

Review: DC780

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE

APPEAL DENIED:

How “Challenging the Verdict” Fails to Overturn “The Case for Christ”

a book review of
Challenging the Verdict
by Earl Doherty
(Age of Reason Publications, 2001)

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Two features of Earl Doherty's *Challenging the Verdict*, a response to Lee Strobel's runaway bestseller *The Case for Christ*, compel a critical review. First, it is a prime example of the sort of false attacks many skeptics bring against Christianity. Such a review presents a good opportunity to address faulty arguments skeptics often raise against popular Christian sources on Christ. Second, it has gained notoriety on the coattails of Strobel's book because skeptics have recommended it in customer reviews on *The Case for Christ's* page on Amazon.com. This marketing ploy has probably generated more publicity for the book than, for example, Drew University professor Robert Price's gushing review of Doherty's book in *Free Inquiry* magazine (Summer 2002).

Lee Strobel presented his interviews of scholars in *The Case for Christ* as though he were a legal affairs journalist (which he was) who is researching the evidence in the case for Christ. He interviewed leading scholars who gave evidence for the traditional orthodox Christian view of Jesus as the Christ, the miracle-working resurrected Son of God, and he concluded that the evidence supports its truthfulness.

Earl Doherty, author of *Challenging the Verdict*, chose a similar legal motif, but this time in a courtroom. Where Strobel used this motif sparingly and effectively, Doherty uses it mockingly and unfairly. Doherty claims that he provides his opposing side the opportunity to “cross-examine” the scholars interviewed by Strobel. He neglects, however, to give the cross-examined witnesses an opportunity to respond to his critical statements. What emerges is not a coherent collection of evidence and argumentation but a strange monologue by Doherty while his witnesses remain silent.

Like Strobel's *The Case for Christ*, Doherty's *Challenging the Verdict* is divided into three main parts. Strobel's “Examining the Record” becomes Doherty's “Is the Gospel Record Reliable?” Strobel's “Analyzing Jesus” is Doherty's “What Was the Nature of Jesus?” and Strobel's “Researching the Resurrection” becomes Doherty's “Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?”

Neither *Challenging the Verdict* nor Doherty's Web site tells us the author's background. He was, in fact, once the president of the Ottawa, a Canadian skeptic group, and is an occasional contributor to a small periodical, *The Journal of Higher Criticism*, edited by Robert Price and dedicated to denouncing the Bible. Doherty's first book, *The Jesus Puzzle*, argues there is no credible evidence to believe Jesus existed as a historical person, a position that so contradicts the evidence that even most liberals he quotes, including the ultraliberal members of the Jesus Seminar, disagree with him. Virtually the only current view similar to his is in G. A. Wells's volumes discrediting Jesus' existence, which have been soundly refuted by, among others, Dr. Gary Habermas in his critical review in the JOURNAL.¹

One of the problems responding to Doherty is that, like many skeptics, he uses a shotgun approach that at first glance seems overwhelming because there is “buckshot” everywhere. Only as one patiently removes one small pellet at a time is it evident that the attack has not been fatal. The “case for Christ,” in fact, emerges from the smoke of Doherty’s attack virtually unscathed except for cosmetic complaints that could be said of any book dealing with complex issues in a popular manner.

Nothing New under the Sun. Most of the arguments in *Challenging the Verdict* have been used before, sometimes much better, by Christianity’s detractors. Skeptics have sought to overturn the evidence for Jesus and the Resurrection since this historic event. The nonbelieving Jews unsuccessfully tried to argue that Jesus’ disciples must have stolen His body from the tomb while the guards were sleeping. Other arguments arose over the centuries, from the fourth-century emperor Julian the apostate to Robert Ingersoll in the nineteenth century and Bertrand Russell in the twentieth century. All were capably answered by Christians employing good history and good thinking. For example, Robert Ingersoll immortalized his disdain for the Bible in his *Some Mistakes of Moses*, to which leading biblical scholars of his day replied convincingly with *Some Mistakes of Ingersoll*.

The unsuspecting Christian reader who first encounters criticisms of Christianity in *Challenging the Verdict* should be encouraged by the wealth of counterevidence published both before and after Doherty’s book. This volume, unlike his earlier one, does not presume that Jesus never existed. He does, however, argue that the New Testament is completely unreliable in telling us anything about any historical Jesus. To support this, he presents a variety of arguments, among them: the Jews never expected a personal Messiah; the Jesus story has more in common with mystery religion myths than history; Christians changed the simple morality tale of myth into a pseudo-history; the New Testament borrows motifs from Old Testament stories and weaves them into Jesus stories that never actually happened; the Jesus Savior story is no different than pagan “savior” stories; the earliest Christian beliefs were Gnostic, but later Christians suppressed them; Paul’s writings speak of a spiritual, not physical, resurrection of the mythic Christ; early Christianity was a confusion of bewildering and contradictory spiritual insights and mystical revelations; and so on.

The interested reader can find a wealth of information in books such as N. T. Wright’s *The Contemporary Quest for Jesus* (Fortress, 2002), Darrell Bock’s *Studying the Historical Jesus* (Baker, 2002), Paul Barnett’s *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity* (InterVarsity, 1999), Gregory Boyd’s *Cynic Sage or Son of God?* (Bridgepoint, 1995), Ben Witherington’s *The Jesus Quest* (InterVarsity, 1995), and Ronald H. Nash’s *The Gospels and the Greeks* (Probe, 1992). Several Internet Web sites have excellent information, including Leadership University (www.leaderu.com), the Christian Think Tank (www.Christian-thinktank.com), and Tektonics Apologetics (www.tektonics.org).

The Skeptics’ Mythical Jesus. Doherty embodies some of the subjective interpretive methods of the Jesus Seminar. He, incredibly, is able intuitively to discern the “real” history behind the hopelessly corrupted New Testament texts to uncover the bare myth of spiritual enlightenment he claims underlies the phony historical and supernatural claims.

In other ways, his interpretive methods are novel. His assumption that from myth comes the erroneous belief in a real, historical character or event is exactly opposite what most scholars of mythology observe. The reader, nevertheless, is asked to accept Doherty’s fanciful suppositions uncritically. If the Christian, however, were to invent his own interpretive system and assert his own dogmatism of a supernatural Son of God from the text, Doherty would insist on objective proof of such an indisputable nature that no figure or event of ancient history could qualify.

This subjectivism seems to blind its adherents, who see nothing incongruous in their insistence that Christians haven’t proved their point while at the same time they advance their own subjective theories. Jesus Seminar founder Robert Funk, for example, once told us that his interpretation of Jesus as a first-century Jewish cynic sage was based on little more than his subjective “experience” of the New Testament.

We asked Funk, "If the New Testament text we possess led you to discover this George Carlin-type of Jesus, what kind of text would there have to be for you to discover a Son of God, resurrected Jesus Christ?" After we went back and forth asking the same question a couple of different ways, he responded, "The exact same text we have already."

"But," we pressed, "if the same text can give some readers a divine resurrected Christ and others a human rabbi Jesus, then you're saying interpretation is subjective — based on some 'inner experience' and not on any scientific, historic, linguistic, or rational investigation or standard." In so many words, he agreed, reminding us that with the New Testament we're dealing with literature, not science, and therefore, strangely enough, subjective experience is valid.

Starting with a Bias. One of Doherty's assumptions is that miracles *cannot* happen. Any account of a Bible miracle might be explained in a variety of ways, but not as an actual historical miraculous event. This argument is less sophisticated and persuasive than nineteenth-century philosopher David Hume's popular treatise but no less dogmatic. He first quotes Gregory Boyd, one of Strobel's experts, concerning the antisupernatural bias of the Jesus Seminar members. Doherty continues, "Well, Dr. Boyd, I just wish we were all as biased as the Seminar in rejecting the supernatural as authentic in the Gospels any more than it is authentic today" (80).

Nowhere does Doherty give a logical argument or empirical evidence that miracles can't happen; he just blindly pontificates.² He should follow the evidence wherever it logically leads him, even if it leads him to the historical fact that Christ rose from the dead.

Doherty's statement presupposes that the only legitimate neutral approach to the issue of Christ's resurrection is one of *disbelief* rather than *withholding of belief*. He commits the common fallacy of neutrality, assuming that one who believes a proposition *cannot* be objective and that only one who *disbelieves* is neutral and objective.

On the contrary, disbelief is a belief *against* and therefore not neutral. Neutrality would be to *withhold belief*, neither excluding the supernatural nor assuming it, but allowing the evidence to support it or contradict it. Some scholars adopt conservative positions *because of* their critical standards.

Doherty and other skeptics assume that evidence for the Resurrection is nothing more than partisan wish fulfillment. In other words, we wish it were the case that God became man, died for our sins, rose again, and reconciled us to God; therefore, we delude ourselves into believing despite the evidence.

What if it is the case, however, that evidence for the Resurrection is the *foundation* of belief, not a stumbling block to belief? Contrary to Doherty's wish fulfillment idea, it is the evidence itself that led Lee Strobel to become a Christian and write *The Case for Christ*: "The atheism I had embraced for so long buckled under the weight of historical truth. It was a stunning and radical outcome, certainly not what I had anticipated when I embarked on this investigative process. But it was, in my opinion, a decision compelled by the facts" (266).

If anyone is guilty of overlooking the evidence in favor of wish fulfillment, it is Doherty. In *Challenging the Verdict* Doherty appears to be biased, committed to a faith, and united with other skeptics in a futile attempt to promote his conviction that the Jesus Christ of the New Testament was, at best, a simple Jewish teacher with Greek Cynic pretensions, at worst, a figment of people's imaginations. Doherty comes to the table with a bias *against* the Jesus Christ of the New Testament.

Bias-Driven Vocabulary. A sentence in the opening paragraph of *Challenging the Verdict* is a good example of Doherty's bias: "Not only have increasing numbers of the rank and file in the established churches rejected old standards of dogma and practice, liberal circles within New Testament scholarship have been bringing modern critical standards to the study of the Gospels and found them wanting in historical reliability" (1). This "loaded" vocabulary implies that the beliefs held by Strobel and "established churches" are merely matters of dogma and practice and are not historical fact and that evangelicals have no standards, are not critical, and are old-fashioned.

False Claims of Fairness. Doherty's unfairness is revealed in his refusal to consult the scholars' published materials. His obligation to do so is greater than Strobel's since Strobel allowed them to present their own material. Doherty's cross-examination is not merely supposed refutations of their evidence but criticisms on issues they didn't even address with Strobel. Doherty challenged the scholars with no acknowledgment of their other materials, which, in most cases, overturn the challenges and affirm the Christian claims for Christ.

A proper cross-examination seeks to overturn the testimony of the scholars by showing that they made contrary statements elsewhere, or by referring to the responses of other scholars to the exact same questions with contrary evidence and argumentation. By introducing completely new questions and challenges, Doherty launched an entirely new trial with no legal impartiality or rigorous standards of evidence. He silences the scholars, reinvents them as mutes, and then condemns them for not answering challenges never contained in their original testimony.

When it comes to the witness of history and evidence to the life and resurrection of Christ, Doherty argues that silence supports his inventive ideas. Because we don't have a full copy of the New Testament from the first century, then obviously, Doherty assumes, no New Testament existed in the first century. Because we don't have every early church father explicitly quoting from and affirming each book of the New Testament as God's Word, obviously they must have been ignorant of the New Testament or didn't consider it Scripture. Because we don't have an explicit, comprehensive record of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection in extant secular history of the time, obviously Jesus must not have existed! The Doherty-enforced silence of the scholars overturns their entire body of work, while the patchy silences of ancient history prove everything for Doherty.

The Living Line of Eyewitness Testimony. Doherty claims the gap between the events of the New Testament and our earliest complete copies contains such a discontinuity that the texts of the New Testament documents are hopelessly unreliable. There are at least two ways to approach this claim: (1) Show historical continuity, and (2) compare this gap with those of other ancient literature that Doherty does consider reliable.

First, we have an unbroken line from the eyewitnesses of the Resurrection, through Paul and the other apostles, into the early second century with Papias, Polycarp, Ignatius, and the *Didache* (an early apostolic teaching document). Even liberal critics such as those Doherty quotes agree that some of Paul's letters were written well within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses to Christ, including his testimony of the bodily resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. The apostle Peter, himself an eyewitness, commended Paul's letters and includes them with other Scripture (the Old Testament) as God's Word: "...our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother *Paul* also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures" (2 Pet. 3:15-16, emphasis added).

In his Acts of the Apostles, the evangelist Luke affirmed that the teachings of Paul agree with the teachings of the apostles, who were eyewitnesses of Christ's ministry, miracles, and resurrection. Paul himself acknowledged in his letter to the Romans that there were Christians whose conversions predated his. He pointed out that they agreed that the Gospel he preached is the same Gospel they believed from the same Christ they saw resurrected. There is a continuity of teaching and testimony from the eyewitnesses through Paul and the other apostles. Papias, Polycarp, and the other earliest church fathers claimed either to have known the apostles themselves or to have known those who knew the apostles.

To discount the testimony of the earliest fathers, who affirmed the apostles, who affirmed Paul, who themselves are affirmed by the liberal critics, is to discount the very critics to whom Doherty appeals! Should we believe the eyewitnesses who affirmed Paul, who was affirmed by the other apostles, who were affirmed by their immediate successors, whose words are preserved in our earliest church writings; or should we believe Doherty, the skeptic who undercuts ancient historiography by discounting the New Testament texts?

Rules for You, but Not for Me. Doherty dismisses the textual evidence for the New Testament as too little, too late, and too inconsistent. He claims we cannot trust them because there are not enough copies or citations that are “early enough”; the fragments far outnumber the complete manuscripts, and the Scripture citations in the early church fathers are fragmentary.

Such wholesale dismissal flies in the face of the standard principles used by genuine experts (including those interviewed by Strobel) to date all classical literature. To dismiss or replace these standards is to disqualify the authenticity of the texts of other ancient literature, including some Doherty uses to try to dismiss the supernatural Jesus Christ of the New Testament!

Doherty assumes when an early writer uses a particular passage from the New Testament, one can infer only that the isolated passage was known to the writer, not the book in which the passage occurs, much less the New Testament in which the book containing the passage is found. With this standard, he could not affirm most of classical literature, including the teachings of Socrates, whose work is known to us only by references and quotations by others (e.g., Socrates’s *Apology* written by Plato). The standard approach is that when an ancient author quotes or refers to a distinctive teaching or saying of a predecessor, and we have the larger context of the quoted material in later copies, we assume that the larger context existed as the ancient writer’s source.

Doherty, furthermore, assumes that unless the early writer specifically says a specific passage is Scripture, the writer must not consider the passage as Scripture. This ignores the context in which most of the passages occur. The context regularly affirms that the writer believes what he is writing or teaching and that he believes Scripture is God’s revelation, of which the relevant quotation is a part.

Doherty argues that if there is any gap between the events depicted in the New Testament documents and our earliest citations, manuscripts, or manuscript fragments, we cannot affirm *any* textual continuity. By this standard, Doherty should reject all the classics because the gaps represented by them are enormous compared to the New Testament.

The comparatively infinitesimal time gap between the New Testament events and our first copies and the overwhelming volume of manuscript evidence we possess far outweigh any similar evidence we have for other classics. Geisler and Nix list in their *A General Introduction to the Bible* (408), for example, that we have only 643 copies of Homer’s *Iliad*, 8 of Herodotus’s *History*, 8 of Thucydides’s *History*, 7 of Plato’s works, 10 of Julius Caesar’s *The Gallic Wars*, and 20 of Livy’s *History of Rome*.³ Compare those numbers to 5,366 copies of fragments, portions, and complete books of the New Testaments, the majority later than the seventh century but with some significant copies from very early.

The difference in gaps is even more striking. The bulk of the copies we have for the classic authors come from the middle ages, a thousand years or more from the composition of the texts. For Herodotus it’s 1,350 years (eleventh century A.D.), for Caesar 1,000 years (eleventh century A.D.), and for Livy 400 years (fifth century A.D.) for one partial manuscript and 1,000 years (eleventh century A.D.) for the other nineteen. The New Testament gap, in contrast, is only 50 years for our earliest fragment, 100 years for our earliest complete books, 150 years for the majority of the New Testament, and 225 years for the complete New Testament.

For Doherty to state we can have no assurance of the dating of the New Testament documents until we have the complete New Testament in manuscript form also ignores the standards used to date ancient documents. Aside from its physical characteristics and the archival setting in which the document is found, the content of ancient documents can help us date them by (1) what it claims for itself; (2) the style, vocabulary, grammar, and other literary features; and (3) the historical and geographical clues within the document.

It would be possible to date the contents of the New Testament to the first century A.D. even if we had no citations from early church fathers and no comments from near contemporaries about when they believed the New Testament was composed. That is how scholars date the *Iliad* to the century of its composition even though our earliest copies of portions of it are dated nearly 1,000 years later.

Doherty's Dubious Sources. Added to Doherty's woeful inadequacy as a textual critic is his wholesale acceptance of a proposed "source document" for the gospels, called Q (after the German *Quelle*, "source"). Regarding Q, we have no copies of Q, no copies of portions of Q, no references to Q in any of the early Christian writings, no references to Q in any of the early non-Christian writings, no references to Q in any of the gospels or the writings of Paul or the other letters; we have, in fact, no conclusive evidence whatsoever that Q ever existed.⁴

Christianity, the Witness of History. Doherty ignores one of the strongest testimonies of the trustworthiness of the New Testament documents. Christianity is, as Sir Norman Anderson termed it, "the witness of history."

We call this a variation on the great-grandfather paradox. Let's say we're discussing the existence of Earl Doherty, skeptic extraordinairé. We can't find any biographical material about him other than his stint as president of the Ottawa skeptics group, his contributions to a small periodical, and his Web site attacking Christianity. We might suspect he is a figment of some skeptic groups' collective imagination, an editorial ghost they have conjured to plague Christian authors such as Lee Strobel.

Then we meet Earl Doherty. He shows us his driver's license, birth certificate, and pay stubs where he works. We are confronted with the *real* Earl Doherty. We cannot explain his existence away without a story about identity fabrication more incredible than believing there really is somebody named Earl Doherty who thinks he can overthrow the truth claims of Christianity. It would be ridiculous to argue that Earl Doherty doesn't exist merely because we don't possess his genealogical history back for umpteen generations. We would be laughed out of the academy of ideas if we were to argue, "We can't verify the identity of Earl Doherty's great-grandfather, so he must not have had one." The very fact of the existence of Earl Doherty is proof that he must have had a great-grandfather even though no evidence may exist today for that great-grandfather.

The existence of the Christianity of the second or third century that has as its *foundation* a belief in the historical verification of its founder's miracle-working power, death-defeating resurrection, and thus His divine identity, could not have come into being from a source that ignores historical verification, conjures up a founder of mythic proportions, and uses miracle and resurrection fantasies as a mere motif of spiritual enlightenment. Today's history-based Christianity exists as the progeny of a history-based event.

If the founders never claimed a historical base, they could not have produced a history-based religion. Myth-propagating founders can produce only a myth-perpetuating religion. There is no need for a myth religion to package itself as a history religion. The apostle Peter, in fact, declared, "We did not follow cleverly invented stories [Greek *muthois* or myths] when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Pet. 1:16).

Even if there were no intact contemporaneous evidence of the historical facts of Christianity's founder, His miracles and His resurrection, the existence of Christianity as a history-based religion (not merely a religion that existed *in* history) argues for a historical origin. Christianity's existence today argues for the existence of Christianity's "great-grandfather," the historic figure of Jesus Christ.

Doherty's challenge has fallen fatally short of its goal. The *Case for Christ* and the faith it examines remain the witness of history.

— Bob and Gretchen Passantino

NOTES

1. Vol. 22, no. 3, Winter 1999, 54–56.
2. Contradicting himself, Doherty's first footnote states that scholars should "follow wherever the evidence leads" (239).
3. In each numbered case, the number refers to all full copies, portions, and fragments of a given work.
4. See our critique of Doherty's use of Q in *The Mysterious Case of the Missing Q*, http://www.answers.org/bible/missing_q.html.