

MEDIA - Waiting for Godot

John Dickson (studio)

That's a clip from a production of Samuel Beckett's acclaimed existential comedy *Waiting for Godot*, performed at The Road Theatre, Los Angeles, in 2015.

Lucky's monologue is one of the most theatrical - and nonsensical - monologues of all time.

Lucky doesn't say much elsewhere in the play: in fact, the character only utters two other sentences throughout the show.

But then comes the 700-word absurdist monolith.

There's a reason the speech often gets a huge round of applause in theatres - learning that much text is a great feat of memory!

At least, it is in the modern world.

The human capacity to commit large blocks of material to memory is an ancient one.

Most communication throughout human history has been oral - word of mouth.

It's only been in the last 500 years or so - particularly with the invention of the printing press at the time of the Reformation - that large numbers of *regular* people in society were able to read.

So learning information up until pretty recently involved *hearing* and committing to memory.

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Let's try *remember that* when we come to our first question in today's episode. We've made it to this season's Q&A ep, and up first is a really important one: Why didn't Jesus write down his message, instead of leaving it to others to do so years later?

That's just one of more than an hour of questions coming up (even longer if you're a Plus subscriber!)

Let's get into it!

I'm John Dickson, and *this* is Undeceptions Q&A 11!

QUESTION 1

Our first question comes from Tom, in the US. Here it is:

I love your sermons, books and podcasts. A crazy question popped into my head the other day. Why did Jesus never write down his teachings or anything else himself? I'm thinking maybe because he had his disciples to do it for him, just as God had other humans write the Old Testament. But just interested in your thoughts if you get a chance. Thanks and Godspeed!

Answer 1

Thanks. The simple answer is: that for short distance communication, oral tradition was far more popular and effective. In a culture where only 10% of people could read and write, writing things down not only wasn't your first instinct, it was a very limiting way to pass on and preserve your teachings.

For many centuries, Mediterranean and Eastern cultures employed oral tradition to maintain their most important ideas.

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To be clear, oral tradition wasn't simply storytelling, in the hope that someone would retell the story somewhat accurately. Oral tradition began with the speaker crafting the message in memorable ways repeating the message over and over, and students—remember, that is what the word disciple means, student—receiving and rehearsing the teachings a little bit like a singer learns a new song.

We have analogies from the Jewish world, where rabbis fashioned their sayings into pithy rhythmic form and their students rehearsed the sayings over and over. The second holy book of Orthodox Judaism is the *Mishnah*. *Mishnah* means repetition. It is the written version of the oral traditions of about 150 rabbis from the period 100 BC to AD 200. It includes not only legal rulings and moral teachings but also important stories about the rabbis. Here is a good example of a saying and a story preserved in the *Mishnah*, which was initially rehearsed as oral tradition before being written down. It's about a rabbi from Galilee who was of the same vintage as Jesus. His name was Hanina Ben Dosa. He had a reputation for praying for people's healing. Here is the oral tradition:

When he would pray for the sick he would say, "This one shall live" or "This one shall die." They said to him, "How do you know?". He said to them, "If my prayer is fluent, then I know that it is accepted and the person will live. But if not, I know that it is rejected and the person will die." *Mishnah Berakhot* 5.5.

This is not just a remembered ritual or legal ruling; it is an oral tradition about a conversation with a famous rabbi.

It offers a good parallel to the memorized Jesus traditions—which include both sayings and deeds. The early Christians had it much easier than most Jewish students because they only had to recall the material of one teacher, not 150.

But the cool thing is, we also have perfect analogies from the Greek and Roman world of the same. I think I might have mentioned before on the show that the school of Epicurus, the founder of the Epicurean philosophy, preserved in the memory a massive amount of the teachings of Epicurus. Let me read just the first four of 40 sayings of Epicurus that every Epicurean student, no matter their educational class, was obliged to learn by heart.

1. A blessed and eternal being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being; hence he is exempt from movements of anger and partiality, for every such movement implies weakness

2. Death is nothing to us; for the body, when it has been resolved into its elements, has no feeling, and that which has no feeling is nothing to us.

3. The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. When pleasure is present, so long as it is uninterrupted, there is no pain either of body or of mind or of both together.

4. Continuous pain does not last long in the flesh; on the contrary, pain, if extreme, is present a very short time, and even that degree of pain which barely outweighs pleasure in the flesh does not last for many days together. Illnesses of long duration even permit of an excess of pleasure over pain in the flesh. Diogenes Laertius, *Epicurus* 10.139-40.

And this is just the first four. There are 36 more statements just like this. It was all eventually written down, but my point is we have excellent evidence, even from critics of the epicurean philosophy, that every student in this particular school had to learn these 40 statements by heart, at an absolute minimum.

All of this is to make the very simple point that in both the Jewish and greco-roman contexts of the first Christians, memorising material was the first instinct, and it was also the most trusted method of transmission and preservation of important teachings.

Jesus and his students Used the typical methods of passing on their sacred traditions.

The real question is: why did the early Christians start writing down their material at such an early date? Remember, we have letters of Paul within about 20 years of Jesus, and the gospels are all written within about 30 to 60 years of Jesus. For ancient times, for this sort of material, was a very early writing process.

The reason is simple. While oral tradition was an excellent method for preserving important material in close proximity, between teacher and student, writing things down is the best method of transmitting things at a

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great distance. In a letter, Paul could transmit his teachings thousands of kilometres away – to the Thessalonians, the Corinthians, the Romans ... And the same is true of the gospels. Mark could write down his gospel in Rome and through multiple transported copies he could get his message anywhere in the Roman world.

In other words, in the first stage of Christianity, when Jesus travelled within the small territory of Galilee and Judea, oral tradition was the best method of transmission and preservation, but once Christianity started to spread throughout the Roman world, after Jesus, writing became much more conducive, even necessary.

QUESTION 2

We're sticking with Jesus for our next question - from Chad.

I've been a Christian for a long time, but have been struggling with an idea lately. I keep hearing in sermons that Jesus "took my place on the cross". I totally understand that I've sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God. But prolonged torture on a cross.... do I/we really deserve that? When I look at my wife, my parents, or any of the other (by worldly standards) decent people I know... I recognise that they're sinners and, like me, deserve separation from God.... but prolonged torture on a cross? It makes a lot of sense to me that Jesus took "our" place on the cross, collectively. He paid an extreme price to save a large group of people collectively. Forgive the irreverent-sounding analogy, but it would be like paying a higher price at the store to buy things in bulk. But I really struggle to accept that prolonged physical torture, as opposed to just death & separation from God, is something that I, and others, deserve....and thus, it's hard for me to accept the idea that he took our places individually. Am I off base here?

Answer 2

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Chad, thanks for this. Get your point. I have a couple of thoughts. This isn't a mathematical equation, where Jesus experienced precisely what each wrongdoer deserves. It isn't the case that God thinks the appropriate punishment for my, let's say, pride or arrogance or neglect of the poor, is to be stripped naked, scourged with a Roman leather strap embedded with metal and pottery, and then crucified over several hours.

This is not the sense in which I think of Jesus dying individually for me. Rather, I think of my judgment being included in his total experience. The punishment he experienced was collective, but my individual case is included in the collective.

More than that, the focus doesn't seem to be on the physical torture, anyway. It's interesting the way the gospels don't emphasize this physical dimension. If this were a novel, you can bet there would be far more blood and guts. But the Gospels don't do that.

The real pain Jesus experienced is less to do with iron nails through his hands and feet than the heavyweight of his infinite goodness and purity bearing the alien force of sin. The apostle Paul put it dramatically when he said in 2 Cor 5: "God made him who had no sin to **be sin** for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." It's an amazing statement, and I can hardly fathom its deepest meaning, that Jesus became sin, though he was personally without sin.

All of this is to say, that it's best not to think of Jesus bearing our judgment only in the physical, torturous sense. Instead, we should imagine Jesus having such an intimate experience of our individual wrongdoing that he *became*, in some mysterious sense, our sin.

But you know what! I think there might be more to say on this. I wonder if, for most of human history, the brutality implicit, if not explicit, in the passion narrative made a whole lot of sense given the brutality and tyranny of so much of people's experience through the centuries. Our private and sanitized sins perhaps deceive us from the truly ugly capacity of human evil. The cross tells us that God has stepped into that brutality, to bear into himself the extremity of injustice, betrayal, torture, and bloodshed. The person who put this thought in my head was Fleming Rutledge, whom we interviewed a year ago for episode 93, The

Crucifixion. So I don't think I can do better than replay her answer to a question very similar to yours:

Fleming Rutledge (taken from Episode 93 'The Crucifixion')

I would say, in a sense, the overarching theme of the book is "why crucifixion specifically" In one way or another in these 600 pages I focus on this question from first one angle and then another.

Is this just an accident that Jesus was incarnate in the time of the Romans? Or was that part of God's foreseen plan, that he would be crucified- a Roman method, a method of doing away with a person that dehumanised him, and cast him out of the human race altogether?

I'm fond of saying - and I keep thinking that someone will contradict me - that if Jesus had not been raised from the dead, we would never have heard of him.

The principal reason (I say that) is we've never heard of anybody else who's crucified prior to Jesus himself ... prior to Jesus the whole purpose was to erase the person being and throw them to the dogs.

Execute them publicly, in the most public place possible, expose them to the most contempt possible, invite dehumanising curses and actions from the part of the passing crowds, and then take them down from the cross and throw them on the dump heap.

It was a very common sight to see people crucified but their names are lost ... their identities are lost ... Jesus is remembered - and I would argue he is remembered because God raised him from the dead. I'll leave it at that - it's a staggering thing to say, and it's not something to say lightly. God raised a crucified man from the dead and thereby came into being a whole body of people who were willing to go out in public and proclaim that they worshipped as Lord and God a man that had been crucified!

We just say that as if it's nothing because we don't know crucifixions, we haven't seen any, we don't understand what it was, we don't know how dehumanising it was, we don't understand that this was a way of eliminating persons being and name and remembrance from the human record.

When you think about how we are 2000 years later we are worshipping this victim of crucifixion, it ought to stagger our imagination.

QUESTION 3

Our next question is anonymous - but it raises some really interesting ideas. Remember, you can always send us anonymous questions. Anyway, here it is!

If people weren't indoctrinated with the concepts that God is just, or that God is love, as presupposed assumed unarguable truths, would we conclude this from reading the Bible?

Answer 3

Dear anonymous, what a poignant question. I imagine there's a lot of experience and probably some uncomfortable Bible reading behind it. Thanks for sharing it.

I have a few thoughts. I don't know how satisfying they are.

First, if we were reading this as an ancient Pagan, There is no doubt in my mind that we would see this strange God of the Bible as loving and just. Ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, and so on, we're used to thinking of the universe as the capricious playground of violent and unpredictable gods. The story they told of origins underlined that disorder is basic, that humans are an afterthought, and that life is to be lived in slavery to the

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gods. An ancient Pagan who opened the first pages of Genesis was confronted by a radically different vision of God, creation, and the human being. There is no violence and disorder. In fact, Genesis makes the point that God is an artist bringing beauty and order to the physical creation. And the climactic scene of the creation is the fashioning of human beings, who are not said to be slaves of the gods, as the Babylonian creation story insisted, but rather they are the very image of God. This expression, an image of god, indicates a family resemblance. Parents called their children their image and likeness. So, from the opening page, we are introduced to a God of order who sees human beings as his children. As the opening statement of the whole Bible, this is surely the controlling thought for the rest of the Bible, including the bumpy bits where we might find ourselves confused about God's justice and love.

Secondly, there are so many explicit statements of God's love and justice: not just the New Testament statements that "For God so loved the world ..." (John 3) and "God is love" (1 John 4) but the OT has some of the most extreme statements of God's love. I honestly think the clearest explicit statements about God's love are in the Old Testament not the New Testament. You see it especially in the books of the prophets. I'm thinking of Hosea. In this book, God describes himself as the wounded lover whose beloved has abandoned him and yet whose enduring love won't let him give up on the adulterous people. "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?" I'm reading from Hosea 11 ... "My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused."

Thirdly, and most importantly, the whole narrative points forward to the cross. This becomes the interpretative key to the whole story. This means that whatever else certain disappointing stories, laws or statements we find, especially in the Old Testament, have to be interpreted in light of the cross. We don't look At the cross through the lenses of, say, the violent destruction of Canaanite children. We read those awful stories through the lens of God who would rather sacrifice himself than let us fall under his judgment.

What does this mean practically? Here's a thought I usually only share privately, because it is easily open to misunderstanding. So I beg

everyone's latitude here. When I read a story like the killing of Canaanite children in the book of Joshua, I can see how it seems completely at odds with the God revealed in Christ, the God who loves us so much he would enter our world and suffer unjustly for our salvation. So I run a thought experiment. A thought experiment isn't meant to be an actual theoretical explanation. It is a hypothetical intended to open up possibilities even if the hypothetical itself is not one of those possibilities. So, when I read of the killing of the Canaanite children, I stop and find myself saying, Lord what happened to those kids? What were you thinking about those kids? And here's one thought experiment that provides some comfort, some alignment with the God of love. I imagine those children experiencing limited distress and going straight into the eternal hands of the loving God, so that if they saw me fretting at the story of their destruction, they would cry out to me, "Don't weep for us. We entered straight into their loving embrace of the God of the universe."

Here's where I need your latitude. My point is not that I believe this is exactly what happened. I am not a universalist. I do not believe everyone will be saved. I believe in the doctrine of hell, just as Jesus taught it. But... This imaginary scenario fits better with God who would rather be crucified than see people lost. This is what I mean by reading through the lens of the cross. I'm perfectly willing to accept that this hypothetical is not what happened to those children. But the crucial intellectual and emotional point is that if I, with my puny logic and imagination, can fantasize about a scenario that helps me cope with Reading this Old Testament story, surely the truth of the matter, whatever it is, will be even more satisfying, more consistent with the God whose love is revealed in the cross. That is the central thing I'm trying to say: once God has revealed himself climactically in the death and resurrection of Jesus, I feel a freedom, a necessity, to interpret everything through the prism or lens of the crucified God.

BREAK 1

MEDIA - God explaining circumcision

Producer Kaley (studio)

That's a skit from TikToker Liv Pearsall - she's got over 4 million followers on TikTok, by the way! She's acting out a conversation between God and Abraham, the first time Abraham hears God explain what circumcision is.

There's a whole series called 'Bible Stories with Liv' that sort or re-enacts a scene from the Bible using modern lingo and jokes. To be honest, I don't get how these are so popular! But they are. And Researcher AI - our resident 20-something - has put a link in the show notes. I wonder if it's one of the things our next listener, Grace, has seen that prompted her to ask this question ...

QUESTION 4

Why did God choose circumcision, and why is this "marker" of God limited only to men?

Answer 4

Thanks, Grace. The first thing I feel like saying, and I hope I am not being naughty, is that surely you women are thrilled that this covenant sign only applies to men! The great thing is the women in Israel were every bit as much a part of the covenant story, the laws, the promises, and so on, as any of the circumcised men. But they didn't have to undergo this physical distress.

OK, but that doesn't explain the weirdness of the sign itself.

I think there is a very simple answer. It is implied at the very point at which circumcision is introduced in the biblical narrative. It's a mark on

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the male sex organ that signifies fruitfulness, descendants, and whole nations coming from his seed. Here's the first reference, in Genesis 17. Abraham and his male descendants have to endure the sign of the promise. His wife Sarah and her female descendants get to experience the blessings of the promise.

*Abram fell facedown,^a and God said to him, ⁴ “As for me, this is my covenant with you:^a You will be the father of many nations.^b ⁵ No longer will you be called Abram^a; your name will be Abraham,^b ^a for I have made you a father of many nations.^b ⁶ I will make you very fruitful;^a I will make nations of you... Every male among you shall be circumcised ... it will be the sign of the covenant^b between me and you. ¹² For the **generations** to come^a every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised ... “As for Sarai^a your wife her name will be Sarah.^b ¹⁶ I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her.^a I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations ...*

Sarah's part of the covenant. She's the mother of the nations that come from her. But only Abraham, the father of nations, has to receive this dramatic physical sign on his reproductive organ that God will give them countless descendants.

QUESTION 5

Our next question comes from Arabella and touches on a theme from our episode 'Political Jesus' with N.T. Wright. Here it is.

Would God forgive the Devil if he repented?

ANSWER 5

Well, Arabella, believe it or not, this was a question the ancient Christians pondered.

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In the third century, one of the most learned Christian scholars, Origen of Caesarea, wondered out loud whether the devil and his demons could be restored to God, in the end. His reasoning was that if the devil is a rational creature, that had fallen from a relationship with God, there must be the possibility that God – through his refining fire, as it were – could restore the devil. Here's what Origen wrote:

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The whole of this mortal life is full of struggles and trials, caused by the opposition and enmity of those who fell from a better condition without at all looking back, and who are called the devil and his angels, and the other orders of evil, which the apostle classed among the opposing powers. But whether any of these orders who act under the government of the devil will in a future world be converted to righteousness because of their possessing the faculty of freedom of will, or whether persistent and inveterate wickedness may be changed by the power of habit into nature, is a result which you yourself, reader, may approve of.

On First Principles Book 1, chapter 6.

John Dickson (studio)

So, Arabella, you're in good – smart – company wondering out loud whether this is a possibility.

One small problem—if you care about the tradition of Christian orthodoxy—is that this specific view of Origen's was condemned as heretical at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553. Specifically, Anathemas 11 and 12 denounce Origen for this view.

There may be philosophical, rather than biblical, reasons for this anathema. Origen believed that all humans and angels were eternal spiritual beings rather than beings created out of nothing. He seems to have had trouble thinking of something eternal as experiencing an

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eternal demise. And this whole matrix of thought was condemned at the Second Council of Constantinople.

But there's a more basic problem, for anyone who thinks the Bible establishes the truth of the matter. A few texts suggest that the Devil and his crew are certainly heading to hell. In Rev 20 we see a picture of final judgment that says, "The devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever." This seems to reflect Jesus' own teaching in the parable of the sheep and the goats, where he speaks of the unjust who neglect the poor and needy and begin sent to the eternal fire with the devil. In Matt 25 Jesus said, "Then he (the Judge of the world) will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'" The way Jesus puts this implies that while hell is an alien place for humans to be thrown, it is a fitting place for the devil and his angels. If anyone's going to hell—and, sadly, Jesus taught it *will* involve some humans—it certainly includes the devil.

So, even if we might think it a theoretical possibility that the devil might turn to God and experience mercy, the Bible seems to be saying that isn't gonna happen!!

Producer Kaley (studio)

Alright, here's a question that several of you wrote in about. In our first episode of this season, The Resurrection (Episode 121), John spoke with Professor Richard Bauckham on the difference between so-called 'apologetics' and *history*. To refresh your memory, here's a little of what he said.

John Dickson (studio)

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Attempting to establish that the resurrection itself is beyond reasonable doubt is part of what we might call 'apologetics'. Long-time listeners know that I'm not a great fan of apologetics - of the word or the industry.

I mean, the root word itself is used by the apostle Peter in his letter to the Christians of Asia Minor. "Always be prepared to give an apologia / an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that they have'. But there's no way Peter was imagining a whole industry of books and courses designed to amass arguments to prove every part of the Christian faith. And there's no way he would approve of the exaggerations that often appear in Christian apologetics.

I prefer to bring good historical, scientific, and philosophical arguments to bear on Christianity - at least to give people good reason to consider the Christian faith for themselves.

It's one of the key aims of Undeceptions to clear away bad arguments for and against Christianity so that listeners can work out if there are any solid reasons to take a second look at Jesus.

Sorry, that's my standard rant. it's our raison d'etre.

Producer Kaley (studio)

So, that's what JD said - and he's said similar things a few times in other episodes. But this one caught your attention! Here's our next question from Steve:

Question 6

Why does JD hate apologetics so much?

ANSWER 6

Ahh ... funny ... you don't sound like a jerk at all, Steve ... But, I admit, ... I am a snob, and that probably does explain part of my aversion to the word 'apologetics'. So much of it seems lightweight. It will use any argument, even a bad one, if it promotes Christianity. There are very, very few books of historical apologetics—to offer just one example—that I could give to one of my former colleagues at the Ancient History department at Macquarie University, or to a professor in Oxford's Classics Faculty where I'll be next week. They wouldn't recognize it as expert history, just intellectual-sounding Christian promotion.

This isn't to say there aren't famous apologists who are experts. Ed Feser has written some of the best defenses of the existence of God and the best critiques of atheism you'll find. But he writes as a professional philosopher. Philosophers recognize his framework and arguments as serious philosophy. William Lane Craig is expert in both history and philosophy, and he argues like an expert. Alister McGrath happily calls himself an apologist. He's written books with 'apologetics' in the title. But, again, he's taken the time to get doctorates in both science and theology. He's a genuine expert.

The same is absolutely the case with Richard Bauckham, whom you mentioned in connection with the Resurrection episode. Richard is one of the most widely revered New Testament historians in the world today. All of his views are informed by the best practice of classicists, historians, and NT scholars. That's why I wanted to interview him on that crucial topic.

But that's not the norm in Christian apologetics.

It's the lack of expertise that permeates much 'apologetics' today that troubles me. Instead of doing professional-level history, science, or philosophy in service of commending the Christian faith, we grab any argument from those disciplines that sounds vaguely positive for Christianity, and we put it in our quiver to shoot out to the world when needed.

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So, to my mind, Apologetics isn't an academic discipline. It's a 'craft' ... It's a craft that involves trawling through the various disciplines to find arguments that might work in Christian persuasion.

I feel about much Christian apologetics exactly what I felt about Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* when it came out, or Christopher Hitchens' *God is not Great*. They are not responsible intellectual works. They are grab bags of arguments from history, science, philosophy, sociology, and so on, that have persuasive force for those who don't know the disciplines and next to no credibility for those who do know the disciplines.

But even if you're not with me on this critique, there's a more basic reason I avoid the word 'apologist' or 'apologetics'. When my friends and I established the Centre for Public Christianity in Australia years ago, we thought long and hard about how we would describe what we were wanted to do in advocating for the Christian faith in public. You could call it 'evangelism', I suppose, except that that word really only has special Christian resonance and, strictly speaking, in the NT the word itself, *evangelizomai*, only refers to the explicit announcement of the news about Jesus' life, teaching, death, and resurrection for our salvation. And the Centre was doing that, plus something much broader.

We thought about 'apologetics'. But we quickly learned that this was a damaged word in mainstream circles—outside the church, I mean. Mostly, people didn't ever use the word 'apologetics' or 'apologist', but we noticed that, when they did, it had a consistently negative connotation. It was basically the equivalent of 'propaganda' or 'propagandist'.

This is exactly how Richard Dawkins uses it throughout his famous 2006 book. He's the mirror image of an apologist, but it's his usage that seems significant. He'll say "religious" apologists try to claim Einstein as one of their own", or "some apologists even add the name of Darwin, about whom persistent, but demonstrably false, rumours of a deathbed conversion continually come around like a bad smell" or "The efforts of apologists to find genuinely distinguished modern scientists who are religious have an air of desperation" and on and on it goes. There are 21 similar negative uses of the term 'apologist', where it means

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'propagandist'. Dawkins didn't invent this connotation. It was already in the air.

And I've seen many examples since, even outside the religious context: apologist for big pharma, apologist for the oil industry. The most recent one I spotted comes from the terrific new book *Against the Sexual Revolution* by Louise Perry. She's not at all religious. It's not a religious book. But at one point she talks about how some queer theorists, like Gayle Rubin and Michel Foucault, even defended paedophilia back in the 60s and 70s. She writes: "If the paedophilia apologetics of sexual revolutionaries such as Foucault and Rubin is remembered at all, it is as a brief and embarrassing detour from the progressive path." Apologetics. She means apologetics.

And if this isn't enough, the Oxford English Dictionary defines 'apologist' as "a person who offers an argument in defence of something controversial: e.g., 'an enthusiastic apologist for fascism in the 1920s'!!!

Umm ... I rest my case!

Question 7

Our next question comes from Paul - and it's a special one for the Undeceptions team!

Director Mark - What's it like working for JD? And how did the two of you meet?

Director Mark (studio)

Hi Paul,

Thanks for your question and all I can say is that I hope the answer lives up to your expectations.

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Firstly, what's it like to work for John? Well, given I 'work' for John, it's not the ... easiest question to answer. So I had my legal counsel draw up the following:

This statement serves as a declaration of my utmost joviality and delight in working under the employ of Professor John Dickson. By proceeding to read this document, I acknowledge and understand that any insinuation, overt or covert, of non-fun or non-awesomeness in relation to working conditions under the esteemed leadership of Professor Dickson is purely fictional and should be taken with a truckload of salt. It is hereby affirmed that our workplace is akin to a carnival of joy, a festival of laughter, and a symphony of delight. Any claims to the contrary, whether muttered under one's breath or conveyed via interpretive dance, are deemed as products of an overactive imagination and should be promptly disregarded.

In witness whereof, I, the undersigned, do solemnly swear to cherish and uphold the spirit of merriment and camaraderie fostered by Professor Dickson, and to defend that oath against any attempts to besmirch the reputation of the Undeceptions workplace as anything other than the epitome of fun-tasticness.

Yours sincerely, etc. etc.

Now, on to historical fact - how did John and I meet? Well, it was 1989 and I was hosting a radio show in country New South Wales and John came to town with his band 'In The Silence'. I had him on the show to promote one of his gigs and asked him all about his life ... which he remembers exactly nothing of. That doesn't surprise me because he came to town again the next year and we did it all over again ... and he doesn't remember that either. Our paths didn't cross again until a few years later in a truly 'sliding doors' moment when he and I applied for the same job. I, unfortunately, got it. I gave up my Phd to work in media; he gave up his media aspirations and pursued his Phd. But God has a sense of humour and we found ourselves working together again a few years later on a documentary called The Christ Files, based on an excellent book John had written. That took us to eight countries together, and we had plenty of time to get to know each other. Since then, we've pretty much been working together on film, television and online

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products all over the world ... going on for well over 30 years now. And in all that time, I have remained 2 years younger than him.

But I think the real reason behind your addressing your question to me - as opposed to the sterling, magical 6-person team that makes Undeceptions work - is because John has something fun to say about me in most episodes. We've actually received a number of emails over the years expressing some concern at the way John describes me ... I think from very well-intentioned people, though mistaken nonetheless. If you're one of our non-Australian listeners then bear with me as this is going to take some stretch of the imagination. In Australia, if we like someone, we mangle something about them. It could be their name - John Dickson is known as 'Dicko' to many of his mates. We can do the same with their looks, their personality, and their character. I tried to explain this to a Japanese friend of mine once - I said, "When an Australian wants to say something funny about a friend, they say the exact opposite of what they mean." A good bloke is a bit of a loser, a real joker 'bores me to tears' and if you really agree with something someone says about you, you tell them to "get stuffed." My Japanese friend responded, "Why would you do that?" Why indeed? As an Australian, I admit that every joke I've told to my American friends has fallen flat. So what is John doing when he insists I'm a fan of a science film no one with two cents to their name would consider buying a ticket to? Well, he's leaning in on the thirty years that came before to give me a poke in the ribs - maybe the way some guys affectionately punch each other on the arm, right? Though I'll admit John's humour does feel a bit like being hit by a car and backed over several times. But, in short, I'm convinced he's saying those things because, deep down, deep, deep, deep, down - he loves me. And I think that if you caught him off-mic with a glass of Laphroaig in his hand, he'd be happy to admit it.

John Dickson (studio)

Rubbish!

BREAK 2

MEDIA: World War Z

Director Mark (studio)

That dramatic clip comes from the film *World War Z*, starring Brad Pitt and Mireille Enos.

It's one of the many, many, *many* films to emerge in recent years toying with the idea of a zombie apocalypse, and what we heard there was the moment Zombies suddenly began overrunning Philadelphia (the scene in question was actually shot in Glasgow, and 3000 people turned up to be used as extras - true story!)

That scene does a pretty good job of capturing the confusion - and terror - that people would feel seeing a whole bunch of undead folks roaming the streets.

Strangely enough - we actually have a scene in the Gospels that has a hint of "zombies" about it.

It comes just after Matthew's account of Jesus' crucifixion.

Have a listen to this.

READING

*And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and[e] went into the holy city and appeared to many people. - **Matthew 27:50-53***

Director Mark (studio)

Now to be fair, this passage doesn't read like something from a *Walking Dead* or *28 Weeks Later* script - but it's still pretty weird!

It's no surprise then that we've got a question about it.

QUESTION 8

What's the deal with Zombies at the end of Matthew?

Answer 8

Thanks, Josh. This is exactly the sort of question (or answer) that is likely to get me into trouble with some folks, because I hold several views in my head at the same time, and only one of them is "It's in the Bible, so I believe it!"

At one end of the spectrum is the view – of more than a few scholars – that Matthew is making stuff up to signal how important Jesus' death was. It's not a true story, but it was intended to be a true story to amplify Jesus. His death was so powerful it opened the graves of the dead and brought people back to life. That's view 1.

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View 2 is similar but a little less harsh on Matthew. This view says that Matthew was reporting in good faith what people reported to him. Obviously, the story isn't true—on this view—but it's not that Matthew was inventing it. It's a piece of legend Matthew incorporated into his otherwise historical account of Jesus' life.

View 3 is at the other end of the spectrum. Some see it as straightforward reporting of historical fact. It happened exactly as Matthew tells it. Tombs were opened. Dead Jewish believers were raised. And, after Jesus' resurrection, they went into Jerusalem to be seen by many.

Now, these first three views all share the opinion that it is meant to be a historical event: Matthew is trying to exaggerate things, Matthew just reports what he was told, and Matthew tells it exactly as it happened. All three approach it as history.

But there are at least two other views worth considering that don't assume Matthew intends his as history.

So view 4 just says this is an interpolation, added to Matthew's Gospel in the second or third century. This is not scholars scratching around for something to say about this weird passage. Everyone who reads Matt 27 – in English but especially in Greek – notices that the sentence about dead people walking sort of pops out of nowhere. Right up to that point, Matthew's account of the crucifixion looks pretty much exactly like Mark's account. Then there is this strange line about multiple resurrections. This might have been a very late legend—a century or more after Jesus—that some scribe copying out the Gospels decided to insert into the story. That's view 4.

View 5 is very different. View 5 says Matthew did write this—it wasn't an interpolation—but he didn't intend it to be read as a historical report. He added it as what you might call an apocalyptic breakout, signalling – in a non-historical way – the future resurrection of all the dead because of Christ's own death and resurrection. There are other apocalyptic lines in Matthew, straight from the lips of Jesus. For example, in Matt 24 "Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather ... 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'

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It's possible to read these statements as factual prophecies about the collapse of the universe, but most scholars see this as apocalyptic imagery about judgment and renewal when Christ returns. View 5 says Matthew is doing something similar: using apocalyptic imagery to underline the significance of Jesus' own death and resurrection. On this view, the death and resurrection of Jesus is more than a historical event; it is a cosmic event guaranteeing resurrection life for all God's people – upon Christ's return.

What do I think? Well, I couldn't bring myself to think Matthew made this story up for effect. I think the Gospel writers were way more conservative and careful than that. The historian in me thinks the most plausible view—on historical grounds—is no.2, that Matthew innocently included a legend. He wasn't personally in a position to know whether this happened, but he believed others who told him.

Now, it's important not to misunderstand what I'm saying. This is what I suspect is the best historical analysis. It's not what I actually believe.

I can happily believe something is more historically sound than something else, without actually believing the former. This is because I don't think history has all the answers. For me, reading the Bible is like listening to a friend you've grown to trust over a lifetime of depending on that friend. That friend might tell you something that people think is ridiculous, something that the weight of historical analysis calls into question, but, if your friend is sincere, you might choose to believe your friend because it always seems wisest to rely on your friend. The Bible is my friend. I find it difficult to believe my friend deceives or is deceived.

So where does that leave me? Well, I reject views 1 and 2, but I wander around views 3, 4, and 5. I can happily agree that Matt 27 is just reporting the facts. I don't think there's any historical evidence for lots of dead people coming to life and being seen in Jerusalem. The historical evidence is against it. But I don't care. History is a very limited discipline because of the paucity of evidence. It would only take one random letter to be discovered in Jerusalem that reports such an event and all the sceptics would change their tune.

But I think it's possible that this line in Matt 27:52-53 is an interpolation. I can see how it interrupts the flow of Matthew's narration of the

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crucifixion. It does stick out like a sore thumb. I give this a 20% chance of being right.

And I remain open to Matthew intending this as apocalyptic imagery, not historical reporting. It's a metaphorical picture of the final day of resurrection inserted by Matthew to make a theological point about the power of Jesus' death and resurrection. I give this a 20% chance of being right, too.

I suppose that leaves me saying I'm 60% confident (on personal grounds, not historical grounds) that Matthew is reporting a straightforward fact. But I remain 40% open to these other possibilities. Hopefully, that's a bit clearer than mud.

QUESTION 9

The next question is the final one for our regular listeners (Plus subscribers will get a couple more),

This question comes from Bell.

I've been wondering how mental disorders such as depression, anxiety and personality disorders fit into the Bible (especially personality disorders). Is a personality disorder a result of insecurities and falling away from God? Or is it just how some people were made? The only people I've known with personality disorders are either not Christian in the first place or they fell away - and it seemed to make them more vulnerable to falling away. How does this fit in with God's justice? I love your work, and I'd love your thoughts!

Answer 9

Bell, this is a hard one. Hard to talk about, hard to understand, and, above all, hard to experience ... for anyone who's going through a mental illness!

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Theologically, mental disorders are part of the ‘groaning’ creation we live in. That’s how the apostle Paul puts it in Romans 8: For the creation was subjected to frustration ... in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. 23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

There is an estrangement between the creator and creation—that longs to be redeemed. The whole creation, and our bodies, will be liberated and restored out of frustration into wholeness and joy.

That is the fundamental meaning of Christ’s resurrection. It is the promise of the “redemption of our bodies” and of creation itself.

That means this side of redemption, we all experience levels of decay, whether physical ailments or mental conditions like anxiety or personality disorders.

I suppose it’s possible that some disorders are the result of trauma and other background experiences. Other disorders are not explained by our experiences. They are just there, part of the frustrated creation, like other incapacities and illnesses, whether blindness or cancer.

First and foremost, this calls for compassion toward anyone who’s suffering in this way ... and, toward anyone who’s experiencing this for themselves, compassion toward themselves, if they can.

You ask about God’s justice. I often fall back on that verse where Abraham cries out to God in Gen 18: Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?

You bet. God will take all things into account, including mental illness, when he untangles our journeys in the kingdom.

But I think I can do better. We ran an episode on Mental Health—episode 38—and we interviewed the wonderful Karen Pang, who experiences sometimes torturous bipolar disorder and somehow walk with Christ through it all. Let me throw to her. Bless you, Bell.

Undeceptions - ‘Mental Health’

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Kaley Payne: Do you find yourself still praying to be healed of your bipolar?

Karen Pang: No.

Kaley Payne: Why?

Karen Pang: Because I've done so, so many times, and those many times I've demanded that He do that. There's a few times where He just says, "No, I'm not going to do it." As my life has continued on, I realize my life is blessed. My life is good because I know I have a good story, and I'm glad He isn't taking it away.

I still have my days. I feel quite stable and quite steadfast, as the Bible would put, and quieter. I think quietness and stillness is the essential part of this experience. Because not only is it the opposite of bipolar, but it is the way that the Bible teaches us as Christians, that is the best place. Also, on your knees, because as He says, "Bring me the broken-hearted and those who are weak." I think that for me, being on my knees has been the best place to be. Prayer also has brought me to my knees to be able to live in this space.

Karen Pang: Sometimes, of course, I raged and I questioned and I hated. I was bitter and I was upset. But the thing is, I know God says it's okay. I can take this. This is okay. Just keep going.
