

GOD?

**A Supplement to
Leaving Christianity**

**Two More Essays
by Jeff Lewis**

This is a supplement to the first print edition of the book, Leaving Christianity, by Jeff Lewis. Both of these essays are included in the second and third print editions.

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Standards of Evidence for Religion

I've often written that I could be convinced of a religion given enough evidence. I suppose it would be fair to discuss just what that evidence would be.

Basically, anything that could be defined as truly miraculous would count as evidence toward a god. This includes fulfilled prophecies, occurrences that are counter to the laws of nature, direct manifestation of the divine, a scripture that contained knowledge that couldn't have been known at the time it was written, etc¹.

However, there are many caveats. First, the evidence that the miracle occurred must be strong and convincing (as Carl Sagan said, "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.") For example, consider the case of Prahlad Jani². He's an Indian yogi who claims that he's gone 70 years without eating or drinking. A doctor has even performed some tests, observing Jani for 9 days in a hospital, supposedly without food or water, thereby confirming the claims. Unfortunately, the tests are questionable. The doctor didn't use the best methodology, and he wouldn't let another investigator who had experience exposing frauds be involved in the study. From the best information that outsiders have been able to gather, it appears that Jani's just a normal person, who had been eating normally up until his time in the hospital, and then began suffering from the effects of dehydration and starvation while he was there.

As another example, consider Ram Bahadur Bomjan³, who some claim is the reincarnation of the Buddha, and who others claim (since according to Buddhism, *the* Buddha has already achieved nirvana) is a Bodhisattva. Bomjan has supposedly sat under a tree meditating for months on end, with no food or water. However, there's no good evidence to back the claims up. There was even a screen put in front of him every night, hiding his actions. When the Discovery Channel sent a film crew to make a documentary, they couldn't detect his heat with an infrared camera the first night they tried (makes you wonder if he'd been leaving every night all along). On a second attempt, they did observe him to go without food for 96 hours, but while four days of fasting is a feat, it's hardly miraculous.

¹ The website, Ebon Musings, has a page titled *The Theist's Guide to Converting Atheists*, which contains a similar discussion, and was a sort of springboard for this essay.

<http://www.ebonmusings.org/atheism/theistguide.html>

² [http://www.esowatch.com/en/index.php?title=Prahlad Jani](http://www.esowatch.com/en/index.php?title=Prahlad_Jani)

<http://www.skeptdic.com/skeptimedia/skeptimedia90.html>

³ <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,450564,00.html>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ram Bahadur Bomjon#Feats of inedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ram_Bahadur_Bomjon#Feats_of_inedia)

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So, the evidence that the miracle occurred must be strong and convincing. It can't be merely hearsay.

As another caveat, the miracle really should be something that's unexplainable by natural processes. This rules out those events that fall into the realm of unlikely, but not impossible. While my chances of winning the lottery may be a million to one, somebody still manages to win every week. In other words, given enough opportunities, unlikely events will inevitably happen to someone. I think one of my favorite examples of such an unlikely event is a pickup truck that nearly went over a cliff in Utah, but ended up landing on a small ledge just to the side of the road. You can see the pictures and read about it on Snopes⁴. Unfortunately, vehicles fall off cliffs all the time. So, as lucky as it may have been for the driver of that pickup to land where they did, it was just the odds playing out. If, say, vehicles with Jews never went over cliffs, while vehicles with non-Jews went over regularly, then there might be something to God protecting his chosen people. But in reality, religious affiliation has no effect on your chances of death by precipitous plunge.

Another example comes from Our Lady of Velankanni Church in Mumbai⁵. The church had a crucifix where water dripped from the feet of Jesus on the cross. People took the dripping water to be a miracle from God, and collected the holy water to cure their ailments, sanctify their homes, or whatever else it is that people do with such things. When a skeptic, Sanal Edamaruku, investigated the statue a few weeks after the miracle was discovered, he found that it was caused by a clogged drainage pipe and some capillary action transporting the water. (This incident also reveals a darker side of organized religions. For his 'crime' of exposing this miracle, the Catholic Archdiocese of Bombay filed charges against Edamaruku under India's version of blasphemy laws, and Edamaruku was forced to flee the country.)

Other, stranger seeming 'miracles', can also be explained naturally. Speaking in tongues⁶, or glossolalia, appears very strange - speakers making vocalizations that they're convinced are other languages. However, as it's been studied, it's been learned that the speakers are using sounds that they're already familiar with from their own language (e.g. a native English speaker won't make the guttural vocalizations of German or French). Further, to quote the Wikipedia article, "where certain prominent glossolalists had visited, whole groups of glossolalists would speak in his style of speech." This certainly makes it appear that it's a

⁴ <http://www.snopes.com/photos/accident/culvert.asp>

⁵ http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/new_scientist/2012/07/a_stature_of_jesus_oozing_holy_water_an_indian_skeptic_debunks_miracle.html

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossolalia>

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learned behavior. I doubt that the speakers are intentionally lying, but I also doubt that they're doing anything more than making interesting noises.

Faith healing⁷ is an example that requires both above caveats. First, I'd need to see some strong evidence that a person was actually healed (and that the supposed event wasn't a fraud). Of the many examples of people who think they've been healed, most can probably be chalked up to self-hypnosis or the placebo effect. A person gets caught up in the moment, and subjective symptoms are reduced. There are probably also cases where a person does get better after visiting the healer, but most of those are likely to be coincidence. i.e. There's no guarantee that the cure came from the healer, as opposed to just occurring spontaneously, which does sometimes happen. Really, what would be needed is some type of study involving a control group, to see just how effective faith healing really is (though I doubt many researchers would be willing to deny patients real treatment for such a study).

Another consideration is that many claims for the divine cross religious borders. If a Christian and a Hindu have both claimed to have felt a god's presence, or to have received a divine message, which one of them should we trust more? Should the Christian and Hindu evidence be counted equally? Doesn't it seem more likely that it's really all in their heads? If supposed miracles occur just as often for diverse people regardless of their religion, then it doesn't argue strongly for their particular religions. This does leave open the possibility of a non-denominational god, but it seems more likely that there are more earthly causes that are being misinterpreted.

Prophecy requires special mention. Of course, these require the same standard of evidence as other miracles. Pointing to a prophecy in an old book, and then pointing to another section of the same book that says the prophecy was fulfilled, isn't very convincing without independent sources confirming the claims. But for prophecies to be convincing, they must also be specific. Nostradamus's writings are an example of how bad this can be. When every generation can interpret a prophecy to be applicable to events happening in their own time, then the prophecy probably isn't specific enough. Prophets must also have a decent accuracy. As the saying goes, even a broken clock is right twice a day. If someone throws out enough prophecies, some are bound to come true. Prophecies must also be unlikely, or something that would be very difficult to predict otherwise. It's not very profound to prophesize that the next round of presidential candidates will lie during their campaigning.

Ideally, miracles should be witnessed by more than one person. Personal revelations fall into this category, especially considering, like I wrote above, that

⁷ <http://www.skepdic.com/faithhealing.html>

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people from diverse religions are all convinced that they've personally felt their god's presence. An example is the case of Adele Brise⁸. She claims to have seen and spoken to an apparition of the Virgin Mary. The thing is, there were two other women with her, neither of whom could see Adele's vision. Despite the unverifiable nature of the event, the Catholic Church has officially decreed "these apparitions as worthy of belief". There are many reasons a person could claim to see apparitions or hear voices. The simplest, though I like to hope the least common because I like to think the best of people, is that they're simply lying – looking for attention, a way to make a buck, or even just playing a joke⁹. But there are also people who really do have mental problems, who have hallucinations or hear voices in their heads. Just because some of them claim the voices are coming from on high doesn't mean that we shouldn't give them the appropriate treatments they need.

Assuming that a miracle did meet the appropriate standards, I can say that I still wouldn't be convinced by a single example. There are too many other possible mechanisms. For example, let's imagine that a prophet came along who truly could predict the future. It's possible their insights were divine, but it's also possible that seeing into the future was an ability of humans, and that most people simply aren't very good at it. I would want to see research done into where the prophet's ability came from. I wouldn't immediately jump to accepting their religion.

There are other possibilities that may seem outlandish, but no more so than Thor being a real deity. As Arthur C. Clarke wrote, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." It's a big universe out there, and it's possible we're not alone. Sci-fi shows like *Star Trek* make us want to think that advanced civilizations would be noble and peaceful, but we don't know that they would. Maybe a civilization wanted to conquer our planet, but their space ship didn't have the resources to do it outright. A few magic tricks to impress the natives would go a long way. Or maybe aliens would be practical jokers, having a bit of fun at the primitive apes' expense.

An important consideration here is the timing of miracles. As far as I've seen, there haven't been any well documented miracles, but even the *claims* of miracles show a decrease in grandeur over time. In Genesis 3:8, God literally walked with Adam and Eve. He didn't hide his presence. Moses parted the Red Sea. The walls of Jericho came a tumblin' down. Jesus walked on water and healed the blind and the lame. The disciples spoke in tongues. The miracles in the Bible aren't subtle. But as we've learned more and more about the universe around us, and as documentation of events has become better and better,

⁸ http://www.shrineofourladyofgoodhelp.com/htmlPages/g_hst_p3.html

⁹ Such as the Cottingley Fairies - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cottingley_Fairies

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miracles have become more and more minor. Why would God change his modus operandi in modern times? If there truly were a god, it wouldn't have to be that way. A god could continue performing major miracles throughout the ages. It seems likely that many supposed ancient miracles are myths, and many more are due to people not understanding how the universe really works.

Once you weed out the myths, hoaxes, and other explainable phenomena, there aren't any well documented miracles, which I think can be extended safely to say that there haven't been *any* miracles. But this brings up another issue - considering the dearth of true miracles in the past, the source of any new 'miracles' would have to be carefully considered. In other words, if a supposed god were to suddenly reveal itself, we would have to ask, 'why now?' It would benefit us to be especially skeptical, and consider all the possible alternative sources of that revelation.

This discussion of miracles is far from exhaustive. There are other classes of miracles that weren't included, and many more specific examples. But I think that this gives a sense for the standards that would be convincing to a skeptic. Miracles must be well documented, not explainable by natural means, and more than simply unlikely events. And even if a supposed miracle was well documented, we must consider other possibilities before accepting it as evidence for any particular religion.

Book Review – More Than a Carpenter

A book review may seem like an odd item to include in a collection of essays, but the book being reviewed made many claims that I commonly hear from Christians. And this book is fairly popular. The last time I checked, it was ranked decently in Amazon's overall book sales, and was the top seller in a few religious categories. So, this book review makes for a good, brief way to look at popular claims actually being put forward by Christians.

Not too long ago, a friend of mine was in a place of business that had a waiting room (for anonymity, I'm leaving out details of the exact type of business). Among the reading material, he noticed a book titled *More Than a Carpenter* by Josh McDowell and his son, Sean McDowell¹⁰. It's basically an evangelical Christian book, purportedly to convince skeptics of the truth of Christianity. Being a bit cantankerous on religious issues, my friend got into a conversation with the lady behind the counter about the book. She ended up offering the book to him so that he could take it home and read it (and presumably save his soul). Not long after, her boss sent my friend another book, Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ*, along with a note explaining that he thought it was better than McDowell's book. My friend, knowing my interests, offered to loan me the books, and I, being the glutton for punishment that I am, took them. Having completed *More Than a Carpenter*, I thought I'd share my thoughts on it.

To summarize, the book was bad. Practically every chapter relied on the Gospels being more or less reliable accounts, and then went off defending Jesus's divinity from there. As I've written elsewhere, if non-believers accepted that the Bible was true, we'd already be Christians. But we don't, so citing scripture as proof is nearly pointless. It would be like trying to prove Mormonism by quoting the Book of Mormon, or Buddhism by quoting the Buddhavacana. McDowell only spent one chapter (Chapter 6) trying to make a case for the Gospels being reliable, and didn't really succeed. And without that base, the rest of his book just falls flat.

Chapter 1. My Story

The first chapter was a short description of Josh's background. I can't fault him on that, since many people do that in books like these (I even have a brief background in the book that I wrote¹¹). But his description revealed a shallow, unexamined life. He did say that he went to church looking for answers when he

¹⁰ The version my friend saw and that this review covers is actually an updated version. The original was published in the '70s by Josh as the sole author.

¹¹ This book, obviously. I was actually referring to the first edition when I wrote this essay.

was in high school, but the way it was described didn't sound like a very earnest search. When he didn't find the answers or sense of meaning that he was looking for, he quit going. In college, he continued this insincere sounding search for answers by pestering his professors after classes and in their offices. He even said that professors would close their doors and shut the blinds to hide from him. I hope that was just exaggeration, because I know how open my professors were when I was a student. It would have taken a particularly obtuse or arrogant student to get them to actually hide. He also mentioned the obligatory hedonistic partying during his college years.

Josh finally found a Bible study group that showed him the light. But even his description of the group seems strange. He mentioned that one of the girls was attractive, which surprised him, because prior to that he didn't think Christian girls were pretty¹². Frankly, this is a little unbelievable considering that he already said he went to church in high school. Was there not a single attractive girl there? Even if his church was particularly homely, 85% of the people in this country are Christian. Did he really think that the only pretty girls were in that remaining 15%?

His background seemed a bit like a clichéd 'I used to be an atheist, but then...' story, with a few outlandish statements making you question his sincerity. He certainly didn't offer anything but shallow reasons for why he was an atheist in the first place.

Chapter 2. What Makes Jesus So Different?

The second chapter was titled 'What Makes Jesus So Different?'. It was his attempt to show that Christ was unique. McDowell argued that only Christ claimed to be God, while Mohammed, the Buddha, and Confucius never made any such claims. He then backed this up with more than 15 pages citing passages from the Bible showing that Jesus did claim to be God and the son of God.

First of all, every religion has some unique aspect differentiating it from other religions. If it didn't, it wouldn't be a separate religion. So, it seems a bit silly to point out a unique aspect of Christianity as if that's proof that Christianity is true¹³.

Second, as I mentioned in the introduction, he was relying on scripture to back up his arguments, before even trying to establish the Bible as reliable.

¹² His exact wording was, "So I turned to one of the students, a good-looking woman (I used to think all Christians were ugly), and I said..."

¹³ Though I suppose this may be McDowell's response to critics pointing out Christianity's similarities to other religions.

The biggest problem for this chapter is that McDowell ignored many, many other religions and examples. Children of gods and mortals (demigods¹⁴) are quite common - Perseus, Heracles, Theseus, Hanuman, and Garuda, to name just a few. Children of gods who are themselves gods are also common. In fact, pretty much every god or goddess in a religion with a pantheon was born of another god and goddess. The Olympian gods and goddesses were all descended from Cronus and Rhea. Osiris was the son of Geb and Nut¹⁵. And there's no shortage of people who claimed to be gods¹⁶ (or even people who claimed to be Jesus¹⁷). Just consider the many such kings or emperors, like those of Egypt, Rome, China, or Japan, or cults of personality like those around Jim Jones¹⁸ or Father Divine¹⁹.

It's also worth mentioning the hints of anti-Semitism in this chapter. Numerous times, McDowell mentioned how 'the Jews' killed Jesus. He could have easily written the Pharisees, or the Jewish leaders, but many places it was simply 'the Jews'.

Chapter 3. Lord, Liar, or Lunatic?

I've already discussed the problem with Lewis's Trilemma in another essay, Liar, Lunatic, or Lord... Or Something Else²⁰. The biggest problem is that people ignore whether or not Jesus was a myth. There may or may not have been an actual historical figure that Jesus of the Bible is based on, but just like Robin Hood or King Arthur, it's entirely possible that much of the story we have now is embellishment.

One quote that caught my eye from this chapter was the following.

Wherever Jesus has been proclaimed, we see lives change for the good, nations change for the better, thieves become honest, alcoholics become sober, hateful individuals become channels of love, unjust persons embrace justice.

¹⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demigod>

¹⁵ Osiris was the Egyptian god of the afterlife, having been killed and then resurrected. For more discussion, see my blog:

http://www.jefflewis.net/blog/2009/01/another_similarity_between_osi.html

¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_people_who_have_been_considered_deities

¹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_people_claimed_to_be_Jesus

¹⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Jones

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Father_Divine

²⁰ In fact, it is the preceding essay in this book.

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In the Wikipedia era, I feel like saying, "Citation needed." I think it might be insightful for McDowell to read the study, *Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Societal Health with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies*²¹ by Gregory S. Paul. To quote part of that study:

In general, higher rates of belief in and worship of a creator correlate with higher rates of homicide, juvenile and early adult mortality, STD infection rates, teen pregnancy and abortion in the prosperous democracies... The United States is almost always the most dysfunctional of the developing democracies, sometimes spectacularly so, and almost always scores poorly. The view of the U.S. as a 'shining city on the hill' to the rest of the world is falsified when it comes to basic measures of societal health.

Chapter 4. What about Science?

This was a very short chapter (4 pages), that did little more than reveal that McDowell has a very muddled understanding of science. He seems to think that science requires experiments in a lab, which would exclude astronomy, or any study of the past, from the realm of science. I've seen this type of argument before, and covered it in my essay, *Confidence in Historical Knowledge*²².

Chapter 5. The Challenge of the New Atheism

This chapter was written by the son, Sean. It started off bad, criticizing the 'New Atheists' for not really offering any new arguments, when in reality, so called New Atheists never claimed to have any new ground breaking arguments. They thought of themselves as merely carrying on in the tradition of previous atheists like Bertrand Russell or Mark Twain. The term 'New Atheism' was coined in an article in *Wired* magazine, not invented by the New Atheists themselves.

As a small point, he also used an expression that I find especially irksome, describing the New Atheists as 'militant'. Now, I realize that modern atheists may not be as deferential as those from the past, now that religion is losing some of its influence over society. But when Christians actually attack abortion clinics²³ and plot to kill police officers²⁴, while Muslims fly planes into buildings²⁵ and riot over the burning of a book²⁶, it seems a bit hyperbolic to call atheists 'militant' who merely write books and speak bluntly.

²¹ <http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2005/2005-11.pdf>

²² That essay is also included in this book – four essays before this one.

²³ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Army_of_God_\(USA\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Army_of_God_(USA))

²⁴ http://articles.cnn.com/2010-03-29/justice/michigan.arrests_1_militia-six-michigan-southern-poverty-law-center?_s=PM:CRIME

²⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11_attacks

In this chapter, Sean showed that he didn't accept evolution. I guess that's not much of a surprise, but it always hurts someone's credibility when they refuse to accept something with so much evidence backing it up.

He did ask a question I've seen before that's worth answering - if our brains are the result of mindless evolution, how can we trust them? The answer is twofold. First, natural selection will favor organisms that have brains that form relatively accurate models of reality. But second, we know we can't entirely trust our brains. They're prone to cognitive biases²⁷, illusions, faulty reasoning, etc. Recognizing and working around the faults of our brains is one of the unsung victories of science (you can read more about this in the article, *The Double-Blind Gaze: How the Double-Blind Experimental Protocol Changed Science*²⁸, though the focus of that article is medicine).

The chapter trotted out plenty of stale arguments that atheists are used to hearing by now. There were some arguments from consequences, such as saying that atheism leads to worse morality (again, see the study by Gregory S. Paul), or that a universe without God lacks meaning, which I've addressed in detail in other essays. A few of the other 'standard' arguments and complaints from this chapter are listed below, followed by my response.

- *New Atheists focus on Christians over Muslims, Buddhists, or other religions* – This is presumably because most New Atheists live in countries where Christianity is the majority religion. But rest assured, we don't believe those other religions, either.
- *Listing prominent Christian scientists from a few hundred years ago* – European society has only recently begun to shift away from Christianity, so nearly everyone in Europe a few hundred years ago was a Christian. And admitting to atheism a few hundred years ago could get someone burned at the stake, so there weren't many outspoken heathens.
- *Fine tuning of the universe* – Douglas Adams' anthropic puddle argument²⁹ is a humorous refutation of this. Additionally, no one knows if a different

²⁶ <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/apr/02/world/la-fg-afghan-violence-20110403>

²⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cognitive_biases

²⁸ http://www.jefflewis.net/double_blind_gaze.html

²⁹ <http://talkingincircles.net/2008/07/19/douglas-adams-on-religion-and-puddles/>

"...imagine a puddle waking up one morning and thinking, 'This is an interesting world I find myself in, an interesting hole I find myself in, fits me rather neatly, doesn't it? In fact it fits me staggeringly well, must have been made to have me in it!' This is such a powerful idea that as the sun rises in the sky and the air heats up and as, gradually, the puddle gets smaller and smaller, it's still frantically hanging on to the notion that everything's going to be alright,

type of universe might have resulted in a different kind of intelligence. i.e. If a different set of laws ruled the universe, there might be very different beings talking of the fine tuning of that parallel universe.

- *Communist China, Communist Russia, and Nazi Germany* – Hitler claimed in public that he was a Catholic, and most Germans who followed him were Christians. And although they were technically atheistic, Russia and China had very strong authoritarian regimes and weren't exactly bastions of free thought. It was almost as if the State was trying to be its own religion.
- *Using Antony Flew³⁰ as an example of a prominent atheist who converted to religion* – At most, Flew became a deist. And there's some controversy over how much he was influenced and misled as he entered his twilight years and his reasoning wasn't as sharp as it once was.

Chapter 6. Are the Bible Records Reliable?

This was the chapter I was most looking forward to. After more than a third of the book leading up to it, I wanted to see what arguments McDowell had for the Bible being reliable. Because, as I said before, so many of his other arguments rely on it, that this book just falls flat without some justification for accepting the Gospels as more or less true. Unfortunately, this chapter was long on generalizations and arguments from authority, but short on actual evidence.

The truth of the matter is that there are no contemporary accounts of Christ. The most we have now are the Gospels and other books of the New Testament, but none of those were written in Christ's time. The oldest Gospel, Mark, was probably written between 65 and 72 AD, while the other three canonical Gospels were written a few years later, with Mathew and Luke borrowing heavily from Mark's account (McDowell quoted one scholar as placing the Gospels between 50 and 75 AD - a little early, but still not contemporary to Christ). Some of the other books of the New Testament were written earlier (such as Paul's letters), but these weren't written by eyewitnesses and are lacking in actual biographical details. In fact, mythicist theories of Jesus posit that Paul didn't discuss Jesus the man, because Paul and other mainline Christians of the time didn't actually believe Jesus was a man. Rather, they thought Jesus was a heavenly being who struggled in a supernatural realm.

McDowell mentioned textual variants³¹, and rightly pointed out that most are of little consequence to the meaning of passages. However, the sheer number of variants shows that the surviving manuscripts are works of people, prone to

because this world was meant to have him in it, was built to have him in it; so the moment he disappears catches him rather by surprise. I think this may be something we need to be on the watch out for."

³⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antony_Flew

³¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Textual_variants_in_the_New_Testament

making mistakes. McDowell also failed to discuss at all some of the more significant variants, such as the story of not casting the first stone, or the final 11 verses of Mark, both of which are widely considered to be later additions to those gospels, and not original to them^{32,33}.

He also mentioned that "In the Jewish culture it was important that a teacher's actual words were carefully preserved and passed down", but completely ignored that the Gospels produce at least two sets of last words for Jesus³⁴, or possibly three, depending on your interpretation ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.", or "It is finished.").

McDowell did mention that we have limited manuscripts of other ancient writings, which is true. However, I'm not sure I follow his argument. For example, he wrote:

Caesar composed his history of the Gallic Wars between 58 and 50 BC, and its manuscript authority rests on nine or ten copies dating one thousand years after his death.

Is his point that we have to question *The Conquest of Gaul* because of the late date of the manuscripts? If so, I'd agree. There are doubtless mistakes that have been made during the copying process. Is his point that we should question whether or not Caesar actually conquered Gaul? In that case, I would disagree. There are other contemporary accounts besides Caesar's. There is archaeological evidence.

Later, McDowell wrote:

If one discards the Bible as unreliable historically, then he or she must discard all literature of antiquity.

'Discard' is a strong word, but 'question' is reasonable. Recalling Caesar's *The Conquest of Gaul*, we have to keep in mind that this wasn't just an unbiased historical document. It was a bit of political propaganda to make Caesar look good back in Rome. Modern readers would do well to remember that and question Caesar's reliability when reading the book.

³² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_and_the_woman_taken_in_adultery

³³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_16

³⁴ http://www.rationalchristianity.net/last_words.html

When it came time to list sources of external evidence, he cited Eusebius³⁵ quoting Papias of Hierapolis³⁶. Unfortunately, Eusebius wasn't writing until the late 3rd and early 4th centuries, and even Papias wasn't writing until the early 2nd century. He also used Iranaeus as an example, but Iranaeus wasn't writing until the late 2nd century. So, none of his examples were contemporaries of Jesus.

When he discussed archaeology, he didn't give any examples of evidence unique to Christianity, only a little general geography. Going back to my Robin Hood example, the existence of Sherwood Forest doesn't lend credence to the myth that the Merry Men lived there.

McDowell also operated under the assumption that early Christianity was more or less uniform. He discussed the books of the New Testament as if they were part of a larger narrative. He just never considered that the different authors might themselves have had different beliefs, nor that there could have been other competing beliefs in early Christianity. Keep in mind the old saying, that history is written by the victors. Early Christians were split into multiple sects. There were Ebionites³⁷, Jewish Christians who rejected Paul of Tarsus as an apostate, adoptionists³⁸, who thought Jesus was born due to a normal conception and didn't become the son of God until he was adopted at his baptism (Bart Ehrman has argued that Mark was originally an adoptionist work), Gnostics³⁹, who were heavily influenced by pagan mystery religions, and others. What we consider mainline Christianity today is composed of the beliefs of the sect that won out.

Throughout the chapter, as well as elsewhere in the book, McDowell tried to indicate that a myth as complex as Christ could not have formed in so short a time. I've mentioned this elsewhere, but just consider the stories you read on Snopes⁴⁰. These are legends born in the modern day and age, when we have newspapers and worldwide communication that make it easy to fact check stories. But you still have people who think Obama is a foreigner⁴¹ who was sworn in on a Quran⁴², or that George Bush was in on 9/11⁴³, or that the Mayan

³⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eusebius_of_Caesarea

³⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papias_of_Hierapolis

³⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ebionites>

³⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adoptionists>

³⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gnostic>

⁴⁰ <http://www.snopes.com/>

⁴¹ <http://www.snopes.com/politics/obama/birthers/birthcertificate.asp>

⁴² <http://www.snopes.com/politics/obama/muslim.asp#quran>

⁴³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/9/11_conspiracy_theories

Calendar⁴⁴ predicts the world will end on December 21st, 2012⁴⁵. Some of these modern day legends are quite involved, and have easily had more written about them than is contained in the New Testament. So, it's not difficult to see how a legend about Jesus could have arisen quickly, especially in a time when stories were spread by word of mouth, and in a time when people were even more open to religious and superstitious explanations.

Rather than write more on the reliability of the Gospels, I'll direct readers to some webpages that discuss this concept, especially the historicity of Jesus. The first reference is especially good. It is a strong case put forth by Earl Doherty for a mythical Jesus, as reviewed by Richard Carrier.

- Infidels.org - Did Jesus Exist? Earl Doherty and the Argument to Ahistoricity⁴⁶
- GodlessGeeks.com - Did Jesus Really Exist? ⁴⁷
- NoBeliefs.com - Did a historical Jesus exist? ⁴⁸
- In His Steps Ministries⁴⁹ (This argues for the Bible being accurate, but in my opinion, not very convincingly. It *is* useful for showing many of the ancient documents with references to Jesus. Just be a bit skeptical of their authenticity.)

Chapter 7. Who Would Die for a Lie?

Many Christians were killed in the first and second centuries. That's not really a controversial claim. However, McDowell makes the assumption that those martyrs must have believed in the currently mainstream version of Christianity to have had enough conviction to die for those beliefs. He assumes that if they didn't believe in the Resurrection, then they must have believed Christianity to be a lie, and therefore wouldn't have died for it. This was his way of dismissing all the other religious fanatics who have died for false causes (Jonestown⁵⁰, Heaven's Gate⁵¹, or the myriad forms of suicide bombers⁵²). But, considering how many different beliefs early Christians had, it's entirely possible that the earliest martyrs didn't believe in the Resurrection but were still sincere Christians. It's also possible, considering the previous discussion on how

⁴⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_phenomenon

⁴⁵ This essay was originally written before that uneventful date.

⁴⁶ http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/jesuspuzzle.html

⁴⁷ <http://www.godlessgeeks.com/JesusExist.htm>

⁴⁸ <http://www.nobeliefs.com/exist.htm>

⁴⁹ <http://www.creatingfutures.net/skeptic.html>

⁵⁰ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonestown>

⁵¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heaven's_Gate_\(religious_group\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heaven's_Gate_(religious_group))

⁵² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suicide_bomber

quickly new myths can spread, that those martyrs did believe in the Resurrection, especially by the late first century.

This chapter also assumes that all the accounts of the apostles are accurate. It would be a bit like using the behavior of Little John or Will Scarlett to try and defend the historicity of Robin Hood. He doesn't entertain the idea that they could all be part of the same myth.

In this Chapter, McDowell mentioned Josephus and Origen (I would have expected those in the last chapter), but without actually quoting what those historians wrote about Jesus. This is a bit surprising, since Josephus is just about the best evidence there is for there actually being a historical Jesus (though even Josephus didn't mention Jesus in writing until around 93 AD). The passage now known as the Testimonium Flavianum is the most explicit description of Jesus in Josephus's Antiquities of the Jews, but its authenticity is rather dubious. Many historians consider it to be a forgery inserted by later Christians (or at the very least, that the passage has been heavily altered). However, there is another passage, considered more likely to be authentic, which reads:

Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others...

That's just about the earliest mention of Jesus independent of the Gospels (there are still no contemporary accounts). However, it's worth considering that Josephus also discussed Hercules (though in a slightly different manner).

Another argument from this chapter was that the rapid spread of Christianity, even after Christ's crucifixion, was an indication that it must have been true. By that same logic, we should consider that Scientology⁵³ might have some merit.

Chapter 8. What Good Is a Dead Messiah?

McDowell here at least admitted that many people die for their beliefs all the time, but then he tried to argue that the Jewish understanding of the Messiah would have made people lose hope if he had simply died, and they would have abandoned the movement. So, this chapter is simply a case of special pleading - Yes, people die for false beliefs all the time, but Christians wouldn't have done the same thing.

It's also worth mentioning here the failed prophecies of Jesus, such as Matthew 24:34 ("I tell you the truth, this generation will not pass from the scene until all

⁵³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientology>

these things take place.") or Luke 9:27 ("I tell you the truth, some standing here right now will not die before they see the Kingdom of God."). Obviously, those failed prophecies haven't kept people away from Christianity. In the same way that people rationalize those, I'm sure early Christians could have found ways to rationalize the death of their prophet (if he did indeed exist) in an era before the myth had grown to what it is today.

Chapter 9. Did You Hear What Happened to Saul?

This chapter dealt with Paul of Tarsus. He described Paul's vision on the road to Damascus, and his subsequent conversion and change in personality, and considered Paul's change as evidence that his vision was real.

In a chapter on the importance of Paul's visions, you'd think McDowell could have addressed the contradictions. Why does Acts 9:7 ("The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone's voice but saw no one!") not agree with Acts 22:9 ("The people with me saw the light but didn't understand the voice speaking to me.")?

This chapter included a passage I might have said myself when I was still a Christian, but now, it seems baseless to me. It's merely stating that the Crucifixion forgave humans of their sins without explaining why (McDowell tried to address this in Chapter 12, so I'll come back to this).

Paul came to understand that through the Crucifixion Christ took the curse of sin on himself for us (see Galatians 3:13) and that God "made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Instead of seeing the death of Christ as defeat, he saw it as a great victory, completed by the Resurrection.

Chapter 10. Can You Keep a Good Man Down?

This chapter dealt with the empty tomb after Christ's crucifixion. McDowell assumed that nearly everything described in the Gospels is true, and argued against alternative explanations for how the tomb could have turned up empty (women and disciples checked the wrong tomb, disciples hallucinated, Jesus had merely fainted instead of died, the body was stolen by the disciples, the body was moved by authorities without the disciples knowing it). He only briefly addressed that the whole thing could have been invented. In two pages, he dismissed the idea that Jesus's resurrection could have been copied from other mythologies, such as Osiris or some mystery religions. He relied almost entirely on arguments from authority, quoting Paul Rhodes Eddy & Greg Boyd, and T.N.D. Mettinger.

The remainder of the chapter was one long appeal to authority, quoting lawyers (not archaeologists or historians) who believed that the Resurrection was a true event.

Chapter 11. Will the Real Messiah Please Stand Up?

This chapter dealt with the prophecies fulfilled by Jesus. I have one small gripe - he listed chapter and verse for several of the prophecies, but not the text of the prophecies themselves. It would have been nice to be able to read the prophecies without looking them up in another source.

He did mention one possibility I hadn't thought of before - that since Jesus was familiar with many of the prophecies, that he would have tried to fulfill them. McDowell dismissed this because some prophecies would have been beyond Jesus's control. But, as I've said for just about every chapter, he never entertained the idea that the gospels could have been fabricated, and that maybe the reason it appears that Jesus fulfilled so many prophecies is because the Gospel writers wrote it that way. (I don't necessarily mean intentional fabrication, though that is possible. Rather, in the repeated retellings of the story before the Gospels were written, Jesus might have been made to fulfill more and more prophecies.)

He focused a bit on genealogy, but never even addressed the discrepancies between Jesus's genealogies given in Matthew and Luke⁵⁴.

McDowell also never addressed failed prophecies, or misinterpretations. For example, Isaiah 7:14 states:

All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us').

The problem is that 'virgin' is a mistranslation of 'young woman'. Further, Jesus is never referred to as Immanuel in the New Testament except when the writers are referencing this prophecy.

As another example, Zechariah 11:12 states:

And I said to them, "If you like, give me my wages, whatever I am worth; but only if you want to." So they counted out for my wages thirty pieces of silver.

But Matthew 27:9-10 incorrectly cites Jeremiah for this prophecy:

⁵⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genealogy_of_Jesus

This fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah that says, "They took the thirty pieces of silver—the price at which he was valued by the people of Israel, and purchased the potter's field, as the Lord directed."

There are all the other failed prophecies of the Bible, but those above are specific to prophecies about Jesus (for general examples, see the Skeptics Annotated Bible⁵⁵, RationalWiki⁵⁶, or the Secular Web⁵⁷).

Chapter 12. Isn't There Some Other Way?

This chapter was an attempt to explain why acceptance of Christ is necessary for salvation, and why you can't just be a good person. I think the following passage is a good representation of his argument.

When Jesus was executed on the cross more than two thousand years ago, God accepted his death as a substitute for ours. The just and righteous nature of God was satisfied. Justice was done; a penalty was paid.

In truth, I think that's barbaric. Even if a sense of justice *demand*ed a penalty, what is 'just and righteous' about killing a scape goat to forgive others? It makes no sense.

Chapter 13. He Changed My Life

This last chapter explained how horrific McDowell's life was before (drunk abusive father, sexual abuse from farmhand, an empty hedonistic lifestyle, anger, etc.), and how much he'd changed for the better after accepting Christ. For all I know, McDowell may be a better person now that he's a Christian, but there are many other possible explanations to consider (such as the social support structure of a church) before jumping to the conclusion that Christianity is true.

After thinking it over, I think there are two big problems with the book. First, as I've repeated many times throughout this review, McDowell took the Bible at more or less face value, and never seriously considered that the stories might be myths. But a separate problem that I never discussed is that many of his arguments were focused so narrowly on Christianity, that he ignored the larger context of other religions. Of course Christianity has some unique aspects, but

⁵⁵ <http://skepticsannotatedbible.com/proph/long.html>

⁵⁶ http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Failed_biblical_prophecies

⁵⁷ http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/farrell_till/prophecy.html

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the types of arguments McDowell used could be adapted to other religions with very little change. For example, Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation⁵⁸ shows a *very* strong commitment to Buddhism, but is no more proof of the truth of that religion than the early Christian martyrs is of Christianity.

The back cover of the book has the following lines (punctuation and capitalization copied faithfully).

read the story. weigh the facts.
experience his love.
and then watch what happens.

I'm still awaiting a book that actually presents this evidence, because McDowell didn't do so here. This book won't convince anybody who's given serious thought to the question of Christianity, and doesn't even present any particularly thought provoking arguments.

⁵⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thich_Quang_Duc