



STATEMENT DH-230

BOOK REVIEW

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE: The Case Against Christianity

by Michael Martin

Boston University philosopher Michael Martin holds that previous attacks on Christianity have been disappointing because they have not been systematic. In *The Case Against Christianity* Martin tries to remedy the deficiency with a critique that is both comprehensive and deep.

According to the atheistic magazine *Free Inquiry* (Winter 1991/92, p. 50), "in contrast to many books of the genre, Martin has a grasp of much of what is going on in biblical studies, which enables him to argue on the territory of his opponents." Thus, "Christian theologians and philosophers must at least try to respond to [Martin]...if they wish to be taken seriously by their peers." If the atheists are willing to stand behind this work, then Christians should be willing to accept their challenge — hence this critique.

Martin does not attack belief in the existence of God here; he did that in a previous book.¹ The doctrines he attempts to refute are those of the Apostles', Nicene-Chalcedonian, and Athanasian creeds. He also attacks the doctrine of Jesus as the model of ethical behavior. In short, what he attacks is orthodox Christianity. Martin claims that "I am not so naive as to suppose that the arguments set forth here will induce many people to give up their Christian beliefs. My claim is that in the light of my discussion rational people should give up these beliefs" (p. 5). It is my contention that, on the contrary, Martin fails to fulfill his purpose. To demonstrate this, I will critique some of his primary arguments.

THE HISTORICITY OF JESUS

Martin's first important point deals with the historicity of Jesus. He follows the thesis of G. A. Wells, a British professor of German, who maintains that it is probable that Jesus never existed. The bulk of their argument rests on the "silence" of Paul, who — they maintain — is surprisingly reticent about the life and teachings of Jesus.

Martin bases his main argument on this silence and puts forth the Negative Evidence Principle (NEP). He explains: "A person is justified in believing that p [i.e., a specific proposition] is false if (1) all the available evidence used to support the view that p is true is shown to be inadequate and (2) is the sort of claim such that if p were true, there would be available evidence that would be adequate to support the view that p is true and (3) the area where evidence would appear, if there were any, has been comprehensively examined" (p. 46).

One problem with this principle lies in point (2). This states, roughly, that in some cases, if p is true there should be adequate evidence to support belief in it. The problem here is that it is often very difficult to say a priori *what kind of* and *how much* evidence there should be if p is in fact true.

To give an example: Martin argues that Josephus mentioned Jesus at most once, and that even this mention is doubtful. He claims that if Jesus were a well-known public figure He should have been mentioned more than that, and "thus NEP applies" (p. 49). There are at least two problems with this. First, a strong case can be made that

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Josephus mentioned Jesus twice.² Second, even if Josephus did mention Jesus only once, this would not be that surprising. As R. T. France observes, "John the Baptist, who was in many ways a figure similar to Jesus,...is mentioned only once, at a similar length, even though Josephus presents him as a significant figure, of sufficient political importance to be executed as a potential leader of revolt."³

Further, the name "Christian" is used only once in Josephus, in a passage that Martin and Wells reject. As France points out, then, "Those who suspect the historicity of the Jesus of the Gospels on the grounds that there are so few early non-Christian references to him, must surely, by the same argument, be even more skeptical as to whether the Christian church existed in the first century. But not even George Wells wishes to deny this! As has been so often noted, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."⁴

The point is, it is very hard to say what writers — especially *ancient* writers — "should" have written about. One gets the impression that Martin thinks that every time an early Christian wrote something, he or she should have included a summary of Jesus' life and Christian doctrine.

Paul's silence can be overstated. It should be pointed out that Paul was writing to individuals who *already knew* much about Jesus. Further, he was concerned "not to retell the Gospel story but to elaborate on key theological and ethical matters and to counter opposition which he faced in various places."⁵ Further, Paul is not entirely silent on the historical Jesus; he mentions historical details in Romans 1:3 and 15:3, 8; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 and 15:4-8; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Galatians 1:19, 2:9, 3:1, 3:16, and 4:4; Philippians 2:6-8; and 1 Thessalonians 2:15. And Jesus' teachings are quoted or alluded to in other places.⁶

Martin also charges that the Gospels were written very late and contain errors. In response, France says the "attempt to disprove the historical existence of Jesus altogether can only be sustained by opting for the latest dates for the gospels which any New Testament scholars will countenance...it is interesting to observe that the lateness of the date proposed is often in proportion to the degree of a scholar's skepticism as to their historical value; the cynic might wonder which comes first!"⁷

The fact is that if the Gospels were written earlier than Martin says they were, his thesis collapses. And there are good reasons for preferring earlier dates.⁸ For example, Luke's Gospel was probably written before Acts (which was also authored by Luke), and yet Acts should probably be dated before A.D. 63.⁹ As for claims of the Gospels being contradictory, one should consult the responses given by evangelical scholars. One place Martin claims there are contradictions is in the resurrection accounts, or at least that they can be made consistent only with the aid of implausible hypotheses (p. 81). Yet John Wenham argues cogently that they are in fact consistent and plausible.¹⁰ Regarding the issue of non-Christian references for Jesus, Murray J. Harris argues persuasively that such testimony to Jesus exists.¹¹

THE RESURRECTION

The next Christian belief Martin assaults is the Resurrection. There is no space here to deal with all the points he makes, but the following comments illustrate problems with a few of his arguments:

- (1) Martin states that we do not have eyewitness testimony to the post-resurrection appearances, except for Paul (pp. 81-82). A strong case can be made, however, that some of the Gospels *do* have eyewitness accounts.¹²
- (2) Martin is hyperskeptical of Paul and the other New Testament writers, constantly suggesting that their motives and honesty are suspect (e.g., p. 83). By his standard most historical writings would be ruled out; after all, anyone's motives can be questioned by those who don't accept their beliefs. Paul and the other Christian writers showed their sincerity by suffering and even dying for their beliefs.
- (3) Martin says the fact that Paul was converted from strong opposition to Christianity to one of its major proponents is of no evidential value (p. 19). Paul, he affirms, was not a true skeptic, since before his conversion he already was a devout monotheist. He notes that Muhammad, on the other hand, was converted from polytheism to monotheism — a compelling conversion. But Martin fails to note that Muhammad was troubled by the polytheistic beliefs of his time; he was not a fervent supporter of them. On

the other hand, Paul may not have been a skeptic in *Martin's* sense, but he was intensely (indeed, violently) skeptical of Christianity! The conversion of Paul deserves an explanation which Martin does not provide.

(4) Martin misunderstands Christian apologist Gary Habermas regarding the story of Jesus' appearance to the 500, cited by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:6 (p. 90). He implies that Habermas is embarrassed by the story and is trying to hide it. Yet Habermas firmly believes in the story of the 500 and thinks that it is good evidence for the Resurrection, although not the strongest evidence.¹³

(5) Virtually all scholars agree that 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 is part of an early creed that was formulated within a few years of Jesus' death and resurrection. Martin basically ignores this evidence. Yet this passage puts the evidence for the Resurrection within a few years of the event.¹⁴

(6) Then there is the matter of the second coming of Christ. Martin says that Jesus taught that He would return from heaven in the lifetime of the generation He was teaching (pp. 116-17). There are several ways to respond to this. Matthew 16:28 may well refer to the Transfiguration; Luke 21:32 and Mark 13:30 may be speaking of the generation that sees the signs Jesus speaks of, rather than the generation of Jesus' time.¹⁵ An alternative explanation is the preterist view, which holds that the Second Coming *did* take place in A.D. 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem; this "coming" was the coming of Jesus *in judgment* rather than His return in glory at the end of the age.¹⁶ Other answers are available.

(7) Martin berates Habermas for holding that naturalistic explanations of the Resurrection fail, yet he offers none of his own (pp. 93-96). All he offers is some speculation of what could have happened with no sustained argument. By failing to present a detailed case for examination he has not presented a viable alternative to the orthodox explanation.

THE INCARNATION

Martin's next attack is against the Incarnation. Here his main fire is directed against the incarnation theory of Thomas Morris.¹⁷ Morris's theory may be summarized as follows: Jesus is a person with two minds, one divine and one human. Morris proposes this theory in order to account for the biblical data of Jesus both being omniscient and limited in knowledge. There is no contradiction here, says Morris, because Jesus' divine mind was omniscient while His human mind was limited. Martin argues that this view is incoherent (pp. 136-37). His line of reasoning is that even if Jesus has two minds, He is still one person, and thus would know everything that both of His minds know. Therefore, Martin states, Jesus the person would still be both omniscient and nonomniscient, which is contradictory.

Martin's critique misses the point. Granted that Jesus with His divine mind would be omniscient, still He would only know things *through* one of His minds or the other. In other words, Jesus would be limited in knowledge when operating through His human mind. This explains why He often appears to be limited in knowledge; acting as a human being, He limited Himself to what a human being would know.

Martin argues against this kind of theory by bringing up another problem, that the Jesus of the Gospels does not seem to be omnipotent (pp. 139-40). He considers the argument that the reason that Jesus did not *act* as if He were omnipotent is that He did not *know* He was omnipotent (p. 140). Martin then demolishes the idea that someone could be omnipotent and remain ignorant of that fact (pp. 140-41). Therefore, Martin concludes that the Incarnation is an incoherent doctrine.

This whole argument is beside the point. Christians should not maintain that Jesus was ignorant of His divine omnipotent power, just that He chose for the most part not to use it. That is, Jesus as a human knew that His divine nature was omnipotent and omniscient, but in order to be a man He chose not to exercise this power most of the time. Usually He acted within the limitations of a man, using only His human powers. The times that He did exercise it was to show forth His divine omnipotent power.

Martin's arguments about what an omnipotent being would do are quite irrelevant. How would we know a priori what an omnipotent being would do? Just because an omnipotent being has infinite power, it hardly follows that he would choose only to perform actions that require infinite power.

In any event, Martin seems to think that we believe Jesus to be omnipotent because of the actions He performed. Rather, the way Christians argue to Jesus' omnipotence is that (1) Jesus claimed to be God incarnate (e.g., John

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8:58); (2) He validated this claim by rising from the dead; (3) God is omnipotent; (4) therefore Jesus is omnipotent. This method of reasoning is relevant to other of Martin's arguments, such as on the Virgin Birth (pp. 105-15).¹⁸

In the remaining chapters Martin continues his attacks with sections on Christian ethics, salvation by faith, the Divine Command theory, and the Atonement. Unfortunately, there is no space here to respond. Let me just say that here, as in the earlier chapters, Martin's arguments are seriously flawed. There is no lack of arguments to critique; for the Christian apologist, his book represents what in military jargon might be called a "target-rich environment." It is encouraging if this is the best that the atheists can do.

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NOTES

¹ Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

² R. T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 25-32.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵ Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 222.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 222-33.

⁷ France, 101.

⁸ John Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992); Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1970); E. Earle Ellis, "Dating the New Testament," *New Testament Studies* 26, 487-502.

⁹ Wenham, 225-38.

¹⁰ John Wenham, *Easter Enigma* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984).

¹¹ Murray J. Harris, "References to Jesus in Early Classical Authors," in *Gospel Perspectives: The Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels*, ed. David Wenham (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1984), 343-68.

¹² Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke*, and Guthrie.

¹³ As told to me by Dr. Habermas in a personal conversation. For a defense of the appearance to the 500, see William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 57-63.

¹⁴ Gary Habermas, "Affirmative Statement," *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?* ed. Terry Miethe (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 23.

¹⁵ Gleason Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 326-27. See also D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 507.

¹⁶ See, e.g., J. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1971).

¹⁷ Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

¹⁸ One final criticism that I will make is Martin's comment on page 122n5. Martin claims there is a contradiction between Jesus being born in a manger and the wise men visiting Him in a house. The answer is that Jesus was born in a manger, and then the family later moved into a house, where the wise men visited. The Bible doesn't say the wise men visited the night Jesus was born. Good grief!