



The Case For Christ

By: Lee Strobel

Category: nonfiction religion

Synopsis:

The Case for Christ records Lee Strobel's attempt to "determine if there's credible evidence that Jesus of Nazareth really is the Son of God." The book consists primarily of interviews between Strobel (a former legal editor at the Chicago Tribune) and biblical scholars such as Bruce Metzger. Each interview is based on a simple question, concerning historical evidence (for example, "Can the Biographies of Jesus Be Trusted?"), scientific evidence, ("Does Archaeology Confirm or Contradict Jesus' Biographies?"), and "psychiatric evidence" ("Was Jesus Crazy When He Claimed to Be the Son of God?"). Together, these interviews compose a case brief defending Jesus' divinity, and urging readers to reach a verdict of their own.

Other books by Lee Strobel

God's Outrageous Claims

Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary

What Jesus Would Say

The Case for Christ

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Finally, I'd like to thank the scholars who allowed me to interview them for this book. Again and again I was impressed not only by their knowledge and wisdom but also by their humble and sincere faith—as well as their desire to help spiritual seekers investigate the outrageous claims of Jesus.

INTRODUCTION

Reopening the Investigation of a Lifetime

In the parlance of prosecutors, the attempted murder case against James Dixon was "a dead-bang winner." Open and shut. Even a cursory examination of the evidence was enough to establish that Dixon shot police sergeant Richard Scanlon in the abdomen during a scuffle on Chicago's south side.

Piece by piece, item by item, witness by witness, the evidence tightened a noose around Dixon's neck. There were fingerprints and a weapon, eyewitnesses and a motive, a wounded cop and a defendant with a history of violence. Now the criminal justice system was poised to trip the trap door that would leave Dixon dangling by the weight of his own guilt.

The facts were simple. Sergeant Scanlon had rushed to West 108th Place after a neighbor called police to report a man with a gun. Scanlon arrived to find Dixon noisily arguing with his girlfriend through the front door of her house. Her father emerged when he saw Scanlon, figuring it was safe to come outside.

Suddenly a fight broke out between Dixon and the father. The sergeant quickly intervened in an attempt to break it up. A shot rang out; Scanlon

staggered away, wounded in his midsection. Just then two other squad cars arrived, screeching to a halt, and officers ran over to restrain Dixon.

A .22-caliber gun belonging to Dixon-covered with his fingerprints and with one bullet having been fired-was found nearby,

where he had apparently flung it after the shooting. The father had been unarmed; Scanlon's revolver remained in his holster.

Powder burns on Scanlon's skin showed that he had been shot at extremely close range.

Fortunately, his wound wasn't life-threatening, although it was serious enough to earn him a medal for bravery, proudly pinned on his chest by the police superintendent himself. As for Dixon, when police ran his rap sheet, they found he had previously been convicted of shooting someone else. Apparently, he had a propensity for violence.

And there I sat almost a year later, taking notes in a nearly deserted Chicago courtroom while Dixon publicly admitted that, yes, he was guilty of shooting the fifteen-year police veteran.

On top of all the other evidence, the confession clinched it.

Criminal court judge Frank Machala ordered Dixon imprisoned, then rapped his gavel to signal that the case was closed. Justice had been served.

I slipped my notebook into the inside pocket of my sports coat and erupted downstairs toward the press room. At the most, I figured my editor would give me three paragraphs to tell the story in the next day's Chicago Tribune. Certainly, that's all it deserved. This wasn't much of a tale.

Or so I thought.

THE WHISPER OF AN INFORMANT

I answered the phone in the pressroom and recognized the voice right away-it was an informant I had cultivated during the year I had been covering the criminal courts building. I could tell he had something hot for me, because

the bigger the tip, the faster and softer he would talk-and he was whispering a mile a minute.

"Lee, do you know that Dixon case?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure," I replied. "Covered it two days ago. Pretty routine." "Don't be so sure. The word is that a few weeks before the shooting, Sergeant Scanlon was at a party, showing off his pen gun." "His what?"

"A pen gun. It's a .22-caliber pistol that's made to look like a fountain pen. They're illegal for anyone to carry, including cops." When I told him I didn't see the relevance of this, his voice got even more animated. "Here's the thing: Dixon didn't shoot Scanlon. Scanlon was wounded when his own pen gun accidentally went off in his shirt pocket. He framed Dixon so he wouldn't get in trouble for carrying an unauthorized weapon.

Don't you see? Dixon is innocent!" "Impossible!" I exclaimed.

"Check out the evidence yourself," came his reply. "See where it really points."

I hung up the phone and dashed up the stairs to the prosecutor's office, pausing briefly to catch my breath before strolling inside. "You know the Dixon case?" I asked casually, not wanting to tip my hand too early. "If you don't mind, I'd like to go over the details once more."

Color drained from his face. "Uh, I can't talk about it," he stammered. "No comment."

It turned out that my informant had already passed along his suspicions to the prosecutor's office. Behind the scenes, a grand jury was being convened to reconsider the evidence.

Amazingly, unexpectedly, the once airtight case against James Dixon was being reopened. NEW FACTS FOR A NEW THEORY

At the same time, I started my own investigation, studying the crime scene, interviewing witnesses, talking with Dixon, and examining the physical

evidence. As I thoroughly checked out the case, the strangest thing happened: all the new facts that I uncovered-and even the old evidence that had once pointed so convincingly toward Dixon's guilt-snugly fit the pen gun theory.

Witnesses said that before Scanlon arrived on the scene, Dixon had been pounding his gun on the door of his girlfriend's house. The gun discharged in a downward direction; in the cement of the front porch there was a chip that was consistent with a bullet's impact. This would account for the bullet that was missing from Dixon's gun.

Dixon said he didn't want to be caught with a gun, so he hid it in some grass across the street before police arrived. I found a witness who corroborated that. This explained why the gun had been found some distance from the shooting scene even though nobody had ever seen Dixon throw it.

There were powder burns concentrated inside-but not above-the left pocket of Scanlon's shirt. The bullet bole was at the bottom of the pocket. Conclusion: a weapon had somehow discharged in the pocket's interior.

Contrary to statements in the police report, the bullet's trajectory had been at a downward angle. Below Scanlon's shirt pocket was a bloody rip where the bullet had exited after going through some flesh.

Dixon's rap sheet hadn't told the whole story about him.

Although he had spent three years in prison for an earlier shooting, the appellate court had freed him after determining that he had been wrongly convicted. It turns out that police had concealed a key defense witness and that a prosecution witness had lied. So much for Dixon's record of violent tendencies.

AN INNOCENT MAN IS FREED

Finally I put the crucial question to Dixon: "If you were innocent, why in the world did you plead guilty?"

Dixon sighed. "It was a plea bargain," he said, referring to the practice in which prosecutors recommend a reduced sentence if a defendant pleads guilty and thus saves everybody the time and expense of a trial.

"They said if I pleaded guilty, they would sentence me to one year in prison. I'd already spent 362 days in jail waiting for my trial. All I had to do was admit I did it and I'd go home in a few days. But if I insisted on a trial and the jury found me guilty-well, they'd throw the book at me. They'd give me twenty years for shooting a cop. It wasn't worth the gamble. I wanted to go home...."

"And so," I said, "you admitted doing something that you didn't do." Dixon nodded. "That's right."

In the end Dixon was exonerated, and he later won a lawsuit against the police department. Scanlon was stripped of his medal, was indicted by a grand jury, pleaded guilty to official misconduct, and was fired from the department. As for me, my stories were splashed across the front page. Much more important, I had learned some big lessons as a young reporter.

One of the most obvious lessons was that evidence can be aligned to point in more than one direction. For example, there had easily been enough proof to convict Dixon of shooting the sergeant. But the key questions were these: Had the collection of evidence really been thorough? And which explanation best fit the totality of the facts? Once the pen gun theory was offered, it became clear that this scenario accounted for the full body of evidence in the most optimal way. And there was another lesson.

One reason the evidence originally looked so convincing to me was because it fit my preconceptions at the time. To me, Dixon was an obvious troublemaker, a failure, the unemployed product of a broken family. The cops were the good guys. Prosecutors didn't

make mistakes.

Looking through those lenses, all the original evidence seemed to fall neatly into place. Where there had been inconsistencies or gaps,

I naively glossed them over. When police told me the case was airtight, I took them at their word and didn't delve much further.

But when I changed those lenses-trading my biases for an attempt at objectivity-I saw the case in a whole new light.

Finally I allowed the evidence to lead me to the truth, regardless of whether it fit my original presuppositions.

That was more than twenty years ago. My biggest lessons were yet to come.

FROM DIXON TO JESUS

The reason I've recounted this unusual case is because in a way my spiritual journey has been a lot like my experience with James Dixon. For much of my life I was a skeptic. In fact, I considered myself an atheist. To me, there was far too much evidence that God was merely a product of wishful thinking, of ancient mythology, of primitive superstition. How could there be a loving God if he consigned people to hell just for not believing in him? How could miracles contravene the basic laws of nature?

Didn't evolution satisfactorily

explain how life originated? Doesn't scientific reasoning dispel belief in the supernatural?

As for Jesus, didn't you know that he never claimed to be God? He was a revolutionary, a sage, an iconoclastic Jew-but God? No, that thought never occurred to him! I could point you to plenty of university professors who said so-and certainly they could be trusted, couldn't they? Let's face it: even a cursory examination of the evidence demonstrates convincingly that Jesus had only been a human being just like you and me, although with unusual gifts of kindness and wisdom.

But that's all I had ever really given the evidence: a cursory look. I had read just enough philosophy and history to find support for my skepticism-a fact here, a scientific theory there, a pithy quote, a clever argument. Sure, I could see some gaps and inconsistencies, but I had a strong motivation to

ignore them: a self-serving and immoral lifestyle that I would be compelled to

abandon if I were ever to change my views and become a follower of Jesus.

As far as I was concerned, the case was closed. There was enough proof for me to rest easy with the conclusion that the divinity of Jesus was nothing more than the fanciful invention of superstitious people. Or so I thought.

ANSWERS FOR AN ATHEIST

It wasn't a phone call from an informant that prompted me to reexamine the case for Christ. It was my wife.

Leslie stunned me in the autumn of 1979 by announcing that she had become a Christian. I rolled my eyes and braced for the worst, feeling like the victim of a bait-and-switch scam. I had married one Leslie-the fun Leslie, the carefree Leslie, the risk-taking Leslie and now I feared she was going to turn into some sort of sexually repressed prude who would trade our upwardly mobile lifestyle for all-night prayer vigils and volunteer work in grimy soup kitchens. Instead I was pleasantly surprised-even fascinated-by the

fundamental changes in her character, her integrity, and her personal confidence. Eventually I wanted to get to the bottom of what was prompting these subtle but significant shifts in my wife's attitudes, so I launched an all-out investigation into the facts surrounding the case for Christianity.

Setting aside my self-interest and prejudices as best I could, I read books, interviewed experts, asked questions, analyzed history, explored archaeology, studied ancient literature, and for the first time in my life picked apart the Bible verse by verse.

I plunged into the case with more vigor than with any story I had ever pursued. I applied the training I had received at Yale Law School as well as my experience as legal affairs editor of the Chicago Tribune. And over time the evidence of the world-of history, of science, of philosophy, of psychology -began to point toward the

unthinkable.

It was like the James Dixon case revisited.

JUDGING FOR YOURSELF

Maybe you too have been basing your spiritual outlook on the evidence you've observed around you or gleaned long ago from

books, college professors, family members, or friends. But is your conclusion really the best possible explanation for the evidence? If you were to dig deeper-to confront your preconceptions and systematically seek out proof-what would you find?

That's what this book is about. In effect, I'm going to retrace and expand upon the spiritual journey I took for nearly two years. I'll take you along as I interview thirteen leading scholars and authorities who have impeccable academic credentials.

I have crisscrossed the country-from Minnesota to Georgia, from Virginia to California-to elicit their expert opinions, to challenge them with the objections I had when I was a skeptic, to force them to defend their positions with solid data and cogent arguments, and to test them with the very questions that you might ask if given the opportunity.

In this quest for truth, I've used my experience as a legal affairs journalist to look at numerous categories of proof-eyewitness evidence, documentary evidence, corroborating evidence, rebuttal evidence, scientific evidence, psychological evidence, circumstantial evidence, and, yes, even fingerprint evidence (that sounds intriguing, doesn't it?).

These are the same classifications that you'd encounter in a courtroom. And maybe taking a legal perspective is the best way to envision this process-with you in the role of a juror.

If you were selected for a jury in a real trial, you would be asked to affirm up front that you haven't formed any preconceptions about the case. You would be required to vow that you would be openminded and fair, drawing

your conclusions based on the weight of the facts and not on your whims or prejudices.

You would be urged to thoughtfully consider the credibility of the witnesses, carefully sift the testimony, and rigorously subject the evidence to your common sense and logic. I'm asking you to do the same thing while reading this book.

Ultimately it's the responsibility of jurors to reach a verdict.

That doesn't mean they have one-hundred-percent certainty, because we can't have absolute proof about anything in life. In a trial, jurors are asked to weigh the evidence and come to the best possible conclusion. In other words, harkening back to the James Dixon case, which scenario fits the facts most snugly?

That's your task. I hope you take it seriously, because there may be more than just idle curiosity hanging in the balance. If Jesus is to be believed-and I realize that may be a big if for you at this point then nothing is more important than how you respond to him.

But who was he really? Who did he claim to be? And is there any credible evidence to back up his assertions? That's what we'll seek to determine as we board a flight for Denver to conduct our first interview.

PART 1

Examining the Record

1: THE EYEWITNESS EVIDENCE

Can the Biographies of Jesus Be Trusted?

When I first met shy and soft-spoken Leo Carter, he was a seventeen-year-old veteran of Chicago's grittiest neighborhood.

His

testimony had put three killers in prison. And he was still carrying a .38-caliber slug in his skull-a grisly reminder of a horrific saga that began when he witnessed Elijah Baptist gun down a local grocer. Leo and a friend, Leslie Scott, were playing basketball when they saw Elijah, then a sixteen-year-old delinquent with thirty arrests on his rap sheet, slay Sam Blue outside his grocery store.

Leo had known the grocer since childhood. "When we didn't have any food, he'd give us some, Leo explained to me in a quiet voice. "So when I went to the hospital and they said he was dead, I knew I'd have to testify about what I saw."

Eyewitness testimony is powerful. One of the most dramatic moments in a trial is when a witness describes in detail the crime that he or she saw and then points confidently toward the defendant as being the perpetrator. Elijah Baptist knew that the only way to avoid prison would be to somehow prevent Leo Carter and Leslie Scott from doing just that.

So Elijah and two of his pals went hunting. Soon they tracked down Leo and Leslie, who were walking down the street with Leo's brother Henry, and they dragged all three at gunpoint to a darkened loading dock nearby.

"I like you," Elijah's cousin said to Leo, "but I've got to do this." With that he pressed a pistol to the bridge of Leo's nose

and yanked the trigger.

The gun roared; the bullet penetrated at a slight angle, blinding Leo in his right eye and embedding in his head. When he crumbled to the ground, another shot was fired, this bullet lodging two inches from his spine.

As Leo watched from his sprawled position, pretending he was dead, he saw his sobbing brother and friend ruthlessly executed at close range. When Elijah and his gang fled, Leo crawled to safety. Somehow, against all odds, Leo Carter lived. The bullet, too precarious to be removed, remained in his skull. Despite searing

headaches that strong medication couldn't dull, he became the sole eyewitness against Elijah Baptist at his trial for killing grocer Sam Blue. The jurors believed Leo, and Elijah was sentenced to eighty years in prison.

Again Leo was the only eyewitness to testify against Elijah and his two companions in the slayings of his brother and his friend.

And once more his word was good enough to land the trio in prison for the rest of their lives.

Leo Carter is one of my heroes. He made sure justice was served, even though he paid a monumental price for it. When I think of eyewitness testimony, even to this day-more than twenty years later his face still appears in my mind.

TESTIMONY FROM DISTANT TIME

Yes, eyewitness testimony can be compelling and convincing. When a witness has had ample opportunity to observe a crime, when there's no bias or ulterior motives, when the witness is truthful and fair, the climactic act of pointing out a defendant in a courtroom can be enough to doom that person to prison or worse.

And eyewitness testimony is just as crucial in investigating historical matters-even the issue of whether Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God.

But what eyewitness accounts do we possess? Do we have the testimony of anyone who personally interacted with Jesus, who listened to his teachings, who saw his miracles, who witnessed his death, and who perhaps even encountered him after his alleged resurrection? Do we have any records from first-century

"journalists" who interviewed eyewitnesses, asked tough questions, and faithfully recorded what they scrupulously determined to be true? Equally important, how well would these

accounts withstand the scrutiny of skeptics?

I knew that just as Leo Carter's testimony clinched the convictions of three brutal murderers, eyewitness accounts from the mists of distant time could help resolve the most important spiritual issue of all. To get solid answers, I arranged to interview the nationally renowned scholar who literally wrote the book on the topic: Dr. Craig Blomberg, author of *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*. I knew Blomberg was smart; in fact, even his appearance fit the stereotype. Tall (six feet two) and lanky, with short, wavy brown hair unceremoniously combed forward, a fuzzy beard, and thick, rimless glasses, he looked like the type who would have been valedictorian of his high school (he was), a National Merit Scholar (he was), and a magna cum laude graduate from a prestigious seminary (he was, from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School).

But I wanted someone who was more than just intelligent and educated. I was searching for an expert who wouldn't gloss over nuances or blithely dismiss challenges to the records of Christianity. I wanted someone with integrity, someone who has grappled with the most potent critiques of the faith and who speaks authoritatively but without the kind of sweeping statements that conceal rather than deal with critical issues.

I was told Blomberg was exactly what I was looking for, and I flew to Denver wondering if he could measure up. Admittedly, I had a few doubts, especially when my research yielded one profoundly disturbing fact that he would probably have preferred had remained hidden: Blomberg still holds out hope that his beloved childhood heroes, the Chicago Cubs, will win the World Series in his lifetime. Frankly, that was enough to make me a bit suspicious of his discernment.

THE FIRST INTERVIEW. CRAIG L. BLOMBERG, PH.D.

Craig Blomberg is widely considered to be one of the country's foremost authorities on the biographies of Jesus, which are called the four gospels. He received his doctorate in New Testament from Aberdeen University in Scotland, later serving as a senior research fellow at Tyndale House at Cambridge University in England, where he was part of an elite group of international scholars that produced a series of acclaimed works on Jesus. For the last dozen years he has been a professor of New Testament at the highly respected Denver Seminary.

Blomberg's books include *Jesus and the Gospels*; *Interpreting the Parables*; *How Wide the Divide?*; and commentaries on the gospel of Matthew and I Corinthians. He also helped edit volume six of *Gospel Perspectives*, which deals at length with the miracles of Jesus, and he coauthored *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*.

He contributed chapters on the historicity of the gospels to the book *Reasonable Faith* and the award-winning *Jesus under Fire*. His memberships include the Society for the Study of the New Testament, Society of Biblical Literature, and the Institute for Biblical Research.

As I expected, his office had more than its share of scholarly volumes stacked on the shelves (he was even wearing a tie emblazoned with drawings of books).

However, I quickly noted that his office walls were dominated not by dusty tomes from ancient historians but by artwork from his young daughters. Their whimsical and colorful depictions of llamas, houses, and flowers weren't haphazardly pinned up as a casual afterthought; they had obviously been treated as prizes -

painstakingly matted, carefully framed, and personally autographed by Elizabeth and Rachel themselves. Clearly, I thought to myself, this man has a heart as well as a brain.

Blomberg speaks with the precision of a mathematician (yes, he taught mathematics too, earlier in his career), carefully measuring each word out of an apparent reluctance to tread even one nuance beyond where the evidence warrants. Exactly what I was looking for. As he settled into a high-back chair, cup of coffee in hand, I too sipped some coffee to ward off the Colorado chill.

Since I sensed Blomberg was a get-to-the-point kind of guy, I decided to start my interview by cutting to the core of the issue.

EYEWITNESSES TO HISTORY

"Tell me this," I said with an edge of challenge in my voice, "is it really possible to be an intelligent, critically thinking person and still believe that the four gospels were written by the people whose names have been attached to them?"

Blomberg set his cup of coffee on the edge of his desk and looked intently at me. "The answer is yes," he said with conviction. He sat back and continued. "It's important to acknowledge that strictly speaking, the gospels are anonymous. But the uniform testimony of the early church was that Matthew, also known as

Levi, the tax collector and one of the twelve disciples, was the author of the first gospel in the New Testament; that John Mark, a companion of Peter, was the author of the gospel we call Mark; and that Luke, known as Paul's 'beloved physician,' wrote both the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles."

"How uniform was the belief that they were the authors?" I asked.

"There are no known competitors for these three gospels," he said. "Apparently, it was just not in dispute."

Even so, I wanted to test the issue further. "Excuse my skepticism," I said, "but would anyone have had a motivation to be achieved by claiming these people wrote these gospels, when they really didn't?" Blomberg shook his head. "Probably not.

Remember, these were unlikely characters," he said, a grin breaking on his face. "Mark and Luke weren't even among the twelve disciples. Matthew was, but as a former hated tax collector, he would have been the most infamous character next to Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus!

"Contrast this with what happened when the fanciful apocryphal gospels were written much later. People chose the names of well known and exemplary figures to be their fictitious authors-Philip, Peter, Mary, James. Those names carried a lot more weight than the names of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So to answer your question, there would not have been any

reason to attribute authorship to these three less respected people if it weren't true."

That sounded logical, but it was obvious that he was conveniently leaving out one of the gospel writers. "What about John?" I asked. "He was extremely prominent; in fact, he wasn't just one of the twelve disciples but one of Jesus' inner three, along with James and Peter."

"Yes, he's the one exception," Blomberg conceded with a nod. "And interestingly, John is the only gospel about which there is some question about authorship."

"What exactly is in dispute?"

"The name of the author isn't in doubt-it's certainly John,"

Blomberg replied. "The question is whether it was John the apostle or a different John.

"You see, the testimony of a Christian writer named Papias, dated about A.D. 125, refers to John the apostle and John the elder, and it's not clear from the context whether he's talking about one person from two perspectives or two different people. But

granted that exception, the rest of the early testimony is unanimous that it was John the apostle-the son of Zebedee-who wrote the gospel."

"And," I said in an effort to pin him down further, "you're convinced that he did?"

"Yes, I believe the substantial majority of the material goes back to the apostle," he replied. "However, if you read the gospel closely, you can see some indication that its concluding verses may have been finalized by an editor. Personally, I have no problem believing that somebody closely associated with John may have functioned in that role, putting the last verses into shape and potentially creating the stylistic uniformity of the entire document.

"But in any event," he stressed, "the gospel is obviously based on eyewitness material, as are the other three gospels."

DELVING INTO SPECIFICS

While I appreciated Blomberg's comments so far, I wasn't ready to move on yet. The issue of who wrote the gospels is tremendously important, and I wanted specific details-names, dates, quotations. I finished off my coffee and put the cup on his desk.

Pen poised, I prepared to dig deeper.

"Let's go back to Mark, Matthew, and Luke," I said. "What specific evidence do you have that they are the authors of the gospels?" Blomberg leaned forward. "Again, the oldest and probably most significant testimony comes from Papias, who in about A.D. 125 specifically affirmed that Mark had carefully and accurately recorded Peter's eyewitness observations. In fact, he said Mark 'made no mistake' and did not include 'any false statement.' And Papias said Matthew had preserved the teachings of Jesus as well.

"Then Irenaeus, writing about A.D. 180, confirmed the traditional authorship. In fact, here-," he said, reaching for a book. He flipped it open and read Irenaeus' words.

Matthew published his own Gospel among the Hebrews in their own tongue, when Peter and Paul were preaching the Gospel in Rome and founding the church there. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself handed down to us in writing the substance of Peter's preaching.

Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the Gospel

preached by his teacher. Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned on his breast, himself produced his Gospel while he was living at Ephesus in Asia.

I looked up from the notes I was taking. "OK, let me clarify this," I said. "If we can have confidence that the gospels were written by the disciples Matthew and John, by Mark, the companion of the disciple Peter, and by Luke, the historian, companion of Paul, and sort of a first-century journalist, we can be assured that the events they record are based on either direct or indirect eyewitness testimony." As I was speaking, Blomberg was mentally sifting my words.

When I finished, he nodded.

"Exactly," he said crisply.

ANCIENT VERSUS MODERN BIOGRAPHIES

There were still some troubling aspects of the gospels that I needed to clarify. In particular, I wanted to better understand the kind of literary genre they represented.

"When I go to the bookstore and look in the biography section, I don't see the same kind of writing that I see in the gospels," I said. "When somebody writes a biography these days, they thoroughly delve into the person's life. But look at Mark—he doesn't talk about the birth of Jesus or really anything through Jesus' early adult years. Instead he focuses on a three-year period and spends half his gospel on the events leading up to and culminating in Jesus' last week. How do you explain that?"

Blomberg held up a couple of fingers. "There are two reasons," he replied. "One is literary and the other is theological.

"The literary reason is that basically, this is how people wrote biographies in the ancient world. They did not have the sense, as we do today, that it was important to give equal proportion to all periods of an individual's life or that it was necessary to tell the story in strictly chronological order or even to quote people verbatim, as long as the essence of what they said was preserved. Ancient Greek and Hebrew didn't even have a symbol for quotation marks.

"The only purpose for which they thought history was worth recording was because there were some lessons to be learned from the characters described. Therefore the biographer wanted to dwell at length on those portions of the person's life that were exemplary, that were illustrative, that could help other people, that gave meaning to a period of history."

"And what's the theological reason?" I asked.

"It flows out of the point I just made. Christians believe that as wonderful as Jesus' life and teachings and miracles were, they were meaningless if it were not historically factual that Christ died and was raised from the dead and that this provided atonement, or forgiveness, of the sins of humanity.

"So Mark in particular, as the writer of probably the earliest gospel, devotes roughly half his narrative to the events leading up to and including one week's period of time and culminating in Christ's death and resurrection.

"Given the significance of the Crucifixion," he concluded, "this makes perfect sense in ancient literature."

THE MYSTERY OF Q

In addition to the four gospels, scholars often refer to what they call Q, which stands for the German word Quelle, or

"source." Because of similarities in language and content, it has traditionally been assumed that Matthew and Luke drew upon Mark's earlier gospel in writing their own. In addition, scholars have said that Matthew and Luke also incorporated some material from this mysterious Q, material that is absent from Mark.

"What exactly is Q?" I asked Blomberg.

"It's nothing more than a hypothesis," he replied, again leaning back comfortably in his chair. "With few exceptions, it's just sayings or teachings of Jesus, which once may have formed an independent, separate document.

4'You see, it was a common literary genre to collect the sayings of respected teachers, sort of as we compile the top music of a singer and put it into a 'best of' album. Q may have been something like that. At least that's the theory."

But if Q existed before Matthew and Luke, it would constitute early material about Jesus. Perhaps, I thought, it can shed some fresh light on what Jesus was really like.

"Let me ask this," I said. "If you isolate just the material from Q, what kind of picture of Jesus do you get?"

Blomberg stroked his beard and stared at the ceiling for a moment as he pondered the question. "Well, you have to keep in mind that Q was a collection of sayings, and therefore it didn't have the narrative material that would have given us a more fully orbéd

picture of Jesus," he replied, speaking slowly as he chose each word with care.

"Even so, you find Jesus making some very strong claims—for instance, that he was wisdom personified and that he was the one by whom God will judge all humanity, whether they confess him or disavow him. A significant scholarly book has argued recently that if you isolate all the Q sayings, one actually gets the same kind of picture of Jesus—of someone who made audacious claims about himself as you find in the gospels more generally."

I wanted to push him further on this point. "Would he be seen as a miracle worker?" I inquired.

"Again," he replied, "you have to remember that you wouldn't get many miracle stories per se, because they're normally found in the narrative, and Q is primarily a list of sayings."

He stopped to reach over to his desk, pick up a leather-bound Bible, and rustle through its well-worn pages.

"But, for example, Luke 7:18-23 and Matthew 11:2-6 say that John the Baptist sent his messengers to ask Jesus if he really was the Christ, the Messiah they were waiting for. Jesus replied in essence, 'Tell him to consider my miracles. Tell him what you've seen: the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the poor have good news preached to them.'

"So even in Q," he concluded, "there is clearly an awareness of Jesus' ministry of miracles."

Blomberg's mention of Matthew brought to mind another question concerning how the gospels were put together. "Why," I asked,

"would Matthew-purported to be an eyewitness to Jesus-incorporate part of a gospel written by Mark, who everybody agrees was not an eyewitness? If Matthew's gospel was really written by an eyewitness, you would think he would have relied on his own observations."

Blomberg smiled. "It only makes sense if Mark was indeed basing his account on the recollections of the eyewitness Peter," he said. "As you've said yourself, Peter was among the inner circle of Jesus and was privy to seeing and hearing things that other disciples didn't. So it would make sense for Matthew, even though he was an eye witness, to rely on Peter's version of events as transmitted through Mark." Yes, I thought to myself, that did make some sense. In fact, an analogy began to form in my mind from my years as a newspaper reporter. I recalled being part of a

crowd of journalists that once cornered the famous Chicago political patriarch, the late Mayor Richard J. Daley, to pepper him with questions about a scandal that was brewing in the police department. He made some remarks before escaping to his limousine.

Even though I was an eyewitness to what had taken place, I immediately went to a radio reporter who had been closer to Daley, and asked him to play back his tape of what Daley had just said. This way, I could make sure I had his words correctly written down. That, I mused, was apparently what Matthew did with Mark although Matthew had his own recollections as a disciple, his quest for accuracy prompted him to rely on some material that came directly from Peter in Jesus' inner circle.

THE UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE OF JOHN

Feeling satisfied with Blomberg's initial answers concerning the first three gospels-called the synoptics, which means "to view at the same time," because of their similar outline and interrelationship'-next I turned my attention to John's gospel.

Anyone who reads all four gospels will immediately recognize that there are obvious differences between the synoptics and the gospel of John, and I wanted to know whether this means there are irreconcilable contradictions between them. "Could you clarify the differences between the synoptic gospels and John's gospel?"

I asked Blomberg.

His eyebrows shot up. "Huge question!" he exclaimed. "I hope to write a whole book on the topic."

After I assured him I was only after the essentials of the issue, not an exhaustive discussion, he settled back into his chair.

"Well, it's true that John is more different than similar to the synoptics," he began. "Only a handful of the major stories that appear in the other three gospels reappear in John, although that changes noticeably when one comes to Jesus' last week. From that point forward the parallels are much closer.

"There also seems to be a very different linguistic style. In John, Jesus uses different terminology, he speaks in long sermons, and there seems to be a higher Christology-that is, more direct and more blatant claims that Jesus is one with the Father; God himself; the Way, the Truth, and the Life; the Resurrection and the Life."

"What accounts for the differences?" I asked.

"For many years the assumption was that John knew everything Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote, and he saw no need to repeat it, so he consciously chose to supplement them. More recently it has been assumed that John is largely independent of the other three gospels, which could account for not

only the different choices of material but also the different perspectives on Jesus."

JESUS' MOST AUDACIOUS CLAIM

"There are some theological distinctives to John," I observed.

"No question, but do they deserve to be called contradictions? I think the answer is no, and here's why: for almost every major theme or distinctive in John, you can find parallels in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, even if they're not as plentiful."

That was a bold assertion. I promptly decided to put it to the test by raising perhaps the most significant issue of all concerning the differences between the synoptics and John's gospel.

"John makes very explicit claims of Jesus being God, which some attribute to the fact that he wrote later than the others and began embellishing things," I said. "Can you find this theme of deity in the synoptics?"

"Yes, I can," he said. "It's more implicit but you find it there."

Think of the story of Jesus walking on the water, found in Matthew 14:22-33 and Mark 6:45-52. Most English translations hide the Greek by quoting Jesus as saying, 'Fear not, it is I'

Actually, the Greek literally says, 'Fear not, I am.' Those last two words are identical to what Jesus said in John 8:58, when he took upon himself the divine name 'I AM,' which is the way God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush in Exodus 3:14. So Jesus is revealing himself as the one who has the same divine power over nature as Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament."

I nodded. "That's one example," I said. "Do you have any others?"

"Yes, I could go on along these lines," Blomberg said. "For instance, Jesus' most common title for himself in the first three gospels is 'Son of Man,' and-

I raised my hand to stop him. "Hold on," I said. Reaching into my briefcase, I pulled out a book and leafed through it until I located the quote I was looking for. "Karen Armstrong, the former nun who wrote the best-seller *A History of God*, said it seems that the term 'Son of Man' simply stressed the weakness and mortality of the human condition,' so by using it, Jesus was merely emphasizing that 'he was a frail human being who would one day suffer and die.'" If that's true," I said, "that doesn't sound like much of a claim to deity."

Blomberg's expression turned sour. "Look," he said firmly,

"contrary to popular belief, 'Son of Man' does not primarily refer to Jesus' humanity. Instead it's a direct allusion to Daniel 7:13-14." With that he opened the Old Testament and read those words of the prophet Daniel.

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Blomberg shut the Bible. "So look at what Jesus is doing by applying the term 'Son of Man' to himself," he continued. "This is someone who approaches God himself in his heavenly throne room and is given universal authority and dominion. That makes 'Son of Man' a title of great exaltation, not of mere humanity."

Later I came upon a comment by another scholar whom I would soon interview for this book, William Lane Craig, who has made a similar observation.

"Son of Man" is often thought to indicate the humanity of Jesus, just as the reflex expression "Son of God" indicates his divinity. In fact, just the opposite is true. The Son of Man was a divine figure in the Old Testament book of Daniel who would come at the end of the world to judge mankind and rule forever.

Thus, the claim to be the Son of Man would be in effect a claim to divinity."

Continued Blomberg: "In addition, Jesus claims to forgive sins in the synoptics, and that's something only God can do. Jesus accepts prayer and worship. Jesus says, 'Whoever acknowledges me, I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven.' Final judgment is based on one's reaction to-whom? This mere human being? No, that would be a very arrogant claim. Final judgment is based on one's reaction to Jesus as God.

"As you can see, there's all sorts of material in the synoptics about the deity of Christ, that then merely becomes more explicit in John's gospel."

THE GOSPELS' THEOLOGICAL AGENDA In authoring the last gospel, John did have the advantage of being able to mull over theological issues for a longer period of time. So I asked Blomberg, "Doesn't the fact that John was writing with more of a theological bent mean that his historical material may have been tainted and therefore less reliable?"

"I don't believe John is more theological," Blomberg stressed.

"He just has a different cluster of theological emphases.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke each have very distinctive theological angles that they want to highlight: Luke, the theologian of the poor and of social concern; Matthew, the theologian trying to understand the relationship of Christianity and Judaism; Mark, who shows Jesus as the suffering servant. You can make a long list of the distinctive theologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke."

I interrupted because I was afraid Blomberg was missing my broader point. "OK, but don't those theological motivations cast doubt on their ability and willingness to accurately report what happened?" I asked. "Isn't it likely that their theological agenda would prompt them to color and twist the history they recorded?"

"It certainly means that as with any ideological document, we have to consider that as a possibility," he admitted. "There are people with axes to

grind who distort history to serve their ideological ends, but unfortunately people have concluded that always happens, which is a mistake.

"In the ancient world the idea of writing dispassionate, objective history merely to chronicle events, with no ideological purpose, was unheard of. Nobody wrote history if there wasn't a reason to learn from it."

I smiled. "I suppose you could say that makes everything suspect," I suggested.

"Yes, at one level it does," he replied. "But if we can reconstruct reasonably accurate history from all kinds of other ancient sources, we ought to be able to do that from the gospels, even though they too are ideological."

Blomberg thought for a moment, searching his mind for an appropriate analogy to drive home his point. Finally he said,

"Here's a modern parallel, from the experience of the Jewish community, that might clarify what I mean. Some people, usually for anti-Semitic purposes, deny or downplay the horrors of the

Holocaust. But it has been the Jewish scholars who've created museums, written books, preserved artifacts, and documented eyewitness testimony concerning the Holocaust."

"Now, they have a very ideological purpose-namely, to ensure that such an atrocity never occurs again-but they have also been the most faithful and objective in their reporting of historical truth."

"Christianity was likewise based on certain historical claims that God uniquely entered into space and time in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, so the very ideology that Christians were trying to promote required as careful historical work as possible."

He let his analogy sink in. Turning to face me more directly, he asked, "Do you see my point?"

I nodded to indicate that I did.