

Why I Believe

An Essay

By Steve Hays

*The natural mind sees God in nothing,
Not even spiritual things;
The spiritual mind sees God in everything,
Even natural things.*
—Robert Leighton

I. Insight & Hindsight

Why am I writing this? For several reasons.

Over the years, I've had a number of college and seminary students approach me to ask me how I'd field this or that objection to the faith. In responding, my answer was naturally shaped by the form of the question. And this is fine as far as it goes. But that doesn't really represent how I'd frame the questions and prioritize the issues if I were offering a positive defense of my own faith. And so I'd like, for once, to take the initiative in setting the terms of the debate from my own point of departure.

Secondly, I'm at a point in life where it is worthwhile to take stock of my reasoning. I became a Christian as a teenager, and I'm now a middle-aged man. So I've passed through the most of the major phases of life, in consequence of which my outlook is pretty settled.

In addition, I've read widely and deeply in the fields of philosophy, theology, apologetics, philosophy of religion, science, philosophy of science, Bible criticism, comparative religion, comparative mythology, and atheism.

I doubt that there are any major arguments pro or con that I'm not acquainted with, so I don't anticipate any intellectual revolutions in my thinking. Having sifted through all this material, it's time to distill it down to a few core questions and answers.

In that regard I need to say in advance what I do and do not intend to cover in this essay. On the one hand, I don't plan to rehearse all the traditional arguments for the Christian faith. This omission doesn't necessarily imply a rejection of such reasons. Many of the arguments I'm leaving out of consideration enjoy considerable merit.¹ But I don't want to

¹ Among the better literature in defense of the faith, I'd mention: R. Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (Oxford, 1994); G. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Zondervan, 1982); G. Berkeley, *Alciphron; Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, R. Adams, ed. (Hackett, 1988); M. Behe, *Darwin's Black Box* (Touchstone, 1998); C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (IVP, 1987); W. Brown: *In the Beginning* (CSC, 2001); J. Byl, *God and Cosmos* (Banner of Truth, 2001); G. Caird,

swamp the reader in a sea of technicalities. I'd like to keep this essay at the level of popular reading and personal reflection. So I'm confining myself to arguments that I myself find especially appealing and compelling. The treatment is admittedly idiosyncratic.

Conversely, I don't plan to parry a lot of stock objections to the faith. This is a needful and beneficial exercise. But it would make the essay ten times longer and twice as technical if I went down that winding path.² In addition, one way of fielding objections is to offer positive reasons for faith. Finally, I have delegated some of the detailed argumentation to footnoted literature for the benefit of interested readers.

Finally, there's a difference between reflective and prereflective reasoning. There are many things we apprehend as a matter of tacit knowledge that we've never tried to prove. And the effort to formalize our reasoning cannot capture the full range of evidentiary support: what it gains in slim rigor it loses in density and detail.³ The exercise is of value, but not without attendant tradeoffs.

Philosophers spend a lot of time trying to tease our tacit knowledge into articulate form. The hardest things to prove are the most obvious things. For if they're already obvious, then what more can you say? And if someone can't see the obvious, how can you make him see it? As Gordon Clark once observed, "philosophy doesn't deal with unfamiliar things; it deals with familiar things, and that is why it puzzles you."⁴

Thus the attempt to prove what we already know can readily foster a misleading impression. For our conviction may be a many-layered thing, built up—like a painting—of many brush-strokes. You can't reduce a painting to a series of brush-strokes. For what makes it a painting lies in the overall composition, and in the texture, and in the interplay of light, shade and color. The effort to peel back the layers and identify every stroke of the brush leaves you with less than the sum of the parts.

So my point is that trying to justify what we believe isn't always an easy thing. In fact, the more fundamental the belief, the harder it may be to explain and defend because it deals with such familiar things—things so basic to our understanding of the world within and around us that it may never occur to us to justify our belief in such things inasmuch as they are what enable us make sense of the world. Without it we couldn't make sense

"The Study of the Gospels," *ExT* (1975-76), 137-41; W. Dembski, *No Free Lunch* (Rowan & Littlefield, 2001); J. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (P&R, 1994); P. Helm, *Faith with Reason* (Oxford, 2000); *Objective Knowledge* (IVP, 1989); *The Divine Revelation* (Crossway, 1982); B. Metzger, "Methodology in the Study of the Mystery Religions and Early Christianity," *Historical and Literary Studies* (Eerdmans, 1968), 1-24; J. Newman, *A Grammar of Assent*; A. Plantinga, "A Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments"; *God and Other Minds* (Cornell, 1967); *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford, 2000); C. Van Til, *Why I Believe in God* (P&R, n.d.); K. Wise, *Faith, Form, and time* B&H, 2002); J. Woodmorappe, *Noah's Ark* (ICR, 1996); W. Young, *Foundations of Theology* (Craig Press, 1967).

² Of the opposing literature, the best of the lot are: R. Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism* (Routledge, 1996) and J. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford, 1982). Cf. A. Plantinga, "Is Theism Really a Miracle?" *Faith and Philosophy* (1986), 3:109-34.

³ What Newman dubbed the "illative" sense.

⁴ Gordon H. Clark: *Personal Recollections* (Trinity, 1989), 68.

of anything at all. And in that respect, some beliefs are self-warranting insofar as they supply the warrant for lesser beliefs.

II. Why I believe in anything

When the average Christian is asked why he believes in God, he may be stumped.⁵ It seems like a natural enough question, so why is it so hard to offer a simple and straightforward reply? One problem is that to pose such a question is to plunge into the river at midstream, rather than crossing at the riverbank.

You see, we prove or disprove the existence or the truth of one thing by assuming the existence or truth of something else. Suppose, for example, someone asked you why you believe in time or space? Wouldn't you be taken aback by such a question? For ordinarily, questions of fact are not nearly that large. If you ask me whether I believe in the lunar landings or the Loch Ness monster, such things and events, if they happen to exist or ever happen, take place within space and time. The spatiotemporal framework is taken for granted. But if you ask me to justify the framework itself, then I may be at a loss in even knowing how to broach an answer, for the question is so big and broad that it leaves me without a point of reference.

So we normally ask whether something exists in space, but not whether space exists. We ask whether something occurred in time, but not whether time occurs. The reason we usually don't give a reason for believing in space and time is that space and time supply the background conditions for reasoning about most other things and events.

And it's that way with God. We don't prove the existence of a Creator in the same way we prove the existence of a creature. For God, if there is a God, is not merely an *object* of truth, but the *origin* of truth; not just another being, but the ground of being and well-being. God is the author of time and space, and the ground of goodness and truthfulness, necessity and possibility.

⁵ For purposes of this paper, I'm operating with an Augustinian doctrine of God, viz., God is a personal agent, of infinite wisdom and might, subsisting outside time and space. I have defended this position in "God of the Fathers," *All Things in Subjection*, M. Selbrede, ed. (Ross House, forthcoming). In this same volume I've also presented my Christian philosophy. Cf. "Trinity & Symmetry."

III. Why I believe in God

1. The Semiotic Universe

I'm impressed by the symbolic dimension of the sensible world. By this I mean that I find it remarkable how the material order supplies an endless stream of metaphors for the moral order. That is, of course, the stuff of poetry.

But because it comes so naturally to us, we may not stop to consider how unnatural it is if nature were all there was. Why are certain sounds (major/minor) and shades (light/dark), lines (backward/ forward) and curves (upward/downward) freighted with moral significance?

Indeed, this dimension is multidimensional. Consider the mimetic and synesthetic plasticity of music. We associate certain progressions and intervals with visual cues. And these carry the same moral and emotive overtones. The symbolic overlay of one medium onto another represents a higher-ordered significance.

And this semiotic potential figures forcibly in the language and communicative power of Scripture. Consider how much spiritual sense is contained and conveyed by such simple and mundane metaphors as: arm, ash, birth, blindness, blood, body, bone, bread, breath, brotherhood, cedar, childhood, city, cloud, darkness, dawn, day, deafness, death, desert, dew, dirt, dog, dove, dream, dung, eagle, ear, earth, eye, fat, fatherhood, fire, firstfruit, firstborn, fish, flesh, flood, foot, fountain, garden, gem, goat, gold, grape, grass, hand, head, heart, heaven, honey, husband, king, lamb, land, leaven, leprosy, light, lightning, lily, lion, lip, locust, milk, moth, motherhood, mountain, nakedness, neck, night, oil, pearl, rain, rainbow, river, rock, root, rose, rust, salt, sand, season, seed, sheep, skin, sleep, smoke, snake, sonship, sparrow, sun, thistle, thorn, tongue, tree, valley, vine, vineyard, water, weed, wife, wind, wine, wing, and wolf, to name a few. The Fourth Gospel has been dubbed the "book of signs" for the way in which earthly things exemplify heavenly things, and shadow forth a better country.

There is no natural explanation for this rich, referential dimension on secular grounds. It doesn't confer any survival advantage. But this makes perfect sense if the material order was made by God to manifest his perfections and pantomime a moral order.

2. The Cryptographic Universe

The classic conundrum of knowledge lies in the hiatus between the subject of knowledge and the object of knowledge. For the mind doesn't enjoy direct access to the external world. In order to receive information from the outside world, such input must be encoded.

For example, a sensible object reflects light. So the surface texture is encoded as electromagnetic information, and transmitted to the eye, where it is reencoded as electrochemical information and transmitted to the brain.

But the match between input and readout is ineluctably teleological. Like a lockbox with one key to open and another to close, the system must be designed so that the constituent parts operate in conjunction. No random process could run through every conceivable combination or solve for all possible permutations.

3. The Narrative Universe

I'm also impressed by the narrative direction of the sensible world. Solomon says that God has planted eternity in our hearts (Eccl 3:14). This intriguing and enigmatic image comes on the heels of his statement that God has made everything beautiful in its time, and is followed by his statement that man is unable find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. So the entire verse is finely sprung on a delicate dialectic between time and eternity.

We register the narrative dimension in the natural world of time, space and light. The backlighting of late afternoon and forelighting at the end of a dark tunnel or leafy trail convey a sense of motion through time—of time past and time future, verging on the "stillpoint of the turning world."⁶ Lighting likewise serves to signal the divisions of the day and seasons of the year, while autumnal or Post-meridian shades, in turn, signify the life-cycle. Streams and rivers further furnish a universal emblem of time's passage.⁷

Such natural narrative associations form the basis of arts. A story has a plot, and the quest genre is the Ur-genre of all literature. A play follows a dramatic arc. Opera and oratorio have a narrative format. The symphonic and sonata forms have a narrative quality. A church nave evokes a journey, while the stained-glass triggers diurnal and seasonal associations.⁸ A film has a storyline. Every movie is a journey of the imagination. Even still photography and still-life painting try to freeze a passing moment.

⁶ In Eliot's evocative phrase.

⁷ The B-theory of time denies the objective flow of time. However, I'm only concerned here with the phenomenology rather than the ontology of time.

⁸ Some Cathedrals augment this effect with a labyrinth in the crossing.

The Bible owes a great deal of its perennial appeal to its narrative power. The story of redemption is the story of stories and story within stories as we follow the progress of the woman's seed, from the Protevangel promise, and all the way through the history of the prediluvians, postdiluvians and Patriarchs, the Exodus, wilderness wandering and Conquest, the monarchy, captivity and Restoration, to its culmination in the Advent of Christ and coming Consummation.

God has encoded his subliminal message in sight and sound. For God is the great storyteller, for both Word and World are divine speech-acts (Heb 1:1-2; 11:1). The universal theme of art and universal appeal of nature lie largely in their token of travel through time and space to a waiting eternity.

4. The Animal Kingdom.

Solomon admonishes the sluggard to go and study the ways of the ant (Prov 6:6-8; cf. 30:25-28). And, indeed, the complexity of insect behavior is very difficult to account for on the basis of raw materialism. How do bug brains no bigger than a milligram execute such complicated and coordinated activities, viz., flying, milking aphids, spinning webs, constructing hexagonal chambers, building underground cities, communicating by code language (the waggle dance)? Even primates don't do anything half as clever. If mental-events are identical with brain-events, what is the neurological basis for their ingenious behavior?

Of course, social insects exhibit a sort of corporate intelligence, but that doesn't explain their coordination. What overarching factor is choreographing and combining their individual efforts? For example, how does the relative complexity of building a beehive compare with constructing a geodesic dome? An evolutionist would attribute the latter achievement to our advanced brain development, yet the same explanation is hardly available in the former case.

Insect behavior reminds me of remote-control signaling, viz., toy cars, boats, planes, drones, robots, &c. If their actions and interactions are being directed by a superior, external intelligence, then I can account for the intricacy of their behavior, but to reduce it to the amount of hardware and/or software that nature can cram into the skull of a bug strains my own capacity for credence.

5. Natural Selection

Darwinists often appeal to natural selection as an alternative to teleology.⁹ White rabbits beat out brown rabbits in wintertime because they blend in against the snow and survive to multiply. Conversely, brown rabbits beat out white rabbits in summertime. And this explanation is fine as far as it goes.

⁹ Natural selection is often touted as a major evolutionary mechanism. But, from what I can tell, it only operates on periodic variations within preexisting and stable species. That doesn't approach macroevolution.

But in order to lodge his claim, the Darwinist must assume a surreptitiously God's-eye standpoint. For natural selection is oblivious to the survival value of camouflage and other adaptive strategies. Only an intelligent observer can appreciate this stratagem. But how could a bottom-up (evolutionary) process solve a problem that only a top-down perspective can grasp? The naturalist must stand outside of natural selection to perceive the (pre-) adaptation of practical means to tactical ends.

6. *The Possible*

The real world doesn't appear to exhaust all possibilities. Indeed, there seems to be an infinite number of variations on the actual world.¹⁰ So what was it that selected for the instantiation of this particular state of affairs out of the plenum of possibilities? Such a selection process must have recourse to some sort of personal intelligence in general, and a mind of at least commensurate amplitude in particular

7. *The Infinite*

It has been said that mathematics is the science of the infinite. Equations imply other equations, multiples imply divisibles, &c. In a system of internal relations, all of the relations must obtain for any to obtain. $2+2=4$ because $1+1=2$ and $4-2=2$. And hence, in a system of infinite internal relations, the infinite must be actual rather than potential.¹¹

Mathematical entities also appear to be mental entities. What else could they be? The number three doesn't have an address. It doesn't subsist in time and space. It doesn't come and go. $2+2$ don't *become* 4.

But if numbers are mental entities, then they must inhere in an infinite and timeless mind—the mind of an eternal and omniscient God.¹²

¹⁰ Cf. A. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford, 1974); R. Davis, *The Metaphysics of Theism and Modality* (Peter Lang, 2000).

¹¹ For a defense of realism (with special reference to math), cf. J. Burgess & G. Rosen, *A Subject with no Object* (Oxford, 1997); B. Hale, *Abstract Objects* (Oxford, 1987); J. Katz, *Realistic Rationalism* (MIT, 1998); C. Wright, *Frege's Conception of Numbers as Objects* (Aberdeen U Press, 1983).

¹² For a defense of abstract objects as divine ideas, cf. B. Leftow, *Divine Ideas* (Cornell, forthcoming); G. Welty, *An Examination of Theistic Conceptual Realism* (Oxford: MPhil thesis, 2000); *Theistic Conceptual Realism* (Oxford: DPhil diss., forthcoming).

IV. Why I believe the Bible

1. Psychological realism

The Bible contains a wide variety of psychological portraits—some are thumbnail sketches, others more 3D—involving *men* (e.g., Aaron, Abner, Abraham, Absalom, Agrippa [I&II], Ahab, Amos, Asa, Asaph, Barnabas, Daniel, David, Eli, Elijah, Esau, Felix, Festus, Gamaliel, Haman, Herod [the Great, Antipas], Hezekiah, Jacob, Jehoiada, Jeremiah, Jonathan, Jonah, Joseph [OT/NT], Judas, Laban, Manasseh, Mordecai, Moses, Naaman, Nebuchadnezzar, Nicodemus, Paul, Peter, Pilate, Rehoboam, Samuel, Saul, Stephen, Thomas, Uzziah, Zecharias) and *women* (e.g., Abigail, Athalia, Delilah, Esther, Hagar, Hannah, Herodias, Jezebel, Lot's wife, Mary, Mary & Martha, Michal, Miriam, Naomi, Rahab, Rebekah, Ruth, Sarah, the Samaritan woman, the Shunammite, the Syro-phenician mother, Tamar, the witch of Endor, the hemorrhaging woman) from all walks of life.

To my mind, and to countless readers before me, their characterization always rings true. They are unmistakable and unforgettable. Even if a novelistic genius could pull this off, the Bible wasn't penned by a novelist, but by several dozen writers of varied experience.¹³ So the only plausible explanation is that we are face-to-face with a record of real people—which is, of course, inseparable from a real life setting.

2. Thematic consilience

The OT is filled with a bevy of apparently disparate motifs involving *people* (Adam, David, Enoch, Jonah, Melchizedek, Moses, Solomon), *places* (Eden, Promised Land, wilderness), *ideas* (remnant, firstborn, firstfruits, theophany, imago Dei, pilgrimage, exile/restoration, inheritance, only child, sonship, spotless lamb, seed of promise), *offices* (prophet, priest, king, covenant mediator, kinsman-redeemer, the Anointed), *institutions* (Temple, tabernacle, Sabbath), *events* (Flood, Exodus), *observances* (circumcision, Pass-

¹³ For a defense of traditional OT authorship, cf. G. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Moody, 1994).

over, burnt offerings, kosher laws, lustrations), and *things* (manna, Jacob's ladder, brazen serpent, red heifer, scapegoat, river of life, tree of life).

In the NT, these seemingly scattered motifs suddenly converge on the person and work of Christ.¹⁴ Although typology is prospective, the pattern only emerges in retrospect. Short of providence and plenary inspiration, it's hard to see how such massive coordination is possible.

3. Archetypal quality

The Bible resonates with themes of perennial and universal appeal. This is something it shares in common with other great literature and drama—although to an uncommon degree. But what sets it apart in that respect is that the Book of Genesis reveals the historical origin of such archetypal literary motifs.

4. Diagnostic discernment

The Bible offers a diagnosis of the human condition. On the one hand, it describes the psychology of the believer. On the other hand, it describes the psychology of the unbeliever. And in both cases, its diagnosis is uncannily acute, accurate and prescient. On the one hand, every believer can find himself in the lives of the Old and NT saints. On the other hand, unbelievers, past and present, act and react, as if typecast, in exactly the way that Scripture predicts—according to the evasive animosity of Jn 3:19-21 or the suppress-and-supplant strategy of Rom 1.¹⁵

In this same connection it is striking that Scripture presents the opposing as well as the supporting side. It candidly records the objections of the unbeliever.

5. Historical centeredness

¹⁴ Cf. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes* (Eerdmans, 1968); E. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery* (NavPress, 1988); R. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (IVP, 1971); W. Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (Zondervan, 1995); J. Motyer & R. France, "Messiah," *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (IVP, 1998), 2:987-995; V. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Wolgemuth, 1991); W. VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption* (Zondervan, 1988); "Jesus, Images Of," *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, L. Ryken et al. eds. (IVP, 1998), 437-51.

¹⁵ Cf. "It is almost as if the human brain were specifically designed to misunderstand Darwinism, and to find it hard to believe...All of our intuitive judgments of what is probable turn out to be wrong...because [they were] tuned—ironically, by evolution itself," R. Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (W.W. Norton, 1986), xi-xii; "Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist," *ibid.*, 6; "The living results of natural selection overwhelmingly impress us with...the *illusion* of design and planning," *ibid.*, 21; "Even if there were no actual evidence in favor of the Darwinian theory...we should still be justified in preferring it over all rival theories," *ibid.*, 287; "We take the side of science *in spite* of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs... [and] just-so stories, because we have an *a priori* commitment...to materialism...no matter how counter-intuitive...Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door," R. Lewontin, *The New York Review of Books* 44.1 (1/9/1997), 31. Robert Jastrow has documented the atheistic prejudice of many modern cosmologists in *God and the Astronomers* (Norton, 1978); Cf. S. Jaki, *God and the Cosmologists* (Gateway, 1989). For a Freudian critique of atheism, cf. P. Vitz, *Faith of the Fatherless* (Spence, 1999).

The Bible is studded with place names and proper names, dates and addresses. It is possible to locate Eden on a map (in Mesopotamia), retrace the route of the Exodus or the journeys of St. Paul. And you can color in the outline of various places and people and people-groups named therein (e.g., Nebuchadnezzar, Pilate, Herod, the Hittites) from extra-Biblical sources. Although our historical distance and the ravages of time impede a complete reconstruction, more than enough survives to show that the many stories of Scripture took place in real time and space.¹⁶

In the NT alone we have four biographies of Christ by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. All of our 5000 Greek MSS designate these authors, and these only.¹⁷ Matthew and John were Apostles, so they wrote from firsthand knowledge. Mark was a native of Jerusalem, whose family home was a house-church frequented by the Apostles (Acts 12:12). So he was likely an eyewitness to the Jerusalem ministry of Christ, as well as having full access to the Apostles for further information. And Luke was in touch with many of the founding members of the mother church in Jerusalem.¹⁸

In addition, two of the NT letters were written by half-brothers of Christ (James, Jude), as well as two letters penned by yet another Apostle (Peter). So the NT is a 1C historical witness to a 1C historical figure, founded on multiply-attested firsthand observation and testimony.

6. Johannine asides

In the Fourth Gospel there are a number of occasions when John will gloss a saying of Christ (e.g., 1:38,42; 2:17,22; 4:2; 6:6,10,46,64,71; 11:13; 20:16). Now, if the Evangelist were making up these speeches, you wouldn't have a direct quotation followed by an editorial aside. Rather, the Evangelist would build his own interpretation into the very form of the statement and then put the whole thing in the mouth of Christ. So these parenthetical comments presume that John is transcribing what Jesus really said, and then putting it in context for the benefit of readers who, unlike himself, were not on the scene.¹⁹

7. The Synoptic Problem.

¹⁶ P. Barnett, *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity* (IVP, 1999); F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1974); E. Blaiklock & R. Harrison, eds., *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology* (Zondervan, 1983); F. Bruce, *In the Steps of the Apostle Paul* (Kregel, n.d.); A. Hoerth, *Archaeology & the Old Testament* (Baker, 1998); W. Kaiser, *A History of Israel* (B&H, 1998).

¹⁷ Cf. ¹⁷ On the originality of the superscriptions, cf. M. Hengel, *The Four Gospels* (Trinity, 2000), 48-56.

¹⁸ For a defense of traditional NT authorship, cf. E. Ellis, *The Making of the New Testament Documents* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (IVP, 1990).

¹⁹ For a Synoptic example, cf. Mk 5:41. Peter, James and John were in the room when Jesus spoke these very words and raised the daughter of Jairus from the dead. One of them then reported this miracle to Mark, who reproduces it verbatim. Note also the extraneous detail of her age (v42). The healing of the deaf-mute supplies still another such instance (Mk 7:34).

The various parallels between the Synoptic Gospels suggest some internal relation of literary dependence. The basic argument is that if a teacher received three student papers as similar as the Synoptics, he'd suspect that his students had collaborated.²⁰ And this is generally resolved in favor of Markan priority, partly because Matthew and Luke never agree to disagree with the order of Mark, which indicates that Matthew and Luke used Mark as their point of departure.

Now this supplies an external check on how Matthew and Luke edit their sources. And when we compare the three we see an extremely conservative transmission of primitive tradition. From time to time, Matthew and Luke touch up Mark's syntax or add some background detail for Matthew's Jewish audience and Luke's Gentile audience. What stands out is dull, dutiful fidelity over marked originality.

Conversely, Matthew and Luke supply an external check on Mark, for they both had independent sources of information and corroboration. Matthew as an apostle, while Luke likely had contacts with the dominical family and founding members of the mother church. So they, in turn, vouch for the historicity of Mark.

Synoptic variants are often treated as evidence of creative redaction, but this overlooks the fact that variants occur when the *same* writer retells the same story.²¹ So this doesn't imply a distinctive doctrinal slant. It rather reflects the narrative conventions of Biblical historiography.²²

8. *The Incomparable Christ*

When we read the Bible, we can identify with almost every character. Some of them are better than us, others worse. Yet we can project ourselves into either persona. But there is one singular and surpassing exception. In Christ we encounter a figure who is at once one with us and yet apart from us, who inspires admiration and defies emulation. He has fellow feeling without loss of firmness, and familiarity without hint of complicity. He can speak at the level of a child, yet with a reserve of subtlety that leaves the keenest listener out of his depth. No other figure, in either fact or fiction, covers such a range and or strikes such a balance, for in him we witness perfect manhood and perfect Godhood conjoined in one peerless person.²³

²⁰ It should be unnecessary to point out that there's nothing inherently dishonest about sharing information. Historians constantly use and reuse primary and secondary source material.

²¹ E.g., (1) The oath of Abraham's servant (Gen 24:3-8; par. 37-41).
(2) The prayer of Abraham's servant (Gen 24:12-24; par. 42-49).
(3) Pharaoh's dream (Gen 41:1-7,18-24)
(4) The résumé of the wilderness wandering (Num 33:1-49; Deut 8-10:11; 29:1-8).
(5) The decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1-4; par. 6:1-5).
(6) The Resurrection/Ascension (Lk 23:13-53; par. Acts 1:1-11).
(7) The conversion of Paul (Acts 9:1-30; par. 22:3-21; par. 26:4-20).
(8) The conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10; par. 11:1-18; par. 15:7-9).

²² Critics who draw up a long list of internal "contradictions" fail to make allowance for this elementary fact.

²³ C. Blomberg, *Jesus & the Gospels* (Broadman, 1997); *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (IVP, 2001); F. Bruce, *Jesus: Lord & Savior* (IVP, 1986); C. Cranfield, "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ," *On*

It is a truism to say that creative writing is autobiographical. This can even be unwittingly and uncomfortably revealing. A famous instance is the figure of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. He is easily the most vivid, memorable and well-rounded character in the epic. And the reason is that Milton put so much of himself into the character. Milton was an imperious, independent, versatile, and supremely self-confident man—and all these traits are reproduced in his diabolical antihero.

Now what I've said about Milton holds true of Austen, Dante, Bunyan, Eliot, Goethe and Racine as well—to name just a few. You could construct a psychological profile from their imaginative vision. If you had no other source of biographical information you could still deduce their sex, social standing, period, place, taste, talent and worldview from their creative labors.²⁴

Sceptics regard the Gospel portrait of Christ as a wholly or fairly free invention of the evangelist or redactor—especially in the more exalted aspects of its conception. But here we immediately run into a roadblock. For powers of characterization are constrained by the personal resources of an author's own personality and experience. Every storybook character is a psychological projection. To be sure, it may be modeled on close observation of humanity in general. But that is still filtered and distilled through the psyche of the writer.

Now the problem with reducing Jesus to an imaginative construct is that it would *take* a Jesus to *make* a Jesus. And, I ask you, dear reader, have you ever met anyone like Christ? I know I haven't. What is more, I have never encountered his like in all the multiplied histories of great men. Indeed, it's disillusioning to read about great men. The more I learn about them, the less I like them. When I study their life in detail, there always emerges some unseemly or unscrupulous side to their character.

There is only one credible explanation for the portrait of Christ that forms itself from the pages of Gospel history: the Gospels present us with a realistic depiction of a real person. To attribute this feat to the creative energies of the evangelist or redactor only pushes the problem back a step. For if we knew nothing else about the author, we would know this much—that he was a man of like passions as ourselves, sharing our fallenness and finitude. Just as water cannot rise above its own level, and muddy water cannot clarify its own issue, a characterization cannot ultimately improve on the character of the creative writer. His writing is ultimately an exercise in mirror-writing as he makes out his own distorted visage at the bottom of the well. That which is flesh begets flesh (Jn 3:6).

Romans (T&T Clark, 1998), 137-50; D. Guthrie, *A Shorter Life of Christ* (Zondervan, 1970); E. Harrison, *A Short Life of Christ* (Eerdmans, 1968); M. Harris: *Three Crucial Questions About Jesus* (Baker, 1994); K. Latourette, *Anno Domini* (Harper, n.d.); J. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (Baker, 1977); L. Morris, *Jesus is the Christ* (Eerdmans/IVP, 1989); R. Reymond, *Jesus, Divine Messiah* (P&R, 1990); A. Schlatter, *The History of the Christ* (Baker, 1997); R. Stein, *Jesus the Messiah* (IVP, 1996); N. Stonehouse, *The Witness of the Synoptic Gospels to Christ* (Baker, 1979); G. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker* (IVP, 1999); G. Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 1954); "The Historical Christ," *The Person and Work of Christ* (P&R, 1950), 5-33; M. Wilkins & J. Moreland, eds., *Jesus Under Fire* (Zondervan, 1995).

²⁴ Cf. B.B. Warfield, "Concerning Schmiedel's 'Pillar-Passages,'" *Works* (Oxford, 1931), 3:181-255