When Did Jesus Become God?

A Christological Debate

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WJK Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville • Kentucky

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Acknowledgments

Thanking others in print is always an occasion for anxiety because of the fear that some who deserve a word of appreciation will be overlooked through human error. But many deserve to be publicly thanked, and even praised, so we must go on. The dialogue that is featured in this book came from the twelfth Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum.[1] So, first of all, we must thank Bill and Carolyn Heard for their passion to have a forum where leading scholars can dialogue about important issues in faith and culture in a collegial manner and on a balanced playing field. Without them the Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum in Faith and Culture would be a dream rather than a reality.

The event would never have taken place without the efforts of Emily Sloane Jarrell and her staff at the Providence Learning Center of NOBTS. Vanee Daure and the media staff of NOBTS must also be thanked for recording it in both audio and video formats.

The dialogue was initially transcribed by Bryan Shuler. He deserves a word of thanks not only for the transcription but also for carrying out other tasks related to the project flawlessly and with enthusiasm. Ricky Michalski and Micah Chung also need to be thanked for their assistance in research and with details of the project in its final stages. Micah also prepared the index for publication. Concerning various topics related to the subject of this book, Robert Stewart is also grateful for fruitful

1. The Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum was a five-year pilot project of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS) that began in 2005. The Forum was made possible by a generous gift from donors Bill and Carolyn Greer Heard; the forum was named in honor of their parents. Apparently they were pleased with the results from that initial five-year trial because in total there were fourteen Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Forums.

communication with Chuck Quarles, Bill Warren, Dan Wallace, Mike Licona, and Rob Bowman.

We very much appreciate Daniel Braden at Westminster John Knox for his interest in publishing this volume as well as his enthusiasm for fair-minded, respectful dialogue on important issues. Additionally, he was always timely in responding to questions and a source of much good advice and encouragement.

Our wives and family must also be thanked; they are consistent sources of support. No book such as this ever is written apart from the scholars who have gone before us. In particular, we are grateful to Larry W. Hurtado, whose groundbreaking work we all applaud. Larry was a magnificent scholar and perhaps even a better human being. It is to him that we dedicate this book.

Judging What They Say about Jesus

Instructions for Assessing Historical Arguments

ROBERT B. STEWART

My father was a judge, which makes me a JK, a judge's kid! Growing up as a JK is not easy. Having a judge as a father is like living with a human lie detector. A constant refrain in our home was "Boys, I hear better liars than you every day." My dad was a skeptic; he did not simply take us at our word, but examined everything we said in light of the available evidence to see whether what we told him was plausible or implausible. What we told him had to be believable and coherent: it had to make sense in light of everything else that he knew. As a judge my father was a student of human nature and knew that we are all inclined to try to make ourselves look as good as possible by whatever means possible. So he was always on guard, making it difficult for us to pull the wool over his eyes. Not only was it difficult to deceive him, but when we were found guilty—and especially when we perjured ourselves to cover up our peccadillos—our father sentenced us to pay for those misdeeds.[1]

1. Because my father was a competitive skeet shooter, the most common form of punishment was reloading shotgun shells. Reloading shotgun shells was a worse form of punishment than it sounds like. The reloading machines for the different gauges of shotguns used in skeet shooting were in the garage, which meant no air conditioning in the summer and no heater in the winter. To top that off, reloading

One of the things for which my father was frequently applauded was the way he would instruct those involved in trials, whether they were jurors or defendants, as to what was going on in a trial and what their rights and responsibilities were. One tribute to him after his death quoted him as saying, "I have always tried to make people understand what is going on in their case. If we are to serve our function of changing people's conduct, how are they going to be changed if they don't know what happened to them?"[2]

Why do I mention this? Because in some ways historians are like jurors.[3] *Both jurors and historians are concerned with discovering the truth about the past.* And to do their jobs effectively, both jurors and historians need to adhere to certain well-reasoned guidelines. In some ways, readers are in a similar position. Good readers critically judge the theses (arguments) that are brought before them. Therefore, my intention in this essay is to offer readers some instructions as to how to assess a historical case.

PRELIMINARY INSTRUCTIONS

Understand the hypothesis that is presented. This *seems* so obvious that it shouldn't need to be stated. But because most readers are impatient, they sometimes take mental shortcuts; as a result, they miss important details that they might otherwise recognize. When readers don't fully understand a hypothesis, they are dealing with something other than what is actually proposed and thus critiquing something other than what has actually been proposed. Therefore, before one can make a historical judgment about a hypothesis, one must understand what that hypothesis actually is.

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shotgun shells is a mindless, repetitive task—which gave my brother and me time to think about what we had done to put ourselves in this situation. So maybe it served its purpose.

2. Mark White, "Judge Blaine Stewart was a great man, who will be missed," *News Journal*, April 7, 2021, https://www.thenewsjournal.net/judge-blaine-stewart-was-a-great-man-who-will-be-missed/.

3. By "juror" I mean either a member of a jury or a judge; I am not contrasting a jury member to the judge. In many trials there is no jury; when there is no jury, the judge is the sole juror, a jury of one. In no trial is there no juror.

Be charitable when assessing a hypothesis or an argument. The principle of charity states that we should seek to "maximize the soundness of others' arguments and truth of their claims by rendering them in the strongest way reasonable."[4] When there are two or more possible ways to understand a hypothesis, we should understand it in the way that is most rational and persuasive within its context, all other things being equal. We should not resort to accusations of bias or shortsightedness before exhausting other options. We also need to keep in mind that even though an overall hypothesis may be incorrect, there may be points at which it is correct and helpful. The principle of charity is one of the first things one learns in philosophy, but the principle applies to other fields as well. Being charitable means that in seeking to understand a hypothesis, historians need to take it in its best possible light, recognizing that even if poorly stated, it may be fundamentally correct, or at least have a grain of truth in it. It also means that sometimes the historian needs to strengthen the argument or refine the hypothesis under consideration to address the fundamental issue properly. One idea that undergirds the principle of charity is that if one has dealt with the best argument for a position and found it wanting, then all the lesser expressions of it fail as well. Besides the obvious logical concern behind the principle of charity, there is also a hermeneutical end. Historians should focus on *what is meant* rather than merely upon *what is said*. Additionally, there is an ethical concern, namely, the Golden Rule. We should treat others and their ideas as we want them to treat us and our ideas.

Judge a hypothesis from start to finish. It's always tempting to skip to the end of the book. Historians must resist the temptation to peek at the conclusion of a historical argument, and if they agree with its conclusion, simply accept it without critically assessing the steps it takes and the reasoning employed to reach its conclusion. Nor should any historian approach an argument with a bias toward the person who made it. Facts are stubborn things; the truth value of a statement doesn't depend upon who

4. Julian Baggini and Peter S. Fosl, *The Philosopher's Toolkit* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 115.

utters it. All historians must first consider the available evidence and assess the reasoning used to reach the conclusion before affirming or rejecting any argument or historical hypothesis.

There is a difference between the evidence and your opinion concerning the evidence. I frequently point out to my students that there is a difference between the Bible and their interpretation of the Bible (whatever view they take regarding the Bible's trustworthiness). This hermeneutical principle also applies to history. Good historians approach historical questions with an attitude of humility. We could be wrong. I know that *I have been wrong at some point* because I have changed my mind on any number of matters, both hermeneutical and historical. Either I was wrong in the past but am now right, or I was right in the past but am now wrong, or I was wrong in the past and I am still wrong, but wrong in a different way or for different reasons. The one thing that cannot be the case is that I have always been right! I do my best. I critically assess what I believe. I tenaciously hold to my beliefs (some more tenaciously than others) and do not abandon them unless I am persuaded that other beliefs are more rational. But I do all this with epistemological humility, understanding that I have an intellectual and moral responsibility to fairly consider the viewpoints of others, especially those with whom I presently disagree.

Historical conclusions can be revised. Unlike jurors, who render binding legal verdicts, historians can change their conclusions. A legal verdict may be overturned; if it is, it will not be done by the person or persons who rendered the initial verdict, but by a higher court. Historians, however, can always revise their beliefs, and sometimes they should.

History proceeds on the basis of inferences. Historians infer conclusions about historical figures or events from the evidence they have at their disposal. This means that two or more historians may argue for contrary positions by appealing to the same evidence. Frequently the debate is over *what the evidence means* rather than over what evidence is relevant, although historians also make inferences in determining what evidence is relevant. Ultimately historians tell an explanatory story intended to

make sense of the relevant evidence. These explanatory stories are drawn from the inferences they make concerning the evidence. Earlier inferences lead to conclusions, or subconclusions, from which they draw further inferences, and thus reach other conclusions.

An argument or a hypothesis is not evidence. An argument may be based upon evidence—most arguments are to one degree or another—but there is a difference between an argument and evidence. Arguments reveal what one takes the evidence to show. Arguments also serve as pleas for others to agree with our position as to what the evidence means. But evidence is one thing; arguments are another.

What should be evident by now is the fact that there is such a thing as historical truth, though this is denied by many today. Some maintain that history is simply a cultural construct. But once we speak more clearly as to what we mean by history, much of the confusion can be cleared away. We must distinguish between *history as an event in the past* (History-E) and *history as what is written about select events in the past* (History-W). Historians tell stories about the past, which they believe to have History-E as the focal point of the story, chronological ground zero, if you will. Modern historians cannot observe History-E directly. Nor can they reflect on their feelings about the event as the event is unfolding, as ancient observers could and often did. Our access to the specific content of the past is generally through History-W, the stories that ancient writers told. So there is a sense in which writers in antiquity, by interpreting and shaping the story as they did, constructed the history that is available to us today.

The fact that History-W is in this sense constructed does not mean that all historical opinions are equally true. All History-W is shaped by several things: (1) *The selection by the historian*. No historian includes everything known about any historical figure or event. Instead, historians write about events and relationships in the lives of historical persons that they consider significant. (2) *The perspective of the historian*. For example, how a historian writes about the Cold War depends on whether one

is a Soviet or an American. (3) *The historian's understanding of what the biblical authors meant by what they wrote*. For example, did Paul in Philippians 2:6 mean that Jesus' nature was one of equality with God the Father *or* that Jesus had the status of a lesser deity?[5] (4) *The worldview of the historian*. The worldview of the historian is perhaps the most important aspect of all because our worldviews shape and color how we view reality. If a historian has a naturalist worldview, then that historian will first seek natural explanations for purported miracles and perhaps not even consider a supernatural explanation. If one has a determinist worldview, then one will place less emphasis upon human intention in the analysis of why historical figures acted as they did. To a significant degree worldviews limit the range of explanation that a historian is open to believing. But worldviews are not strictly determinative. Individuals can, and often do, critique their own worldviews, and some change worldviews as a result.[6] We all have a worldview even if we don't know what a worldview is. A worldview can enhance or inhibit the historian's search for truth.

All this highlights the fact that *there is always a hermeneutical dimension to historical writing*. All historical writing obviously involves a process of selection (one event or person is written about while another is not). What is not as readily apparent is that selecting entails a process of interpretation because what is selected is determined on the basis of what is deemed meaningful, and meaning is a hermeneutical issue. Clearly, then, interpretation (hermeneutics) is as much a part of writing history as it is of reading history. Historians write about history as interpretation in a way that does not exclude history as "real events in the past." In other words, History-W refers to History-E, *objective events* in the past, *through interpretation*,

5. Phil. 2:6: "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited" (NRSV); ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἁρπαγμὸν ἡγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ (Greek New Testament).

6. For instance, both Bart Ehrman and Michael Bird have had a change in worldviews, Ehrman from conservative Christian to agnostic, and Bird from atheist to Christian. For more on how worldviews impact the writing and reading of history, see N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1, *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 38–88, esp. 83–88.

not apart from interpretation. N. T. Wright states it thus: "The myth of uninterpreted history functions precisely as a myth in much modern discourse—that is, it expresses an ideal state of affairs which we imagine erroneously to exist, and which influences the way we think and speak. But it is a 'myth,' in the popular sense, for all that."[7] None of this means that there is no truth to matters of the past, or that all historical writing is simply a matter of perspective. History is, of course, a matter of perspective, but it is not *merely* a matter of perspective. For instance, either Nixon knew about the Watergate cover-up, or he did not. Either Jesus was buried after he was crucified, or he was not. The perspectival nature of history does nothing to mitigate the laws of noncontradiction and excluded middle.

Because historians are the gatekeepers, we must not only be aware of the agendas of historical figures but also of the agendas of the historians writing about them. For example, both Ann Coulter[8] and George Stephanopoulos[9] have written books about the Clinton White House. Both Coulter and Stephanopoulos have agendas; their agendas are not remotely similar. In the same way, one should understand the perspectives of ancient historians and modern historians writing about the ancient world. In fact, knowledge of the agenda of a historical figure may increase the historian's ability to know the truth.

Our certainty that we know the truth about the past is never on the same level as the certainty we can have about mathematics, but that doesn't mean that there is no truth to historical claims, or even that we can't know that truth. We simply know what we know with less than 100 percent logical certainty. But *we don't have 100 percent logical certainty concerning most of what we know*. In fact, we don't have absolute certainty about most of our most important beliefs. We routinely base our existential commitments on beliefs about which we cannot be logically certain. We routinely travel in cars and planes with

7. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*,1:85.

8. Ann Coulter, *High Crimes and Misdemeanors: The Case against Bill Clinton* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1998).

9. George Stephanopoulos, *All Too Human: A Political Education* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1999).

less than 100 percent certainty that we will safely arrive at our destinations. Perhaps a story will illustrate.

Several years ago one of my colleagues asked me to join him and his college-age son for lunch because his son was going through a crisis of faith. The young man had been raised in a Christian home, attended Bible-believing churches, and was frequently exposed to the best Christian theology. Nevertheless, he was genuinely doubting the foundation of the Christian faith. We went to lunch, and I began to ask him questions as to where he was in his faith and why. (Note: I did not assume that I knew why he was doubting. I wanted to hear him in his own words.) Rather quickly, I thought I had identified his basic issue. The conversation that followed went like this:

STEWART If I'm understanding you, you think that there's rather good evidence for the existence of God, the truthfulness of Christianity, and the resurrection of Jesus, but you're troubled because you can't be 100 percent certain that these things are true, yet Christianity calls for a 100 percent commitment of your life. Am I understanding you correctly? (*Notice again: I made certain that I was actually addressing his issue, not simply repeating a stock apologetic answer!*)

YOUTH Yes, exactly.

STEWART Do you want to get married?

YOUTH *looking somewhat confused*. Oh yeah, I'm going to get married.

STEWART OK. When you get married, would you like to have a wife who is faithful to you 100 percent of the time, or would it be OK if she cheated on you occasionally, like once every leap year?

YOUTH I want a wife who is always faithful to me!

STEWART But how could you ever be certain that she was faithful to you 100 percent of the time?

YOUTH *after a long pause*. I guess I couldn't be 100 percent certain.

STEWART So I guess you're never going to get married.
YOUTH I'm going to get married.
STEWART But you can't be certain.
YOUTH I'm going to get married.
STEWART But marriage—just like Christianity—requires a total, 100 percent commitment of your life, and you've already agreed that you can't be certain that your future wife will always be faithful to you.

At that moment the lightbulb came on as the realization hit him that even our most important existential commitments don't require 100 percent logical certainty. So it is with historical knowledge. We can know vitally important facts about the past without having 100 percent certainty as to their truthfulness.[10] We can even base our lives on beliefs about the past that we are not 100 percent certain about!

In fact, we hold some logically uncertain yet crucially important beliefs so tightly that we cannot *not* believe them. For instance, I cannot disbelieve that my wife will love me tomorrow. I know that she *can* choose not to love me tomorrow, but it is impossible for me to actually believe that she *will* not love me tomorrow. How can I be so certain? One word: evidence! I have abundant evidence, accumulated for over thirty-eight years on a daily basis and in multiple ways, that my wife loves me and will continue to love me for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until one of us dies. I have more than enough evidence to convince me that she is the sort of person who will love me tomorrow because I know her to have the strength of character to keep her vows. At some point the cumulative effect of this sustained barrage of evidence overwhelms even my professionally trained level of skepticism. All this points out not only that we can know

10. Sometimes one hears, "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." This is simply not true. The evidence for some claims is extraordinary, but no belief requires extraordinary evidence (as though what it would mean for evidence to be "extraordinary" were obvious). Beliefs require sufficient evidence, justification, or warrant. The distinctions between evidence, justification, and warrant need not detain us here.

vitally important facts without 100 percent logical certainty, but also that historical knowledge, like most of our knowledge, is arrived at by an a posteriori rather an a priori manner.

I am not saying that we do not need to examine relevant evidence when and if it is brought forward to challenge our beliefs. I am also not saying that we shouldn't examine the arguments that support our own beliefs to assess their merits. We should be as skeptical about our skepticism as we are about the beliefs of those with whom we disagree. But I am saying that somebody else having a different opinion on a matter than I do is not the sort of evidence needed to defeat a properly based historical belief. It is evidence that someone disagrees with me: that's all. It is not the kind of evidence needed to change my mind, nor is it proof that our contrary views are equally correct or incorrect.

DEFEATERS

A "defeater" is a reason either to change your belief as to the truth value of a statement, or to doubt what you previously believed about a statement. There are different types of defeaters. For our purposes, two types of defeaters are relevant: *undercutting* defeaters and *rebutting* defeaters. An undercutting defeater is the sort of evidence that undermines my confidence in my belief concerning a particular proposition. On the other hand, a rebutting defeater is evidence that changes my belief concerning a particular proposition either from belief to unbelief or from unbelief to belief. A rebutting defeater is thus stronger than an undercutting defeater because a rebutting defeater makes it irrational for me to continue to believe what I had previously believed.

Perhaps some hypothetical examples will illustrate the difference between these two types of defeaters.

Example #1: When I left the house this morning, my wife had a slight headache but assured me that otherwise she was feeling fine. As a result, I came to believe that my wife was well. Later my wife called and told me that she had been to

the doctor because she had developed a sore throat and had begun to run a fever, and a test had confirmed that she had strep throat. I no longer believe that my wife is well. In fact, I form a contradictory belief: I now believe that my wife is ill. *The call from my wife served as a rebutting defeater* for my earlier belief that my wife was well. After hearing that she had tested positive for strep throat, it became impossible for me to believe that she was well.

Example #2: This morning I glanced out my office window onto the Quad of our seminary and saw what appeared to be people dressed like faeries prancing about on the lawn of the Quad. This was admittedly unusual, but I generally trust my eyesight unless given a reason to doubt it. So although I was puzzled, I concluded that I was in fact seeing faeries. Ten minutes later, I received an email addressed to faculty and staff saying that around the time that I thought I was seeing faeries, a leaky tanker truck carrying a hallucinogenic gas drove past my office. The email encouraged us to report to the campus clinic if we began to see strange things. *The email served as an undercutting defeater* for my belief that this morning there were faeries in the Quad. I do not know *for certain* that I inhaled any of the gas or that I was hallucinating, but I do not need to know for certain that I was hallucinating for my confidence in my belief concerning faeries to be undercut.

Undercutting defeaters are thus weaker than rebutting defeaters. Whereas rebutting defeaters have the power to change my belief about a proposition from belief to unbelief, or vice versa, undercutting defeaters merely have the power to cause me to be uncertain about my belief concerning a proposition. Yet both are significant.

But defeaters can be defeated. Suppose that right before I left for the clinic (because I had seen something strange on the Quad), I read an email sent even earlier that morning to faculty informing us that a troupe of Shakespearian actors would be rehearsing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the Quad that morning. That would serve to defeat the undercutting defeater to my belief that faeries were dancing on the Quad. I conclude

that I indeed see people dressed like faeries that morning on the lawn of the Quad, and therefore I conclude that I don't need to go to the clinic after all.

Most of the defeaters in historical investigation are under-cutting defeaters rather than rebutting defeaters. Typically, a historical defeater would be along the lines of a new discovery being made that shines a new light on how the culture of the time functioned and undercuts some of our earlier presupposi-tions, or a new way of interpreting a key text is proposed, or a gifted scholar proposes a new theory as to how to understand a complex of related issues. None of these can be tested or con-firmed with anything approaching the level of certainty required for these relevant cases to be considered rebutting defeaters. Instead, most historical defeaters initially give us pause concern-ing our conclusions and offer a reason to reevaluate some of our beliefs. They may lead us to consider positions that we previ-ously had not considered, or even to accept beliefs that we had previously rejected, or vice versa. Generally, when these sorts of things happen, some scholars alter their beliefs while others do not. Therefore, what qualifies as a defeater is often subjectively determined.