

# THE CASE FOR Christmas

---

*A Journalist Investigates the Identity  
of the Child in the Manger*



LEE  
STROBEL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

*To:* \_\_\_\_\_

*From:* \_\_\_\_\_

## **Resources by Lee Strobel**

- The Case for Christ*
- The Case for Christ* audio
- The Case for Christ—Student Edition* (with Jane Vogel)
- The Case for Christ* curriculum (with Garry Poole)
- The Case for Christmas*
- The Case for Christmas* audio
- The Case for a Creator*
- The Case for a Creator* audio
- The Case for a Creator—Student Edition* (with Jane Vogel)
- The Case for a Creator* curriculum (with Garry Poole)
- The Case for Easter*
- The Case for Faith*
- The Case for Faith* audio
- The Case for Faith—Student Edition* (with Jane Vogel)
- The Case for Faith* curriculum (with Garry Poole)
- The Case for the Real Jesus*
- The Case for the Real Jesus* audio
- Discussing the Da Vinci Code* curriculum (with Garry Poole)
- Discussing the Da Vinci Code* discussion guide (with Garry Poole)
- Exploring the Da Vinci Code* (with Garry Poole)
- Experiencing the Passion of Jesus* (with Garry Poole)
- Faith Under Fire* curriculum series
- God's Outrageous Claims*
- Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*
- Off My Case for Kids*
- Surviving a Spiritual Mismatch in Marriage* (with Leslie Strobel)
- Surviving a Spiritual Mismatch in Marriage* audio
- What Jesus Would Say*

## **Other Resources by Garry Poole**

- The Complete Book of Questions*
- Seeker Small Groups*
- The Three Habits of Highly Contagious Christians*
- In the Tough Questions Series:**
  - Don't All Religions Lead to God?*
  - How Could God Allow Suffering and Evil?*
  - How Does Anyone Know God Exists?*
  - Why Become a Christian?*
- Tough Questions Leader's Guide* (with Judson Poling)

# THE CASE FOR Christmas

---

*A Journalist Investigates the Identity  
of the Child in the Manger*

LEE  
STROBEL

ZONDERVAN

*The Case for Christmas*

Copyright © 1998, 2005 by Lee Strobel

This book is excerpted from *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel,  
copyright © 1998 by Lee Strobel.

This title is also available as a Zondervan ebook.

Visit [www.zondervan.com/ebooks](http://www.zondervan.com/ebooks).

This title is also available in a Zondervan audio edition.

Visit [www.zondervan.fm](http://www.zondervan.fm).

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

This edition: ISBN 978-0-310-33766-9 (hardcover)

---

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Strobel, Lee, 1952–

The case for christmas : a journalist investigates the identity  
of the child in the manger / Lee Strobel. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-0-310-26629-7 (hardcover)

1. Jesus Christ—Person and offices. 2. Apologetics. I. Title.

BT203.S78 2005

232.92—dc22

2005015810

---

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from The Holy Bible, *New International Version*®, *NIV*®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Any Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design: Curt Diepenhorst

Cover photography: © Liliboas / iStockphoto®

First Printing August 1998 / Printed in the United States of America

# Contents

Introduction	Ion : Who Was in the Manger . . . . .	7
	on That First Christmas Morning?	
chapter	1: The Eyewitness Evidence: . . . . .	13
	<i>Can the Biographies of Jesus Be Trusted?</i>	
chapter	2: The Scientific Evidence: . . . . .	37
	<i>Does Archaeology Confirm</i> <i>or Contradict Jesus' Biographies?</i>	
chapter	3: The Profile Evidence: . . . . .	55
	<i>Did Jesus Fulfill the Attributes of God?</i>	
chapter	4: The Fingerprint Evidence:.. . . .	67
	<i>Did Jesus—and Jesus Alone—</i> <i>Match the Identity of the Messiah?</i>	
conclusion	Ion : The Verdict of History . . . . .	87
	For Further Evidence . . . . .	93
	Notes . . . . .	95



# Who Was in the Manger on That First Christmas Morning?

**T**he *Chicago Tribune* newsroom was eerily quiet on the day before Christmas. As I sat at my desk with little to do, my mind kept wandering back to a family I had encountered a month earlier while I was working on a series of articles about Chicago's neediest people.

The delgados—sixty-year-old perfecta and her granddaughters Lydia and Jenny—had been burned out of their roach-infested tenement and were now living in a tiny two-room apartment on the West side. As I walked in, I couldn't believe how empty it was. There was no furniture, no rugs, nothing on the walls—only a small kitchen table and one handful of rice. That's it. They were virtually devoid of possessions.

In fact, eleven-year-old Lydia and thirteen-year-old Jenny owned only one short-sleeved dress each, plus one thin, gray sweater between them. When they walked the half mile to school through the biting cold, Lydia would wear the sweater for part of the distance and then hand it to her shivering sister, who would wear it the rest of the way.

But despite their poverty and the painful arthritis that



kept perfecta from working, she still talked confidently about her faith in Jesus. she was convinced he had not abandoned them. I never sensed despair or self-pity in her home; instead, there was a gentle feeling of hope and peace.

I wrote an article about the d elgados and then quickly moved on to more exciting assignments. But as I sat at my desk on c hristmas eve, I continued to wrestle with the irony of the situation: here was a family that had nothing but faith and yet seemed happy, while I had everything I needed materially but lacked faith—and inside I felt as empty and barren as their apartment.

I walked over to the city desk to sign out a car. It was a slow news day with nothing of consequence going on. My boss could call me if something were to happen. In the meantime, I decided to drive over to West h omer s treet and see how the d elgados were doing.

## What Jesus Would Do

When Jenny opened the door, I couldn't believe my eyes. *Tribune* readers had responded to my article by showering the d elgados with a treasure trove of gifts—roomfuls of furniture, appliances, and rugs; a lavish c hristmas tree with piles of wrapped presents underneath; carton upon bulging carton of food; and a dazzling selection of clothing, including dozens of warm winter coats, scarves, and gloves. o n top of that, they donated thousands of dollars in cash.

But as surprised as I was by this outpouring, I was even more astonished by what my visit was interrupting: perfecta and her granddaughters were getting ready to

give away much of their newfound wealth. When I asked perfecta why, she replied in halting English: “Our neighbors are still in need. We cannot have plenty while they have nothing. This is what Jesus would want us to do.”

That blew me away! If I had been in their position at that time in my life, I would have been hoarding everything. I asked perfecta what she thought about the generosity of the people who had sent all of these goodies, and again her response amazed me.

“This is wonderful; this is very good,” she said, gesturing toward the largess. “We did nothing to deserve this—it’s a gift from God. But,” she added, “it is not his greatest gift. No, we celebrate that tomorrow. That is Jesus.”

To her, this child in the manger was the undeserved gift that meant everything—more than material possessions, more than comfort, more than security. And at that moment, something inside of me wanted desperately to know this Jesus—because, in a sense, I saw him in perfecta and her granddaughters.

They had peace despite poverty, while I had anxiety despite plenty; they knew the joy of generosity, while I only knew the loneliness of ambition; they looked heavenward for hope, while I only looked out for myself; they experienced the wonder of the spiritual while I was shackled to the shallowness of the material—and something made me long for what they had.

Or, more accurately, for the one they knew.

I was pondering this as I drove back toward the tribune tower a short time later. Suddenly, though, my thoughts were interrupted by the crackle of the car’s two-way radio. It was my boss, sending me out on another assignment. Jarred back to reality, I let the emotions I felt in the

d elgado apartment dissipate. and that, I figured at the time, was probably a good thing.

as I would caution myself whenever the d elgados would come to mind from time to time over the ensuing years, I'm not the sort of person who's driven by feelings. as a journalist, I was far more interested in facts, evidence, data, and concrete reality. Virgins don't get pregnant, there is no God who became a baby, and c hristmas is little more than an annual orgy of consumption driven by the greed of corporate a merica.

o r so I thought.

## Embarking on an Investigation

as a youngster, like countless other wide-eyed children, I listened with rapt fascination to the annual Bible story about c hristmas. But as I matured, skepticism set in. I concluded that not only is s anta c laus merely a feel-good fable, but that the entire c hristmas tale was itself built on a flimsy foundation of wishful thinking.

sure, believing in Jesus could provide solace to sincere but simple folks like the d elgados; yes, it could spark feelings of hope and faith for people who prefer fantasy over reality. But as a law-trained newspaperman, I dealt in the currency of facts—and I was convinced they supported my atheism rather than c hristianity.

all of that changed several years later, however, when I took a cue from one of the most famous Bible passages about c hristmas. t he story describes how an angel announced to a ragtag group of shepherders that “a s avior who is Messiah and Master” had been born in d avid's town. Was this a hoax? a hallucination? o r could it actu-

ally be the pivotal event of human history—the incarnation of the living God?

the shepherders were determined to get to the bottom of the matter. Like first-century investigative reporters being dispatched to the scene of an earth-shattering story, they declared: “Let’s get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us.” They left, running, to check out the evidence for themselves.<sup>1</sup>

essentially, that’s what I did for a living as a *Tribune* reporter: investigate claims to see if they’re true, separate rumors from reality, and determine facts from fiction. So prompted by my agnostic wife’s conversion to Christianity, and still intrigued by memories of the delgados, I decided to get to the bottom of what I now consider to be the most crucial issue of history: *Who was in the manger on that first Christmas morning?*

even after two millennia, controversy continues to swirl around that issue. “Scholarly debate is intensifying over who Jesus actually was: divine, human, or both?” said a recent *Tribune* article. “Jesus has been portrayed in a burst of books as, among other things, a cynic philosopher, an apocalyptic prophet, a zealot, a rabbi, a pharisee, a feminist, a radical egalitarian, and a postmodern social critic.”

*The Case for Christmas* seeks to get to the bottom of this matter by retracing and expanding upon my original investigation into the roots of this cherished holiday. Can we really trust the biographies of Jesus to tell us the true story of his birth, life, teachings, miracles, death, and ultimate resurrection from the dead? Did the Christmas child actually grow up to fulfill the attributes of God? And did

the baby in Bethlehem miraculously match the prophetic “fingerprint” of the long-awaited Messiah?

Join me in separating hard evidence from holiday tradition and sentiment. One thing is clear: as it was for me, this quest could very well become the most important endeavor of your life.

# The Eyewitness Evidence

## *Can the Biographies of Jesus Be Trusted?*

When I first met 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 head—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 sixteen years old, 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. "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 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 staged an ambush. Leslie

and Leo's brother, Henry, were brutally murdered, while Leo was shot in the head and left for dead. But somehow, against all odds, Leo lived. The bullet, in a place 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 and his two cohorts. His word was good enough to land them 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—thirty years later—his face still appears in my mind.<sup>2</sup>

## 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 the Christmas manger really contained 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 encountered him after his alleged resurrection? Do we have any records from first-century “journalists” who interviewed eyewit-

nesses, asked tough questions, and faithfully recorded what they scrupulously determined to be true?

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 flew to Denver to interview a scholar who literally wrote the book on the topic: Dr. Craig Blomberg, author of *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*.

### INTERVIEW: Craig L. Blomberg, PhD

Craig Blomberg is widely considered 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 for 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. He is currently a professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary.

As he settled into a high-back chair in his office, cup of coffee in hand, I too sipped some coffee to ward off the Colorado chill. Because 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.

"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 coffee cup on the edge of his desk and looked intently at me. “t he answer is yes,” he said with conviction.

h e 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 l evi, the tax collector and one of the twelve disciples, was the author of the first gospel in the n ew t estament; that John Mark, a companion of peter, was the author of the gospel we call Mark; and that l uke, known as paul’s ‘beloved physician,’ wrote both the gospel of l uke and the a cts of the a postles.”

“h ow uniform was the belief that they were the authors?” I asked.

“t here are no known competitors for these three gospels,” he said. “a pparently, it was just not in dispute.”

e ven so, I wanted to test the issue further. “e xcuse my skepticism,” I said, “but would anyone have had a motivation to lie by claiming these people wrote these gospels, when they really didn’t?”

Blomberg shook his head. “probably not. r emember, these were unlikely characters,” he said, a grin breaking on his face. “Mark and l uke 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!

“c ontrast this with what happened when the fanciful a pocryphal Gospels were written much later. people chose the names of well-known and exemplary figures to be their fictitious authors—philip, peter, Mary, James. t hose names carried much more weight than the names of Matthew, Mark, and l uke. s o 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 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 of 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 AD 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 Matthew, Mark, 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 AD 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 AD 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 preach-

ing. 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.<sup>3</sup>

I looked up from the notes I was taking. “Okay, 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 resolve. 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?”

## When Was Jesus Born?

History doesn't pinpoint Jesus' birthday. Spring is most likely, because shepherds were watching their flocks at night and this is when ewes bore their young. In fact, around ad 200, theologians concluded Jesus was born on May 20. "Others," said journalist Terry Mattingly, "argued for dates in April and March. This wasn't a major issue, since early Christians emphasized the epiphany on January 6, marking Christ's baptism."

In ad 385, pope Julius I declared December 25 as the day for celebrating Christ's birth. "He chose that date," Christian researcher Gretchen Passantino told me, "partly to challenge the pagan celebration of the Roman god Saturnalia, which was characterized by social disorder and immorality."

---

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.

"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 orb'd 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 eyewitness, to rely on Peter's version of events as transmitted through Mark."



## 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.

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

“t here are some theological distinctions to John,” I observed.

“n o 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 l uke, even if they’re not as plentiful.”

t hat 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. “c an you find this theme of deity in the synoptics?”

“Yes, I can,” he said. “It’s more implicit but you find it there. t hink of the story of Jesus walking on the water, found in Matthew 14:22–33 and Mark 6:45–52. Most e nglish translations hide the Greek by quoting Jesus as saying, ‘Fear not, it is I.’ a ctually, the Greek literally says, ‘Fear not, I am.’ t hose 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 e xodus 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 bestseller *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.’<sup>4</sup> 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. “s o look at what Jesus is doing by applying the term ‘son of Man’ to himself,” he continued. “t his is someone who approaches God himself in his heavenly throne room and is given universal authority and dominion. t hat makes ‘son of Man’ a title of great exaltation, not of mere humanity.”

I ater I came upon a comment by another scholar, d r. William l ane c raig, 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. t he son of Man was a divine figure in the o ld t estament book of d aniel who would come at the end of the world to judge mankind and rule forever. t hus, the claim to be the son of Man would be in effect a claim to divinity.<sup>5</sup>

c ontinued 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? t his mere human being? n o, that would be a very arrogant claim. Final judgment is based on one’s reaction to Jesus *as God*.”

“a s you can see, there’s all sorts of material in the synoptics about the deity of c hrist, 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. "Okay, 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.

## Hot News from History

It’s one thing to say that the gospels are rooted in direct or indirect eyewitness testimony; it’s another to claim that

this information was reliably preserved until it was finally written down years later. t his, I knew, was a major point of contention, and I wanted to challenge Blomberg with this issue as forthrightly as I could.

a gain I picked up a rmstrong's popular book *A History of God*. "I listen to something else she wrote," I said.

We know very little about Jesus. t he first full-length account of his life was s t. Mark's gospel, which was not written until about the year 70, some forty years after his death. By that time, historical facts had been overlaid with mythical elements which expressed the meaning Jesus had acquired for his followers. It is this meaning that s t. Mark primarily conveys rather than a reliable straightforward portrayal.<sup>6</sup>

t ossing the book back into my open briefcase, I turned to Blomberg and continued. "s ome scholars say the gospels were written so far after the events that legend developed and distorted what was finally written down, turning Jesus from merely a wise teacher into the mythological son of God. Is that a reasonable hypothesis, or is there good evidence that the gospels were recorded earlier than that, before legend could totally corrupt what was ultimately recorded?"

Blomberg's eyes narrowed, and his voice took on an adamant tone. "t here are two separate issues here, and it's important to keep them separate," he said. "I do think there's good evidence for suggesting early dates for the writing of the gospels. But even if there wasn't, a rmstrong's argument doesn't work anyway."

"Why not?" I asked.

"t he standard scholarly dating, even in very liberal

## Believing the Virgin Birth

though 79 percent of Americans believe the virgin birth, it was a stumbling block for philosopher William Lane Craig when he was young. “I thought it was absurd,” he said. “For the virgin birth to be true, a Y chromosome had to be created out of nothing in Mary’s ovum, because Mary didn’t possess the genetic material to produce a male child.”

Still, he became a Christian. “You don’t need to have all your questions answered to come to faith,” he told me. “You just have to say, ‘the weight of the evidence seems to show this is true, so even though I don’t have answers to all my questions, I’m going to believe and hope for answers in the long run.’”

Craig, who became an expert on scientific evidence for a creator, later resolved the issue. “If I really do believe in a God who created the universe,” Craig said, smiling, “then for him to create a Y chromosome would be child’s play!”

---

circles, is Mark in the 70s, Matthew and Luke in the 80s, John in the 90s. But listen: that’s still within the lifetimes of various eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus, including hostile eyewitnesses who would have served as a corrective if false teachings about Jesus were going around. Consequently, these late dates for the gospels really aren’t all that late. In fact, we can make a comparison that’s very instructive.

“The two earliest biographies of Alexander the Great were written by Arrian and Plutarch more than four hundred years after Alexander’s death in 323 Bc, yet historians



consider them to be generally trustworthy. Yes, legendary material about alexander did develop over time, but it was only in the centuries after these two writers.

“In other words, the first five hundred years kept alexander’s story pretty much intact; legendary material began to emerge over the next five hundred years. so whether the gospels were written sixty years or thirty years after the life of Jesus, the amount of time is negligible by comparison. It’s almost a nonissue.”

I could see what Blomberg was saying. at the same time, I had some reservations about it. to me, it seemed obvious that the shorter the gap between an event and when it was recorded in writing, the less likely those writings would fall victim to legend or faulty memories.

“let me concede your point for the moment, but let’s get back to the dating of the gospels,” I said. “You indicated that you believe they were written sooner than the dates you mentioned.”

“Yes, sooner,” he said. “and we can support that by looking at the book of acts, which was written by luke. acts ends apparently unfinished—paul is a central figure of the book, and he’s under house arrest in rome. With that the book abruptly halts. What happens to paul? We don’t find out from acts, probably because the book was written before paul was put to death.”

Blomberg was getting more wound up as he went. “that means acts cannot be dated any later than ad 62. having established that, we can then move backward from there. since acts is the second of a two-part work, we know the first part—the gospel of luke—must have been written earlier than that. and since luke incorpo-

rates parts of the gospel of Mark, that means Mark is even earlier.

“If you allow maybe a year for each of those, you end up with Mark written no later than about ad 60, maybe even the late 50s. If Jesus was put to death in ad 30 or 33, we’re talking about a maximum gap of thirty years or so.”

He sat back in his chair with an air of triumph. “Historically speaking, especially compared with Alexander the Great,” he said, “that’s like a news flash!”

Indeed, that was impressive, closing the gap between the events of Jesus’ life and the writing of the gospels to the point where it was negligible by historical standards. However, I still wanted to push the issue. My goal was to turn the clock back as far as I could to get to the very earliest information about Jesus.

## Going Back to the Beginning

I stood and strolled over to the bookcase. “Let’s see if we can go back even farther,” I said, turning toward Blomberg. “How early can we date the fundamental beliefs in Jesus’ atonement, his resurrection, and his unique association with God?”

“It’s important to remember that the books of the New Testament are not in chronological order,” he began. “The gospels were written after almost all the letters of Paul, whose writing ministry probably began in the late 40s. Most of his major letters appeared during the 50s. To find the earliest information, one goes to Paul’s epistles and then asks, ‘Are there signs that even earlier sources were used in writing them?’”

“And,” I prompted, “what do we find?”

“We find that paul incorporated some creeds, confessions of faith, or hymns from the earliest c hristian church. t hese go way back to the dawning of the church soon after the resurrection.

“t he most famous creeds include philippians 2:6–11, which talks about Jesus being ‘in very nature God,’ and c lossians 1:15–20, which describes him as being ‘the image of the invisible God,’ who created all things and through whom all things are reconciled with God ‘by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.’

“t hose are certainly significant in explaining what the earliest c hristians were convinced about Jesus. But perhaps the most important creed in terms of the historical Jesus is 1 c orinthians 15, where paul uses technical language to indicate he was passing along this oral tradition in relatively fixed form.”

Blomberg located the passage in his Bible and read it to me.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that c hrist died for our sins according to the s criptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the s criptures, and that he appeared to peter, and then to the t welve. a fter that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. t hen he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.<sup>7</sup>

“a nd here’s the point,” Blomberg said. “If the crucifixion was as early as ad 30, paul’s conversion was about ad 32. Immediately paul was ushered into d amascus,

where he met with a christian named ananias and some other disciples. His first meeting with the apostles in Jerusalem would have been about ad 35. At some point along there, Paul was given this creed, which had already been formulated and was being used in the early church.

“Now, here you have the key facts about Jesus’ death for our sins, plus a detailed list of those to whom he appeared in resurrected form—all dating back to within two to five years of the events themselves!

“That’s not later mythology from forty or more years down the road, as Armstrong suggested. A good case can be made for saying that christian belief in the resurrection, though not yet written down, can be dated to within two years of that very event.

“That is enormously significant,” he said, his voice rising a bit in emphasis. “Now you’re not comparing thirty to sixty years with the five hundred years that’s generally acceptable for other data—you’re talking about two!”

I couldn’t deny the importance of that evidence. It certainly seemed to take the wind out of the charge that the resurrection—which is cited by christians as the crowning confirmation of Jesus’ divinity—was merely a mythological concept that developed over long periods of time as legends corrupted the eyewitness accounts of Christ’s life.

For me, this struck especially close to home—as a skeptic, that was one of my biggest objections to christianity.

Later I clicked my briefcase closed and stood to thank Blomberg. Our interview, reported in more detail in my book *The Case for Christ*, heightened my confidence in the overall reliability of the gospel accounts, including

the c hristmas story. s till, there were some vexing puzzles related to Jesus' birth that only an archaeologist could answer—and that led me to the author of the book *Archaeology and the New Testament*.