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Problems for the Miracles of Jesus

I. The Centrality of Miracles, and Evidence for Miracles

Arguably, belief in God for millions of people and the weight of the Christian religion rests upon the miracles of Jesus. 70% of Americans polled claimed to believe the Jesus was resurrected from the dead.¹ Were it not for the miracles of Jesus, Christians, for the most part, would not believe in god, and perhaps Christianity would not exist at all. For many, perhaps most, the proof of the miracles of Jesus rests upon accounts given in the Gospels of the New Testament in the Bible. Hume's analysis of believing in miracles is important and influential, but I wish to argue for some general epistemological challenges to believing that the miracles of Jesus occurred that are distinct from Hume's.

My interest is in the case of a modern person drawing a reasonable conclusion about the miracles of Jesus on the basis of Biblical sources. I will argue that it is highly unlikely that a vital segment of the evidence is included in the Bible that would be necessary for a person to conclude with confidence that the Jesus miracles occurred. That is, the Biblical accounts that we have do not include any possibly disconfirming information about those events, if it had existed, so we should not believe that the Jesus miracles occurred on the basis of the Bible. And if it is unreasonable to conclude that the miracle claims are true, then belief in God for those people whose belief is founded on the truth of the miracle claims is unfounded, and the Christian religion, to the extent it is based upon the truth of those claims is also unfounded.²

The focus will be upon explaining this notion of potentially disconfirming evidence, its role in forming reasonable beliefs, and the reasons for thinking that it has been excluded from the Biblical accounts of the Jesus miracles. By "Jesus miracles," I have in mind the various extraordinary feats that Jesus is said to have performed: walking on water, healing the sick, resurrecting the dead, and feeding the hungry. More specifically, the miracle that is central to the Christian religion is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. After the Romans and Jews

¹ *The Harris Poll*, #119, November 29, 2007, "The Religious and Other Beliefs of Americans, More People Believe in the Devil, Hell, and Angels Than Believe in Darwin's Theory of Evolution," http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=838

² By extension, a similar argument can be applied to comparable cases where a modern religious belief is founded upon important factual claims that are recorded in ancient religious documents.

executed Jesus, it is reported that his body was put in a tomb. Thereafter, some of Jesus' followers are reported to have gone to the tomb and found the body missing, or alive again.³ Later, the resurrected Jesus is said to have appeared to many of his followers. Many people take the resurrection of Jesus to be the capstone demonstration of his divinity and the central event for all of Christianity.

I will argue that the manner in which the body of information we have about the Jesus miracles was gathered, recorded, and preserved in the Christian Gospels makes it unreasonable to believe that the core Christian miracles really occurred. The sort of argument that I am rejecting can be thought of this way:

1. If the Gospels claim that the miracles of Jesus are true, then they actually occurred.
2. The Gospels claim that the miracles of Jesus are true.

3. Therefore, the miracles of Jesus actually occurred.

Arguments of this sort are frequently criticized for circularity: Premise 1 is sometimes justified by appealing to other claims in the Bible that report that the things the Bible records are true. But there is another class of defenses for premise 1 that I wish to analyze and reject that are not so clearly circular. Under many circumstances, when a source of information that one takes to be reliable and accurate indicates that a claim is true, then it is reasonable to believe it. We trust friends, family, reliable sources of information like news anchors, and others to tell us the truth, and we often form reasonable, justified beliefs on the basis of what they tell us. One of the presumptions behind this trust is that we take it that the source has presented us with enough of the relevant information for us to make draw a reasonable conclusion ourselves. We assume, among other things, that had disconfirming evidence been available to the source, then that would have been transmitted too.

Obviously, it is quite common for people, either explicitly or implicitly, to take the Gospels as a reliable source of information about Jesus. What I will do here is raise some general epistemic concerns about the availability and the accurate transmission of possibly disconfirming information to the Jesus miracles in the Bible. With little confidence that such information would have been available or successfully transmitted to us today, a reasonable person should not conclude that Jesus was resurrected on the basis that the Gospels report he was.

II. The Role of Potentially Disconfirming Evidence in Forming Reasonable Beliefs.

Suppose a police detective Smith has ulterior motives in implicating suspect Jones in a murder. As Smith gathers and compiles evidence surrounding the murder, he subtly sifts, filters, and adjusts the evidence. Smith chooses to ask a lot of questions about some issues, particularly about Jones, and not others. Smith investigates Jones vigorously, while neglecting to check up on highly suggestive leads concerning other suspects. Smith even leaves some important facts out the file concerning Jones. When Smith gets information that suggests Jones' guilt, he readily accepts it, while applying excessive critical scrutiny to any counter indications to Jones' guilt. And so on. We could even imagine that in creating a case file, Smith doesn't actually include any false claims, but the sort and amount of information that he includes clearly implicates Jones and not anyone else. Smith then presents this body of adjusted (but true) information to District Attorney Brown. Under the assumption that she has received all of evidence that is relevant one way or another concerning Jones' guilt, she

³ It turns out that on the details of the events here vary greatly between the four Gospel accounts of the resurrection in the New Testament. We will consider the implications of these differences later.

concludes that Jones is guilty and proceeds to make a compelling case for that conclusion to the jury. Brown and the jury eventually arrive at the (probably) justified, but mistaken conclusion that Jones is guilty. The other information that got omitted during Smith's adjustments, the filtering, and the truth about the murder never come to light.

Suppose a Nurse Smith is helping to treat a patient Jones. Smith has some of her own ideas about medicine, illness, and diet. As people will do, she's become enamored of the idea that too many dairy products in peoples' diets leads to high cholesterol, and ultimately to serious heart problems. She talked to Jones on many occasions, she's seen Jones's file, and she's now passionately convinced that Jones eats too many dairy products and as a result now has atherosclerosis. She's sure that if he could just get treated for that, and eliminate dairy products, then it would help him greatly. So either intentionally or not, as she compiles information about Jones and manages Jones's medical file, she tilts and guides the information towards what she knows will make a convincing case for Jones's high cholesterol and atherosclerosis. In this case, we can imagine that she does add some information to the file that she knows to be false, and she deliberately excludes some information that is accurate, but her intentions are positive; she only wants what is best for Jones and she thinks that these falsifications are necessary to get him the right treatment. Doctor Brown picks up the file, consults her medical manuals, carefully studies all of the information and comes to the (probably justified) conclusion that Jones has high cholesterol and atherosclerosis. The other information, the real data that was present without Smith's interventions, never comes to light, and Brown is never the wiser. The placebo effect kicks in from treatment for Jones, and the treatment he does get for his fabricated syndrome has some collateral effect on his real problem, and eventually he feels better and is declared cured.

Consider another case. Imagine some medieval doctor trying to ascertain the causes and mechanism of the bubonic plague during its outbreaks in the early 1300s in Europe. Without modern bacterial theory and an understanding that the bacterium was born from rats to humans in the blood, and even with the best available evidence at the time, that doctor would only be able to form a dim, inaccurate picture of the problem. It would take until the 19th century for scientists to develop the conceptual tools, the instruments, a method of investigation, and the knowledge base that would make it possible to understand what the disease was and how it was transmitted.

There are several important facts about these three cases. First, the person gathering information may or may not have a deliberate, conscious intent to misrepresent. In both cases, they could genuinely believe that they are gathering all of the important information and then transmitting it accurately and completely. Nevertheless, vital counter evidence could be left out. Furthermore, in these cases and countless others like them, a discrepancy between the original purpose for recording the information and the purpose that it ultimately gets used for could also lead to significant misrepresentations of the facts. If my wife makes a list of things that need to be done to the house from most expensive to least expensive, and I take it to be a list of things to do from most important to least important, we will both, obviously, have a different plan in mind. Additionally, without the necessary conceptual tools, background knowledge, and the ability to investigate the appropriate aspects of a phenomena, one cannot hope to form the sort of evidential picture about it that would lead to accurate conclusions.

In the first two examples, District Attorney Brown and Doctor Brown had reasonable expectations not only that the information relayed through Smith was true, but that it was in some relevant respects complete with regard to the issue at hand. Furthermore, there is a presumption that the purpose that guided the gathering and recording of the information at least roughly matched the purpose that would guide the ultimate evaluation of the body of information. In both examples, Brown assumed that the picture that she was getting about

Jones was the whole picture, with all the relevant details included that would be necessary to make a well-informed decision.

These considerations lead us to a principle:

Counter Evidence Principle (CEP): S would be reasonable in concluding that p is true on the basis of the evidence E only if it is reasonable for S to believe that the evidence E would indicate $\sim p$ if $\sim p$ had been the case.⁴

That is, it is not reasonable to believe some claim p merely because I have some evidence indicates its truth. If that evidence is filtered, slanted, selected, or otherwise misrepresentative of all of the relevant facts, then it may support p, but p may turn out to be false, and a larger, more complete evidential picture would have made that clear. Or p may in fact be true, and the information (E) that S considers seems to justify it, but details about the way that E was compiled, if S had known about them or considered them, would have undermined S's confidence in the inference. Or it may be that $\sim p$ is true but even the best available body of evidence doesn't reveal it because of inadequacies in the available investigative tools, concepts, or background knowledge. The point is that before S concludes that p is true, the information that S possesses concerning p must potentially include evidence that would disprove p, if any exists and is available.

Suppose Doctor Smith is evaluating patient Jones. Numerous tests have been done on Jones and the results are all compiled in Jones' file. Without anyone's knowledge, a crucial machine in the lab that evaluates blood has broken during the night so that it reports that every blood sample that is submitted to it has an elevated white cell count. Smith reads Jones' file carefully and finds that all of the evidence there strongly indicates that Jones has ailment X. Furthermore, a necessary condition for having X is that a patient's white cell count is elevated. In fact, Jones' white cell count is not elevated, but the misleading lab results don't show that. Naturally, Smith assumes that if Jones' white cell count were not elevated, then the blood test results would make that clear. So on the basis of the information in the file, Smith concludes that Jones has X. But if Smith had reason to think that the information in the file is not complete, or that the counter indications to X would not show up in the tests, even if they existed, then Smith, if she was being reasonable, would withhold judgment about whether or not Jones has X until better evidence is available.

In this case, there is no deliberate manipulation of the information, no conscious misrepresentation, no lying, and no deceit by any person. And the problem in the body of evidence could be quite hard to detect. Suppose that the blood testing machine *broke back* into proper functioning order the next day.

In order for someone to infer reasonably that p is true on the basis of some body of evidence, then there must be the expectation that counter evidence to p, had there been any,

⁴ The principle here is similar to Wykstra's CORNEA principle that he brings against William Rowe's inductive argument from evil against the existence of God. Wykstra says,

On the basis of cognized situation s, human H is entitled to claim "It appears that p" only if it is reasonable for H to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if p were not the case, s would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her.

would have made it into E. That is, if the goal is to believe that p is true *on the basis of* E, then E needs to be a body of evidence that would include the events, or indicators that would have disproven p, if they had occurred. Otherwise, E can't be trusted in its support p. E by itself would neither confirm or disconfirm p, even if every indicator in E seemed to clearly prove p. If E has been actively doctored by someone who favors the conclusion p for other reasons so that any counter indications have been removed or diminished, then it will look like E supports p, but that won't be because p is true. Or if any one of many other kinds of filters, adjustments, or biases had been at work on the composition of E, then it might give what appears to resounding support for p when in fact just the opposite is true and there is abundant evidence outside of E that shows it.

III. Counter Evidence Concerning the Jesus Miracles

What are the implications for the Jesus miracles of these general points about the composition of a body of evidence that leads to a reasonable conclusion? I will argue that we have good reasons to doubt that the CEP has been or can be met in the case of the Jesus miracles. We have reasons to doubt that our information about them is even nominally complete enough to draw a reasonable conclusion. It does not seem that the purposes behind the reporting them and the purpose that is now often put to the information match. We have good reasons to doubt that the record is impartial and objective. And the people that recorded and transmitted the Jesus miracles did not have the conceptual tools, investigative methods, or background knowledge that would be necessary to adequately evaluate and represent the phenomena.

Before we can consider the arguments for those specific conclusions however, we need to consider some details about the body of evidence we have concerning the Jesus miracles.

1. The History of the Gospel Accounts of the Miracles of Jesus

Scholars who study the New Testament seemed to have reached a consensus about the approximate dates of a number of important events. Among the people who believe that Jesus existed, it is generally agreed that he was executed around 35 CE.

The four Gospel accounts, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the primary sources of information that we have about Jesus in the Christian cannon. Mark, the Gospel that is typically identified as the earliest, is thought to have been written around 65 CE, about 30 years after the death of Jesus, by Mark the Evangelist (not the apostle, not an eyewitness). It is not thought that Mark the Evangelist was an eyewitness himself; rather, he based his account on reports that he heard from others. We do not know how many people and how many retellings of the story separated him from any eyewitnesses there might have been to the events in question.

Matthew and Luke are thought by most scholars to have been written much later, probably around 90-100 CE. Again, these books were not written by eyewitnesses. Rather, most agree that they borrowed heavily from Mark in their accounts and possibly some other, now lost, source.

The oldest fragments of manuscripts that exist today from these books date to around 200-250 CE.⁵ So 110-160 years separate time they are thought to have been written from any actual copies that we can consult now.

⁵ <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0700433.htm>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chester_Beatty_Papyri

The Gospel of John is dated sometime around 90-100 CE, so it was composed 70 or more years after Jesus' death. One of the oldest copies we have of it is date about 200 CE.⁶ This book seems to differ most substantially in tone, purpose, and detail from the others.

In the surviving copies of the different Gospels, many variations in wording occur.

For the argument we are considering in this paper, we can focus our attention on the Gospel of Mark. It is widely agreed to be the earliest, and it was a primary source for 2 of the other Gospels, so much of what will be said about it applies to them as well.

For our argument, consider just these three dates. Jesus is thought to have been executed around 35 CE. Mark is thought to have been written 30 years later. But the oldest existing copies of Mark that we possess today are from 320 CE and 370 CE. So between the time of the alleged events surrounding Jesus' death and the actual copies of reports of those events that we possess, around 300 years passed. As far as we know, there could have been hundreds of people and hundreds of iterations of the story that transpired in that period.

2. Has the Counter Evidence Principle Been Met For Us Concerning the Jesus Miracles?

The question before us is how adequate is the body of evidence that we possess that might allow us to draw some conclusions about the miracles of Jesus? As we have seen, even if some evidence we possess indicates that some claim *p* is true, we should not draw the conclusion unless we have the expectation that counter evidence, if there had been any, would have been included. In keeping with that concern, there are some important questions that we must ask about the accounts of the Jesus miracles:

Were the people surrounding Jesus and the ones giving the accounts of the miracles that he is alleged to have performed impartial, objective observers?

Consider these groups of people: the alleged witnesses; the people who conveyed the witness' stories later to others; the authors of the Gospels who wrote decades later on the basis of these retold stories; and all of the people who have otherwise played a role in the transmission of the stories across the nearly 2,000 years that have transpired.

Were all of those people well-equipped with the tools and cognitive abilities to detect fraud or identify self-deception?

Did they understand the value of having careful investigations into paranormal claims?

Did they know, 1,800 to 2,000 years ago, how often claims about the paranormal, about miracles, and about supernatural events are mistaken?

Did they understand how frequently people giving eyewitness testimony, particularly about matters that they are passionately and personally involved in, unconsciously distort evidence, sift for confirmation, and ignore counter-evidence?

Did they know what sort of questions to ask and what aspects of the case to investigate in an alleged paranormal event?

⁶ <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0700433.htm>

Suppose that the Jesus stories were known to be false by someone who had figured out what was going on. Would that evidence of their falsity have survived centuries of active culling, adjusting, and protecting of the Jesus stories by faithful adherents?

Do we have reasons to think that every person involved in the telling and retelling of the story on its path from the events in 35 CE to their recording in the documents from 320 and 370 CE had the goal of preserving all the important details about those events, even the ones that, had they been present, would have suggested that the miracles were not authentic?

Would the dedicated Christians who transmitted the stories about Jesus down through the centuries have the goal of preserving all of the information about him, including evidence that would have undermined the authenticity of Christianity?

Should we think today when considering the history of the evidence about the Jesus miracles that the CEP was satisfied for any of people involved? Was it satisfied for every person in that chain leading to us?

And finally, for one of us today who considers that record of the miracles of Jesus in the Gospels, is the CEP satisfied?

I believe the answer to all of these questions is no. Even if the answer to many or most of these questions is no, then a reasonable person would be forced to withhold judgment about the truth of the Jesus miracles on the basis of the Gospels. At the very least, a conservative approach would suggest that we just don't know the answers to many of these questions. And if that is correct, then these questions show that the evidence that we have concerning the Jesus miracles is not adequate to support the conclusion that they occurred. These questions illustrate that we cannot accept premise 1 in the argument: If the Gospels claim that the miracles of Jesus are true, then they actually occurred. And if we cannot accept this premise, then it is unreasonable to believe that Jesus was a supernatural, divine being on the basis of the New Testament Gospels.

3. Some Counter-Evidential Possibilities

One of the challenges here is to think of counter-evidence that might have been available, but which may not have been originally discovered, recorded, or, even if it had, would not have survived the long history of transmission. Consider several novel possibilities:

Suppose there had been a hoax concerning the miracles of Jesus. Perhaps after his execution, some of the disciples conspired to spread some impressive stories and stage an empty tomb. Suppose that there were people who knew about it and even made some protests about the misrepresentations. Would we expect for reports or information about those whistleblowers to have survived and made it into the body of evidence we have today concerning Jesus' miracles or resurrection?

Suppose there was never an empty tomb at all. Suppose Jesus was buried there and the body remained there. But the enthusiasm and the ardent desires of the disciples got the better of them in the months, years, and decades that followed before the Gospels were written. The movement gained momentum, thousands, then millions of people became converts, and a religious institution built upon the veracity of those stories came to be the primary mechanism of preserving and propagating the stories. Would we expect that those pieces of counter indicative

evidence would survive through the centuries of that process and end up accurately represented in the information that we have today?

Suppose the few people who claimed to have seen the miracles of Jesus exaggerated, embellished, or even filled in missing details. Given the body of evidence that we have today, should we expect to find a record anything of that sort present there? Do we have reasonable grounds for thinking that the evidence we have in front of us presents a balanced, accurate, and relatively complete picture?

Suppose that when the author of the first Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus began to record the events that they had heard about second and third-hand, 30, 40 or more years later, the Christian movement had gotten established in a number of towns and the hopes of a great many people hung in the balance. So either knowingly or unknowingly those authors subtly adjusted, improved, aligned, or embellished the stories they had heard. Would we be in a position now with the body of evidence we have in front of us (the Gospels) to find the indicators of those subtle, or maybe not so subtle, adjustments, and deem the account unreliable?

Suppose that Jesus had given a sermon in which he said something like, "The stories you have heard about my being the Son of God, and the reports about my performing miraculous feats have been created by some of my overly enthusiastic and imaginative followers. I am nothing but a normal person and I am not a divine being." And suppose that these enthusiastic and imaginative followers ended up being the primary sources we now have for information about Jesus. Would we expect to have a careful and accurate record of this sermon from Jesus now?

It won't be adequate here to respond by arguing that Jesus would have never said something like this in one of his sermons or that such comments from Jesus are inconsistent with what we know about his sermons, his life, and his mission. By hypothesis in this scenario, the information we now have about Jesus' sermons and his life and mission will have a certain character that will misrepresent him, and that misrepresentation will be inconsistent with this hypothesis. It would be blatantly circular to use the misrepresentative information to argue that other accounts about him aren't accurate.

Suppose that someone happened to be in the area of the tomb and saw some Roman teenagers sneaking in and stealing the corpse during the night. And they later told many people about what they had seen. Given the history of the body of information that we have about Jesus now, would we expect to find a careful account of that grave robbing incident within the evidence we have now about the life of Jesus?

Suppose that a group of Roman teenagers had stolen the body and no one saw it or ever reported the incident. Would we expect to find information about that instance of grave robbing, had it occurred, in the information we have now about Jesus?

In several of the Gospel accounts, and in the non-canonical Gospel of Peter, one or two "angels" are found inside the tomb. In John, Jesus himself is found in the tomb. Suppose that these angels were the grave robbers, or Jesus was alive there all along and that the people checking the tomb made a mistake.

I am not arguing that in fact any of these things happened. We don't know that they did, and we don't have any specific evidence in their favor other than knowledge about human nature in general and the religious impulse in humans. But these are common and plausible scenarios that we frequently see happen as people tell and retell stories, gossip, and try to recall events from the past.

If tiny adjustments in the stories had been made over the centuries as hundreds and thousands of people with a powerful, vested interests in the authenticity of the Jesus stories copied and recopied, told and retold, taught and re-taught those stories as church doctrine, would there be clear indicators of the adjustments or discrepancies in the body of evidence

that we have in front of us today? If the miracles had not been authentic, would we expect to find indicators of that within the records of those miracles sustained by the Christian church?

Was there any sort of substantial investigation of the Jesus miracles conducted by disinterested third parties? Did any of them know what we know about how to conduct impartial investigations? Did any of them know what sorts of alternative explanations there are in these sorts of cases? And did they know what sorts of signs to look for? And finally, if there had been any sort of serious investigation or corroboration of these miracle claims, and if that investigation had revealed something suspicious about them, would we expect to find that counter evidence, or any of those indicators in the body of evidence we have today?

Again, I believe that the answer to all or most of these questions is no. There was no real investigation that we know of conducted concerning the miracles of Jesus. And they certainly weren't conducted by disinterested third parties.

It may be objected that in fact during the history of Christianity there has been a great deal of effort to corroborate the claims upon which it is founded. And so we would have a reasonable expectation that the counter evidence, if it had been there, would have been faithfully preserved so that future generations could investigate the question unhindered and draw a conclusion for themselves.

But consider that for the most part, the institution of Christianity has been the sole record keeper and source of information for many centuries regarding these texts. The people copying, preserving, and sustaining the Gospel accounts have been dedicated believers within the Christian church. A less than charitable reading would suggest that we have had a case of the fox watching the hen house for many centuries, and our primary means of confirming or disconfirming whether the chickens have been eaten is by checking with the fox himself.

IV. Some Specific Problems with the Sources

1. The Mark Bottle Neck

At many points in the history of the evidence, the conduit through which it passed was very small. The narrow passageway through which our information has passed about the Jesus miracles is going to amplify the risk of filtering, distortion, and misrepresentation. That means that we don't have the advantage of multiple, independent corroborations. We don't have intersubjective verifications.

The Gospel of Mark was the earliest written account. It was written 30-40 years after the alleged events. And it was based upon repeated stories that its author had heard; he was not an eye witness himself. So a large part of the information that we have about the resurrection passed through this narrow bottleneck. It is also possible that the path that the stories we have now traced through history narrowed to a single person at any number of other points. There may have only been one person who told the author of Mark about the resurrection. Or all of the other subsequent accounts of the story were based upon Mark, making its author the single line of access between the events and where we are now. It is possible that there was this sort of narrowing at many points along the path to us. So at each one of those points, the edifice of modern belief in God comes to rest upon whether or not that single individual who would become the source of information for future generations, misstated a detail here or there, or embellished a little bit, or omitted something that did not fit, or took a bit of artistic license.

There is a significant risk of error introduced by the layers of transmission that the information would have gone through from the eyewitnesses (if there were any) to the authors of the Gospels. As the stories got retold and passed on, we would expect details to get embellished, omissions, and adjustments. As the 30-150 years passed from the date of the events to their eventual recording by the authors, the risk would increase significantly.

Furthermore, it does not seem reasonable to expect that the goal of each of the links in this chain would have been to perfectly preserve every bit of evidence, including counter indications, so that future generations could decide for themselves based on the record whether or not the Jesus miracles happened. We would expect, at a minimum, that the intentions of these links in the chain would be to record what they took to be the truth—that the miracles really happened. That's the story they would have told and retold.

Here's an experiment. Find something that you have written, something that came out of your own mind—a letter or an essay. Since it is entirely your own creation, you should be more familiar with it, and know its details better than anyone else. Read it carefully, and then put it away. Now sit down and try to rewrite it, word for word. How successful were you at capturing every word, every important detail, every vital concept? Did the tone stay the same, was the thesis exactly the same? Did you add anything that wasn't there before? Did you leave anything out? I suspect that even with something that you wrote and that came from your own mind, there are noticeable and important changes that occurred. I suspect that you couldn't prevent its being changed even if you tried very hard. How much harder would it be to conduct this experiment with a story that someone else told you? How much harder would it be to do this when so many important political, social, moral, and religious issues hang in the balance? How hard would it be to keep one's most sincere hopes, and passionate needs out of it? Wouldn't it be very hard to accurately retell a story after 30 years, 90 years, or 150 years?

Consider this example. The Book of Mark is the only place in the New Testament where Jesus is called a carpenter. In Matthew, he's called a carpenter's son. So consider what a narrow conduit this has become. The whole culture of portraying Jesus as a carpenter has sprung from a single mention in one sentence in one book of the Bible. By most accounts, that book was probably based on hearsay evidence and written 30 years after Jesus died, and the oldest copy of it we have is from 300 years later. If that account stated that Jesus was a tax collector, that would be the entire story and portrayal that we have today. If he had written that Jesus was a normal man with no ability to perform miracles, perhaps that would be the widespread view we have today. Or if a book had written that Jesus was a normal man with no divine abilities, that source would have been altered or eliminated.

2. The 300 Year Gap

Roughly 300 years passed between when we think that Jesus died and the oldest copies of Mark that report his resurrection. So we have no direct means to effectively confirm what sorts of changes or how many changes may have occurred in the information in its transmission across that gap. The information may have been preserved with the utmost care by a very short list of diligent scribes, or it may have morphed into an unrecognizable new shape by being told and retold through thousands of minds and mouths. The truth is probably somewhere in between.

The problem is that we just don't know what sorts of filtering or adjustments may have occurred. Like our earlier example, we don't know about whether the blood analysis machine was broken. In order to satisfy the CEP, we would hope that originally any available counter evidence that there might have been was included in the body of information, and then as that body of information was transmitted from person to person across the centuries, the account remained complete enough for anyone who would ultimately evaluate it to make an informed decision about the authenticity of the Jesus miracles.

But we have several reasons to doubt that such faithful transmission across the gap would have occurred. Would the intervening years have left the information unscathed? Were the people and institutions involved in the transmission dedicated to the perfect preservation of all counter indications that might have been present?

A significant risk of alteration is introduced by the centuries. As the stories got retold and passed on, under any normal circumstances, we would expect details to get embellished, omissions, and adjustments. As the years passed from the date of the events to their eventual recording by the authors, the risk would increase significantly.

It would be plausible to maintain that information consistent with or supporting the Jesus miracles that was input in this process would have been output in some form at the other end. But for those of us on the output end, drawing a reasonable conclusion about the contents requires that CEP be satisfied. If $\sim p$ had been the case, would that be revealed in the output?

Again, I believe the answer to this question is no. There are several considerations that support that answer. It is implausible to think that each of the links in this chain would have preserved counter-indications to the authenticity of the Jesus miracles. Even if it was the conscious goal of some of the people involved to do so, it seems unlikely that all of them would have had that goal. And even if that was their goal, it seems unlikely that they all would have been successful at preserving all the counter-evidence. It is not clear that the people or institutions involved took their project to be preserving the record so that future generations could decide for themselves whether or not the Jesus miracles happened. We would expect, at a minimum, that the intentions of these links in the chain would be to record what they took to be the truth—that the miracles really happened. That's the story they would have told and retold.

Do we have reasons to think that every single person involved in the telling and retelling of the story on its path from the events in 35 CE to the eventual recording in the 320 and 370 CE manuscripts had the goal of preserving all the important details about those events, even the ones that, had they been present, would have suggested that the miracles were not authentic? It seems highly unlikely. It's plausible to assume that those people involved in the transmission of information were converted Christians and they had the goal of spreading information about the authenticity of Jesus' miracles.

It may be tempting to bring other evidence from later writings to bolster the case for the authenticity of Mark, or they may wish to cite facts like the rapid growth of the early church, the impressive influence that the Gospel tradition had on so many people in the centuries that followed, or the success of this tradition overall in history. These sorts of answers to the epistemological challenges I am raising are painfully circular, however. It is widely accepted that the later writings such as Matthew and Luke were based upon the story told in Mark, and another source, now lost, known as Q. We do not have the Q manuscript, but if we did, all of the same challenges to its ability to support the veridicality of the Jesus miracles would apply to it. And if Matthew and Luke were based in part on Mark, they cannot then be employed to support the accuracy of Mark, the earlier source. Likewise, any appeal to the growth of the early church or the influence and success of the Gospels on many people to bolster Mark's ability to give adequate evidence for the miracle claims is question begging. The growth of the early church was based, in large part, on the Gospel of Mark. The widespread influence of Christianity arose, in large part, from the Gospel of Mark. We cannot then use these effects to validate Mark's ability to give an accurate portrayal of the evidence surrounding the alleged miracles. There is no doubt that many people believed that the miracles of Jesus occurred. And many of them believed on the basis of the story they encountered through Mark. But the question we are considering is not the argument from widespread belief to the truth of the Christian miracles. We are considering the argument from the earliest reports of the Christian miracles in the Gospels to the truth of the Christian gospels. We are attempting to evaluate the character of that body of evidence and assess its suitability to give us the complete picture of all the relevant information. If there had been any counter indications to the authenticity of the miracles available to the eye witnesses, would those counter indications have made it into the Gospels and be available to us today? My answer has been no.

Between the alleged events and the oldest surviving copies of reports about those events, centuries past during which the story could have gone through countless changes that we would not be able to detect now. We now have the output but not the input of that process. And it is doubtful that the output allows us to satisfy CEP. We should doubt that counter evidence got into the record at the outset, and we should doubt that it would have survived through those years. There's just too much that we do not know about what may have happened, what the eyewitnesses may have known, or what may have happened to that information on its way to us.

3. The Winnowing Problem

Ironically, we do know about a great deal of winnowing, adjusting, and excluding of the various texts of early Christianity that occurred with the explicit purpose of creating a single, coherent canonical set of writings. The Bible that we now have coalesced over the centuries through a process that deliberately tried to minimize contradictions, eliminate alternative accounts, lessen dissonant details, and exclude information that does not fit with core Christian doctrines. The canonical New Testament as we know it today was sifted from a much broader and more diverse set of writings by the middle of the second century.

A partial list of other early Christian documents that we don't have, or that give even more widely varied accounts of Jesus and his followers includes: Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of the Twelve, Gospel of Peter, Gospel of the Basilides, Gospel of Mathias, Acts of Andrew, Acts of Paul, Acts of John, and the Epistle to the Laodiceans. It is significant that in the Gospel of Peter, for instance, we get a different account of the resurrection that suggests grave robbing. In it, the Jews get Pilate to put Roman guards at the tomb. The guards hear a voice and then see two men come down from the sky and then carry a body out of the tomb. Later, Mary and her friends find someone dressed in white in the tomb who claims that Jesus is gone.

Remarkably, in modern discussions of the criteria for canonicity, scholars have openly invoked consistency and a coherence of themes and details as grounds for excluding some of these other works from the officially accepted list. So we have some believers actively sifting through the various Christian writings and accounts of Jesus to find a core group of writings that they deem to be consistent and acceptable. Then those works are presented as the evidence that the miracles of Jesus are true, among other things, and the fact that they contain a roughly consistent story itself is invoked as part of the reason they should be accepted. So, founding the case for the Jesus miracles on the New Testament Gospels turns out to be very much like finding Jones guilty on the basis of evidence that Detective Smith has deliberately selected to implicate Jones in a murder.

Despite this deliberate winnowing of information to get the desired results, some surprising differences in the Gospel accounts have survived.

In the Luke account, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and other women go to the tomb, find it open, talk to two men in shining garments, and then go tell what they saw to the other disciples.

In Mark, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome go to the tomb, find it open, and find one man sitting there in white inside. They talk to him, then they run away in fear and they do not say "any thing to any man; for they were afraid."

In the Matthew account, Mary Magdalene and the "other" Mary go to the tomb. A great earthquake opens it by rolling the stone away. They go inside and find an angel of the Lord in white. Then they leave with fear and joy and run to bring the disciples word.

In the John account, Mary Magdalene (by herself) finds the tomb open. She goes and gets Simon Peter and the other disciple "that Jesus loved." The two of them go to the tomb and

find it empty. They leave, but Mary stays crying. Then two angels appear to her. Then Jesus himself appears to her. She talks to him and then goes to tell the rest of the disciples.

These starkly different accounts of the alleged resurrection of Jesus should raise serious questions for anyone who thinks that this book can be employed as a reliable historical document or trusted for accuracy concerning the Jesus miracles. If we include the Gospel of Peter account, then in four out of the five accounts, the tomb isn't found empty; rather some one or two people ("angels") are found inside. And in one case, they are seen removing the body. And none of the accounts tell the same story about who went to the tomb and the series of events.

The variations between these different accounts gives us a good picture of how morphing and modification of the texts could occur. They also show how implausible it is to believe that these documents contain all of the relevant information that one would need in order to decide whether or not the evidence is on the whole favorable to the authenticity of the Jesus miracles. We have only the barest scraps of fragmented and contradictory information about the alleged events. And we have a number of convincing reasons to think that the sorts of information that would disprove or cast doubt on the Christian miracles would not have survived within a much handled set of documents that are used by so many with the goal of proving Jesus or substantiating their faith. So the inference that the Jesus miracles really did occur based upon the body of evidence present in the Gospels is illegitimate.

V. Ways the Evidence Could Be Better:

It does not seem that we can find epistemic fault in the people who transmitted the Jesus story for not knowing about the Placebo effect, or about double-blind controls, or for not conducting a full scale modern investigation. Some or all of them may have been doing the best they could have with the available tools and information. But the question is not about whether or not they were justified given what they saw or heard from others. Nor is it about whether or not they really believed what they reported. The real question is about whether or not you and I, now, 2,000 years later, are justified in concluding that the Jesus miracles occurred on the basis of the information that those people left.

Furthermore, it's useful to simply think about ways in which the information we have now could be better and more convincing than it is. It does not seem unreasonable to expect or ask for some independent corroborations of the Jesus miracles that do not come from committed, self-professed converts. (It is a problem that there are hardly any of those left.) We could imagine Pontius Pilate or the Romans who performed the execution, investigating the claims of his resurrection and discovering that it was an unsubstantiated rumor. We could imagine an Apostle confessing to being involved in a large deception. And I have suggested that that information did not survive the various levels of filtration and transmission to today.

In general, small samples of information are less trustworthy. The more evidence that can be gathered the better. If a miracle were to occur, all other things being equal, we would have better evidence if there are more people who attest to it. A few passionate believers with a great deal of investment in the cause of the miracle claim are not as reliable (or not reliable at all) as a large group of diverse, autonomous people.

Wishful thinking, the power of suggestion, peer-pressure, mistakes, delusions, inattention, prior expectations, misunderstanding of the events, revisions, hedging, vagueness, and confirmation bias can all be influential in leading someone to believe that something extraordinary has happened. We have a great deal of empirical research now that shows even when people are working hard to carefully observe and note some series of events, their reports frequently suffer from these sorts of distortions. Numerous psychological studies have shown that it takes very little prompting and only slight suggestions to get people to fabricate stories,

deny what they have seen with their own eyes, and come to genuinely believe something that is a mistake. A reasonable person's evaluation of the authenticity of reports of miracles should reflect an awareness of this psychological background.

One of the most important rules of the evaluation of empirical data in a scientific investigation is that there must be double-blind controls in the evaluation of the evidence. On the researchers' side, the individuals who evaluated whether or not the data supports or refutes a hypothesis must be as objective, free of bias, and as un-invested in a particular outcome as possible. James Randi has investigated thousands of cases of alleged paranormal, pseudoscience, and alternative medicine claims. The single biggest problem he finds, and the inevitable downfall of all of them, is that invariably enthusiastic believers, adherents, and people with powerful interests in a positive outcome are responsible for the "investigating" of the phenomena in question. So not surprisingly, given that people have such an uncanny knack for finding what they are looking for, they conclude that the phenomena is real and that it is resoundingly supported by the evidence. He has despaired more than once from having to explain the most rudimentary elements of the principles of double-blind testing. And time after time, when more rigorous controls are employed, the evidence that seemed to be there during the earlier, sloppier investigations, evaporates.

What should be clear now is that by any reasonable standard, the body of evidence that we have is actually quite poor. We can't help but ask, if it is God, after all, that is producing and preserving the evidence in question, surely it would not be challenging for him to have made the case for the authenticity of the Jesus miracles much better? It seems obvious, that if an omnipotent and omniscient being had intended that people in later centuries would come to believe in the authenticity of the Jesus stories, it would have been a trivial matter to bring it about that the evidence was vastly better than what we have now.

VI. Best Case Scenario: Agnosticism.

There are reasons to think that for the sort of claims in question, i.e., about supernatural and paranormal events and entities, the people responsible for the body of evidence we have could not have given us what we would need to conclude reasonably that those claims are true.

As the people living in the Iron Age saw it, the world was infused with magical and supernatural events. Their minds and lives must have been overrun with spooks, spirits, supernatural forces, mysteries, and frightening possibilities. Virtually none of the facts about nature that you take for granted were a part of their knowledge base. They didn't know that such a thing as oxygen exists, they didn't know that infections are caused by viruses, they didn't know that it gets dark at night because the earth is turning, they didn't know what made water boil, and they didn't know that there are no evil demons. The vast majority of them did not know how to read or write. The average life expectancy was 20-30 years because of their staggering ignorance of medical science and basic hygiene and public sanitation.

The general propensity for Jesus' contemporaries to believe in supernatural, paranormal, or spiritual events would have been very high. The people surrounding Jesus would have believed in and reported many paranormal events and entities that were not real. So even if the Jesus miracles had occurred, their propensity to believe makes our prospects for separating authentic from inauthentic cases dim to say the least. They would not have been in a good position to detect frauds, lies, deceptions, or mistakes about the authenticity of the miracle claims if they had been present.

We would not expect that this audience would be well-equipped to observe and record events that were so charged with spiritual, magical, and social implications. Even today there are millions of educated, intelligent people with the benefit of a modern college education who are regularly duped into believing preposterous supernatural claims that are refuted by easy

investigations. Yogis, gurus, spiritual leaders perform simple sleight of hand tricks that can be found in any introductory magic book for children, and gullible people who have a powerful desire to believe give up their jobs, sell their possessions, and become devoted followers. So much the worse for some uninformed tradesman in the first century who lacks our level of information and who observes some seemingly miraculous event. Given the epistemic background of the people observing and reporting the Jesus miracles, whatever really happened, we should be much more surprised to find them being skeptical than believing. *Prima facie*, we should take their earnest believing in supernatural or paranormal claims with a grain of salt. We can put the problem this way, if God were trying to pick an audience with the intention of proving his existence and communicating his desires, he could have found a much less gullible, less easily-impressed, and more critical audience. It would take surprisingly little to win their hearts and minds of the people in the first century. But a reasonable person in the 21st century would be foolish to have the same liberal standards.

VII. Conclusion

Recall the CEP:

S would be reasonable in concluding that p is true on the basis of the evidence E only if it is reasonable for S to believe that the evidence E would indicate $\sim p$ if p had not been the case.

What we have now seen is that for the person who now considers the information we have concerning the miracles of Jesus, this principle is not met for a variety of reasons. So this argument, specifically premise 1, is undermined for them:

1. If the Gospels claim that the miracles of Jesus are true, then they actually occurred.
2. The Gospels claim that the miracles of Jesus are true.

3. Therefore, the miracles of Jesus actually occurred.

We should not accept that premise 1 is true. We have a number of substantial reasons to believe that even if the Jesus miracles did not occur, the Gospels would still claim that they are. We should doubt that counter evidence that would be crucial to give a complete picture of the events if it had existed would not have made it into the information we have today. And we should doubt that the people responsible for producing the information we have were well-equipped to distinguish a genuine supernatural event from something more ordinary. So their claiming that the miracles of Jesus are true is insufficient grounds for believing that they are true.

The principle of access to possible counter evidence has not been met in the case of the miracles upon which the Christian church was founded. The principle has not been met in the case of the miracles that are alleged to prove the existence of God. And for many, the existence of God rests entirely upon the truth of those miracles. So for them, a belief in the existence of God is unfounded.

I have not argued for any single alternative account of the miracles of Jesus. Nor have I argued specifically that any of the people involved in the transmission of information about Jesus deliberately misrepresented the events, or consciously altered the information they were recording. Many of those individuals may have done a very careful and faithful reproduction of the elements of those accounts that were of importance to their purposes, or that they earnestly believed. But in order us to form a reasonable conclusion now, we need to be confident that if

there had been counter evidence, the information we have before us now would reveal it. But we have seen that there are many reasons to doubt that such evidence would have made it into the Gospel accounts and then been faithfully transmitted across the centuries to us now. As long as we have those suspicions that our information is incomplete, it would be unreasonable to conclude that the Jesus miracles happened.