

WHY I BELIEVE....One Person's Story

(by Marion D. Owens)

Introduction

I have chosen to relate the story of my faith in the hope that it may be of some value to others who perhaps are having some struggles with their own faith. Every thinking person must, sooner or later, deal with faith-threatening questions. Faith, by its very nature, must deal with doubts---and find satisfactory answers. Otherwise it is not really faith.

Each person has his own distinctive way of looking at things. What impresses one person may not be significant to someone else. I have chosen to relate facts and principles which have had the greatest impact on my own thinking, hoping that others may benefit.

Background

I grew up in a religious Bible-believing home. My faith developed very early, reinforced by strong family, church, and other personal relationships. I did not know *anyone* who did not believe in God.

My faith was further reinforced by four years in Christian colleges, surrounded by a community of believers. I knew, of course, that there were atheists, agnostics, etc., and I read books refuting the ideas of such persons.

Challenge to Faith

As a young teacher I moved from my native Missouri to Illinois to teach in a community where I knew no one. I rented a room from a couple there. The husband was a teacher in the local high school. Before long I learned that he was a Sunday School teacher in the local Methodist Church. I was startled to learn that he did not believe in God. I could not imagine such a situation. I asked if his preacher knew what his views were. He assured me that the preacher knew---and had no problem with it!

During succeeding months we engaged in a number of discussions about our beliefs. It was my first experience with face-to-face discussions with a confirmed atheist. I found that he had some very hard questions for me to deal with.

The result was that in order to be intellectually honest I needed to “go back to the drawing boards” regarding my faith. Indeed I had to establish my *own* faith rather than rely on a faith passed on to me by others.

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Rebuilding Faith

Now, more than fifty years later, I realize that the development of my faith has been a continuous process. I know what I believe---and *why*. This discussion will explore a great deal of my thinking.

I am not a scientist and do not claim scientific expertise. However, I am very interested in what scientists have to say, always seeking to distinguish between established facts and mere theories. I know that truth and *true* science are always consistent; *theories* are a different matter.

Basic Questions

There are really two basic questions which I have sought to answer: (1) Is there a creator of the universe, and (2) if there is, is this creator the God of the Bible? We are familiar with the passage from Psalms declaring that “..The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands”. (19:1) It has *always* been unthinkable to me that the amazing universe created itself, or that it began from nothing. I challenged my teacher friend with where the universe came from. His answer was that “it always was”. Such a glib answer violates all kinds of scientific principles, but he had nothing better to offer.

He asked where God came from. Of course I had to say that I did not know. We both had to settle for “I don’t know’s”---he for the universe, and I for God. But the fact is that the universe is there for all to see. There is no escape from dealing with its origin. Even proponents of the “Big Bang” theory have to deal with the origin of whatever it was that went “Bang”. Certainly whatever happened is too wonderful and amazing for our minds to comprehend. It is very clear to me that there was some great cause behind the formation of our universe...and I have no trouble referring to that cause as God.

Difficult Questions

Atheists and skeptics delight in asking difficult questions such as why God did this or that. Or they contend that a compassionate God would not tolerate various

catastrophes, suffering, etc. I long ago realized that I do not have the mind of God. I have a long list of questions of my own---but I

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realize that my human limitations will never allow me to comprehend God's great designs and intentions. I have learned to trust that what he does is right, whether or not I understand it. It is a tragedy when a person concludes that he cannot really have faith in God unless he can answer all the questions of the skeptics.

Origin of the Bible Message

The fact is simple: the Bible message either came from God (as it claims), or, if there is no God, it obviously came entirely from man. A major factor in the development of my faith has been an examination of the scriptures over many years to determine whether or not they contain unmistakable signs of divine involvement. Romans 10:17 indicates that faith *comes* from hearing the Bible message. The skeptic might scoff, saying that *of course* the writers claimed to be from God. True, but what is the evidence? This is the question which I will be discussing. The reader is urged to consider the evidence that there is too much in the Bible that cannot be explained by purely human authorship.

It must be understood that the Bible had some forty writers over many centuries. They were from different eras, backgrounds, and points of view. They did not compare notes to see that their writings were consistent or that they were promoting some long-term set of theories.

Too Many "Coincidences"FAR Too Many!

If there is no God, and no man has supernatural powers, it is obvious that no one has the ability to foretell the future---except by guess or coincidence. The following discussion examines a number of matters which defy explanation if the writers of the Bible had no supernatural knowledge. Taken together they furnish what I believe is more than convincing evidence of divine involvement. (The listed items are in no particular order.)

I. The Melchisedek Connection. In Genesis 14:18 a mysterious person named Melchisedek is introduced. He was both a priest of God and King of Salem. (This was the first mention of a priest in the Bible.) There is no mention of how he became priest---or king. He brought bread and wine (interesting combination) to Abraham and also pronounced a blessing on him.

According to verse 21, Abraham gave Melchisedek a tenth of what he had taken in battle.

So who was Melchisedek? How important was he if the great man of God, Abraham, paid tithes to him? No answer is given.

Then, many centuries later, the name Melchisedek crops up again. In an intriguing statement David said (Psalms 110:1ff), “The Lord’ said to ‘My Lord’”.. First of all, that raises the question of who he meant by “My Lord”. “The Lord” clearly refers to God---but who was he calling “My Lord”?

In verse 4 God is quoted as telling “My Lord”, “You are a priest forever in the order of Melchisedek”.

Those who believe the Bible understand that David was a prophet (Acts 2:29-30) and that he was referring to Jesus.

However, if David had no prophetic powers, to whom could he be referring? How would anyone reading what he wrote have a clue as to what he was talking about? And why would it occur to him to bring up the name of an obscure person like Melchisedek? What did he---or anyone else---know about the “Order of Melchisedek”? What possible future situation could he have imagined that would somehow have anything to do with Melchisedek? Was this some kind of idle babbling---or was God sending a message?

There is another complication. David was loyal to the Law of Moses, under which his people had lived for centuries. The Law of Moses had a well-defined priesthood with strict limitations on who could be a priest---and these provisions had nothing to do with Melchisedek. And no one was priest “forever”, but only until he died. Why would David think of predicting some future different type of priesthood...with a “forever” priest?

How much did David really understand about what he was saying? There is an intriguing passage in I Peter 1:10-12. It basically says that God had the prophets to say things which they did not themselves understand. Curious, they asked God for an explanation of what they had just foretold---but God would not tell them. They were told that they were serving people of a later time (Us!).

So it is altogether likely that David had a very limited understanding of what he was saying, and probably had no clue about the Melchisedek prophecy. Again, was this random babbling---or was God leaving more clues of his presence and his plans?

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More centuries pass. Nothing more about Melchisedek. Jesus never brings up the name. But then we get to Hebrews, chapter seven, and find a profound and enlightening explanation of how everything fits together. As one studies this chapter and notes the remarkable understanding of the writer (who was too modest to identify himself) he realizes that no human could have thought up all these principles and explanations without divine guidance. The explanations harmonize remarkably with all other foundational principles of both the Old and New Testaments---FAR too well to be just coincidence! (The book of Hebrews furnishes a whole study within itself showing how much cannot be explained by coincidence.)

II. The Kingdom Connection.....A number of times, over a period of centuries, various prophets provided limited details of a great event to occur in the future. These prophets did not compare notes and probably had little, if any, knowledge of what others had said. The question is: were these just random babblings---or were they definite clues left by God in order to strengthen our faith by “tracing his steps”? Note some of these clues:

1. In Isaiah 2 (about 750 B.C.) the prophet spoke of an event to occur in the “last days” (not defined). The “mountain of the Lord’s Temple” was to be established. “All nations” would stream to it. The “Word of the Lord” was to go out from Jerusalem. How much did Isaiah (or his readers) know about what he was referring to? We do not know, but probably not much!

2. The prophet Jeremiah also lived in a culture which for centuries had been regulated by the Law of Moses, a hallowed tradition among Jewish people. Any proposal to change or replace it must have been considered as radical and unacceptable in his day. But that is exactly what Jeremiah proclaimed!

In Jeremiah 31:31, the prophet quotes God as saying that he would establish a whole new covenant with his people, quite unlike the one that was made through Moses. There was to be a whole new relationship between God and his people, featuring forgiveness of sins.

Again, were these random babblings of a weird prophet, or is it another clue of what God had in mind to accomplish some time in the future?

3. The Jewish people experienced glory days during the reigns of David and Solomon. But in succeeding years the nation's power diminished as it divided into two parts and began a steady trend of embracing idolatry.

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Finally, they were completely subjugated with many forced into Assyrian and Babylonian captivity.

Writing from Babylonian captivity the prophet Daniel made a bold prediction, as found in Daniel, chapter two. Interpreting the dream of Nebuchadnezzar he foretold three coming kingdoms---which match perfectly with the Medo-Persian, the Greek, and the Roman empires. In verse 44 Daniel predicted that during the days of the fourth (Roman) empire God would set up a kingdom which would *never* be destroyed, but would endure forever.

How did Daniel know that there would be a kingdom set up during this fourth kingdom (this was written more than 500 years before Jesus came to earth---at which time Jesus' kingdom was set up!). Was this just random babbling---and was it pure coincidence that a kingdom was set up during the Roman period---a kingdom which continues to this day??

It is only natural that the Jewish people, who surely longed for a return to something like the greatness of David's kingdom, took heart at the promise of a future kingdom which God would set up. This expectation was very much a part of the hopes of Jewish people (as they chafed under Roman domination) when Jesus came to earth. Jesus spoke of a coming kingdom, reviving the hopes of his disciples. Jesus consistently spoke of a different kind of kingdom (using parable after parable) than what the Jews were looking for---but it seems that few, if any, of his listeners really grasped what he was talking about. (This fact is brought into sharp focus when one considers the question asked by the apostles just before Jesus' ascension in Acts 1:6. They asked, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?")

It looked as though all the teaching of Jesus had been in vain---the apostles just had not gotten it. If there is no God and all this was purely human activity, surely the efforts of Jesus would have failed in establishing the kind of kingdom he kept speaking of. But, as succeeding events will show, remarkable developments occurred which cannot be explained as mere coincidence. (More about the kingdom later.)

III. The Empty Tomb.....The Jewish leaders knew about Jesus' promise to rise from the dead on the third day. They were determined to prove him wrong, and thus the

stationing of soldiers at the tomb to prevent a theft of the body. Clearly this was a good plan...if only humans were to be involved.

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All the Jews would need to do would be to display the corpse four days later, thereby proving that Jesus had been a false prophet---and clearly there were plenty of Jewish leaders who would have been more than delighted to do exactly that!

But it did not happen. What happened to the body? If the Jews or Romans had gotten it, they would have displayed it. Lacking a better answer, they accused the disciples of stealing it.

The facts tell a far different story. Not only did the disciples not steal the body---they did not show up at the tomb at all! The only ones who came to the tomb were some women who were prepared to apply spices to a dead body.

It is apparent that the disciples were disheartened, disillusioned, and somewhat disoriented after the crucifixion. We can only imagine how shocked they must have been. Despite the fact that Jesus had promised to rise on the third day, the apostles either forgot it, did not believe it, or were too despondent to respond.

Besides that, why would the disciples want to steal a dead body? To prove what? And to whom? If the man they had trusted turned out to be a liar, what would motivate them to keep perpetuating a myth? It makes no sense. Did they have the mental and emotional energy to spite the Jewish leaders? It seems clear that they were much too bewildered, confused, and disorganized to attempt such a ruse. (More about the resurrection in the next section.)

IV. The Transformed Apostles

As discussed in the last segment, the apostles were in very low spirits after the crucifixion. For whatever reasons, not a one of them showed up at the tomb on the third day to witness the resurrection. Even after news of the resurrection began to spread there was widespread skepticism, as exemplified in the episode involving Thomas. What would it take to convince the apostles that Jesus really *did* rise from the dead? This is a crucial question.

One of the most powerful evidences of the resurrection of Jesus lies in the reaction of the apostles. Using just a little common sense, consider this question: could an imposter convince eleven apostles that he was Jesus, a man whom they had known so

well for three years? Could an imposter convince any of us that he was someone---a person whom we had known

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well---whom we knew had died only three days earlier? None of us believes that. To argue that an imposter (for whatever reason) could pull off something like this defies all reason.

When Jesus was arrested the apostles scattered in panic. Peter tried to ease up to a position of seeing what was going on, but upon being discovered, he became frightened and actually denied even knowing Jesus. These facts, coupled with the failure to show up at the tomb help to explain their skepticism about reports of Jesus' resurrection. It could be no coincidence that to a man they all became so convinced that in coming days we see them transformed from "wimps" to "tigers".

In the early chapters of the Book of Acts we see the extraordinary boldness of the apostles, especially Peter and John, as they defied orders not to tell about Jesus, even when their defiance resulted in imprisonment. These events, plus later reports of the courage and faith of these men, demonstrate forcefully that *they* were totally convinced that Jesus was alive. The ones who knew *best* were the strongest advocates of the truth of the resurrection. In no way could this be a coincidence! Certainly their convictions strengthen my own.

V "Coincidences" Galore!

Just before Jesus returned to heaven (Acts 1) he told the apostles to go to Jerusalem and wait for the "gift" which had been promised to them. (It is important to note that none of the events which followed could have been orchestrated by Jesus---in human form---as he was no longer around physically.)

What was the promised "gift"? These words are from John 14:26: "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will *teach* you all things and will *remind* you of everything I have said to you."

As one reads the gospels he notes that the apostles often had a hard time really understanding what Jesus was teaching. It seems that he was always having to explain things to them. Then, noting how they scattered in disarray at his arrest, how skeptical they were of his resurrection---plus their question about the kingdom at the time of the ascension, one could be excused for asking, "Wow, are these the guys who are being counted on to carry out the great mission of God??"

By all human standards these men were woefully inadequate to

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understand, proclaim, and administer the profound principles of Christianity---by *human* standards, that is. Those who deny the existence of God cannot give a convincing explanation of how these unprepared people accomplished what happened in the establishment of the church. To the open-minded it is clear that things happened exactly as Jesus said they would: the Holy Spirit came, reminded, taught, and provided forceful direction to the apostles.

It is fascinating to note the amazing series of “coincidences” which occurred in Acts, chapter two. As just noted, Jesus had promised to send the Holy Spirit to remind and teach the apostles. In Mark 9:1 we note Jesus’ promise that the kingdom would come with power. In Acts 1:8 we find Jesus’ promise that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came on them. Note the following “coincidences” in Acts two:

1. The Holy Spirit came on the apostles.
2. The apostles had miraculous powers to speak in tongues.
3. Peter was the spokesman (as assigned by Jesus in Matthew 16:18-19)
4. People from many nations were present (as foretold in Isaiah 2)
5. It occurred in Jerusalem (as foretold in Isaiah 2)
6. It occurred in the “last days” (as foretold in Isaiah 2)
7. It introduced a whole new covenant (as foretold in Jeremiah 31).
8. It introduced a new priesthood (as foretold by David in Psalms 110:4).
9. It occurred in the period of the Roman empire (as foretold by Daniel)
10. Repentance and forgiveness of sins were preached, beginning in Jerusalem (as Jesus had foretold in Luke 24:47).

Could all this have been by coincidence---or is it not clear that a guiding force was present...far superior to human planning?

VI..Explaining Paul

The chief priests and other Jewish leaders must have smiled as they noted the zealous young firebrand, Saul of Tarsus, as he eagerly sought permission and authority to try to stamp out this budding “cult” of Christianity. It must have reminded them of their own zealous ferocity just a few years earlier when they whipped a crowd into a frenzy as they loudly demanded the crucifixion of Jesus. They must have been pleased that Saul was trying to

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finish the job that they had not been able to complete with the killing of Jesus.

We can only imagine the conversations that must have ensued when word got back to the Jewish leaders that Saul had suddenly changed from being a mortal enemy of Christianity to being an equally zealous defender and proclaimer of the very message which he had so violently opposed.

And indeed this transformation calls for an explanation! What could have happened? This was not an ignorant, easily-influenced, unstable sort of fellow. In fact, he was exceptionally knowledgeable and well-trained, having been taught by the great teacher, Gamaliel. He had proved his toughness, standing by approvingly as the godly man, Stephen, was savagely beaten to death by a barrage of stones.

All efforts to explain Saul’s conversion other than the truth of Jesus’ appearance to him are woefully inadequate. Even though this man, unlike the other apostles, had not had privilege of being taught by Jesus during his ministry, we find in his writings a depth of knowledge and understanding of Christianity which exceeds that of those who had been with Jesus. Only miraculous revelations to him could ever explain such profound understanding. His years of faithful service, enduring terrible suffering, testify to the absolute conviction that he had been in contact with the Lord---just as the lives of the apostles testify to their conviction that they had seen the risen Jesus.

Just what could account for the sudden change in Saul? It was not that the people around him had used persuasive arguments to convince him to believe in Jesus; all those with him shared his views. It was not because a change would benefit him financially; there was no evidence whatever that there would be *any* financial benefit. It was not because he would gain prestige; he was already held in high regard within his own fraternity---and the group which he would be joining was *anything* but prestigious. It was not to gain social standing; he probably did not know a single person among the Christians---and he certainly could not expect a warm friendly greeting.

It was not that Saul had a temporary mental or emotional lapse; otherwise he would have recovered and resumed his mission. He certainly had not lost his intellectual capacity, as demonstrated abundantly in his subsequent writings. And he certainly had lost none of his zeal.

The conversion of Saul is just one more example of God providing reassuring evidence to those who serve him.

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It is not just Paul's conversion that is so remarkable, but indeed the extensive body of his writings which reveal a remarkably profound understanding of the core concepts of Christianity. Unlike the other apostles who had spent over three years hearing the teachings of Jesus, he received---from *somewhere*---a mastery of concepts which exceeded the understanding of the original apostles (see Peter's statement in II Peter 3:15-16). From where did it come? Did he dream it all up on his own---or did it indeed come to him by revelation from God? (I am convinced that there can be no plausible explanation except by miraculous revelation.)

VII. Explaining Jesus

History is replete with charismatic leaders who have risen up and developed a following. Was Jesus just another such person---or is there compelling evidence that he was far more than this?

When human leaders arise and work to build a following, they have some motive---or motives---in mind. Sometimes it is because they want power, or perhaps fame or wealth. Ordinarily it soon becomes apparent what their motives are.

There has to be some explanation of Jesus. What were his motives? It is universally acknowledged that he was a "good man" and that he was not only a master teacher, but also that he presented a remarkable set of teachings. Indeed his teachings continue to benefit the entire human race as no other set of teachings ever has.

But Jesus made some remarkable claims. He insisted that he was the son of God and that he had a pre-existence with God before he came to earth. How can this claim be explained if indeed there is no God? Was Jesus so delusional that he *really* believed something this false? If so, he was truly a mental case.

Did he know that he really was only human but continually lied to people in order to curry their favor? If he did that he was obviously an incredibly dishonest deceiver.

As one studies the life and teachings of Jesus he realizes that they are totally incompatible with the idea that he was either a lunatic---or a liar.

It has been correctly observed that Jesus was one of three things: lunatic, liar---or Lord! (Evidence for the latter is overwhelming!)

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But there is far more about Jesus that demands explanation. Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of what prophets had foretold. There were, indeed, many details which the prophets spoke about the coming one whom they considered to be the messiah. If there is no God---and if the prophets spoke only ideas randomly conjured up in their own minds---how could they have been so accurate in so many details about Jesus? Just as amazing, how could Jesus have managed to arrange so many details of his life to match the prophecies?

For example, how did Jesus arrange to be born in the tribe of Judah...and the lineage of David (Psalms 89:3-4)? How did he arrange to be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), even though his family lived in Nazareth? How did he arrange to be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver...and have the money go to buy a potters' field (Zechariah 11:12-13)?

How did he arrange for the soldiers to cast lots for his clothes (Psalms 22:18)? How did he arrange to die before those crucified with him---so as to avoid having his bones broken (Psalms 34:20)? How did he manage to have his side pierced (Zechariah 12:10)? How did he arrange to be given vinegar and gall (Psalms 69:21)? How did he arrange to be buried by a rich man (Isaiah 53:9)?

One could go on and on showing the details of Jesus' fulfillment of prophecy. There is a limit to how much the scoffer can attribute to "coincidence". The truth is that the Lord has provided us with an abundance of evidence that Jesus was indeed divine and completely worthy of our confidence.

VIII. The Great Parallels

There is a very important question which must be discussed: is there an over-all pattern, consistency, and continuity in the scriptures which goes far beyond what can be explained by purely human knowledge and planning? The evidence points to a resounding YES!

In any generation people's thinking is framed by the culture in which they live. We have noted David's reference to a new order of priesthood (Melchisedek) and also Jeremiah's prediction of a whole new covenant to come. Both of these must have

raised eyebrows as they signaled drastic alterations in the revered system of things established by the law of Moses.

But when one takes a close look at the parallels between the Old

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Testament system and the New Testament system, he has to marvel at how such systems were ever designed to have so many matching elements. It *certainly* goes far beyond what any one man---or group of men---could have sat down and worked out. (In fact, several key elements such as the statements by David and Jeremiah, almost certainly were made by men who had no idea what they were talking about.) Paul, writing in Colossians 2:17, refers to elements of the Mosaic system as “shadows” of things to come. Following is a partial list of elements in the Mosaic system which have counterparts in the Christian system. No intellectually honest person can attribute all these parallels to “coincidence”. (To gain a much deeper understanding---and fuller appreciation---of how profoundly the two systems intertwine, the reader is referred to such passages as Galatians, chapter 3 and 4---and the amazing book of Hebrews.)

1. In the old system there was a great “law-giver”, Moses. The counterpart in the Christian system is Jesus.
2. Old system: the Israelites, captives in Egypt, were led through the waters of the Red Sea, through a wilderness period, into Canaan, their “promised land”. New system: People are led from captivity to sin, through the waters of baptism---and through the wilderness of this sinful world---into our “promised land”,---heaven.
3. Old system: A priesthood was established consisting of Levites, including both regular priests and a high priest. New system: a new priesthood is established in which all Christians are priests---with Jesus as High Priest.
4. Old system: A tabernacle (tent---later a temple) was constructed in which was a Holy Place (into which regular priests went daily to perform their assigned duties), and a Most Holy Place into which the High Priest went once each year to offer animal blood.

New system: the church (not a building) is established in which priests (Christians) perform their daily duties.
5. Note these counterparts:

Tabernacle..... Church

Table of showbread..... Lord's Supper

Burning of incense Prayers

Candlestick Light of God's Word

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6. Old system: the high priest went into Most Holy Place once each year offering animal blood.

New system: our High Priest, Jesus, went *once for all* into our Most Holy Place (heaven) offering his own blood, providing forgiveness of sins---which could never be achieved in the old system using animal blood.

These are only a fraction of the great parallels in the Bible which are clearly part of a master plan---and the work of a master planner. If that master planner was not God....then who was it??

IX...Conclusion

God has *always* required faith---but he has never required *blind* faith. He has always provided abundant evidence that he exists and that he can be trusted to keep his promises. This discussion has not even touched upon the world of scientific evidence of God's existence. (For a mountain of scientific evidence the reader is referred to DOES GOD EXIST?, Box 2704, South Bend, Indiana, 46680-2704).

The Bible speaks of those who have eyes but *will not* see and those who have ears and *will not* hear. This discussion has not been for people such as these. It is rather for those whose hearts and minds are open, seriously seeking truth. This is written with the conviction that a thorough examination of the evidence *forces* one to the conclusion that some power greater than man is responsible for the Bible message.