 men, what *really* happened was that his teaching that man does not live by bread alone so suddenly caught on in this very large assembly, that these people began to realize that it was as if they had all eaten, become full and had twelve baskets of fragments left over.

This hypothesis encounters the following difficulties:

1) Roman and Greek myths come from the upper class. Literalism comes from fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes and religious legalists. Folk culture does not originate legend and myth - it can only perpetuate it.

There is no coherent evidence that the Apostolic Christ has any direct linkage to a parent, established myth. It is *like* the "corn-god" myths. It is *like* Isis and Osiris. But there is no religious mentality pregnant to deliver such a myth into the lower class of Palestine of that time.

2) It projects a Cartesian worldview of dualism upon the apostolic mind. This phenomenon is described as *logomorphism*, which is the tendency to project modern ways of thinking back into a logical age.³ For example, the religious existentialism of the modern age, with its two-tiered conception of truth⁴ appears to be completely unknown to the Apostolic community of the first century. This is everywhere present in the way that the authors of the New Testament Documents are completely aware of the parabolic nature of language itself; i.e., they do not childishly play with language - they are conscious of all the rhetorical categories - of myth and parable, figures and types, discursively logical and poetically metaphorical. And the major players of the stories are ordinary people - who knew the difference between normal and abnormal - who knew that virgins don't get pregnant.

³ Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction*. Wesleyan University Press. 1973. Pg. 90 (c 1928 Faber and Gwyer, Ltd.)

⁴ This phenomenon was explored at great length and with considerable precision in Francis A. Schaeffer's thesis in *The God Who is There* and *Escape From Reason*. (c 1968, IVP)

There is no blurring in the Apostolic narratives between fantasy and reality of the kind which exists in the modern mind. There are no unimaginably unintuitive quantum theories of parallel universes in the Apostolic mind. Either a cat is dead or it is not dead - not dead and alive at the same time - as in some modern ideas of physics. There are no "virtual realities" in which history itself is a shadowy abstraction. There is no "paranormal". There is no reheated Persian pantheism which says that the world is all an illusion or a dream of God. The world of the Apostles was hard and real - just as it was to Aristotle. Yes, it was populated with a pantheon of spirits. But these spirits were as real as rocks. There is no word for "real" in the Greek. The Apostolic world simply did not conceive of a metaphysical, modern world of improvable parallel "dark" universes, dark energy and dark matter which comes popping in and out of existence. The alleged myth-making of the Apostles looks very much like the projected face of the superstitions of the modern mind.⁵

3) It contradicts the expressly stated purpose and reporting methodology of the Apostolic community. All the Apostles are quite aware that there was an "invisible" world everywhere interpenetrating the visible world, but in their witness to the events concerning Christ, it is made perfectly clear that there is no attempt to confuse the two - there is no confounding of "spiritual sight" with physical sight: *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life.*⁶ And this is precisely the reporting methodology which the Apostles say that Christ commanded: *Then Jesus answering said unto them, Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached.*⁷ It is the same method assumed when Christ chides Nicodemus: *If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?*⁸ And this method is assumed when Christ condemns the self-inflicted blindness of the religious establishment of the day: *You hypocrites, you can discern the face of the sky and of the earth; but how is it that you do not discern this time?*⁹

⁵ It may be suspected that the true modern, psychological motive force behind this blind projection is the unwavering commitment to a pantheistic universe - that Jesus *could* not have been representative of any other reality. That Jesus could have *only* been teaching that his two "worlds" were the worlds of deceptive sense and the incomprehensible "other" wherein all things are god. But the other world of Jesus is a very busy place. It is populated with the same sorts of concrete particulars that inhabit *this* world - angels, for example, and the souls of just men made perfect, who have each been given a "white stone" individuality" that no man can know save himself and God. The suspicion rests on the common unreality of the sensible world between "modern" science and pantheism. And there is a common reductionism at work in both this "eastern" religious ethos and the new "western" scientific epistemology. Higher level structures are dismissed in search of a singular and more elementary (reductionist) *real* force back of all things.

⁶ I John 1:1

⁷ Luke 7:22

⁸ John 3:12

⁹ Luke 12:56

4) The Apostles could not have been using “myth” as an argument to prove that the supernatural did exist, because in the first century, the existence of the “supernatural” was a universal assumption. The *modern* presumption that the supernatural cannot exist does not fit with the climate of the time. The significance of miracles in the Gospel stories was not that they “really” occurred as opposed to only seeming¹⁰ to occur. The emphasis was on the nature, magnitude and coherence of the miracles. For example, Herod surmised that Jesus might be John the Baptist returning from the dead. This was a superstitious world. It is illogical to suppose that the Apostles felt compelled to “prove” a supernatural one.

5) The Apostles were psychologically incapable of producing a myth of such intensity, creativity and durability. Modern theories place the apostolic myth in conflict with the “historical Christ.” But if the Apostles did not get the myth from the historical Christ, where *did* they get it? From some clever, gnostic Essene-like secret cult? Then why do the makers of a very clever and consistent myth portray themselves as unenlightened fools? Whether the Apostolic Christ be right or wrong, the fact remains that the Apostles have created a religion that far, far surpasses any of the tepid “historical jesuses” which have been recently “discovered.”

6) The Gospels do not look like the Greek, Roman or Pseudo-Gospel myth. The pseudo-canonical writings illustrate this. There, the miracles are the main attraction. They are fantastic, unrelated and almost certainly false. With the NT writers, everything is different. One gets the sense that if they all had to choose between presenting the historical Christ-event or relating the miracle accounts, they would have unhesitatingly dropped the miracles. This also explains the inattention to major details, the cavalier attitude about “accuracy”, the incidental stuff still embedded in the pericopies (like bending down to draw in the sand, or the young man that fled away naked in the garden) and the unflinching, almost uncaring inclusion of the utter foolishness of the apostles themselves. The poetically unrelated fantastical flights of fancy (for example, Heracles) are missing in the Gospels. The significant thing is not that documents like *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* exist; the significant thing is that similar undisciplined literary excursions are rigidly excluded from the four Gospels. There is a distinct genre difference. The earliest observable phenomena of canon formation betrays the fact that others saw this genre difference too. When authorship could not be fixed by reliable testimony as having originated within the Apostolic cadre, this genre criterion was always valid in helping to determine authorship. In such cases it is reasonable to assume that apocryphal writings were rejected by the post-apostolic community not primarily because of their fantastical, mythical content as such, but because it was believed that such content could not have come from an Apostolic hand.¹¹

¹⁰ This subsequently became relevant to some extent with the Docetists and the Gnostics who believed that the establishment had confused appearance with reality.

¹¹ This helps explain why Revelation was among the disputed books for a time.

7) There was insufficient time for a myth-making community racked by the Jew/Gentile controversy and the Paul/James theological dispute to generate a mythical overlay of such uniformity. This community did not exhibit the characteristics of “group-think.” The Synoptics, for example, all take casual liberty paraphrasing factual details of what happened. One writer softens this; another hardens that, but the uniformity is undeniable and inexplicable. There was insufficient time for a “faith community” to arise that could account for this uniformity. Additionally, there are no visible “mind-guards” to prevent the kind of diversity that we do see and to prevent the presentation of other internal community conflicts and embarrassments such as Paul’s censure of Peter, Paul’s dispute with Mark, the early unrest in an apartied Jerusalem Church between Jew and Gentile, and Peter’s betrayal of Christ. Paul’s justification by faith is unceremoniously juxtapositioned with James’ justification by works. No intermediate argument exists in the New Testament documents attempting to reconcile these two positions - which would immediately suggest a revision or “norming” of the facts by a “faith community”. Internal to the documents, there is witness to such an authoritative community, but there is insufficient time to account for this authoritative community apart from the mechanism which the documents themselves affirm. If the Apostolic community was not constituted by the historical, Apostolic figure of Christ – where did it come from? And it is not only that a relatively uniform, authoritative set of beliefs about Jesus has to be achieved in a few ticks of the sociological clock. If the genre of the Gospel is myth, we must also account for a *multi-tiered* uniformity. First there must have been a theological consensus (the “good liberal”, the “apocalyptic radical”, “the lamb of God” etc.). Then there must also be the uniformity of the mythological overlay that was projected upon this consensus.

8) The Apostolic community had no official community theological *system* to “protect”. In the case of the evolving community that we see in the Luke/ Acts sequence, whether one starts with Mary’s hymn of praise, or Paul’s warnings about worldly wisdom in Corinthians and Colossians, there is a very strong sense that sophisticated and elite theological systems are things to be very strongly wary of. This was a community that did not embrace a theological system so much as it embraced an unsystematized cluster of beliefs. Their primitive creeds are lists of beliefs which mixed items of historical fact with theological idea: *For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep.*¹² But the fundamentalism of this community is nevertheless severe. Regarding the core of what *was* taught - there is nothing but intolerance for dissent. By contrast, the oracles and visions behind the classical myths were only *partly* believed by the Greeks and Romans, and so their

¹² | Corinthians 15:3-6

writers felt free to aggressively manipulate even the core facts of their myths in order to preserve and protect their theory of history from political sabotage.¹³

9) There are no linguistic hints in the primary materials that the NT Documents are mythological abstractions of perfectly normal sensory events. In a myth, the author is invisible. But in the Gospel materials, we find the author having a dialogue with the reader because the author was a *participant* in the very story that he is telling. The myth, once it has been created, reads like a nursery story - full of one-dimensional flat facts - like an old wife's tale. But in the NT literature, there is a rich variety of multi-layered "poetic diction", that is, ordinary figures of speech, which betrays its non-mythical character. In myth, there is very little psychologizing because mythical heroes are not men of flesh and blood. But in Acts, the sophisticated subtleties of interpersonal machination is clearly evident, especially as Luke accurately portrays how Paul is delivered up the chain of command to Caesar through Lysius, Festus, and Agrippa.

10) That Christianity soon found itself in a titanic struggle with Docetism and Gnosticism shows that it was a cluster of historically rooted beliefs that was absolutely intolerant of a mythical reinterpretation.

The Apostles did not embrace myth or religious abstraction. They vehemently fought against it. At every point of contact, the second and third generation Church violently opposed the mythical systems of Docetism specifically, and Gnosticism generally, on the grounds that the historical facts about Christ, as well as the authority and succession of his Bishops, could be established and authenticated on ordinary, rational grounds. Succeeding Bishops were soon to argue that if the Apostles secretly embraced a mythological docetism¹⁴, then they utterly failed to pass it on to their immediate successors. One can see a battle against these mythical interpretations in the very text of I John: *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life.*¹⁵ One can also see a rigid intolerance against religious abstraction in Paul early in his preaching: *Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain...And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.*¹⁶ Surely, if the Apostles were consciously projecting a mythological, theological abstraction upon a perfectly ordinary stream of historical events, despite these statements, they would have been guilty of a conspiratorial hypocrisy of unimaginable proportions.

¹³ Just as today we use "idealized" history to accomplish the same thing.

¹⁴ Elsewhere called the "Apostolic Secret"

¹⁵ I John 1:1

¹⁶ I Corinthians 15:12-14,17 And Paul reiterates this censure against religious abstraction in his last letter to Timothy: *But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some.* (II Tim 2:16-18)

The Apostles were lying.

This hypothesis encounters the following difficulties:

1) The Apostles were incapable of the moral turpitude required to falsely claim literality for a wholly untrue abstraction. There is insufficient motive. One can imagine an investigator falsifying evidence in the name of justice, or a politician bearing false witness against his opponent for the good of the people. But the massive duplicity required in this case could not have arisen from a band of fishermen that went back to their fishing profession immediately after the crucifixion, who, when they finally *did* tell the story, uniformly portrayed themselves as morally defective fools.

2) Men do not give their lives for a lie or a myth. One figurehead man may die for a lie if he is crazy, but not a significant percentage of the leadership. A modern American Liberal, who has completely re-mythologized the cluster of Apostolic beliefs, would have no difficulty in denying the "literal" divinity of Christ (the virgin birth, etc.), and no difficulty in affirming the "functional" divinity of Caesar (since "we are all God's children") - if *he* had been faced by Roman persecution. Yet the early martyrs did not escape death in this way. They doggedly clung to ordinary propositional creedal statements when a simple admission that these statements were mythical or metaphorical in character would have saved them.

Conclusion: The NT accounts are not mythical in nature because the Apostolic community:

1. had no coherent social linkages with a parent myth.
2. did not have the necessary Cartesian worldview.
3. expressly stated that its message was not mythical in nature.
4. had no necessity to "prove" the existence of something (the supernatural) which was universally assumed.
5. was incapable of producing a more "interesting" Christ than any of the sub-historical jesuses produced by modern research.
6. failed to produce documents which conform to the classical genre of myth (for example: no fantastical flights of poetic fancy).
7. did not have time to eliminate its own internal struggles, let alone create a seamless, multi-tiered, uniform, mythological "Christ of Faith" which seven ecumenical councils of world-wise men and eighteen hundred years of Christendom mistook as fact.
8. had no theological system to "protect" from revisionism, especially in view of the fact that the struggle to understand what had happen is still going on within the documents themselves.

9. employed a full range of poetic diction without any linguistic trace of a two-tiered, rigidly compartmentalized, gnostic use of language - and found itself *immediately* embroiled with the myth oriented systems of Docetism and Gnosticism.