

Special Note from Rick

I hope you enjoy reading this sample from my new book

Hell? No! Why You Can Be Certain There's No Such Place As Hell.

I spent many years agonizing over the belief that God might actually subject billions of people to the worst sort of torture for all eternity, that is, until I took it upon myself to examine this idea from every angle. I poured over the entire Bible, but in a way I hadn't done before—setting aside *everything* I had been *told* it means, to read every passage in its own context! I especially focused on the original texts of the gospels to find out what Jesus actually had to say, if anything, about endless retribution. And sure enough, it was then that I finally began to understand there is *no way* a fate such as Hell awaits anyone, not according to the Man from Galilee!

I can hardly describe the sense of liberty and joy I felt as I began to understand the original words of Jesus about the nature of God that makes the existence of Hell an impossibility!

Once you're done reading this chapter, I'm confident you'll want to know more by getting my entire book. You can wait until then, but if not, just go to my website www.thereisnohell.com and order your complete copy right now!

Did Jesus Believe in Hell?

If you've ever been the victim of an ugly rumor, something someone said or wrote that alleges you said something awful, something completely and totally contrary to who you are, and then, have someone else who actually knows you, someone who has listened to you talk, someone who has paid attention to see how you conduct yourself, someone who "gets you," who publically speaks up and says, "Now hold on just a minute! I *know* this person, and there is no way in the world he would ever have said that!" isn't that great? And don't you know that the only people who would believe that ugly rumor are just those who haven't really listened to you, those who haven't really paid attention to how you've conducted yourself, those who don't know you, those who don't get you! Well, this is exactly the problem we find with those who spread the awful rumor that Jesus believed in and actually taught that there's such a place as Hell!

Before we delve into the details of what Jesus actually said, and what he actually did, let's establish how important is the meaning of the historical Christian claim that Jesus was God's Word. What exactly does this mean? Clearly, Jesus was a flesh and blood person, not some voice coming out of a cloud, so clear implication behind the idea that a *person* is a *Word* is that the totality of that person's life is serving as a message! Perhaps we can compare this idea to someone in modern times, like Martin Luther King, whom we think of as a person whose life was about bringing civil liberties to racial minorities. In this regard, King was perhaps the Main Expression or Principle Representative of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Likewise, if Jesus was/is the Word of God, this is to say that he was God's Main Expression or Principle Representative of God to us. So, to say that this *person* was *The* Word of God means that he was the *full* expression of God. And it also implies that whatever God was trying to communicate to us before (for example, in the Old Testament), it was either incomplete or garbled, not getting through! So finally, God tries to get his message about who he is and what he's really like,

through a person, through that person's total life, not just what he said, but how he acted. To put it another way, if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus, that's what it means to say that he was God's Word.

Believe it or not, though, there are more than a few believers who try to say that whenever Jesus told us to do this or not to do that, he was only giving us orders, things that God wanted us to do, but not necessarily what God did. In other words, they try to say that God has a double standard, one set of rules for us, and no rules for him! He can tell us not to lie, but if he wants to, he can lie! He can tell us to return love for hate, but he can return hate for hate if he so chooses! He makes the rules, so he is under no obligation to abide by any rule he sets down for us! Well, I'll address this issue in more detail in a later chapter, but for now, let's understand just how bogus this idea is.

Hopefully, it's already obvious that no such double standard can exist, side by side, with the notion that Jesus is God's Word. If the way he acted doesn't tell us how God is, then the most one can say is that Jesus was a mere prophet...but not God's Expression, not his Word! Secondly, if God gets to do whatever he pleases, if he can kill, if he can torture, if he can return evil for good, then we have to cut out all the many admonitions in the Scriptures to imitate God: "Be ye, therefore, imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ also loved us" (Ephesians 5:1). If, indeed, God gets to do all sorts of things that are only wrong for *us* to do, then this passage makes no sense. In that case we should have been exhorted to *not* imitate God! To make this passage consistent with the idea that God intends to inflict horrific pain on billions of people, it would have to read, "Be sure *not* to imitate God!" However, the passage not only instructs us to imitate God, but makes the seamless connection between God's behavior and the "loving walk" of Jesus, that we are to also imitate!

Now, it's beyond the scope of this book to prove, one way or the other, if Jesus actually was God's Word. And there are a ton of other books that do a fine job with that topic. The only reason I bring this point up is because, ironically, almost everyone who makes the claim that Jesus believed in and taught about Hell, also claim to believe that he was God's Word! Well, if so, then they are just like the people I just talked about who would believe in the worst, ugliest rumor about someone. Why? Because either they never *really* knew him, or if they ever did, they've drifted very apart from him. Otherwise, they wouldn't buy the rumor for a single second!

If we really get to know Jesus in the gospels and, thus, get to know God, what do we see? Well, do we see a guy who was vindictive? Intolerant? Punitive? No, just the opposite! Time and again, Jesus is forgiving, patient and compassionate which, if he is God's Word, means that God is forgiving, patient and compassionate.

However, how many times do we hear those who say God is going to burn billions of people forever try to justify it by saying, "God is so holy that he cannot tolerate sin in his presence, so he must punish sinners in the worst way, and separate them away from his presence!" Sorry, but again, if Jesus was God's Expression, time and again we see him going way out of his way to hang out with sinners, to get as close to them as he can! He took a lot of flack for doing so, but his response was, "It's the sick who need a doctor." In other words, Jesus' attitude toward sinful man shows us that God is anything but incapable of being around sinners (which is impossible,

by the way, if God is also omnipresent, everywhere)! He doesn't get upset or angry or offended to have them "before him." On the contrary, God's very Expression looks up the most sinful of people and has dinner with them? So the message of Jesus' "walk" is that God reaches out to the sinner, and wants to be as close to them as he can...so he can help them! Maybe he doesn't like some of the things we sinners do, but if we are sick with the disease of sin, then God, as The Doctor, wants all the more to come to heal us of it!

Speaking of healing, Jesus spent most of his time doing just that—healing the physically ill! Now, if we'll really think about it, why in the world would he heal people if his ultimate intention is to make most of us suffer in the worst way! Why do we read that, even when Jesus was, himself, physically exhausted, the gospels tell us he had so much compassion, that he kept on healing. So what was the point of all this non-stop compassion if it was not to say that God is compassionate, that he can't stand to see us suffer, and that his compassion is unending. If there's a Hell, then Jesus was sending the wrong message! If Jesus was the Word of a deity who intends to torment billions, he should never have healed anyone, but told them how that was just a very small taste of what would be in store. He would have condemned the sick saying, "you're just getting a little head start on what you really deserve!" But that's not at all "the Word on the streets" that Jesus walked!

Hades Vs. Gehenna

If you hang around Pseudo-Evangelical preachers long enough and the topic of Hell comes up, you've probably heard this assertion: "Jesus preached twice as much about Hell as he did about Heaven," as if to say, "Since Jesus must have *really* believed in Hell, it must be real, and so you'd better turn or burn." But did the actual, historical Jesus of Nazareth really believe in Hell? Assuming the majority of what is recorded in the gospels accurately represents Jesus' teachings, we can be very certain that he did *not*.

Let's begin by dispensing with the assertion that Jesus preached more about Hell than Heaven, which turns out to be completely false, even if we include all the passages which were added to the gospels long after they were originally written. The fact of the matter is, the gospels only represent Jesus as having mentioned Hell (and I'm being generous here by including the transliterated, Aramaic word, *Gehenna*, along with the original Greek word *Hades*, which are both translated as "Hell" in the King James Bible) a grand total of 14 times, and that's only in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The gospel of John does not contain the term at all!

Consider these two Greek words. Most people might recognize the term *Hades* since it comes from Greek mythology and most of us have heard about it in school, books, movies and so on. Of the 14 times Jesus was supposedly talking about Hell, it was only in 4 places where the original word was *Hades*—Matthew 11:23; 16:18 and Luke 10:15; 16:23! *Hades* was thought by the Greeks to be the eternal abode of all the souls of all the dead, but in common usage, the term often referred to those who were being eternally punished for having offended the gods in some way. So it wasn't that big of a step for early Greek converts Christianity to modify the idea behind *Hades* a bit to become the place of eternal punishment for those who were not Christians.

For the sake of argument, though, let's just take a moment to really think through what it would mean for Jesus to have actually used the word *Hades* to describe some place in the next world where the unsaved are tortured. As noted above, Hades is the name of a god, the Greek pagan god who ruled over the underworld. Whenever we read *Hades* in any Greek text where the term is clearly referring to a *place*, we really should be translating the word as an abbreviation for the *Realm of Hades* or the *Kingdom of Hades*! Of course, there are those who insist that the four places where the Greek texts use this word are faithful renditions of the original, divinely inspired, autographs of the gospel writers. If so, what would this mean? Well, it would mean that, when the Holy Spirit of God Almighty was deciding what to call the place where, presumably, God would begin torturing the souls of people who were not saved at the time of their deaths, of all the words he could have chosen to use, he went with the name of a pagan god, who was ruling over the underworld, as imagined by the pagan Greeks! Really? Did the Omniscient Spirit think this was the best way to convey the idea? Was the Holy Spirit not the least bit worried that people might just get the pagan Realm of Hades confused with a place that was actually created by the God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob? And why wait all through the centuries of the Old Testament to finally tell us about this place and that it's name was, just by coincidence, going to be the same as what the pagan Greeks were calling their underworld? Wouldn't it have made a lot more sense to come up with something a lot sooner, let the pagan Greeks keep their underworld name, and leave a pagan god's name out of it?

OK, I'm teasing a bit here because, really, it's blatantly obvious to any impartial observer that, of course, there was no Jewish Hades by any name! There were very few Jews who would have felt in any way comfortable tying their views of the afterlife with what the pagan Greeks believed. No! What happened is that the belief in Hades came *directly* from the Greeks, pure and simple, and it never caught on with the early followers of Jesus who were all Jewish. Only after the Church became a Gentile Greek movement did the use of Hades come into vogue, and then, the belief was superimposed on Jesus' lips well afterwards.

Now, when it comes to the word *Gehenna*, which makes up the remaining 11 places where Jesus was supposed to have preached about "Hell"—Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15,33; Luke 12:5 and Mark 9:43,45,47—the story is *very* different! Indeed, *Gehenna* is a Jewish word, Aramaic to be exact. Literally, *Gehenna* means the "Hinnom Valley," which was just outside of Jerusalem and, at the time of Jesus, was the location of the city dump. Now keep in mind, 2000 years ago, there were no limitations as to what got put in the dump, such as dead human bodies! It was hard enough for the average person (who typically didn't own land their own land where they could have a family cemetery) to find some way to afford the fees associated with burying a loved one in a public cemetery. So when it came to the indigent or those who were executed by the Romans in Jerusalem, their bodies were simply hauled out and dumped with all the trash in Gehenna. In time, the idea of not being properly buried, but dumped with the trash in Gehenna became synonymous with getting the worst sort of punishment, not just the death penalty, but also the humiliating mistreatment of one's corpse. Given the ancient notions about Sheol and how proper burial was key to resting in peace, the idea of "going to Gehenna" was a dreaded one, but not because of any sort of conscious, eternal torture by fire or any other means.

Where the confusion comes in, if not intentional distortion, is the conjoining of Gehenna with the word "fire." But this has a very simple explanation, the only practical way of keeping diseases

from spreading, and not to mention the awful stench, was to *periodically* burn the trash in the dump, which is actually what people who live way out in the country (even in modern, industrialized nations) still have to do where there is no trash pick up. So it wasn't unusual in ancient times when referring to the final disposition of the corpses of the condemned and executed in or near Jerusalem, to say, "Oh those guys got Gehenna fire." Perhaps not all that different from the expression not all that uncommon just a few decades ago, "they gave him the chair!" referring to convicted criminals who received the death penalty by the electric chair.

Moreover, this isn't really too different from the many execution idioms we commonly use in exaggeration. In the passage above, for example, it's likely Jesus was not being literal when he said calling someone a fool will get you the death penalty. If that sounds a bit odd, think of how we often say something very similar. How many teenage girls have said, or at least thought, "If I find out she's flirting with my boyfriend, I'm so gonna kill her." Or at the workplace, "...and my boss just threw me under the bus!"

In Matthew 5:21-22, for example, Jesus teaches that getting angry with someone for no reason will land you before a local judge who might fine you, that insulting someone will land you before a district judge who might throw you in jail and calling someone a fool will land you before an imperial judge who might throw you into "Gehenna fire." But this doesn't sound right, unless we consider the hyperbole here. Perhaps the feeling of what Jesus was putting behind his words is better communicated with a modern hyperbole, "You should never call someone a fool, 'cause it could get you killed!" In any case, the context is all about legal judgments and their successively more serious, but quite earthly, punishments.

Matthew 10:28 also refers to the imperial Roman court which had the ability to issue capital punishment. Here, Jesus taught not to fear them as much as God. The same goes for Matthew 18:9, "if thy eye offends thee, gouge it out. Better to lose an eye than to end up in Gehenna." Which was actually just another way of saying, "if you have to choose between going blind or getting the death penalty and not getting a proper burial, it's the lesser of evils to be blinded." Again, he wasn't being literal, but using the Gehenna dump as a hyperbole.

Knowing what *Gehenna* really means, then, tells us the King James Bible translators (and sadly, most English bible translations ever since) were quite wrong to equate going to *Gehenna* with going to Hell. In the 11 instances where Jesus is said to use the term *Gehenna*, the context gives no indication whatsoever that he was referring to any sort of ongoing punishment, much less being tortured eternally in Hell.

By contrast, Jesus is quoted in the gospels as using the term "Heaven" 135 times, almost 10 times as much as Hell! (For those who think I'm making this up, just get out any exhaustive concordance, look up the words and add them up for yourself.) If Jesus believed in Hell, surely, he would have talked about it at least as much as Heaven, not 10 times less.

No, the reason the gospels have Jesus talking about Heaven 10 times more than Hell, is simply because he never really preached about Hell in the first place! The handful of passages that put the word "Hell" on Jesus' lips were added later on. But there's more than just the sheer volume of textual evidence to support the idea that Jesus never believed in Hell, and that is because of the way the doctrine would have directly conflicted with everything else he taught.

But even if one insists that Hell must be real because of the 4 places Jesus is quoted as using the word *Hades*, the argument in favor of Hell becomes even weaker, especially when we consider Matthew 16:18. In the previous verses, Jesus gives his disciple Simon a new name, Peter, which is famously known to mean “rock” or “stone.” And then he makes a very interesting claim: “...and upon this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hell [*Hades*] shall not *prevail* [emphasis mine] against it.” Now, I put the word “prevail” in italics because I’d like you, the reader, to think for a moment about what it is that gates surrounding a particular area do—keep people in or out or both! But if we read the next verse, it becomes clear that we’re talking about gates designed to keep people locked *in*: “And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven...” In other words, if this passage is an accurate quote of Jesus talking about Hell, then the most you can say is that, perhaps, there was a Hell, but not any more, or at least, if there is, there’s no one in it!

I know this is a tough one, especially for Pseudo-Evangelicals because, believe it or not, they are almost always told that the meaning of this verse is that the Church is somehow always going to survive the attacks of the Devil. It’s a bizarre interpretation! For starters, the “gates of Hell” is taken to mean “the Devil,” and, perhaps mostly because of the King James Version English use of the word “prevail,” the imagery is flip flopped into the gates of Hell being used as some sort of offensive weapon to attack the Church with! Confusing to say the least.

So let’s sort this out. First, the original Greek word translated as “prevail” would have been more properly represented by the word “hold.” With this translation, the statement becomes much more clear: “...and the gates of Hell will not *hold* against it [the attack of the Church] it!” So, instead of the standard Pseudo-Evangelical interpretation which makes the Church out to be weak, a garrison that is just barely managing to stave off invasion, trying to hold on to their faith against a powerful assault by the Devil and, presumably, all his demons from Hell, the real idea behind this verse is that it is the *Church* that will be a powerful force, going to be on the attack, as an ancient army often did back in those days, assailing the gates of a city, in the hope of knocking them down!

Now that we have the correct image, let’s move on to what the message is behind it. If, as Jesus is quoted here, the gates of Hell are not going to hold, and the Church is going to knock them down, then what is the subsequent result? Clearly, the entire point is that everyone who is trapped inside of Hell, would be able to escape! We’re not talking about temporarily cracking open the gates to let some out, but that they are permanently destroyed. And if this were not clear enough, the very next statement has Peter receiving the “keys” to heaven. Therefore, everyone who was trapped in Hell gets out and then, with Peter’s help, they get to go to Heaven.

For the purpose of this discussion, it’s not relevant to concern ourselves with some of the other interpretations which have been made of this passage (such as whether or not this means Peter was the first Pope, and whether or not and pope had the ability to discriminate as to when those who are languishing in the intermediate if only temporary place of punishment, Purgatory, could go to Heaven). In all likelihood, this entire passage was a later insertion to the book of Matthew, but if anyone wants to insist that it’s not, they can certainly do so, but only at the peril of making the idea that Jesus believed in a permanent Hell even more unlikely!

The Real `A La Cart Theology

OK, if you happen to be an Pseudo-Evangelical or a former Evangelical reading this right now, it's likely a little voice in your head is saying something to the effect of, "Ah ha! He's just taking a scissors to the bible!" or "Oh, it's the old cafeteria method of interpretation, picking and choosing only the passages you like," or "A La Carte Theology." For anyone else trying to understand what all these euphemisms are referring to, it's all about a very clever method of biblical interpretation Pseudo-Evangelical leaders came up with to give their followers the false impression that they are being faithful to every single word God provided to them, when in fact, it allows them to reject almost all of Jesus' actual teachings!

Here's how it works. New converts to Pseudo-Evangelicalism are told, repeatedly, that "every word" in the Bible is directly inspired by God. The Bible is often referred to as "THE word of God." To reinforce this idea, preachers are taught (literally, they're instructed in Bible college, in courses specifically for learning how to preach) to speak very authoritatively and claim the Bible is infallible, void of any contradictions...though the truth is that it is oozing with them! Of course, all the contradicting passages in the Bible are only a problem for the few converts who actually read the Bible. But the vast majority never do. They simply listen to what the preachers or televangelists tell them it says, and they, in turn, only quote from selected parts of the Bible, never from any of the controversial ones.

This deceptive seduction is very similar to the way in which a slippery car salesman will first demand that a potential customer sign a vaguely worded "commitment" paper that offers few details on the car deal. Then, the salesman disappears for a while, supposedly trying to convince his boss to sell the car for such and such a price, only to return with the news that the best he can do is a much higher price! Of course, what he's really doing is emotionally manipulating the buyer. He's hoping the customer will still feel obligating to uphold his end of the phony bargain, even though he has not intention of doing the same at his end, the old Bait and Switch! The buyer is overcome by the sense that he has made a commitment, and may not even realize he was cornered into buying a car for a price he really couldn't afford.

Similarly, potential converts to Pseudo-Evangelical Christianity are told they must accept every word of the modern Bible as inspired by God, long *before* they've had any chance to read it for themselves. And even though the historical position of Protestant Christianity (as well as that of the largest and most broadly represented gathering of Evangelicals in modern times, known as the Chicago Conference on Biblical Inerrancy) regarding the divine inspiration of biblical texts applies only to the original "autographs" (in other words, the original texts, not any of the many, many copies which followed over centuries of time),¹ the Pseudo-Evangelical leadership gives the false impression that there have been no changes along the way, over all these hundreds of years since they were first written, changes which make for numerous contradictions that would ordinarily be quite apparent, even to a novice Bible reader.

Now, let me take a moment to explain just how crafty a lie this is, and how it employs a very well known propaganda technique—the "Either/Or" fallacy. First, a believer is told, over and over again, that the gospels written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were inspired by God, and it is true that this is the historical Protestant position. But make no mistake about it, the Pseudo-

Evangelical hierarchy is well aware of the fact that those original writings are long gone due to the ravages of time! All we have left are copies of copies of copies of copies, and there a lot of discrepancies between them. But even though they *know* that some very contradictory things were added to the gospel texts along the way (most of which are very obvious to any objective reader and glaringly so to literary and textual experts with no personal agendas), they make it seem as if there are no other choices to make other than to believe that “every word” of *the modern Bible* is the “infallible Word of God” or to reject the whole thing as a lie! Since their unspoken agenda hinges on getting people to believe that Jesus believed in Hell, they intentionally want their converts to think all the adulterations of the original gospels found in the later copies are just as inspired as the original autographs! And since it’s pretty difficult for average believers to discern the difference between the actual Word of God and a book that they’ve been told is the exact same thing, they are cornered into accepting even the most bizarre of passages, though they are so contradictory to all the rest!

Here’s a great example. In John 12:32, Jesus is quoted as making an unequivocal statement as to how many people will be saved, “if I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw *all* men unto me.” He doesn’t say when or how, but he does make it clear how many—*all*! Of course, leave it to those who insist this passage can’t mean what it plainly says to find a way to make it say something else. Typically, they’ll take the word “draw” and say, “Oh, you see. This just means that Jesus will ‘try’ to save everyone; his Holy Spirit will ‘try’ to attract everyone to saving faith, but not that all will respond!” Well, sorry guys! There’s no way to justify this particular spin on the word “draw” as if Jesus were some kind of advertiser hoping to get his commercials out to millions in the hope that a small percentage will actually “buy” his product! No, that’s not it at all! When he says, he *will* draw all men to him, the language denotes a *prophecy* saying that, in due time, at some point in the future, the very last one of all men *will come* to Jesus.”

In order to deal with the minority of converts who do manage to read the Bible and encounter its many contradictions, they are simply told, “Oh, you’re so young in the Lord, and have as yet to learn how to interpret the Bible,” which is just another way of saying, “pay no attention to what one passage says in its own context, but let us Pseudo-Evangelical leaders *reinterpret* it for you.” In other words, the Pseudo-Evangelical leadership has found a way to get their followers to completely set aside many parts of the Bible, parts that one would otherwise think to be very important to anyone claiming to be a follower of Jesus! They accomplish this by redirecting the convert to a handful of the same passages over and over again, the ones that fit whatever pet doctrines they hold to and play down the importance of all the rest! When necessary, they’ll take all the other passages, which they pay lip service to as also being the words of God, and dismiss them by saying, “Oh, that was for a different dispensation (another time period when, supposedly, God’s rules were different from what they are today),” or “that passage means...,” and it’s taken complete out of its context and reassigned some other meaning. And when all else fails, they turn to their argument of last resort, “Oh, yes, there are many mysteries, but God will explain them all once we’re in Heaven.” In other words, “Stop asking so many questions, and just believe what we tell you!”

Making an Idol (“a Brazen Serpent”) Out of the Bible

I want to underscore just how important it is to understand what Pseudo-Evangelicals are typically told about the Bible, as compared to what historical Protestantism and even their own scholars will admit to. It’s a distortion that is subtle, but the impact is *huge*! Here’s what the convert is told, and what we hear over and over and over again: “The Bible is God’s Word!” And they say it with a lot of gusto, sounding as authoritative and sure as can be! Once someone believes that this book, often labeled “Holy Bible,” often bound in leather with a gold trim on the sides of the pages, all of which is designed to convey “authority,” it’s really, really hard for him that the truth was twisted, ever so slightly, in order to manipulate him into actually reject *most* of what’s contained in that very same Bible!

Allow me to illustrate what’s going on here with a story from the Bible, often known as the Worship of the Brazen Serpent. Way back in the Old Testament days (Numbers 21:4-9), when the children of Israel were wandering around in the desert with Moses trying to lead them to the Promised Land, the Israelites were attacked by a plague of poisonous snakes. So, as usual, Moses prayed to God for help, and as the story goes, God told Moses to make a brass statue of a snake and to hold the “brazen serpent” (as it is called in the old King James Bible) up on a poll with instructions to the Israelites that, if they were bitten by one of the snakes, all they had to do was look at the metal snake, and they would be healed. As a result, we’re told, a lot of people were saved from death, and the plague finally abated.

Now, fast forward to several hundred years later, to the time of the Kings. Moses has been dead for centuries, and sure, there was the temple in Jerusalem, built by King Solomon, where one could worship the national deity Yahweh. But this was the only temple to Yahweh in all the kingdom! Graven images of Yahweh (I’m saying “Yahweh” here to distinguish him from all the other gods) were strictly forbidden, and even if someone could leave his farm long enough to make the trip to the one and only temple, only the priests could get anywhere near the “holy of holies” on the inside. In other words, it was pretty difficult for the average person, most of whom were illiterate, to have any sort of *tangible connection* to the Divine! (If you ever wondered why the Israelites had such a hard time giving up idolatry, this was one of the main reasons for it.) So, you might say most of the Israelites were deprived of having anything “holy” that they could see or hear or smell or touch or taste, which made it kind of hard to relate to!

So, guess what happened one day when whoever it was that was put in charge of storing the Brazen Serpent (maybe an off duty temple priest or Levite, short on cash) blew the dust off of it to let people come and check it out? Of course, they began to worship it! We’re told they came and burned incense before the image (and no doubt, the caretaker made sure to have some on hand for a pretty price!). Since this image was actually made by Moses himself, no one was going to get in trouble for breaking one of the Ten Commandments which specifically forbade the making of graven images! Nice! Plus, here was an object that had actually served as the instrument by which the people of Israel had been saved from dying in the wilderness. One can almost hear the caretaker telling everyone, “The Brazen Serpent is the One True Image of Yahweh, the only one he put his stamp of approval on! Surely, if you’ve got any requests, making an incense offering before this ‘Holy Brazen Serpent’ will get Yahweh’s direct attention!” After all, this was more or less what all the priests and priestesses of all the other

gods and goddesses did. So, if one was trying to be faithful to Yahweh, but felt like there was something missing, something all the other Gentiles got to do, then worshipping the Brazen Serpent was a very attractive option!

Eventually, though, a king came to the throne named Hezekiah, who was tied very closely to the priests of Yahweh in Jerusalem. One of the first things he did upon taking the throne (most likely because the priests were a little jealous of the competition), was to have the Brazen Serpent shrine destroyed (II Kings 18:4)!

What's the moral of the story? Well, human nature hasn't changed all that much since the Old Testament days, and so we have all got to be careful that we don't fall into the trap of "making a Brazen Serpent" out of something that may seem to be as holy as can be, as representative of God as you can get, so near to being his divinely inspired message to us as is possible in this world, but to be wrong on every count! Sadly, this is exactly what's happened with the Bible, especially among many, if not most, Pseudo-Evangelicals.

Instead of looking directly to God to know what his Word is, instead of looking directly to the person whom, historically anyway, Christianity understands to be the Word of God in the flesh, and instead of looking to the original autographs, the original writings of the gospels to understand as best as we can what Jesus originally taught through his preaching and through his actions, the Pseudo-Evangelical leadership has made an idol out of the a book which is, at best, an assembly of the translations of the oldest copies of copies of copies of those original writings! Instead of being careful to inform all their converts that it is only the originals that are, once more, in accordance with the historical Protestant Church and the most recent agreement by the Chicago Conference on Inerrancy, regarded as directly inspired by the Holy Spirit, and what we find in the Bible is only "the Word of God to the extent that it accurately renders what those original texts said"!

But this is not what they do! They're not just sloppy about it, but they intentionally make equate what the Bible says with what Jesus actually said, even though they *know* very well that what we have in the Bible is a flawed representation of the originals! In fact, they go so far as to endow the Bible with sacred status, calling it "holy" or "sacred" or "inerrant." They want to make sure that everyone who claims to be "born again" gets the message that they will instantly become *persona non grata* if they should so much as *think*, much less vocalize, any doubt whatsoever that there could be any errors in any of the verses that are in the modern Bible. They have, in effect, created an idol out of the Bible, cleverly seducing the unwary believer from the actual Word of God, Jesus, to something similar, something closely associated with Jesus, but not actually Jesus—the Bible. But make no mistake! To say the "Bible" is God's Word is to reject the belief that Jesus is God's Word. Both cannot be true!

And they have a reason for doing so! On some level at the top of the Pseudo-Evangelical Leadership, they know their political and economic dominance depends on keeping their flocks weighed down with fear! Fear of a deity who is cold, cruel and vindictive. They are acutely aware of the fact that the few verses that contain the belief in Hell were added to the gospel texts, and just how much it contradicts everything else they say! But by insisting that the Bible *is* God's Word instead of honestly explaining that the Bible only *contains* the Word of God, they

can then bully their converts into swallowing the belief, even when they are very reluctant to do so, even when they sense, deep down, that there is something extremely wrong with the idea that the God who is, in every other gospel text revealed to be so kind, loving, caring and forgiving, is somehow just the opposite!

So Can We Believe Anything in the Bible?

All that said, let me assure that we don't need to go to the other extreme either! It is actually quite remarkable that we have enough existing texts from enough different parts of the Old World, that dispassionate textual and literary scholars are pretty confident about being able to piece together a pretty good representation of what the original autographs said. To be sure, there are those who would say that, because of all the many contradictions in the Bible and the fact that it's really a compilation of many, many writings that were very often the recollections of oral traditions that circulated for many years before *that*, therefore *nothing* in the Bible could ever be considered to be a reliable source of information! Certainly, these doubting Thomases have a point. Even by the most generous estimates, the earliest of Jesus' sayings were not committed to writing until decades after his death. Those collections, in turn, were circulated and eventually combined with others. Sadly, not even those documents survive today, but only copies of copies of copies of them. One can easily understand (if for no other reason than by having ever played the game of telephone, in which a group of people sit in a circle, a message is whispered into the ear of one person, and the next one tries to repeat it to the next and so on, until the message goes full circle, only to find out that it has dramatically changed, just in that short interim) why it seems doubtful that *any* of Jesus' original sayings are discernable at all!

That said, experts in evaluating historical documents have developed methods of determining which of many texts and variations is *most likely* to be a fair representation of what was originally stated by applying a strict regimen of *weighing* every passage according to specific criteria. This art is a combination of forms of criticism, textual and literary. It's what historians have to do all the time when they're examining various accounts of, an ancient battle, for example.

We could compare the Bible to one of those geography books with a bunch of plastic page inserts that show various changes to an area over time, as one layer is placed upon the other...but with the exception that these pages were all torn loose, mixed up and put in a pile and, then later on, some other plastic pages were tossed in by persons with various agendas who sought to distort the views of the original, geographic history. So, the challenge for the textual and literary expert is to take that pile and, using the skills of textual and literary criticism to piece the pages back to their original structure or, at least, get as close to it as possible.

However, continuing with the same analogy, the Pseudo-Evangelical leaders just take the whole pile of inserts together, just as they are now, and *claim* that it must be viewed as one solid picture! The key word here, being "claim." The fact is that these inserts were never neatly organized by one original writer, but by hundreds of writers, over thousands of years. So naturally, when you take it as a whole, there are bound to be a host of differing pictures that don't match up at all. The solution? For Pseudo-Evangelical leaders, it's just a matter of saying

which little piece is supposed to be more important than all the others! And in so doing, they get to dismiss large parts of the Bible (parts that would otherwise, for example, hold up to critical scrutiny as those which are most likely the original words of Jesus) just in order to cling to only a handful of other passages that contradict all the rest of Jesus' teachings.

When Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation in 1517 C.E., it was politically understandable, though quite irrational, that he, and the Protestants who followed, take a strong stand on the "infallibility" of (what was then) the Bible. They had to find a counterweight to match the Roman Church's claim of the Pope's infallibility. But the Pseudo-Evangelical leadership has long since then moved beyond a need to compete with claims to authority by the Pope to a much more sinister expediency—to protect and advance the agenda of the extreme wealthy and powerful. In a new twist on the saying, "keep your friends close, keep your enemies closer," the Pseudo-Evangelical leadership found a formula that has worked remarkably well. By superficially embracing "all" of the words attributed to Jesus, they virtually hypnotize their followers into ignoring many, if not most, of his sayings that would cause one to challenge the claims of the wealthy and powerful, all the while conferring upon the average Pseudo-Evangelical pew occupant a proud sense of "standing true" to the belief that "every word" of the Bible is inspired by God (the Plenary Verbal view of inspiration as theologians call it)! But the deception is really not that complex. It would be admirable for its simplicity were the effects not so damaging.

We could compare their simplistic argument to the witnesses or "testaments" of an automobile accident. Let's say there are 4 different people who claim they saw a car smash into the front window of a convenience store. The first witness reports the car hit it straight on, going very fast. The second says the car was spinning "doughnuts" before it hit the storefront. The third person reports the car was flipping end-over-end, and finally, the fourth witness claims the car simply fell out of the sky! All these stories are recorded by a police officer and submitted as an "official report."

Now, imagine the insurance adjuster reviewing these reports simply cobbles them all together, as if under some order requiring that he not doubt what any of the alleged witnesses reported, nor whether the persons they reported to did any investigation to verify their reports! "Well, since we have an official police report, and no police officer would ever lie, the car must have first begun spinning in circles, then turning end-over-end, then bounced up into the sky, and finally landed just in front of the store to run straight into it!" Regardless of how soon it was after the accident, it would be very naïve to think that the objective truth of what really happened could be ascertained by simply slapping together all the testimonies to form one picture.

Instead, the smart way to make any sense of these different statements is to look for clues *within* them to find out which are more reliable. There are quite a number of questions that ought to be asked in order to properly *weigh* the value of what each person says. Their proximity to the site of the accident is one. If a witness was far away, they're not as likely to have seen what happened very accurately. What were they were doing at the time? Were they distracted? And what about the personal prejudices. Let's say one witness was a racist who, upon learning the driver was African-American, was much more inclined to think he was intoxicated and had not been in control of the vehicle for some distance. Another might have a skewed perception of the

event because the store owner is a personal friend. I could go on, but hopefully, you get the point--to get an accurate, objective idea of any event, given the weaknesses of human prejudice and perception, one has to be very critical of each witness to get at the real truth of what occurred!

Further, think about how much more complicated a report like this would be if the adjuster had to try to make sense of the accident many years afterwards, and all the original reports had been lost! Let's say the accident occurred in a small town back in the early 1920s and all the accident records were done by hand, and whenever a report needed to be copied, the copy was also done by hand. With every hand-written copy, the likelihood of unintentional, and even, intentional error grows greater! It would be very easy, for example, for some court clerk making copies to get a little carried away and inject some new details, or leave out other ones, especially if she had some personal prejudice about the event, based on what she heard about it, or how she felt about the store owner or if she knew the car driver.

Well, these are the same sorts of challenges we face when trying to make sense of the various copies of copies of copies of "reports" that were ultimately collected into one book we know as the Bible! The Pseudo-Evangelical leadership would have us believe that all the "reports" *are to be taken at their face value*, and that we *must* patch them all together into one unified explanation, never minding, of course, all the scores of passages that must be reinterpreted to mean something other than what is justified in each of their own contexts, in order to force them to be consistent with others! But when you start to ask them about the details, it's just amazing at all the various explanations they'll resort to in order to force the pieces together. Some will just ignore or downplay the significance of some of the reports. Others will reinterpret the parts that don't fit in such a way that they come to mean something entirely different, just so it will fit with the parts they do like. But no matter how creative they have to be to find some justification for their particular idea of what the final picture turns out to be, *they will never, ever admit that many of the records were just never accurate to begin wit!* Were a lawsuit filed and a jury had to decide whether or not the driver deserved to go to jail for being unduly negligent, if not maliciously intending to cause the wreck, all the testimonies would have to be examined carefully and cross examined, in the hope that some consistencies would arise to give a clear picture of what really happened. So what we should do when reading the gospels is employ the same sort of "cross-examination" strategies court lawyers use to get a good idea of what Jesus originally said.

Undermining the Core Message of Jesus

The majority of the stories and sayings attributed to Jesus promote the theme of caring about others. This should come as no surprise to anyone who is actually familiar with the gospels. Jesus is repeatedly quoted as saying things like, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." Of course, Pseudo-Evangelical leaders love to scoff at the idea that we should give more "weight" to the passages supporting a Jesus who promoted a loving God. But one good reason (coming from one of the many aforementioned literary "cross examination" techniques) we can justify this greater weight assignment is the fact that Jesus' teaching about universal empathy *is often challenged in the very same context!* Later scribes who were seeking to add in their own views

were too focused on their personal agendas to fabricate along with them stories of Jesus' contemporaries calling him into question on the very points they were hoping to put beyond question.

Universal empathy was, indeed, a revolutionary concept, and it was not well received, especially by the established Jewish sects of Jesus' day. It just seemed way too sweeping a concept, and the gospels record many encounters between Jesus and Jews who tried to get him to soften up on it—"How many times should I forgive?" "Who is my neighbor?" "Do I *have to* share my wealth with those in need?" But each and every time people made excuses, Jesus let them know, in no uncertain terms, how they were not getting it. His "stump speech" was, "God cares about *everyone* who is suffering and wants to relieve their pain and *so should you!*" So then, it only makes sense that, in Heaven, the place where the caring and empathetic message of Jesus would presumably be realized to its fullest extent, the last thing we'd expect to see is *Jesus himself* keeping the flames of Hell on full blast in order to cause and sustain as much suffering as possible!ⁱⁱ

And it wasn't just what Jesus said, but how he acted that tells us more about his view of God than anything else! Let's consider the following gospel passages, taking note of what percentage of the suffering Jesus helped:

And his [Jesus'] fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him *all* [emphasis mine] sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatick, and those that had the palsy; and he healed them (Matthew 4:24 KJV).

But when Jesus knew it, he withdrew himself from thence: and great multitudes followed him, and he healed them *all* [emphasis mine] (Matthew 12:15 KJV).

Now when the sun was setting, *all* [emphasis mine] they that had any sick with divers diseases brought them unto him; and he laid his hands on every one of them, and healed them (Luke 4:40 KJV).

And the whole multitude sought to touch him: for there went virtue out of him, and healed them *all* [emphasis mine] (Luke 6:19 KJV).

Let me bring your attention to a couple things here. The more obvious should be the fact that Jesus healing *everyone*. There is no distinction made whatsoever that he limited his compassion for their suffering to any particular ailments, nor did it matter whether the persons faithful Jews or not, "sinners" or not, rich or poor, thankful or unthankful, whether they believed anything else he said or not. If they were hurting, Jesus healed them.

Now, for what might not be so clear, but definitely implied by these actions of Jesus—that he didn't want them to suffer! Sounds like a real "Duh, no kidding Einstein!" thing to say, right? However, if one wants to argue that this exact same Jesus was intent upon inflicting the worst sort of pain on many, if not most of these very same people, which is precisely what except the doctrine of Hell implies, then it makes no sense that Jesus would have bothered to help and heal every, single last one of these throngs of people! Perhaps, it would make sense if he only healed

those who accepted his teachings, or who believed him to be the Messiah. But no such limits are mentioned! If, Jesus is “the same, yesterday, today and forever,” then we would have to conclude that if he could not allow for even one person to go on suffering, no matter what the cause, at this time in history, then he could never stand idly by on a Day of Judgment and do nothing while billions of people—some of them, the same ones as he healed in the above passages—be tossed into a lake of fire to suffer even more!

Speaking of fire, we should also think for a moment about the very decent likelihood that a good number of those who were coming to him for healing, had suffered from burns! Imagine how often people at this time in history who relied heavily on open fires for the preparation of their food and warmth in the winter, when there were no fire departments, when there were no smoke detectors, when there was no classes in fire prevention, and children and animals were running loose all the time, everywhere...how often someone was accidentally burned!

So, let's say, very conservatively, that of all those who came to Jesus for healing, about 10% were burn victims, and Jesus healed every single one of them! But why should he do that, if in fact, he was going to turn right around and inflict the pain of getting burned on many of these very same people? It's completely absurd to think so! And yet, those who would have us believe in Hell are really telling us this is exactly what happened! That Jesus, being one with God, knew all along that all this healing he was doing was some sort of cruel trick, kind of like when a torturer allows his victim to recover from his wounds for a bit, just so he will regain consciousness again so the suffering will be all the worse and prolonged!

No, instead what is plainly inferred from the *unconditional* and *unlimited* response Jesus had for all those who were suffering is that God has the same characteristic, that God looks upon all of human suffering with compassion and wishes only to stop all of it, for all time, for every single one.

Is God Exempt From the Golden Rule?

How about the one teaching of Jesus that almost everyone has heard of—The Golden Rule! Luke 6:31 (and a very similar rendition in Matthew 7:12) quotes Jesus as saying, “as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.” Once more, this teaching makes perfect sense if Jesus was trying to help us understand that God is the Ultimate Empathizer! The Golden Rule sums up the whole concept of feeling what others feel, and acting in accordance with that ability!

And the Golden Rule means the most at times when others hurt us! Our powerful, primitive urges tend to get the best of us when someone who is “not one of us,” and with no empathy in place, we tend to hurt “outsiders” far more than they however they (or how we perceive they) hurt us. This is where the Revenge Factor plays out, and which lies at the root of so much, if not all, the suffering humans inflict one upon the other. But following the Golden Rule means that we extend to all others the sense of caring we extend toward ourselves. With the exception of some very disturbed people (which don't count in this equation by the way), we would never

deliberately heap pain upon ourselves. That being the case, then there's no way we should heap pain on others.

Does God Have a Double Standard?

Now to the bigger question! Why would Jesus tell us to follow this Ultimate Empathy rule if God were not the Ultimate Empathizer? To claim that God is somehow exempted, is to say that he has a *double standard*! That God orders us to do something that he either can't or is unwilling to do! If there were a Hell, then God, indeed, would do unto others an infinitely worse thing that he would never do to himself!

No! Clearly, this very famous teaching of Jesus was his way of letting people in on something about God's nature, that he is the Ultimate Empathizer, that he could no more bear causing any one of us pain, than any normal mother could stand to see her child suffer. In fact, the teaching helps us understand Jesus view of God as one who never, ever gives up on us, even if we are hurting ourselves, because he is incapable of ceasing to feel what we feel, and because he is ultimately good to himself, he must do all he can to rescue each and ever one of us.

Do Two Wrongs Make a Right, After All?

Although it's no specifically stated in any of the gospels, the common moral assertion *two wrongs don't make a right* is a very clever and faithful way of representing a very key element of Jesus' core message. Going back to his famous teaching to turn the other cheek, the message is clearly implied, "Is someone slaps your face, and if slapping someone's face is wrong, then if you slap his face back, you are simply doing yet another wrong, with the mistaken notion that paying him back in kind somehow makes everything OK when, in fact, you have now merely committed the wrong as well!"

Yet, if God puts people in Hell, then the concept of 2 wrongs not making a right would have to be changed! At the end of the day, Jesus words would be dismissed, because God would not only return a "slap" for every "slap" any human had given others, but God would heap upon the original slappers and infinite number of counter slaps! In this regard, then, the wise old saying ought to be changed to "Two wrongs don't make a right, but an infinite number of wrongs do!"

Seeking the Last Lost Sheep Until He Finds It

It's actually quite ludicrous to believe that the attitude of the earthly Jesus toward lost souls was accurately portrayed, for example, in the gospel parable about the Good Shepherd, only for him to take a diametrically opposing stance once back in Heaven!

Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, 'This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.' And he spake this parable unto them, saying, 'What man of you,

having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, *until he find it?* [emphasis mine] And *when* [not “if”] he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbors, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.’ Luke 15:1-7

The Gospel of John has a similar story:

I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. John 10: 11-13

Clearly, the point of these stories is to describe God as one who is not satisfied with even one soul lost, a deity who is not at all content even if there is just one, “missing sheep.” The character of God, according to this parable, is that he keeps seeking out the lost *for as long as it takes* until he finds the very last one. If there were a Hell as the Pseudo-Evangelical preachers insist, the parable would have to be dramatically altered—The Shepherd would be content with only one saved sheep. Not only might he *allow* the other ninety-nine to be lost, as the hireling would, but he, himself, would be actively involved in seeing them devoured! The hireling merely fled away when the wolf came, because he had no real care for the sheep, and was only passively responsible for the loss of some of the sheep. But if Hell is real, then Jesus would actually be more comparable to the “wolf,” for he would have to be directly involved in administering the torture suffered by the lost in Hell. It is unfathomable, therefore, that the Jesus who did all he could during his earthly ministry to *alleviate suffering*, and the Jesus who, when he wasn’t helping the suffering directly, was teaching anyone who would listen that they should also be doing all they can to help the suffering, could in any way be the same Jesus who, in the next world, does all he can *to make* billions of people suffer!

A point that seems to get lost whenever we hear an Pseudo-Evangelical preacher arguing so vociferously for the “reality” of Hell is the way they can compartmentalize the character of the God of Jesus, as exemplified by his practical teachings, with a deity who could torture. Let’s take another teaching of Jesus that tells us about how to confront those who do bad things to you to see what it reveals about the nature of God in his view. “Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also,” which is found in Matthew 5:38-39, and then expanded upon in Luke 6:29f, “and him that taketh away thy cloke forbid not to take thy coat also.” Now, just in case you didn’t know, Jesus is quoting from the Old Testament book of Exodus, Chapter 21 which has God telling Moses to tell the people of Israel that if someone pokes out your eye, then you’re to poke out his. But Jesus says not what God wanted, that he didn’t want or need “justice,” or revenge, but instead, to respond to evil with good. Quite the opposite of what the Jews of his day had heard all their lives, this teaching was revolutionary!

It carried with it a view of God's nature that rebuked the "eye for an eye" concept, and the view that God is all about getting back at those who do bad things, that he is compelled by his "just" (or let's face it, the real word is "vengeful") nature to hurt people to the same degree they had allegedly sinned. Instead, Jesus' bold assertion implied God is anything *but* vengeful and, therefore, he asks that we return good for evil *because that's what God does!*ⁱⁱⁱ So, if God "turns the other cheek," then clearly, he is not one to punish, or get revenge, but to return love for evil, making it impossible for him to hurt anyone for whatever sins they may have committed, much less, hurt them far above and beyond the measure of what the old "eye for an eye" standard implies!

Let's look at another gospel story in which Jesus denies the idea that God inflicts pain on people to punish them for sins.

And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him...When he had thus spoken, he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay, And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam, (which is by interpretation, Sent.) He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing. John 9:1-4, 6-7

This passage gives a very good insight into the degree to which the Jews of his day had bought into the idea that God causes bad things to happen to people as retribution for either the sins they had committed or even the guilt for the sins which their parents had committed and, presumably, had not been punished for! After all, when they read the Old Testament, it sure seemed like God was a vengeful, wrathful being, based on what Moses said and many of the stories of the ancient Israelites. So, could it be that Jesus was basically dodging the issue because, privately, he believed Moses was wrong? Well, that's one possibility, but another explanation is that Jesus was simply trying to communicate the real message about what God wanted all along! That all the stuff in the Old Testament about God having some huge need to hurt people had to do, not with God, but with the Israelites' inability to get Him!

The Bad Relationship God Had With the Hard-Hearted Israelites

Have you ever told someone something (maybe someone with whom you had an unhealthy relationship), and they took it all the wrong way, largely because they interpreted what you said through their internal, mental filters due to all the "baggage" they were carrying around? If so, then it's not too hard to understand why God's people in the Old Testament were lucky to understand anything God was trying to say!

For example, there's a story in which, supposedly, God told the prophet Samuel to tell King Saul to kill every man, woman and child (and their little dogs and cats too!) of a certain tribe called the Amalekites. Now, if God was talking to Samuel at all, his real message was probably something like, "I want you to tell King Saul to share my love with the Amalekites, and don't leave anyone out, not even their dogs and cats." But by the time that message got inside

Samuel's head and had run through the gauntlet of his bad-view-of-God filter, it turned into, "I want you to tell King Saul to go kill all the Amalekites, and don't leave anyone out, not even their dogs and cats!"

You might say, God had an unhealthy relationship with Israel, and it showed! Again and again, they just didn't get him! Sometimes, he'd get through, but more often than not, his Word either never made it to them in one piece, or if it did, it was soon turned inside out.

What was God to do? He still loved them, but the Israelites were not ready for a healthy relationship. So, you might say God then tried to take them to therapy, and work with them, one step at a time to bring them around.

According to Jesus, God decided to give them little bits and pieces of what he really wanted, just to get them going in the right direction, to make some sort of forward progress, however short the distance might be. This is why Jesus took many of the divine proclamations in the OT and viewed them as "hardness of heart" commands, things God told them that, sadly, allowed them to continue doing bad things, but for the purpose of keeping them from doing really, really, really worse things.

This is why he said, "you've heard it said, 'an eye for an eye', but I say, return good for evil!" In the OT, God was just trying to stop the Israelites from taking dozens of eyes for an eye (you know, completely blinding not only the person who gouged out someone else's eye, but his entire family's eyes as well!). He put a cap, in other words, on so many of the evils going on back then, as an interim solution.

Jesus explained Moses' law about divorce as a "hardness of heart" declaration, designed to keep men from dumping a female sex slave in such a way that no other man would take her and, thus, leave her on the street to either starve (if she was old and sick) or to have to become a prostitute. Moses' law put a deterrent on this sort of "divorce" by saying "You better think twice before you abandon a woman. Once you get rid of her, you can't have her back, and if you do, you have to put it in writing so she can prove that's she's free to be with another." He didn't try to tell men at the time of Moses, "It's wrong to purchase women as sex slaves!"

God wasn't happy about any sort of slavery! But he knew the ancient Israelites weren't ready for an emancipation proclamation. So he gave them a law that said, "You have to stop all work at least one day a week" to, literally, give the slaves a break! And even Jesus didn't break it to the people of his day about how God wanted all to be free. He just tried to say, "Look, the Sabbath was made for man, not the other way around."

God didn't really want any blood sacrifices, not of animals, and certainly not of humans! He finally got this through to the prophet Hosea, when he said, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." But the Israelites were not ready for that. So, God started from where they were. First, he started by prohibiting human sacrifice. He made it clear that they were not to "pass their children through the fires of Moloch." (Hint: how weird would it be for God to forbid burning children to death if, as Pseudo Evangelicals claim, he was intending on burning them and people of every age for eternity!) And he also told them, in gross detail, how to kill the sacrificial animals in such a way

that it would be quick and virtually painless, by forbidding the strangling of animals and other slow and painful means of dispatching them.

Behind this and all of his Hardness of Heart commands, there was the underlying message that God doesn't like suffering! But it was only when Jesus came along (*The Word of God*) when he just came right out with it, by letting us know what God's real desires were.

So, now, with at little better idea of how Jesus understood what was going on back in the Old Testament days, let's reconsider what was going on with the blind man. If it was true that the blind man was blind because of sin, and that God just had to punish sin because he is so just and righteous, then it would have been wrong of Jesus to undo the act of God. But again, we see him teaching just the opposite, that God would be glorified, not by the infliction of pain and suffering, but by the relief of it! If we look at all the many, many healings Jesus performed, according to the gospels, each and every one stands as a testimony to his view of God as one who abhors human suffering, and who instead desires to bring healing instead, even though every person whom Jesus healed was a sinner.

Was Jesus' Empathy For Human Suffering...A Temporary Phase?

Perhaps, the gospel passage which most clearly tells us how Jesus would react to the idea of eternal, fiery torture is found in Luke's gospel where we're told, on one occasion, he was rejected by an entire village of Samaritans, and his disciples wanted to, quite literally, give them Hell!:

And when the disciples heard that the Samaritans would not let Jesus pass through their village, they asked, "Lord, shall we call upon the heavens *to rain down fire on them* [emphasis mine]?" And then Jesus rebuked them, saying, "Ye know not what spirit you are of. The son of man didn't come to destroy, but to save men." And then they went around the village to another city. Luke 9:51-56

It could hardly be more obvious that, if while he was on earth, Jesus was *completely incensed* when his disciples wanted *to burn people with fire*, regardless of the fact that *they had knowingly rejected him*, then surely the heavenly Jesus would be even *more* incensed at the very thought of endlessly doing far worse to people, again, regardless of whether they had rejected him in any way.

If there were any truth at all to the notion that the same Jesus rejected by the Samaritan villagers in the above passage was also the Jesus described in Revelation who presides over the casting of billions into an eternal fire, his reaction would have been completely different: "Ye have the right spirit, guys. But not to worry! The son of man is going to burn these people soon enough, and when I do, it's not just going to be for a few minutes, but forever!" By all rights Jesus should have taken a look at the nearby sundial and said, "Oh, come on disciples! It's a little early in the day to be roasting people! Can't you just hold off for a bit? Trust me, it'll be no time at all before you'll get to see just how vengeful I can really be!" Doesn't exactly sound like, well, like Jesus, does it?

The attitude of Pseudo-Evangelical preachers who similarly “know not what spirit they are of” is appalling, especially those who subscribe to the Cosmic Torturer View. They are, indeed, *hoping* for far worse than what Jesus’ disciples had called for—not just an agonizing death by fire from the sky lasting for a few, horrific minutes, but an *indefinite* fiery torture! So if Jesus felt his disciples were succumbing to the wrong spirit just for *suggesting* that fire be rained upon others *for a few moments*, imagine what spirit he would say believers are in league with for not only suggesting, but *looking forward to* the fiery torture of others *for eternity*? Certainly not the *Holy Spirit*!

However, most anyone who has been exposed to some of the sayings of Jesus has some sense that he was not the kind of person to hurt others. The majority of the stories of Jesus have him spending most of time and effort healing those who were suffering from one malady or another. Even many of those who preach the most damning of Hell, fire and brimstone sermons, can’t bring themselves to portray Jesus as the one in control of the “fire switch” that keeps the flames of Hell at full blast. They try to separate Jesus out, as if to say he is powerless to do anything, and tearfully sad for all who end up being plunged into Hell.

But this makes no sense! After all, these same preachers insist Jesus is God. That being the case, then certainly, Jesus could, if he wanted to, put an immediate stop to the torture, and more certainly, that is exactly what he would do, assuming that we’re talking about the same person who walked the shores of Galilee. There’s a huge disconnect in their thinking, that has them showing Jesus as all compassionate during his earthly ministry, and maybe even on the final judgment day. But after that, we’re led to believe Jesus will somehow take the utter pain of the billions flaying in the flames of Hell and put them out of his sight and out of his mind, which would be rather hard to do if, in fact, he is one with God, who is all knowing.

The real problem, of course, is that no one in their right mind who had only been exposed to the original sayings of Jesus would ever in a billion years conclude that he would ever, could ever, hurt anyone. Were they to read the few parts which talk about Hell that were added to the Bible much later on, as separate documents (free of the notion that Pseudo-Evangelicals of today are bound by, the idea that they *have to* accept every word in the singular-looking, modern Bible as coming directly from God, even though it’s actually a collection of thousands of different writings which had, for years, circulated individually), they would conclusively and resoundingly reject such writings as the ludicrous adulterations that they are!

The Message of Jesus Has Survived Amidst Revisionism and Adulteration

Just in case, let’s also make note of the fact that it wasn’t just Jesus who rejected the doctrine of Hell. To be sure, the idea imported by the many Greeks who, eventually, came to dominate the Early Church, that the God of Jesus intended to send all non believers to the same realm ruled by the Greek god Hades, had a huge impact on later writers whose words made their way into the New Testament...but not all of them! Briefly, let’s look at a couple examples outside the gospel texts that were faithful to Jesus’ teachings as they pertain to the fate of those who, for whatever reason, don’t come to a knowledge of God’s saving grace.

In I Timothy 2:1-6 we find the amazing claim, “I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for *all men*... for this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; *who will have all men to be saved*, and to *come to the knowledge* of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave Himself a ransom for *all*, to be testified in due time.” It’s very plain that the concern here is not that God’s will might somehow be thwarted, but that not all men will, in this lifetime, “come to the knowledge” about what God has done for them all! “Salvation” here, in the context, has to do with no longer being lost in ignorance of being saved, not going to Hell.

Here’s a great one, found in Philippians 2:9-11 (and for those who’ve only heard the distorted interpretation of this passage, please, set aside what you were told to think it means, and let’s re-read it without the commentary): “Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him [Jesus], and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus *every* [emphasis mine] knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that *every* [emphasis mine] tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.” Clearly, this passage is saying that, sooner or later, the day is coming when everyone will believe in Jesus and be serving him. But for those of you who have never before heard how this passage is spun like a top by Pseudo-Evangelical preachers, get ready for a whopper! Long before most converts ever have a chance to read the letter to the Philippians on their own, they’re told over and over that the people described in this passage are being *forced* to bow down and *forced* to say, “Jesus is Lord.”

However, the context and the Greek language support no such interpretation! This is the same language that’s used in every case where people are otherwise “getting saved.” And just in case there’s the slightest doubt in anyone’s mind, I Corinthians 12:3 says “...no man can say ‘Jesus is Lord,’ but by the Holy Spirit”! In other words, sure, it might take a while, but sooner or later, the inspired writer to the church in Philippi wrote, everyone will come to know God, will have the Holy Spirit come into their hearts, and then acknowledge him as their Lord and Savior!

Mind you, the guys who superimpose this notion of people being forced to acknowledge Jesus as their Lord and bowing down to him, as if at gun-point or at the edge of a sword, are the same guys who constantly try to justify the idea of God torturing people in Hell because “*everyone has a choice*, and those who end up in Hell chose not to believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior”! In other words, they want to have it both ways! When confronted with the obvious injustice and cruelty of God burning people, they try to shift the blame onto the tortured by claiming they “chose” to be so horrifically treated. But when they are confronted with a passage that plainly says everyone will eventually choose Jesus and give him reverence, then they say, “Oh, they’re being compelled to do that just before they’re tossed into the Lake of Fire.” Apparently, they’re also forced to receive the Holy Spirit into their hearts as well, which goes contrary to that whole getting to make a free choice thing!

The Bell Curve in the Bible and the Women Who Got Jesus’ Message

One more point I’d like to make about the preservation of Jesus’ original message. It should be obvious to anyone who can objectively read the Bible that the image of God runs on a sort of bell

curve. When we first begin reading the Old Testament, God is often depicted as cruel, impatient, vindictive and even jealous. But even in the Law of Moses, one can detect that at least some limits were being put on the inhumanities that were commonplace at that time. Then, here and there, the prophets began to up the ante. In some cases, taking direct exception to the Law of Moses when, for example, the Law claimed that guilt for a given sin was carried out to “the fourth generation,” as exemplified by the old Hebrew saying, “The fathers ate the sour grapes, but their children’s teeth were set on edge,” is no longer applicable!

Then Jesus appeared and took the message of who God was to a whole new level, and one might even say, his revelation was too much for most to handle! There’s a good reason why the Jews, for the most part, rejected him. It was simply too difficult for them to let go of the Law.

Sad to say, though, it wasn’t long before the curve which peaked during Jesus’ ministry began to run downhill again. Within a short time, a number of the Jewish converts to Jesus, most notably Paul, began to characterize Jesus’ mission as some sort of ultimate blood sacrifice to appease God’s wrath, though Jesus never once alluded to such a purpose. As the Church became more and more a Greco-Gentile movement, it wasn’t long before the belief in Hades was adopted and blurred with the Persian, originally purgative notion of a Lake of Fire.

It’s really a wonder that Jesus’ message was preserved at all, given the tendency of Man to not get what God said in the first place, and then when the message does get through, to revise and redact it afterwards.

But I have a theory about how the message was preserved if only imperfectly, and the key word does have to do with Man. Think for a moment who it was that stuck to Jesus through thick and thin. When the disciples saw Jesus arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, and when they realized that he was not going to put up any sort of fight, but actually stopped them from hurting anyone, when no army of angels showed up, when the power of God did not come crashing down to smite the Roman garrison and the Jewish collaborators, when, in other words, it finally became clear that, if Jesus was the Messiah, he was nothing at all like the Messiah they had hoped for, they took off, with only one exception, the one disciple who got Jesus, and had a clue about his real mission.

But he wasn’t alone! There were also some women. We learn later that Mary, his mother was there, but also Mary Magdalene and others whom we only know as “the women” or the “daughters of Jerusalem.” Isn’t it so very interesting that, at the most critical moment of Jesus’ life, at the point where he demonstrated in the most profound way how God reacts toward us sinful, cruel and unfair humans, with nothing but the greatest love and forgiveness, it was the *women* who hung in there! Why do you suppose that?

Well, I am convinced it’s because they understood Jesus’ message! While the disciples were constantly scratching their heads, wondering, “How many times should we forgive?” and “So, now are you going to slaughter all the Romans?” and “Which one of us will get the highest appointment in your kingdom after you take over the world?” it was the women who picking up on what Jesus was really saying about God!

And this should probably come as no surprise! Women are, by far, 100x more perceptive than us guys! They notice the details that dudes walk right over time and again. But there's another advantage that the daughters of Jerusalem had over the disciples in getting Jesus' core message—the ability to give life and nurture children. You may have noticed that, up until this point, I've gone along with the typical convention of referring to God as a "he," as a male, but only because I didn't want my words to become an undue distraction. The reality is that God, if indeed God is our maker, would have to have all the attributes of both man and woman, male and female, father and *mother*!

So, one might say that the Old Testament vision of God was a distorted one, largely because it saw God only from a man's point of view, but Jesus was able to show a side of God that had severely neglected, his parental, caring and loving, his nurturing side. As the women followed Jesus and listened to him and watched him, and heard what he was trying to say about what God was really like, *they were catching on because they already knew what that was like!* As mothers, mothers who had carried life inside of them, who had given birth, who had fed helpless infants from their own breasts, even though they did nothing but cry and demand and make a mess in whatever they used for diapers back then, they had nothing but love for their children, and unending patience! They could see what Jesus meant about God, because they understood what unconditional love was.

Therefore, though it may never be proven scientifically, but if we could somehow go back to the days of the early Jesus Movement, I would not be at all surprised if, whenever men began to take liberties with what Jesus said, and when they tried to redact his words, twist them around and superimpose their old beliefs over his, it was the women who said, "No, that's not what he said, and that's not what he meant!" Had it not been for their influence in the years that followed Jesus' death, we may very well have never learned of anything he actually said and did.

ⁱ Article X states as follows, "We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original."

²⁴ We're not talking about hard science here, but the *art* of weighing what is contained in the earliest and most reliable documents we have available which assert what Jesus was to have said and taught. You are not likely to get an accurate picture of Jesus' teachings if you just *presume* everything in those texts is accurate. So, what to do, since we have no reliable contemporary recordings of what Jesus said, but only some collections of stories and sayings that first circulated by word of mouth? It is at this point where we have no choice but to examine the *context* itself to look for clues that would tell us which, if any, of these stories and sayings came from Jesus, and *weigh* them according to these internal clues.

As an example of how we might weigh some stories/sayings as more likely to be original to Jesus than others, we can ask which ones went along with the conventional thoughts of the day, and which ones ran contrary to them? When you find varying streams of ideas in different stories and different sayings, and some conform to the status quo, while others stand out in opposition to the typical religious assumptions of the day, it makes sense to add a little more weight to the oppositional sayings. Whatever Jesus might have said that everyone else was saying would not have likely been worth recording and circulating. No news there, in other words.

Here's another one. Which sayings make the original leaders of Christianity, the 12 disciples, seem clueless? Any saying which held up and continued to be circulated in spite of knocking these guys about, is more likely to have

been original. Any which glorify the disciples and put them on pedestals is probably an exaggeration. These are quite reasonable questions to ask, and it's reasonable to assign greater likelihoods accordingly.

Now, since some are always going to contend that one can never be certain that classifying sayings in this manner is 100% accurate as to *who* said them, I would finally contend that what's really important is not so much which of these concepts of God came from Jesus or whether they all did, but to focus on the concepts *themselves!* In the end, it really doesn't matter if it was Jesus, or one of his disciples or maybe even his wife.

What we can be quite certain of is that *someone*, very early in the Christian movement, came up with the idea that God is not damning, but forgiving. Personally, I think it was Jesus, but even if it was not, the *idea* was revolutionary, and represented a whole new way of religious thinking. The *idea* most certainly stood in opposition to what was typically assumed then, and even now.

ⁱⁱⁱ In all fairness, we should note that the Law of Moses, like the Code of Hammurabi which preceded it, was actually a relative improvement for it's time. Prior to these codes, it was not uncommon to exact vengeful punishments that were far in excess of what the original offence was. But Jesus took this concept to whole new level, but rejecting the idea of revenge, "justice," altogether.