

The “Easter Answer” Answered

by Dan Barker

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Reply to “The Easter Answer” by Stephen R. Kingsley (February 2009)

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Stephen,

Finally, after a too-long delay, I have a response to your Easter Answer. It has been bothering me for many months that I have not been able to find the time to sit down and give your work the serious attention it deserves. However, in the meantime you have sent me a revised version of your Easter Answer, dated February 2009, in which you mention events that happened in December 2008. Since I am working from your new 2009 version, and can discard your uncorrected or incomplete 2008 version (which took you 4 years to finish), I suppose I am not that tardy after all.

I want to thank you for taking my Easter Challenge seriously. I admire the fact that you properly understand the challenge, and approach it logically and civilly. You are very smart, and you worked hard to do what most scholars say cannot be done. You did not give up easily in the light of obvious and honestly acknowledged problems. That is one sign, I think, of a true scholar. Although neither of us is a professional scholar, we are engaging in a scholarly dialogue. As professional spokespeople for our respective world views, we have a responsibility to be informed by scholarship.

But well-meaning scholars can disagree. Some of the fiercest debates are between scholars who are truly friends at the personal level. In fact, I think a real scholar *wants* to be proved wrong, not taking it personally. I appreciate your friendly approach, which is something I do not always encounter in debates.

Part 1 of my response is mainly general, with a few specifics thrown in to get us started. This section is much too long! If this were a chapter in a book, I would edit down that section. (It takes more than 20 pages before I get to any real evidence.) But I think you will enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it, and I hope you will chuckle at some of the humor. I also hope you will stick with it. The point is to step back and see a broader picture, an objective framework which may help us to understand why so few scholars (as you point out) think the resurrection stories are harmonious. So bear with me and it should become clear that I am hoping to get you to look at your approach from a distance, as an objective outsider might see it.

Part 2 builds from there, going into specifics, crystallizing and applying principles. At the end of Part 2, my case is made.

My approach in Part 3 is to go through your book, starting at the beginning, and commenting on various things you wrote. Some of these remarks are relatively tangential, but others are exquisitely relevant, adding new information and argument that strengthens my overall critique. Since you end with a sermon, so do I.

Thank you for forcing me to dig back through this material. It has been many years since I have looked at it in such detail. I have done a few debates on the resurrection over the years, but I usually only briefly touch on the internal coherence of the narratives, focusing more on the evidence of legendary embellishment and broader themes, since (as we both agree) even if the accounts were coherent, that would not prove the resurrection actually happened. Perhaps after this, you may want to deal with some of those other matters which I think actually prove that the stories are mythical, or at least legendary—but that is another day.

PART 1

Alice

Alice: Dan, I solved your Easter Challenge.

Dan: Thank you for sending it to me. Yes, I read the narrative you produced. Very funny. Nice joke.

Alice: Why do you call it a joke?

Dan: Ha! You have Jesus dancing the tango in Los Angeles!

Alice: And why is that a joke?

Dan: You're kidding.

Alice: You don't believe Jesus could dance the tango?

Dan: You're not serious. I thought you sent me that "solution" just to tweak my nose.

Alice: Of course I am serious. Don't you believe Jesus could dance the tango?

Dan: No, I don't. Or, maybe so. I suppose a god, if he exists, could dance anything he wants. But the New Testament doesn't say a thing about Los Angeles, and the tango wasn't invented until the beginning of the 20th century!

Alice: That's true, but that's irrelevant to your challenge. Jesus was the omniscient son of God, so he knew about the tango, and the bible nowhere says Jesus did not dance. There is no reason he could not have traveled to Los Angeles during the 366 days he remained on earth before the ascension. There is nothing about dancing the tango in Los Angeles that is nonsensical. Dancing and traveling to the American continent are perfectly plausible events.

Dan: Well, maybe. But forgive me, that sounds crazy. The New Testament does not mention Los Angeles or the tango, or 366 days, or the Cheshire Cat or pogo sticks or many of the other items you put into your narrative.

Alice: I did not put those into the narrative. They were there all the time.

Dan: My Easter Challenge asks you to write a simple chronological narrative . . .

Alice: Which I did.

Dan: . . . that does not omit a single detail . . .

Alice: Which I did not.

Dan: Well, your new narrative omits the angels, and the earthquake, and Peter . . .

Alice: I used the “t” from “Peter” to make the word “tango.”

Dan: You did what?

Alice: It’s very simple. I rearranged the letters to make new words. After removing the “t” from “Peter” I got the word “peer,” which was useful in the little side story about British nobility.

Dan: You can’t be serious.

Alice: “Los Angeles” was easy. I took an “e” from “sepulchre” and added it to “angels.” The fact that it was not actually called “Los Angeles” in Jesus’ time does not mean he didn’t know what it would be called someday—let’s call it a prophecy—or that he could not have traveled to that geographic area of the west coast of the North American continent to visit with the native Americans who also needed to hear the Good News.

Dan: Are we on Candid Camera?

Alice: But it works!

Dan: You can’t be serious.

Alice: Do you think Jesus would have allowed those Indians to die without hearing the Gospel? Your challenge was that I not omit a single detail. Every letter of the original resurrection stories appears in my new narrative, and the story I produced is plausible. You may not think it is believable, but that was not your challenge. A science fiction story can be totally impossible, yet you accept it as a plausible narrative within the framework of the assumptions of that genre of fiction.

Dan: That’s right. My Easter Challenge does not require you to prove that what happened was actually true, or even possible, but . . . You rearranged all of the letters in the original accounts to make a new story? What version of the New Testament did you use?

Alice: I used the New American Standard. But I could have done it with any

translation.

Dan: Why not the original Greek?

Alice: Would you like me to do it with the Greek? I took some Greek in bible school, and I'm certain I could do it.

Dan: Would that narrative also include Los Angeles?

Alice: Probably not. It would be a different story. But it would be plausible. Would that satisfy you?

Dan: Assuming you are not joking, it amazes me that you don't see that your "solution" violates all the basic rules of interpretation, textual criticism, and the historical method.

Alice: But that is not my problem. Your challenge did not mention "interpretation, textual criticism, and the historical method." You simply asked me to produce a plausible narrative that does not omit a single detail, and I have done that.

Dan: But I'm sure that if you check with any scholars, they will tell you that what you have done is not permissible.

Alice: I did that, and you are right. I talked with many scholars, and they all say that what I did cannot be done.

Dan: Well, there you go.

Alice: But I have proved them wrong, don't you see? I did what they said cannot be done. You are looking at it from an orthodox perspective, limiting your interpretation to a simplistic straightjacket of the traditional meaning.

Dan: But your narrative completely destroys the intention of the original writers.

Alice: How do *you* know what their original intention was?

Dan: Well, I think it's obvious that we should glean their meaning from the words they wrote, in context, in the flow of their material.

Alice: That is one way of looking at it. But your Easter Challenge does not require that method. You asked me to write a plausible chronological narrative that does not omit a single detail.

Dan: By destroying words you are omitting details.

Alice: No, I am not. Every single letter is still present in my narrative. Every detail is

still there.

Dan: That's not what is meant by "detail." Asking you to retain every detail does not allow you to dismantle the manuscript at that level of granularity.

Alice: Says who?

Dan: Says me, and I'm sure every other scholar of the bible and literature, as well as every average reader who knows how to comprehend a story.

Alice: But you did not say that in your Easter Challenge. You did not define the word "detail" or demand that I submit to *your* methodology. In fact, your *a priori* methodology, ruling out in advance what messages we are permitted to draw from the texts, is exactly what is keeping you from seeing the true meaning. Your bias is barring you from understanding that the "apparent contradictions" are illusory and disappear when we put the elements together in a way that God knew they happened, not necessarily in the way events might appear to flow in the text, which I admit, at face value, does appear discrepant. If you wanted to keep me from anagramming the New Testament, you should have explicitly ruled it out in your challenge.

Dan: I didn't think that was necessary.

Alice: Well, that is your mistake, not mine. You issued a challenge that you now say contains terms that are not properly defined. I accepted your challenge based on how I interpret the word "detail," and if you now tell me you meant something different from what I understood, then you are changing the terms of the challenge. That is unfair. I put a lot of work into this, based on how I perceived your challenge.

Dan: I appreciate your hard work. But we often don't define every single word we write. We assume that the reader knows there is a general consensus of scholarly opinion within the field we are discussing—or even more simply, we assume that the reader has common sense. I don't think you will find a single bible scholar or textual critic—or person on the street—who allows you to use the word "detail" in that manner.

Alice: I admit that the scholars agree with you. But they are not writing my narrative.

My mother and my sister agree with me. You did not specify that I must conform to scholarly opinion. If I did that, then I would be able to produce nothing new. By thinking outside-the-box, I am able to show them, and you, that what was once thought impossible can actually be done.

Dan: But don't you see that if I reject your definition of "detail," I am unable to accept your work?

Alice: Yes, but don't you see that if you *do* accept my definition of "detail," then I have indeed solved the Easter Challenge?

Dan: But I don't accept it.

Alice: But I am asking, *if* you accept my definition of "detail," would you agree I have accomplished something amazing?

Dan: Well, technically, yes. If we destroy what I intended when I issued the challenge, and if we allow you to use *your* definition, then we could say that you have succeeded.

Alice: Thank you!

Dan: I am not congratulating you. I am not backing off from my intended meaning, which is what virtually every reader would understand.

Alice: I am not "virtually every reader." I have a good mind of my own. And you do admit that I have succeeded within the context of my own interpretation of the word "detail."

Dan: That is not admitting much. You still have to convince the rest of us of the validity of your methodology, your usage of "detail," and the plausibility of your final narrative.

Alice: Why do I have to do that? Your Easter Challenge said nothing like that. If I am forced to submit to the votes of the traditional interpreters, I will lose. Your challenge only asks that I write a plausible narrative without omitting a detail.

Dan: And I say you indeed have omitted details, by destroying the words as the authors intended them to be understood.

Alice: Well, you are not the ultimate judge. I say that I *have* preserved every single detail of the original narratives, producing a coherent story that meets your challenge.

You owe me \$1,000.

Dan: I never offered a reward. If someone does answer the Easter Challenge, the reward is truth.

Alice: Well, someone owes me \$1,000, not that I want the money personally. I'll donate it to my church. I just think those who issue challenges should be accountable and honest. They should admit when their challenge is answered.

Dan: I will be happy to admit it, if someone does it right.

Alice: Who judges what is "right"? We just determined that your "right" is not the only "right." You admitted that "technically" I have solved the challenge.

Dan: I meant "technically," within *your* imaginative framework of interpretation, you have found a strained way to prove to yourself that the bible is not contradictory. I cannot accept your framework.

Alice: Then you are being dishonest and unfair. Your Easter Challenge did not specify which "framework" I am allowed to use.

Dan: Any framework that ends up with Jesus dancing the tango in Los Angeles is off the table.

Alice: You just don't want to admit that the bible is telling the truth. You atheists are spiritually blind. You have no integrity.

Bob

Bob: Wow, that Alice sure is nutty.

Dan: I'm not surprised to hear you say that.

Bob: No one in their right mind would think you can rearrange all the letters and preserve the original details. By destroying the words, she has altered the original meaning. Anyone can see that.

Dan: Almost anyone.

Bob: The original words should be kept intact. That is the level at which meaning is derived, and by respecting that important criterion, I have solved your Easter Challenge in a much more plausible and acceptable manner.

Dan: I would love to see your solution.

Bob: It's quite simple. Rearranging the letters is stupid, but if you move the *words*, you can get a plausible narrative that is not contradictory.

Dan: You rearranged the *words*?

Bob: You told Alice that was allowable.

Dan: I told Alice that rearranging letters destroys the original words, but that does not mean we can move the *words* around.

Bob: But rearranging words does not destroy the original meaning. I thought you agreed that meaning is shown at the level of words.

Dan: Don't tell me you have taken all the words in the resurrection stories and shuffled them around.

Bob: Not all of them. But your challenge allows that possibility. For example, I replaced the word "forty" from Acts 1:3 with the word "none" from John 21:12, which means that Acts 1:3 actually says that Jesus stayed on earth "none days," or more meaningfully "no more days." I moved "forty" to I Corinthians 15:6, which now says "seen of above five hundred forty brethren at once . . ."

Dan: Is there a doctor in the house?

Bob: Are you making fun of me? I put a lot of work into this project.

Dan: But I don't think there is a single scholar or literary critic who would permit such a shuffling of the original texts.

Bob: That is not my problem. Your challenge does not require me to conform the scholars.

Dan: You are sounding like Alice. How can you change 500 to 540? Paul mentions 500 witnesses, not 540 witnesses.

Bob: Paul said it was "*above* 500 witnesses." Luke is just adding more specificity. Just because Paul did not include the extra forty witnesses does not mean they weren't there.

Dan: If they were there, he should have included them.

Bob: How do you know that? Paul was just being general, using a round number, and Luke, being a doctor (who would certainly be more precise), gives us the number

to another decimal place of precision. The number 540 includes 500, so there is no contradiction.

Dan: Are you serious? Luke's number is describing days, not witnesses, so you can't mix them. Acts 1:3 says "forty days," not "forty witnesses." You have destroyed Luke's original intention.

Bob: How do you know what Luke's original intention was? Your challenge does not require me to get inside Luke's head and know that he was explicitly ruling out "witnesses" when he said "days."

Dan: But it's a totally different context. I think it is obvious, based on general principles of interpretation . . .

Bob: Says who?

Dan: Your solution is no better than Alice's.

Bob: But I agree with you that Alice is nutty, and you agree that meaning comes at the level of words, not letters.

Dan: But I do not agree that you can rearrange words and keep the original meaning of the sentences.

Bob: That is not my problem. I have diligently adhered to the exact challenge you issued, using my understanding of the meaning of the word "detail," and you are not permitted to defend yourself, after the fact, with a "clarification" that effectively changes the rules.

Dan: But I never imagined anyone would be as nutty as Alice, or as nutty as you!

Bob: Now you are name calling. Resorting to *ad hominem* is a sign that you are losing the argument. If your reasoning were valid, you would not have to insult me.

Dan: Calling someone "nutty" is not *ad hominem*. I'm only using the word you used to describe Alice, and for the same reason.

Bob: But words are not letters, so it is not the same reason.

Dan: It's the same reason because you are drawing the line of meaning—the concept of "detail"—at too low a level. Alice drew the line at letters, and you are drawing it at the words. Both lines are way below the level at which the complete message of the writers is to be understood.

Bob: You are not the authority on what the original writers intended to say nor at where the level of meaning is located. Your challenge did not specify that we had to follow the “party line” of traditional interpretation.

Dan: Well, you are right about that. My challenge does contain some assumptions of interpretation and methodology that I didn’t feel were necessary to spell out.

Bob: So you admit that using *my* assumptions I have met your challenge?

Dan: No, I don’t. I have to judge the success of your attempt using the criteria I find most useful. Using *your* assumptions does not solve it to *my* satisfaction. But I can concede that you have “solved” the challenge in an absurd way, using *your* assumptions to *your* satisfaction.

Bob: Then you owe me a thousand dollars.

Dan: I never promised a thousand dollars. But even if I had, I could change it to “none dollars.” I get the word “none” from John 21:12.

Bob: That is crazy.

Dan: Exactly.

Charles and Diana

We can also imagine Charles telling us that he denounces the methods of Alice and Bob and has produced a plausible narrative by rearranging all the *sentences*; and we would reply similarly. We might also hear from Diana announcing she has solved the challenge by respecting the integrity of the original text at a higher level, moving only intact *paragraphs* around to make a plausible story. I would reject such approaches, for the same general reasons, and so would you. We can’t shuffle sentences and paragraphs around freely.

Now along comes Elizabeth.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth: Why do you waste your time with Alice, Bob, Charles and Diana? They are obviously kooks. They are violating basic principles of form and interpretation.

Dan: Well, I issued a challenge and they responded. They put a lot of work into their answers. And to their credit, my Easter Challenge did not announce any restrictions to the form or interpretation of the narratives. Technically, within their own frameworks, at their level of “detail,” they did produce very creative, “plausible” narratives.

Elizabeth: Well, “technically” you could make *anything* work. They “solved” it by violating basic principles. Their final narratives do not accord with what the New Testament actually says, at the level of meaning in storytelling. You are right to assume, without formally stating it, that proper interpretation does not allow any rearranging. We should keep the original narratives intact.

Dan: I am not completely opposed to rearrangement, in principle. It is possible that some passages might have been intended to be understood in the perfect tense, for example, not depicting what *was* happening, but what *had* happened. The pluperfect does not appear in the New Testament, so it is possible that the chronology might sometimes be ambiguous and open to alternative arrangements.

Elizabeth: True. That gives some wiggle room.

Dan: But in the absence of any clear evidence or justification for that, such as the context of the passage in that document or the context of known external history, we should stick with the flow at the surface tense of the narrative. The mere possibility of rendering the aorist as the past perfect is not an excuse for invoking it wherever it might help our agenda.

Elizabeth: I agree. And I think we can reconcile the Easter stories without resorting to such tricks.

Dan: Good. That keeps things cleaner. But first I want to know what you think of Alice, Bob, Charles and Diana. Why do you think they did what they did?

Elizabeth: It’s hard to imagine that people like that really exist. I’m suspect you made them up, just to make a point.

Dan: Let’s assume they exist, just like someone might assume that the women who visited the tomb went home to get some sleep in the middle of their visit.

Elizabeth: That is not impossible.

Dan: No. And it is not impossible that Alice, Bob, Charles and Diana exist.

Elizabeth: Point taken.

Dan: So why did they—why would they make up such wild scenarios?

Elizabeth: I suppose the main reason is that they sincerely believe that the New Testament stories were inspired by God and therefore cannot have any contradictions. They came up with their “solutions” in order to prove the skeptics wrong. And by the way, my solution does not “make up” any scenarios.

Dan: We’ll have to see about that. Do *you* believe that the New Testament stories were inspired by God, and therefore cannot have any contradictions?

Elizabeth: Yes, but that is irrelevant to your Easter Challenge.

Dan: I agree. But you suggested that is a reason we should be wary of Alice, Bob, Charles and Diana.

Elizabeth: No. Well, that is not the only reason. They also used bad methodology.

Dan: But they don’t think they did. They believe that they stuck to my requirements.

Elizabeth: But you and I agree that they stretched the rules.

Dan: Yes, but *they* don’t agree. They actually think, in spite of our protests, that their solutions are admissible. You have to admit that my original Easter Challenge does not explicitly rule out the approaches they took.

Elizabeth: That’s true, but I don’t fault you for that. You were not required to delineate every single principle of textual interpretation in your challenge. You are justified in holding general assumptions about what is permissible.

Dan: And if someone disagrees with my assumptions?

Elizabeth: Then we have to educate those people.

Dan: But they tell me that is unfair. Since they “technically” adhered to the conditions of my challenge, they feel free to claim victory. When I told them, after the fact, that they were violating principles that I did not specify, they cried foul.

Elizabeth: I see their point, but you are not being unfair. You are simply following general principles of interpretation, and common sense. I think most scholars would agree with you that we cannot dismantle the text to that degree.

Dan: And if Alice, Bob, Charles and Diana disagree?

Elizabeth: That is their problem, not yours.

Dan: In addition to their confirmation bias, you also say that they used bad methodology. *Why* would they do that?

Elizabeth: Maybe they are not that smart. Maybe their devotion to their faith clouds their judgment. Or maybe they are smarter than the rest of us and we just don't grasp what they are doing. Perhaps they are being tongue-in-cheek to expose the fact that your Easter Challenge contains unspecified assumptions.

Dan: Do you think my Easter Challenge contains unspecified assumptions?

Elizabeth: Yes, but I agree with those assumptions, so that is not a problem. At least I think I agree with your assumptions. You'll have to tell me if that is true.

Dan: Tell me about your solution.

Elizabeth: All right. Unlike the others, my answer does not resort to rearrangement. I have kept all of the elements of each narrative in the order they appear in the text.

Dan: By "element" you mean "detail"?

Elizabeth: Yes, roughly, though at a broader, story level, not at the level of letters, words and sentences. I have simply interleaved some of the elements from one or more accounts into another account, much like historians do when they use multiple sources to write a broader history. Your challenge, after all, is calling for a new narrative—a history—combining all that is known, or claimed to be known, from all of the available sources. Although the historian does produce something original—a history book that did not exist before—nothing really new is created, and the original sources are left intact, allowed to stand on their own.

Dan: Well, sometimes historians do produce something new. A historian might actually know more than the author. Historians can have a broader view, or a more recent scientifically informed understanding, than any of the individual writers, and might be able to answer questions that the original sources were unable to solve.

Elizabeth: I suppose that is true, though I am not making that claim myself. I am

acting more like a reporting historian than an editorial historian. You certainly cannot object to that approach.

Dan: Of course not, in principle. It remains to see how you do it in practice. Although your approach is actually a kind of rearrangement, I see your point. You are rearranging elements as they appear on the pages, not as they happened chronologically in history.

Elizabeth: Exactly, but your Easter Challenge allows for that, otherwise we have no way to proceed. I would even suggest that your Easter Challenge demands that approach. Since what is “on the page” can appear discrepant, we have to interlock details like puzzle pieces—not rearranging any element with the individual stories or altering the chronology of narrative.

Dan: I understand. Historical method allows us to paint a bigger picture by combining information from various sources. This can sometimes strengthen a story, but it can also weaken it. Sometimes the sources contradict each other. Often the historian will decide that some historical claims are untrue.

Elizabeth: Yes, but I show that we don’t have any such contradictions among the Easter narratives, and even if some historians believe some of the actual elements in the stories are untrue for other reasons, that is irrelevant to your challenge to simply “tell the story.”

Dan: I understand that. My Easter Challenge is not asking for truth. It is asking for plausibility. In other writings, I do ask for the truth of the resurrection story, and I claim to show that there are many other reasons for doubting the story.

Elizabeth: I have read your other writings, but I am not commenting on those here. Your Easter Challenge simply asks us to “tell what happened,” not to “prove what happened.”

Dan: Understood.

Elizabeth: I have answered your challenge by producing a plausible narrative that omits not a single detail.

Dan: What do you mean by the word “detail”?

Elizabeth: Well, I guess that word can be subject to debate, but to begin with, it means

leaving nothing out.

Dan: Alice and Bob left nothing out of their narratives.

Elizabeth: Technically true. But you agree that they destroyed words and sentences.

They dismantled the details. So in effect they left *everything* out.

Dan: So by “detail” or “element” you must mean something more than just leaving nothing out. You must also mean something like “a piece of story at a level of meaning that cannot be reduced to smaller pieces.”

Elizabeth: Yes. I guess we can say that a story element is the smallest chunk of narrative that can’t be broken down into smaller chunks without altering, damaging or interfering with the element of the story being told.

Dan: So the element, or detail, could be any size.

Elizabeth: Yes. It could be a couple of words, or a long paragraph. Many elements are strung together into a longer narrative, but the basic “element,” as I use the word (perhaps corresponding to your word “detail”) is a discrete, intact unit. The element can be amplified or clarified from another source as long as there is no damage to the original text of that element—and you permit that possibility in your challenge when you allow additional explanation to be set aside in parentheses.

Dan: Yes. Most historians do that. We often need contextual comments or broader analysis to more fully understand a passage. But how do you decide when you have reached a level below which an “element” or “detail” cannot be further reduced?

Elizabeth: Well, certainly not as low as the level of letters or words. It would be somewhere at or above the level of the paragraph, as long as we are not wantonly rearranging them as Charles and Diana did.

Dan: Of course. But your definition of “element” seems to admit of some fuzziness.

Elizabeth: You mean two people might disagree about where the line should be drawn?

Dan: Exactly.

Elizabeth: In that case, we would have to appeal to reason, context, scholarly opinion, and common sense.

Dan: That didn't get us very far with Alice and Bob.

Elizabeth: No, it didn't. We will just have to disagree with them. Maybe it would be best to talk about specific examples. If you will look at my narrative, maybe you can tell me if you think I have drawn the line in the wrong place.

Dan: Does your narrative have any tangos?

Elizabeth: Ha! It doesn't even have a waltz.

Dan: And unlike Alice, you kept the earthquake?

Elizabeth: Of course. Matthew tells us that there was a "great earthquake" before the stone was rolled away.

Dan: By "Matthew" you mean the "author of Matthew." We don't really know who wrote the book of Matthew.

Elizabeth: True, but moot. We can call whoever wrote that book "Matthew" for convenience.

Dan: Agreed.

Elizabeth: Matthew tells us: "And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it." (Matthew 28:2) So, yes, we have to keep the earthquake.

Dan: Why didn't any of the other gospel writers mention this "great earthquake"?

Elizabeth: I don't know, but that's irrelevant to your challenge. Maybe they didn't think it was important. Or perhaps only Matthew knew about the earthquake.

Dan: It's irrelevant to "telling the story," but it is not irrelevant to "telling a plausible story." You think the earthquake was so "great" that it caused a tomb to open, and nobody but Matthew felt it? The NIV translates it "violent earthquake." No other historian, author or other gospel writer mentions this earth-shaking event.

Elizabeth: You don't know that nobody else felt it. Besides, the earthquake did not cause the tomb to open. The angel did.

Dan: Well, the "violent" earthquake is in there for some reason. Perhaps it was the method the angel used to roll back the stone. God (if he exists—I assume you understand I am talking hypothetically) would not throw in an extraneous detail

in his “inspired” scripture, would he?

Elizabeth: I don’t know. I assume it all has some reason for being in the text.

Dan: Whatever the reason, a “great earthquake” is a huge part of a story, and God would not have included it as a mere throwaway, especially not in a story that Paul tells us keeps the faith of Christians from becoming “vain.” Assuming it really happened (with no corroboration), if the earthquake was massive enough to roll back a heavy stone, then it also must have caused a lot of other damage. Is Jerusalem on a tectonic fault? Shouldn’t there be archeological evidence for that earthquake? (Actually, there were *two* such earthquakes in recent succession, including the earlier one in Matthew 27 that split rocks apart and opened graves.) Homes and buildings and entire towns must have been wrecked. Earthquakes of that size usually result in hundreds or thousands of deaths. The disciples and the women must have been very busy Sunday morning tending to the injured and dead friends and family members. Why didn’t the other writers—or any other writer of history—mention this “great earthquake”?

Elizabeth: Maybe they thought the resurrection of the Son of God was more important.

Dan: NonChristians wouldn’t think that. The earthquake *was* important to Matthew. Why not to the other New Testament writers?

Elizabeth: So Matthew wrote it down. It’s covered. It’s documented. The other writers may have assumed that everyone knew about it, and noticed that Matthew had included it, so it didn’t matter.

Dan: Mark wrote his gospel many years before Matthew, and Mark neglected to tell us about the “great earthquake.”

Elizabeth: Well, whatever the reason, it is irrelevant to your challenge.

Dan: It is irrelevant only in the superficial sense of “telling the story.” But I am also asking for plausibility. Don’t you think it is odd that such a powerful element of the story—a detail that is not incidental, since it explains how the tomb was opened—would not be mentioned by anyone else? And later on Easter Sunday morning, why do we not see the disciples tending to the sick and injured and dead

bodies that must have resulted from this “act of God” that caused a horrible national tragedy? Why do they pass over this “great earthquake” as if it never happened?

Elizabeth: Let me concede that that is a problem. But I repeat: it is strictly irrelevant to your challenge. Aren’t you getting ahead of yourself, discussing plausibility before methodology?

Dan: Maybe I am. I’m just trying to get a grasp on what you consider to be an “element” or “detail” of the story. Let’s step back a bit and ask if you consider “earthquake rolling stone away” to be a basic indivisible element of the narrative.

Elizabeth: Well, remember, Matthew says it was the angel who rolled the stone away, not the earthquake. So we have to consider the element to be “earthquake, angel, stone rolling away.”

Dan: Got it. So that “element” cannot be broken apart in any way?

Elizabeth: What do you mean?

Dan: Is it possible that the earthquake happened on Sunday morning, the angel came down on Tuesday, the stone was rolled away on Wednesday, and the angel sat on the stone on Friday?

Elizabeth: Why would anyone think that? The text says what it says. It all happened more or less intactly, seamlessly.

Dan: Yes, according to the narrative. I’m trying to confirm the level at which you think a “detail” exists. Is it possible that those four items within that verse could be broken apart into separate details?

Elizabeth: I suppose it is possible theoretically, but that seems a bit of a stretch. If we take the verse at face value, with no other indication that those are separate events, then we have to go with what it appears the author is telling us.

Dan: It appears to be a straightforward narrative telling an intact, though perhaps not complete, element of the story.

Elizabeth: That’s right.

Dan: What if the author of John had said the stone was rolled away the following Thursday?

Elizabeth: He didn't.

Dan: But what if he did?

Elizabeth: In that case, we would have to consider breaking up that verse. We would have to move the first appearances to the following Sunday, a week later. It would not destroy the verse, or remove any detail, but we would have to insert an element from somewhere else to fill out the story.

Dan: To fill out a story that appears not to need filling out.

Elizabeth: Yes. That is the nature of your challenge, to explain things that seem to need further elaboration.

Dan: But all by itself, it doesn't seem to need further elaboration.

Elizabeth: No, not at face value. But if you want to harmonize with the other writers, you have to do things like that.

Dan: You have to break apart what appears not to need to be broken apart.

Elizabeth: Yes. Historians can do that, if they are trying to reconcile the big picture.

Dan: All right. So, when you criticize Bob for breaking the narratives into words, you are really only complaining about the rearranging of words, not the actual breaking point between details. By admitting the possibility that "earthquake" and "angel" and "stone" and "sitting"—all in the same sentence—might theoretically be separated from each other in time, aren't you also agreeing that "detail" or "element" can be considered at the level of words, if necessary?

Elizabeth: Maybe, sometimes. But I'm not doing any rearranging.

Dan: True. But you *are* breaking the story into smaller elements that are not obvious from reading the text. Do you think we could expand the narrative of Matthew 28 into a week? Or two weeks? Or seven weeks, up until the Day of Pentecost?

Elizabeth: That would be a stretch. Reading Matthew, after the first verse, we get a feel that most of it happened on Sunday.

Dan: When exactly did the earthquake happen?

Elizabeth: It happened sometime during the night before the women arrived at the open tomb.

Dan: *Before* the women arrived? That's not what Matthew says. Matthew 28 shows it

happening *after* the women arrived.

Elizabeth: But my solution to your challenge proves that Matthew 28:1 actually occurred the evening before, and there was more than one visit by the women. The women went home to get some sleep, and the next morning, after the stone was rolled away, they came back.

Dan: That's beside the point. The earthquake in 28:2 happened after the arrival of the women in 28:1, whenever that was. If Matthew 28:2 is not telling us exactly when the earthquake happened, then it could have happened any time after that Sabbath or Sunday, even a week or two later.

Elizabeth: I see your point. But all I have to do is make it fit with the other Easter narratives, which show the first appearance of Jesus on Sunday, so there is no reason to make such a stretch.

Dan: I don't know if you see my point. I am asking something more basic. I am asking you to tell me where you think a "detail" or an "element" is understood. It seems to me that we may have a disagreement about the definition of "detail."

Elizabeth: Well, it works for me. I don't see the problem. If it works, it works.

Dan: The problem is that if *you* mean something by "detail" that is different from what *I* mean by "detail" then we are comparing apples and oranges.

Elizabeth: Well, I have to go with what I think the text means.

Dan: That's what Alice and Bob said.

Elizabeth: O, come on! You can't think we don't have a general consensus about this kind of interpretation.

Dan: Although there indeed may be a "general consensus" (if we were ever to poll everyone in the world on this topic), I think different people sometimes pick what suits them.

Elizabeth: And do you do that?

Dan: Maybe. But it is my Easter Challenge, and I have to evaluate any "solution" by what I consider to be sound interpretation. And if my interpretation is supported by most informed scholars, then my confidence in methodology is strengthened.

Elizabeth: Well, that does not seem fair. You seem to be ruling out any and all

attempts to interpret things differently, squelching dissent.

Dan: But you just told me that I am justified in not stating every single criterion of methodology. Perhaps I should have.

Elizabeth: Then you would have painted me into a neat corner. You would have explicitly disallowed *any* solution by simply claiming that the scholars have already decided the issue.

Dan: I did not do that. You can see that I specified how you could do it. I just never imagined there would be people like Alice and Bob who would be so—as you phrased it—“nutty.”

Elizabeth: Well, you never imagined someone like me would come along either.

Dan: You are right about that.

Elizabeth: This is all beside the point. So far, all you have done is ask questions about my methods. Nothing you have said disproves my new narrative.

Dan: Nor could I disprove the narratives produced by Alice or Bob. If it falls apart methodologically, then it doesn't have to be disproved.

Elizabeth: How does my solution fall apart methodologically? Where did I inappropriately break into the narrative?

Dan: Good question. Let's get down to specifics. The first eight verses of Matthew 28 are a unit, a real-time element of a story in progress, yet you break into that element by imagining that the women went home, moving the earthquake to a later time, then moving the angelic message to those women to an even later time. If you read Matthew all by itself, as the original readers did, not knowing of any other gospels, then you get a good sense of what *he* considered to be the elements of the story. The women come to the tomb, the earthquake and angel cause the stone to be rolled away, and then the angel talks to the women. Do you see that? The angel talks to “the women.” What women are these, if not “the women” mentioned at the beginning of that story? Clearly, any reader with basic common sense and a simple understanding of narrative can see that the angel is sitting on the stone and talking to those two women who came to the tomb in 28:1. As a setting for the story, the time is established—whether it was Saturday

night or Sunday morning—it all happens right then, right there. No other time indicator is given in 28:1–8, no sense that a few hours, days, or weeks have passed within this scene.

Elizabeth: I agree that is what it looks like, but if we read Mark, Luke, and John, we can expand Matthew’s story.

Dan: Don’t get ahead of yourself. If we are going to break into Matthew’s narrative, we first need to know what Matthew actually said before deciding if and where this is permissible. As you defined it, an element is “the smallest chunk of narrative that can’t be broken down into smaller chunks without altering, damaging or interfering with the element of the story being told.” Matthew does not say that any time has passed between the details in that element of his story.

Elizabeth: He didn’t have to say it. We can infer it from the context of the other gospels. Just because he didn’t say “later the next morning” doesn’t mean that’s not how it happened.

Dan: Theoretically, that is possible, but immediate context comes first, before we try to “infer” anything from any outside context (if legitimate). If we look at Matthew’s style of narrative, we see that it makes much more sense to consider it all an intact story.

Elizabeth: What do you know about Matthew’s style?

Dan: Matthew was in the habit of specifically marking the timing of events. When one element of the story ends, he sets up the next element with either a notation of a specific time or an indication of the passage of time.

Elizabeth: How do you know that?

Dan: We see it in context, in the real immediate context of Matthew himself. Look at the previous chapter, Matthew 27, which reports what happened the day before. The chapter starts with “Early in the morning,” and is followed by “meanwhile” (verse 11), “while” (verse 19), “when” (verse 24), “then” (verse 26), “then” (verse 27), “after” and “then” (verse 31), “as they were going out” (verse 32), “when” (verse 35), “from the sixth hour until the ninth hour” (verse 45), “about the ninth hour” (verse 46), “immediately” (verse 48), “when” (verse 50), “at that moment”

(verse 51), “when” (verse 54), “as evening approached” (verse 57), “the next day” (verse 62). In the 65 verses of that one chapter alone, Matthew uses 18 different time markers, being very careful to specify when and where things happened.

Elizabeth: Isn't that good?

Dan: Of course, but then why would he change his practice in chapter 28?

Elizabeth: He doesn't. Chapter 28 also has time markers.

Dan: Exactly, and it is those time markers that we should honor when trying to determine what Matthew considered to be an “element” of his narrative. Notice that he continues his careful practice of setting up each element by starting chapter 28 with “After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week” (that's the NIV) or “Now late on the sabbath day, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week” (that's the American Standard). It doesn't matter which translation we use, or exactly when the event started—Saturday evening or Sunday morning—because we can take that starting place in time as the beginning of his next element of the story. After that, the next time marker happens eight verses later, “as they went” (verse 9), followed by “when they were going” (verse 11), “and when they were assembled” (verse 12), “then” (verse 16), “and when they saw him” (verse 17). Those 20 verses in chapter 28 contain six time markers. Matthew 28 has almost exactly the same ratio of markers to verses (0.30) as chapter 27 (0.28).

Elizabeth: That is a convenient coincidence, but what is your point?

Dan: It's more than a coincidence. It shows consistency. The point is that if we respect the style of writing, Matthew 28:1–8, between time markers, should be considered one element. This honors the context of Matthew's habit of storytelling. It is clear that Matthew intends that “the women” the angel spoke to in 28:5 are the same two women who appear at the start of the scene in 28:1. Any other interpretation stretches credulity and destroys the meaning of the narrative at the level of an element that cannot be dismantled. If it was wrong for Alice and Bob to break into letters and words, it is equally wrong for you to break into Matthew's discrete chunks of story.

Elizabeth: I see your point. But isn't it *possible* that there was an unspecified gap of time in chapter 28?

Dan: I suppose it is possible there was a gap between every single word, but is that reasonable?

Elizabeth: It's not implausible.

Dan: Well, I think it is. Since Matthew was in the undeniable habit of marking elements of his story with exact or relative times, he would have said something like, "After the women went home to sleep and returned the next morning," or "later the next morning" or some other clue to the timing.

Elizabeth: You don't know what he *would* have said.

Dan: Yes, I think we do know. Look at his habit. He's telling us a story, and he has been careful to follow a style not only in the material before 28:1–8, but also in the material that immediately follows. We must conclude, based on what (and how) he has been communicating to the readers, that there is no temporal break in those verses. Any reader can see there is a natural flow of time between connected details in that element. If you break that story apart, you have destroyed the original meaning of the text.

Elizabeth: But no meaning is lost in my narrative.

Dan: Yes, it is. You have turned the careful Matthew into a sloppy storyteller. If Matthew "meant" the element to flow as an unbroken narrative—if he meant the angel sitting on the stone to be talking to the two women mentioned at the beginning of that scene—then his "meaning" is destroyed.

Elizabeth: Who are you to decide where "meaning" resides?

Dan: I didn't just "decide" it. I gave a good reason, in context, for taking Matthew's account as an unbroken element.

Elizabeth: Well, you didn't specify in your challenge that we had to be that restricted with the details.

Dan: Now you are sounding like Alice and Bob.

Elizabeth: Are you saying we cannot insert additional information into any of those stories? I thought your challenge allowed for parenthetical remarks.

Dan: Yes, it does. But you can't just insert them *anywhere*. If you are inventing an element—such as the women going home to sleep and then coming back the next morning—you can't just rip open the text and stick it where you want. Your “parenthesis” does more than simply explain: it alters the obviously seamless temporal flow of the text.

Elizabeth: What if I said Mary scratched her nose as she was listening to the angel?

Dan: That seems harmless.

Elizabeth: I just made it up. It doesn't hurt anything to add it.

Dan: No, it doesn't hurt. But neither does it help.

Elizabeth: So if you accept *that* insertion, why not the insertion of them going home to sleep?

Dan: Because the nose scratching doesn't interfere with the temporal flow. Do you have any evidence that Mary scratched her nose?

Elizabeth: It is not implausible, is it?

Dan: No, not on its face.

Elizabeth: On *her* face.

Dan: Ha. Yes, the nose is on *her* face.

Elizabeth: So how do you decide what is an acceptable insertion?

Dan: Well, as I said, the nose scratching does no violence to the flow of the narrative.

Elizabeth: But the nose scratching would slow things down a bit, and that is a tiny interruption to the flow.

Dan: Not if it was happening as the angel was talking. It would add to the time it takes the story to be *told*, but not to the time it took the story to *happen*. But even if it did add time to the story, it is not a large enough blip to warrant Matthew needing to say something like, “And about the second hour before sunrise, Mary scratched her nose.”

Elizabeth: How do you know at what level Matthew might have felt the need to insert a time marker?

Dan: I think we can reasonably infer such a level, but it is not necessary. Matthew had his own reasons, and whatever they were, we have to consider the narrative

between his markers, by his choice, to be an unbroken element. If Matthew had indeed said, “And about the second hour before sunrise, Mary scratched her nose,” then we would be alerted to the passage of time, and to the introduction of a new element in the story before which we might allow an insertion from another writer. Without such a marker, the introduction of nose scratching would become a part of the element, not a separate element. It wouldn’t obstruct the flow.

Elizabeth: But you do admit that some things *can* be inserted into the text.

Dan: Not anywhere and everywhere. The fact that they *can* be inserted does not mean they *should*. You just made up the idea of Mary scratching her nose.

Elizabeth: Yes. Let’s say I just want to add some color, some human detail to the story. You agree that is not implausible.

Dan: It is not implausible, but it is superfluous and meaningless. If Matthew left it out, why do you feel free to insert it?

Elizabeth: Your challenge allows that possibility.

Dan: Okay, granted. You are free to embellish, as long as you don’t disrupt the storytelling. You could add that a bird fluttered by and the angel blinked and a cat chased the bird and Sook-Kah-Lon was teaching his son how to make arrowheads in Connecticut at that exact moment—you can say anything plausible you want, but you can’t demolish Matthew’s basic story.

Elizabeth: Thanks.

Dan: But that doesn’t help you. Nothing is gained. If Matthew left those things out, then there is no reason for us to insert them.

Elizabeth: But I inferred that the women went home to sleep. I didn’t really invent such a scenario. People do have to sleep. Since I view Matthew 28:1 as happening in the evening, and the angelic message the next morning, after the resurrection, it makes perfect sense to insert a parenthetical explanation that the women went home to sleep.

Dan: Maybe they stayed up all night.

Elizabeth: It is more plausible that they got some sleep. It doesn’t really matter.

Dan: They wouldn’t get much sleep if there was a “violent earthquake.”

Elizabeth: Maybe that is what got them up early the next morning.

Dan: That's quite an alarm clock!

Elizabeth: Yes, now that you mention it.

Dan: And "the women" who woke up are the two women in verse 28:1?

Elizabeth: Yes, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, at least.

Dan: And "the women" that the angel spoke to in 28:5 are the same two women?

Elizabeth: That group includes the same two women, but it is a larger group now. We know this from what the other gospel writers tell us.

Dan: But don't you see the problem? I have shown you that verses 1–8 are to be considered one unbroken element. You can't insert all of that extra material into Matthew's story.

Elizabeth: But it *could* have happened that way.

Dan: No, I don't think so, not taking seriously what and how Matthew wrote. Tell me: at the text level, what happens between verse 1 and 2?

Elizabeth: At the text level? Nothing happens between those verses.

Dan: All we have are the words, "And, behold . . ."

Elizabeth: That's right.

Dan: Matthew has been telling us a story, broken into elements between time markers, and here we have no time marker, just a simple continuation from verse 1 to verse 2. That word "and" is connecting details within a story element. There is no room there for any break in time.

Elizabeth: You don't know that.

Dan: Yes, we do. That's the only sensible way to read those verses.

Elizabeth: You are being inflexible.

Dan: I can be quite flexible, if there is sufficient reason. There is no reason here to halt the story. Look at what it says. Matthew did not start 28:2 with "And later" or "The next morning." Imagine how the original readers or listeners understood the story, this being the only gospel most of them would ever know of. The original text was not broken into verses. (This is the King James Version, but you can see it with any translation): "In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn

toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre. And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men. And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you.”

Elizabeth: I have read that, many times.

Dan: So don't you see the flow? “And behold” immediately follows verse 28:1. Verse 28:2 naturally follows from the setting of the scene.

Elizabeth: Yes, I agree, it does read like an intact narrative. But I still feel free to break into it.

Dan: I don't. And I gave my reasons. What are your reasons?

Elizabeth: My reason comes from what the other gospel writers said.

Dan: And my reason comes from what Matthew himself said, from the text itself, which is much stronger than something someone else might have said years later.

Elizabeth: What Matthew wrote was no less important than what the others wrote.

Dan: That may be true. But when it comes to interpreting Matthew, and Matthew alone, before comparing with the others, and before deciding where his text might be dismantled, we must assume that he knew what he was doing.

Otherwise, anything goes!

Elizabeth: You seem to be disallowing any and all harmonizations.

Dan: No, not in principle. I am open to explanation, context, even embellishment. But in this specific instance (and others) in your narrative, I am not. Your “solution” insults and destroys Matthew's story. Don't you see that?

Elizabeth: I see what you are saying, and I see why you say it, but I think your methodology is too restrictive. I don't think my solution destroys Matthew's

meaning.

Dan: That's what Alice and Bob said. You agree with me that they scrambled the details, but you don't seem to acknowledge that you have done something very similar.

Elizabeth: You can't seriously class me with Alice and Bob!

Dan: In this particular case, yes I can. They deliberately failed to grasp basic principles of interpretation, and so do you. You are smarter than they are, and you retain more meaning than they do, but all of you have stretched the clearly intended meaning of the authors, in different ways.

Elizabeth: Not to the same degree.

Dan: Maybe not to the same degree, but to the same effect.

Elizabeth: How else are we going to reconcile the New Testament if we don't do something like that?

Dan: Well, there you go. You are assuming that the New Testament must be reconcilable.

Elizabeth: Yes, I admit that. The New Testament was written by God, and God is perfect.

Dan: That is also an assumption.

Elizabeth: You don't believe in God?

Dan: That is irrelevant. For objectivity, it is better that I don't. Or whether we believe in God or not, it is better for objectivity that we first assume the texts were produced by human beings.

Elizabeth: Maybe for objectivity it is better if you do believe in God. Maybe the true meaning is hidden from those who are looking at it coldly, blindly.

Dan: That is not objectivity. That is spooky.

Elizabeth: But those stories are talking about God, and spirits, and angels and miracles. You have to assume that the writers are talking about something real.

Dan: We can assume that the writers *believed* they were talking about something real. Or, if they were writing fiction, we can assume that the events are provisionally real, within the story, but not objectively real outside of the story. And I think one

of the many ways we can test the claim that a perfect God exists is to examine the documents this perfect God supposedly gave to us. If they turn out to be contradictory, then they can be treated as the work of humans, not the work of a god.

Elizabeth: Even if they were solely the work of humans, that would not make them imperfect.

Dan: Not necessarily. But after examining their writings, if they turn out to be, in fact, discrepant, we can discard the idea that they were produced by a perfect God.

Elizabeth: But if the writings of those humans are indeed discrepant, that does not prove that a God does not exist. It only means that some scriptures are not really scriptures.

Dan: But you claim that the entire New Testament, including all of the resurrection accounts we are discussing, were produced by your perfect God.

Elizabeth: But God used humans to tell his message.

Dan: You want to have your cake and eat it too! God is perfect, but it is not his fault if there are mistakes in his holy scripture.

Elizabeth: I think we can assume that God would know the best way to communicate his message.

Dan: If there is a God.

Elizabeth: That's my assumption.

Dan: And my assumption is that we agree that those documents were written by human beings.

Elizabeth: If Jesus rose from the dead, then that is strong evidence for a God.

Dan: Maybe not. If it really happened (which I doubt), then it would be strong evidence for a miracle, or for an as-yet not understood aspect of the natural world, but not necessarily for a God. In my other writings I show that there are much more likely nonsupernatural explanations for the disciples' belief in the resurrection.

Elizabeth: That's outside the bounds of your Easter Challenge. But I do see that if you don't believe in God, you are forced to find a natural explanation.

Dan: Of course, and I take that as a compliment, but that's not the point I'm trying to

make. Do you agree that the documents were written by humans?

Elizabeth: Yes, but they were inspired by God.

Dan: Do you agree that humans make mistakes?

Elizabeth: Humans *can* make mistakes, but not if they are inspired by God.

Dan: Can a human being be mistaken in his belief that he is inspired by God?

Elizabeth: It happens all the time.

Dan: Then what makes those particular writers exempt? Why are they special and everyone else is not?

Elizabeth: I don't think I need to answer that question. God can communicate his message any way he chooses. Besides, your challenge does not ask us to prove the story.

Dan: I know that, but I'm just trying to get you to see that we can look at the documents as if they were merely produced by fallible human beings, not limiting ourselves to the requirement that they be perfect.

Elizabeth: Well, even if they had some minor imperfections, that would not mean the total, unified message of scripture is compromised.

Dan: But it *could* mean that their stories are sometimes contradictory.

Elizabeth: Possibly, to a small degree.

Dan: And who draws the line where that "small degree" becomes a large degree?

Elizabeth: If, after reading the whole thing, we "get" the message, then the small discrepancies can be ignored. I'm sure you do that when you read novels, or letters from your friends. You don't force them into a straitjacket of required perfection.

Dan: But it seems that is exactly what you are doing in reverse. You are not allowing the writers to make mistakes.

Elizabeth: Not on major things.

Dan: So you assume, up front, that the biblical writers cannot disagree on what you consider to be "major things."

Elizabeth: Yes, I make that assumption. I have many other reasons for believing in God and trusting his message.

Dan: That's beside the point of the challenge, though it might touch on your bias, your eagerness not to see those writings as anything more than the product of eager, perhaps sincere, but nevertheless fallible human beings.

Elizabeth: And what about *your* bias?

Dan: My bias is proudly naturalistic. I see no evidence for the supernatural. But I am willing to change my mind, if there is evidence.

Elizabeth: And if I show you that the resurrection stories are not discrepant, then wouldn't that be evidence toward the claim that there is a supernatural world?

Dan: Yes, but it would be evidence in the same way that Lucky Charms is evidence for leprechauns. It would be "evidence" that demands a verdict, but a jury is free to examine whether the charge is beyond a "reasonable doubt."

Elizabeth: But you admit that it would be evidence.

Dan: Yes. But we're not there yet. In order for your evidence to be admissible, you have to produce a coherent, noncontradictory, plausible version of it.

Elizabeth: And that is the point of your Easter Challenge. I understand. So the only way for us to proceed is to assume that we are both naturalists, simply looking at the details of the stories themselves, on their own merits.

Dan: Yes. That's all I was trying to say. So, in that framework, what do you think of my clarification of the word "detail" that shows that passages such as Matthew 28:1-8 are an intact, unbreakable element of the story?

Elizabeth: I'll have to think about that.

Dan: Good.

Part 2

In Part 1, I wanted to address some things that may not necessarily reflect your exact position—I don't want to attack a straw man—but I think Elizabeth's views are close to yours, so I'm sure we're in the ballpark. There were many issues covered, but the main point is to clarify what I consider to be an unbreakable "detail" or "element," showing why we must disallow much of your Easter Answer. If you disagree, you will have to come up with stronger evidence or reasoning than I have presented. I suppose you might find some scholars who agree with you, but then you will be conceding the importance of scholarly opinion, thereby allowing me to strengthen my criticisms by quoting scholarship that finds the resurrection stories to be incompatible. You have already agreed that there is much scholarship that supports my position.

Before we get to the specifics of your Easter Answer, let me crystallize some general principles discussed above.

Who is the authority?

How do I know what the authors intended to say? How do you know it? In order to be qualified to interpret the New Testament, is it necessary to have a Ph.D. in Greek, ancient history and theology? Are the only real authorities those who have graduated from a seminary? If that is true, then the pews of churches around the world will have to be emptied. If that is true, then those pews are merely filled with passive recipients of "truth" handed to them from their priests and pastors. They may as well not read the bible because, not being properly trained experts, they are going to get it wrong. Regardless of how those uneducated and unsophisticated believers might try to interpret the New Testament, are we going to tell them that they should not even try, that they should leave it to the pros?

I don't think so, and neither do you. If you ask me who is the authority, I will reply "I am." And "you are." And "they are." Neither you nor I are professional scholars,

yet we both feel qualified to read and understand what the bible tells us. Everyone who reads the book that God supposedly gave to *all* of us is the authority. Just as in a court of law, when the “experts” on both sides of a case disagree, the judge will often appeal to the hypothetical “reasonable observer,” so in the court of biblical understanding, we should appeal to the “average reader.” In a jury trial, the verdict is not handed down by the experts, but by a pool of people who represent, more or less, a common body of peers, ideally a group of independent, objective observers who have no conflict of interest in the case. None of the attorneys or their expert witnesses are allowed to vote with the jury. (Jury tampering is a crime.) Your mother would not be allowed to sit on a jury in a trial in which you are the defendant, nor would any of the disciples be allowed a vote in the trial of Jesus. Experts can testify, attorneys can argue, judges can preside, but the simple jury decides the verdict.

This principle should be all the more forceful to you, I think, since you do believe in a God. If there is indeed a loving, all-knowing, all-powerful deity who wants to communicate his message of utmost importance to “all the world,” then he would have done it, should have done it, in a way that any person picking it up—any “reasonable observer” or “jury of peers” or “average reader”—would be able to understand it. I am certain you do not preach that Jesus died solely for scholars.

As a pastor, I am sure you ask your congregation to “read the bible for yourself.” You don’t require them to “take my word for it.” You trust that your God was big enough and good enough to deliver his message straight to them, without need of intermediaries. His word should be accessible to all of us, without need of an expert to explain it.

If that is not true, then God did a sloppy, irresponsible job. Since I don’t believe in God, I see evidence for this fact in the multitudinous contentious denominations and sects, most disagreeing with each other, each one able to open the bible and prove to the others that their theology or interpretation is correct while the others are wrong. In my book *Godless* I point out: Paul wrote that God is not the author of confusion, but can you think of a single book that has caused more confusion than the bible? In any event, I am not presenting this fact as evidence against your particular interpretation,

your Easter Answer. I am only using the fact of the highly divisive fragmented “body of Christ” to show that we may as well trust our own judgment and common sense, as “average readers,” because the authorities are not doing any better.

Of course, since most of us are not fluent in koine Greek, we must rely on translators. Translators are a special breed of authorities, with immense responsibility, yet we often see that they disagree with each other. (You gave a couple of examples of this yourself.) When it comes to the actual reading, each person has to choose a translator (actively or passively), and once having done that, to use their own judgment. If you believe that your all-loving, all-powerful God is capable of ensuring that his message is preserved and uncorrupted, then you can’t fault non-scholar believers for trusting that the version they hold in their hands is accurately representing what God wanted to tell them. If you do doubt it, then you confirm my claim that God (if he exists) did not care enough to ensure that his crucial message be handed to readers in a manner that they could properly understand it.

It is wonderful to be informed by scholarship. Much important work is being done by people who have dedicated their lives to understanding the ancient languages, cultures and religions. In fact, many readers loosen their rigid, simplistic interpretation of the bible after they have been informed by such scholarship. But ultimately, we all have to decide for ourselves what those scriptures mean, otherwise the bible is not for everyone.

By the way, I should mention something that you probably agree with. Believers are not more qualified to understand the bible than nonbelievers. If that were true, no nonbeliever could ever convert by reading the bible. No nonbeliever would have the freedom to reject the message of the New Testament. I often tell Christian students who show up at my campus events that my freedom to say “No” actually underscores their freedom to say “Yes.” They should welcome the fact that there are atheists and skeptics, because if everyone had to say “Yes,” there would be no free will involved (if you believe in free will). And if they say that the *rejection* of Christ is based on a faulty understanding or bias, why I can’t I say the same thing about the *acceptance* of Christ?

What is each author telling us?

Each story should first be understood on its own merits. Before we add information to one account from another, we must be clear what each account is saying, all by itself, independent of the others. That just seems sensible. “What is *this* story telling us?” Two different accounts, after all, are not one account, even if they are thought to be telling the same story. We can’t assume, before we look at them, that they must not be contradictory. If two accounts are indeed contradictory, the only way to know it is to learn what each of them says, independent of the other, and then compare them. If we don’t do that first step, at least, then we can’t say either way whether they are contradictory or not. I think you agree with this basic sensible principle.

Each of the gospels was intended to stand alone. Very few (if any) of the early readers and listeners had access to all of the accounts. Matthew and Luke, it appears, had access to Mark and to another lost source, but they did not have access to each other’s work. And, of course, John was written much later. It wasn’t until the end of the second century that some Christians were able to bring the four canonical gospels together in one place. There were many other gospels, including the Gospel of Peter, Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Judas, Gospel of the Hebrews, etc., but around the year 180 was when the names of the gospels that you accept were fixed. The original gospels were read and heard by groups of people in nearly complete isolation from each other.

That means that in order to know what Matthew meant, or Mark meant, we have to read them in isolation, uninfluenced by the others, just as the original readers and hearers got them. This doesn’t mean we can’t later amplify or clarify details, but it does mean we can’t wantonly tear them apart in order to “make them fit” with the others. Any additions or insertions have to be very cautiously and conservatively made, with heavy qualifications.

I see that you may not agree that this principle can be applied, should be applied, by the “average reader.” But I assumed that anyone reading my Easter Challenge would naturally accept this sensible principle (just as we assumed that the New

Testament cannot be anagrammed). The scholars accept this principle, and so do most common readers. As I will explain below, for example, any average reader can see that Matthew meant for Galilee to be the location of the first (and only) post-resurrection appearance to the disciples.

Where can we break up the text?

If a narrative appears to be relating a contiguous element of a story between time markers, we should take it at face value as happening all within the same time period, assuming it to be an unbroken detail of the story, unless there is very compelling evidence to the contrary. Simply interleaving data from another account for no other reason than that it helps to reconcile a contradiction is not a compelling justification. In fact, that would be merely begging the question, making it impossible to acknowledge a contradiction, if one indeed exists. This principle seems sensible. It's how we read anything. I suspect you agree, though not as strongly as I do. If you are going to disagree, then you should have a good reason, something other than "I can make things fit."

This is why I spent so much time with Alice, Bob, and Elizabeth. Alice and Bob thought they could "make things fit." Elizabeth, who outwardly agrees with my criticisms of Alice and Bob, also thinks she can "make things fit." But she—like you, I suspect—does not agree with my usage of "detail." This boils down to a basic misunderstanding, and I accept some of the fault. Seeing what you wrote, I now realize I could have been more explicit, but as I told Alice, "I didn't think that was necessary." I could have said: "Don't anagram the New Testament," but that never occurred to me. I could have said: "Don't break a contiguous element of a narrative into separate chunks of time," but that never occurred to me either. I thought that you, like most readers, would be able to accept what the author is telling us within that author's framework before trying to inject material from another author, or from your imagination. As I told Elizabeth, I am not opposed to inserting or interleaving details—that is good history. I am opposed, as you should be, to making those

insertions at points where the original author clearly meant there to be no break.

I already explained what I think you did wrong with Matthew 28:1–8, but I want to take a broader view to point out something that absolutely astounds me, something that is so obvious that I never imagined it would have to be pointed out. As we read Matthew, it is patently clear that he intended the first post-resurrection appearance to be in Galilee. When I read your answer, I was surprised at how nonchalantly you transport this first visit into the imprecise future. It's as if you haven't really read Matthew at all. I suppose I need to explain, even though I am certain you have read this many times. Notice how strongly Matthew emphasizes Galilee—he hammers us with it four times.

Galilee #1. In Matthew 26, at the Mount of Olives right after the Last Supper, Jesus was predicting the immediate future to his disciples. I know this occurs before, or outside, the resurrection account, so it is technically not part of the Easter Challenge, but it is extremely close to the resurrection, connected by the next relevant chapter, and exquisitely relevant to what follows because it predicts what follows. This is what “context” means, after all. Jesus had told his disciples earlier in that chapter that he would be betrayed and crucified, then on the Mount of Olives predicted that he would rise from the dead. In verse 26:32 he says: “But after I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee.” Now admittedly, he did not use the word “first.” He did not say, “I will go before you into Galilee where you will see me for the first time.” He didn't have to say that. He only tells us about one post-resurrection meeting, so there was no reason to say “first meeting.” The one-and-only meeting is obviously the first meeting, and saying “first” would be pointless. It is clear that “after I am risen again, I will go before you” connects those events with no other time marker or indication of a passage of time. He does not mention the forty days or any of the post-resurrection appearances that the other gospel writers relate. He tells it simply: “After I come back to life I will go ahead of you to Galilee.”

Galilee #2. Now look at what the angel told the women after the resurrection in Matthew 28:5–7: “Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He

is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you.” That’s it. That’s Matthew’s entire message of God through the angel to the women: “Jesus is risen. He’s not here. Tell his disciples he is going to Galilee, and there you will see him.”

Do you see that? Jesus predicted he would rise and go before them to Galilee, then the angel affirmed that prediction, telling the women that he had risen and was going before them to Galilee. Pretty straightforward. Notice that the angel said it in the present tense: “he goeth” (KJV, ASV), “is going” (NKJV, NIV, NASB). The angel told the women that by the time the disciples got the message, Jesus would be heading for Galilee before them. (To treat this verb as a rough future tense, as some translators have attempted, would be completely ad hoc.)

Galilee #3. Then Jesus himself appears to the women, and here is the entirety of what he said to them: “Be not afraid: go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me.” (28:10) That’s his whole message! He is reaffirming what he said the night of the Last Supper, and what the angel told the women that morning, that he was heading for Galilee and they would see him there.

Galilee #4. And finally, the disciples (who by now most certainly got the message) do as they were told: “Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them. And when they saw him, they worshipped him: but some doubted.” (Matthew 28:16) Notice that although there is a time marker here, it is relative. Matthew didn’t say, “Jesus told his disciples to meet him in Galilee and on the sixth hour of the second day of the third week after that, they went up there to meet him.” Matthew says “Then.” This is clearly right away, not days or weeks later.

If you doubt this (I’m sure you do, based on what you wrote), then back up and look at Matthew’s whole story, in context. He uses the word “Galilee” four times: Galilee, Galilee, Galilee, Galilee—Jesus said it to the disciples, the angel said it to the women, Jesus said it to the women, then the disciples went to Galilee to meet Jesus. Ignoring, for the moment, what any of the other writers may have written, we have to

determine what Matthew meant to say: the appearance of Jesus to his disciples in Galilee was the first post-mortem appearance. Anyone who is reading Matthew, and Matthew alone, can come to no other conclusion. If that is not what really happened—if Galilee was not the first appearance—then Matthew has grossly deceived his readers.

Notice, by the way, that in Luke's Easter story we also have a mention of Galilee, but it is totally different. The angels say, "He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee, Saying, The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again. And they remembered his words." Luke does not tell us anything about an appearance in Galilee. Luke has the first appearance on the road to Emmaus and later that night in Jerusalem—no mention of a meeting in Galilee. The appearance of "Galilee" in the angelic message looks like Luke garbled the story. Don't you find this a bit odd? Luke, like Matthew, should be allowed to stand on his own, but remember, each of these gospels was *meant* to do exactly that. As I said above, before we try to stitch them together, we must determine what each of them intended independently, as if there were no others. If harmonizing destroys what any of the authors actually intended (not just to scholars, but to the common reader), then it comes at too great a cost.

Some scholars have suggested, somewhat convincingly, that the passion narratives were originally not read from a text, but presented as plays around the country, since most people could not read. Some towns could afford a larger cast, therefore having more than one woman or more than one angel at the tomb. In fact, some of the narratives appear to be scripts, as if they were set on a stage. If someone like Luke was influenced by watching one of these passion plays, then he indeed might have heard the "angel" say words to the women (or woman) such as "Jesus said something about Galilee," and later reconstructed the scene in a garbled fashion.

And in case there is any lingering doubt (a good word to use here) that Matthew intended Galilee to be the location of the first appearance, notice that he tells us that when that meeting took place, "they worshipped him: but some doubted." (28:17) If the appearance in Galilee were just one more encounter, weeks later, after many other

previous meetings, then why would some of the disciples have doubted? These were men who believed in miracles. They supposedly saw Jesus perform many impossible feats. They heard him predict his own resurrection. They saw his transfiguration with Moses and Elijah. They felt the earthquakes. If Galilee were a subsequent appearance, then they had already seen Jesus alive after his death. They saw him materialize out of thin air, passing through a solid door. They touched him and ate food with him. So, why did “some doubt”? Were they *that* stupid? Clearly, any average reader can see that Matthew intended the first meeting to be in Galilee.

This is a prime example of what is wrong with your Easter Answer. I am guessing that you will object that this is irrelevant, that regardless of how it *looks*, you have actually produced a plausible narrative that does not omit a single detail. But remember that Alice and Bob said the same thing: they insisted that they left nothing out. I replied that that is technically true, but since they dismantled the original words or sentences, they actually did leave things out. They omitted details by destroying them. Any average reader can see that you have destroyed, and therefore omitted, Matthew’s claim that the Galilee meeting was the first post-resurrection appearance. You do not respect what Matthew wrote, independent of the others.

You have failed to meet the conditions of the challenge.

I think it might help you to see the problem if you will turn to pages 10–12 of your book, your “Timeline, Easter to the Ascension.” It should be staring you in the face. Notice that through Easter Sunday, you show us the day and the time for everything the Gospel writers (not Paul) relate, but after that it gets vague. You do show “Morning” for John 21:1–25, but that happens on an unspecified day (“about two weeks after Easter,” you guess) and John is the last gospel written, not one of the synoptics. Do you see how you have written “Time?” in all those blanks? The reason you don’t know the time for Matthew’s story of the Galilean visit in 28:16–20 (“about three weeks after Easter,” you speculate) is because that scene is actually reported in the same passage (same context) that the Easter Sunday story is told. You are asking us to believe that Matthew, after carefully setting his narrative within a clear time and place, suddenly without warning, intended his readers to make a three-week jump to

some vague, unspecified time in the future? That stretches credulity so much that I have to say, “No way!”

The only time marker you can give us in that chart after Sunday is “Forty days after Easter,” and only for Acts, and only for the day, not the time of day. (As we have seen, it would be irresponsible to lump Matthew’s account with the “final appearance” reported in Acts. We will also see below that this is true with Luke’s gospel.) If Luke had not reported those forty days in Acts, your timeline would be entirely different. If we just had the gospels (and not those few verses in Acts), everyone would agree that Matthew and Luke happened on Sunday, and we could even make better estimates of the times of day. It makes much more sense to think somebody got something wrong. Otherwise, your solution would be less vague, and your chart would have those time indicators that the gospel writers were in the consistent habit of giving us.

Since we have jumped over to Luke, let’s apply our principles to his narrative as well. Luke’s style is different, but like Matthew, he also inserts time markers into his narrative. Like we did with Matthew, we can back up and get a running start to see Luke’s style with marking time: “Now the feast of unleavened bread drew nigh” (22:1); “Then” (22:3); “Then came the day of unleavened bread” (22:7); “and when the hour was come” (22:14); “when he was at the place” (22:40); “and when he rose up” (22:45); “and while he yet spake” (22:47); “Then” (22:52); “Then” (22:54); “And when they had kindled a fire” (22:55); “after a little while” (22:58); “and about the space of one hour after” (22:59); “and when” (22:64); “and as soon as it was day” (22:66); “Then” (22:70); “then” (23:4); “when” (23:6); “as soon as” (23:7); “and when” (23:8); “then” (23:9); “And the same day” (23:12); “when he had called together the chief priests” (23:13); “as they led him away” (23:26); “when they were come to the place” (23:33); “Then” (23:34); “and it was about the sixth hour” (23:44); “until the ninth hour” (23:44); “now when” (23:47); “and that day was the preparation and the Sabbath drew on” (23:54). That’s 29 time markers in 127 verses, a rate of 0.23, a little bit lower than Matthew’s rate.

In chapter 24, the Easter morning story, we have “Now upon the first day of the week, very early in the morning” (24:1); “and it came to pass, as they were much

perplexed thereabouts” (24:4); “and as they were afraid” (24:5); “Then” (24:12); “that same day” (24:13); “while they communed together” (24:15); “then” (24:25); “it is toward evening” (24:29); “as he sat at meat” (24:30); “and they rose up the same hour” (24:33); “as they thus spoke” (24:36); “when he had thus spoken” (24:40); “while he blessed them” (24:51); and “continually” (24:53). That’s a rate of 0.26, very close to the 0.23 of the previous two chapters. (This ratio, by the way, is nonscientific, since it depends on where verses are broken and on exact-versus-relative time markers. But it is interesting to see that each writer has a pretty regular style of marking time, measured by this crude yet consistent method.)

Notice that there is no time marker between Luke 24:49 and 24:50. As with Matthew 28:1–2, the transition between Luke 24:49–50 is the word “And.” If there were supposed to be a break of 40 days between those two verses, Luke, following his style of storytelling with careful time markers, would have indicated it in some way. Since there is no gap there, we must conclude, reading Luke alone (before trying to harmonize with Acts) that the entire 24th chapter happened “upon the first day of the week,” as he sets up the story. Breaking into that element of the story at that point does damage to Luke’s text. It destroys (therefore omits) a detail. It turns Luke into a deceiver.

Notice also that in Luke Jesus tells the disciples, before he leads them out to Bethany, to stay in Jerusalem until the Day of Pentecost. (24:49). If they stayed in Jerusalem for 50 days, then there was no way they could have traveled up for Matthew’s reported appearance in Galilee (which Luke does not mention, obviously, since he would be contradicting himself), especially if Jesus levitated into the clouds after only 40 days.

Don’t you see that Matthew and Luke are telling *different* stories? Forcing them together destroys the original intention, not to the same degree as Alice’s anagramming or Bob’s word swapping, but nevertheless to an irreparable degree. When I issued the Easter Challenge, I was confident that any reader, after comparing what each of the narratives says, would clearly see their internal integrity, and their intended meaning, not allowing elements to be torn to pieces. I admit that you, like Alice and Bob, are

very creative and industrious, but I have to reject your solution, not because I don't believe the story, but because of the logical reasons underlying a sensible methodology of interpretation that disallow the wild approach you are taking.

And please don't think I am saying you cannot do any interleaving or explaining. I am only saying you are doing it at unacceptable places in the text. Nor am I saying the narratives are all internally inconsistent—I think, for the most part, that each of the gospel writers does tell a consistent, if not totally plausible, story. But they are telling consistently *different* stories.

You put a lot of work into supporting your claim that Matthew 28:1 happened the evening before the resurrection, and you have probably noticed that I have not contested this claim. If I thought it were important, I might argue that the words could be taken either way, as you point out. I might remind you that scholars and translators disagree about whether “dawning” might actually refer to “evening,” as you admit. But I think such an argument is pointless, and, besides, if you are right, it actually weakens your case. I am happy to concede a point that strengthens my criticism. If Matthew has the women visiting the tomb the evening before, then that creates an even *greater* disagreement among the gospels than if it were simply a different time the next morning. Remember, Matthew 28:1–8 is a discrete, unbreakable element of Matthew's story. Whether it happened on Saturday or Sunday, it all happened together. Your “solution” simply digs a deeper hole. (I am surprised you did not take the approach—perhaps you considered it and rejected it—as some have done, of trying to render Matthew 28:2 in the past perfect, transporting the earthquake and rolling stone back in time before the women's visit. But since you didn't bring it up, we don't have to deal with it. I suppose you figure that moving 28:1 back to Saturday and breaking the story apart before 28:2 accomplishes something better, making the pluperfect ploy pointless.)

Part 3

At this point I have made my major critiques of your Easter Answer. Since you have indeed omitted at least one detail from the stories, your answer fails. It is more than that, of course, and below I will show instances where you also failed to integrate elements into a single narrative, but I think you agree that all I need is to produce at least one example of your failing to meet the conditions. Though technically there is no more that needs to be said, I want to go through your Easter Answer, making various observations, some more relevant than others.

On page 14 you state that “Barker placed an atheist sign next to a nativity scene in the Washington State Capitol Building, something that caused quite a stir.” That is mainly true, but a bit misleading. It was the state of Washington that decided where to place our atheist sign. We did not want our sign there at all, but were using it to protest the intrusion of the nativity scene. That capitol building had never before been used as a public forum for such displays. The year before, a Christian man had asked to place a nativity scene in the capitol rotunda during December, and the state turned him down, claiming that that secular setting was not the place for religious or anti-religious messages. He was welcome to use other public forums, such as a park (with a permit), but the state rightly decided that the capitol should respect the separation of church and state. He sued the state (with the help of a right-wing Christian legal organization from out of state), and the state caved-in, settled, and allowed the nativity scene. When some of our members in Washington State heard about this, they were dismayed that their secular capitol building was being used to promote religion, so they asked the Freedom From Religion Foundation to help them complain, and to insist that if there were religious messages, there should also be alternative points of view in that (now) “public forum.” Nonbelievers, after all, make up at least 15% of the nation. Millions of good Americans do not believe in God or celebrate the Christian nativity. The state should not be allowed to appear as if it were endorsing one religion over another, or over nonreligion. We asked the state for a permit to display our Winter Solstice sign, and

after they looked over the application (which included the wording), they properly granted us a permit, and told us where we could place the sign. We told the media that our atheist sign does not belong in a state capitol, but as long as there are religious messages, our protest should be allowed as well. Our sign championed reason and the Winter Solstice (the real reason for the season), but it was erected to make a point. The local evening news filmed me unveiling and reading the sign (which the state had decided to place next to the nativity scene), and when Bill O'Reilly saw that footage, he ran it on his national TV show, causing quite a ruckus. Hundreds of Christians showed up to protest. Our sign was stolen, and later recovered, bent and damaged. Many religious groups then requested permits to erect their own displays, some calling us atheists "fools." Soon the capitol became a circus, with too many signs and displays. The Christians held a huge rally outside the capitol, complaining with bullhorns that we atheists were trying to take away their freedoms, and calling us names. Bill O'Reilly asked his national audience to flood the governor's office with complaints, saying our sign should go but the nativity scene should stay, but the state held firm. (On the other hand, our office was flooded with calls and emails from people who had never heard about us, wanting to join our group. Some of them said, "Any group that Bill O'Reilly hates is a group I want to join!" We owe Bill O'Reilly a huge debt of gratitude.) After the requests for permits kept coming in to the state—including a display honoring the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and Rev. Fred Phelps' placard spewing bigotry not just against us and homosexuals, but against all other Christians who do not share his narrow world view (which is 99.99% of all Christians, including you)—they decided to put a moratorium on further permits. The last we heard, the state is going to disallow such displays in the capitol building, which is fine with us. That is a victory for state/church separation. If the religious group sues again, the state will have plenty of evidence to present to the court that religion is indeed divisive, and that religion and government should be separate. I don't know what you think about state/church separation, but I assume you agree that this wonderful American principle of governmental neutrality is good for all of us.

Also on page 14 you suggest that "Barker's Easter Challenge is intended to pierce

the heart of the Christian faith with a deadly wound.” That is not true. It is indeed true that I and other skeptics have “pierced the heart of the Christian faith with a deadly wound,” but this is not due to the Easter Challenge. There are many believing Christians who agree with me that the resurrection stories are hopelessly discrepant yet this presents no threat to their faith. Many liberal Christians accept the fact that there is mythology, metaphor, exaggeration, discrepancy, and outright deception in the bible, yet they overlook these human problems, finding deep meaning in the Christian faith in spite of them. To these believers, my Easter Challenge is not a “deadly wound” at all. It is only a certain type of conservative, inerrantist Christian such as yourself who might feel threatened by the Easter Challenge. And if you are interested in knowing how I truly “pierce the heart” of the Christian faith, including the resurrection claims, see my new book *Godless: How An Evangelical Preacher Became One of America’s Leading Atheists*. The resurrection contradictions are only a very tiny part of the whole criticism. My chapter, “Did Jesus Really Rise From The Dead?”, devotes much more space to the myth and legend hypotheses than to the internal coherence of the narratives.

On page 20 you accuse Ralph Nielsen of being “spiritually blind.” That is an outrageously inappropriate thing to say in a scholarly argument, not because it is necessarily false (if such an accusation is even testable—since there is no such thing a “spirit,” we are all technically “spiritually blind,” even you), but because it is unkind and *ad hominem*. Denigrating your opponent is not the way to conduct a dialogue. Nielsen might be mistaken. He might be arrogant. (I have met him, and I doubt he is arrogant.) He might be deliberately deceitful (again, I doubt this). But to say that he is “spiritually blind” is to classify him as something less than a true human being. It puts you and your followers into a superior, master caste. What if I were to say, “Stephen Kingsley is a nice guy (though intellectually retarded)”? That would amount to a blanket dismissal of anything and everything you could possibly say: I would be right, and you would be always wrong, since you are are a sick outsider, and I am a healthy insider. Such unkind comments are superfluous if you have evidence and reason. That remark you made about Ralph betrays an underlying intolerance and lack of charity. And if you reply that you truly believe it because the bible says it, then all the more reason to

reject the bible for its rude dismissal of sincere, “nice” (as you put it) human beings. If I were to treat you like that, you would be justified in never talking with me again. No further rational or moral dialogue is possible with someone you consider to be “spiritually blind.”

And what exactly does that mean? How can you tell if someone is “spiritually blind”? Is there an optic nerve that connects to the “spirit”? Is there a damaged cognitive function in the occipital lobe that severs us from the perception of the “spirit world”? And what exactly is a “spirit”? No one has ever defined the word “spirit” in terms that tell us what it *is*, only in terms that tell us what it is *not*, such as “intangible,” or “noncorporeal,” or “nonphysical essence,” or “metaphysical entity,” and so on. How do you measure a “spirit”? I think what you mean when you say “spiritually blind” is simply “not seeing things my way.” There is nothing that you have that Ralph or I or any other skeptic lacks. We have eyes, ears and brains as good as yours. There are many Christians who think *you* are “spiritually blind.” The phrase means nothing, so it is nothing more than a put-down. If you had said Ralph was “intellectually misinformed” or “methodologically flawed,” that would mean something real, and we could get a grip on how to “solve” Ralph’s problem, allowing Ralph to rebut whatever argument you present for your accusation. But saying we skeptics are “spiritually blind” removes from the debate any hope of addressability and allows you to retreat to some special realm where only you believers (like the Pythagoreans or the Sufis) have access to true knowledge.

On page 22 you inadvertently uncovered another contradiction, without seeming to know it. You write: “When the Pharisees demanded a sign of Jesus, he replied by saying the only sign he would give them was his resurrection from the dead (Mt. 12:38–40).” Here is what Matthew actually says there: “But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” Do you see the problem? Jesus predicted he would be buried “three days and three nights.” I agree with you that we might count Friday afternoon to early

Sunday morning as three days, if we allow for the Jewish custom (as you say) of counting part of a day as a whole day. (This does seem a bit imprecise. Would the 25 hours between 30 minutes before sundown and 30 minutes after sundown the next day be counted as three days? Or would the 60 minutes spanning a half hour both sides of sunset on the same evening be counted as two days?) Assuming this is true (and I am not arguing), this would make those approximately 32 hours Jesus was in the tomb (less than a day and a half) count for “three days.” But in Matthew 12:38–40, Jesus said it would be “three days and *three nights*.” There is no possible way you can count three nights over that period. At most, your Easter Answer describes a night and a half. Let’s put aside the absurdity of a man remaining alive half a week inside a whale, and the insult of accusing those of us who request evidence (“seek for a sign”) of being “evil and adulterous.” (Why would adultery have anything to do with evidence?) Matthew himself belies the prophecy by reporting that Jesus was “in the heart of the earth” only two nights, if the resurrection is indeed the “sign” Jesus was talking about. The resurrection reported by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, then, could *not* have been the fulfillment, the “sign” Jesus was offering. If it was, then we have a clear contradiction.

On page 22 you assert that Nero tried to blame Christians for the fires in Rome, but this is dubious history. Scholars generally agree that Nero did not burn Rome, and there is even less evidence that there was a group of Christians in Rome at that time, nor is there any other historical evidence that Nero persecuted Christians (even if they *were* in Rome at the time). I discuss this in my book, *Godless*. On the same page you state: “It is unlikely that the early faith could have grown so quickly unless it were spread by those who had reason to be convinced and were willing to suffer for their cause.” But that is both true and untrue, and irrelevant. Many other religions spread just as quickly. Look at Mormonism—they had martyrs too. Look at Islam—Muslims have long been fervent evangelists, and martyrs, and have produced an impressively huge world religion, all in a relatively brief period of time. All we need is a belief, not a historical fact, for a religion to grow rapidly. Besides, the growth of early Christianity was not that fast. It didn’t really get off the ground until the 2nd century, and was not firmly established until the beginning of the 4th century, under Constantine.

On the same page, and following, you write: “In addition to numerous non-biblical historical references and sources for early Christianity, best of all we have the direct written testimony handed down to us through the ages of perhaps four eyewitnesses (the Gospels bearing the names of Matthew and John, the testimony of Paul, and the resurrection affirmations found in I Peter), plus the second-hand written reports penned by the writers of Mark and Luke.” First, I want to compliment you for saying “writers of.” You acknowledge that those names were added much later, and that we really don’t know who penned those documents. (The writer of Matthew, after all, refers to “Matthew” in the third person.) But I have to caution you not to claim “numerous non-biblical historical references and sources for early Christianity.” In my book, *Godless*, I go into great detail showing that there was not a single first-century historical reference to any of the stories outside of the New Testament. What we have are 2nd-century (and later) 2nd- and 3rd-hand reports that are often inaccurate, fuzzy, and unreliable, some just passing on what they heard others say. And *none* of them mention “Jesus.” Some of them mention a “Christ,” and others a “wise king,” and so on. But none mention “Jesus.”

And why would you say Paul was a direct witness? He was not part of the resurrection stories. He never claimed to have met Jesus personally. His “appearance” was visionary, years after Jesus supposedly died and ascended. He never talked with Jesus or saw him perform any deeds. In fact, in Galatians, Paul, describing his “appearance,” says that God “revealed his son in me.” That is a inner (“in me”) spiritual experience, not a flesh-and-blood “direct witness” of Jesus. In Paul’s letters, he never quotes anything Jesus said in the gospels (except to repeat the liturgical Last Supper formula), never mentions a single deed of Jesus, and sometimes directly contradicts Jesus. Paul was definitely not a direct witness. The “silence of Paul” is one of those thorny problems that trouble students of the historicity of Jesus. (I discuss all this in much greater detail in my book.)

On page 25, I appreciate how you say: “Even if the accounts are assumed fictional it’s yet possible to fairly judge the consistency of the writings.” I see that you understand that my Easter Challenge (in itself) is not overreaching. We assume that Harry Potter is

fictional though we admire J. K. Rowling for offering us a consistent and coherent narrative. (And if you think wizardry and magic are what yank it into the realm of fiction, you understand how we skeptics feel about the bible.) And you are right, it is quite possible to fairly judge the consistency, and the judgment quite fairly comes out negative, as we have seen.

On page 26, you also properly ask for fair rules. Speaking of the forty-day gap between Luke 24:49 and 24:50, you write: “To prove contradiction in this case (and numerous others in the resurrection accounts) critics must prove the existence of a rule that prevents the Gospels from being added together to form a more complete picture.” I have provided you with that fair rule, as we saw above.

At the bottom of the page you write: “Our method then requires us to identify each event clearly in each account, separate it from its native source, and subject it to the influence of the other pieces. Once the pieces are distinguished, it’s simply a matter of determining where each belongs in the chronology.” You are right that we need to identify “each event,” but you are wrong to insist that we should “separate if from its native source.” As I have shown above, you have “separated” the stories into “each event” at inappropriate places. That is why so many scholars have told you that the accounts cannot be reconciled. I have already stressed that if we do allow letter or word or sentence breaking, or any other breaking at any place we want, then anything goes. We do need fair rules—without them there would never be a contradiction under the sun.

Your entire Chapter Three seems beside the point, as I have already pointed out. I have asked a number of scholars to comment, and I get different answers, as you do. Some are adamant that Matthew 28:1 happened on Easter Sunday morning. (Richard Carrier says there is “no wiggle room” here, if I understand him. [*See note at end]) Other bible scholars, such as Hector Avalos whom I respect and admire, agree with you that it could indeed have been Saturday evening, though they insist that no side should be dogmatic about it. So, I am not being dogmatic either. I only suggest that the “average reader” throughout history has seemed to think those two women in Matthew 28 visited the tomb on Easter Sunday morning. But notice what you say on

page 36: “It seems the writer of Matthew went to *great lengths* with two phrases to let the reader know that . . .” (Emphasis mine). Those two temporal phrases in Matthew 28:1 hardly seem like “great lengths.” He was using a basic time marker. It is you who thinks it was “great lengths” because you yourself had to go to “great lengths” to make your point. It is not a bad point, but I think you are claiming too much. If it can be said that Matthew went to “great lengths” about anything, it was his very careful, consistent usage of time markers throughout his narrative that convince us that we cannot break out any “event” between Matthew 28:1 and 28:2. If you consider those two temporal phrases in Matthew 28:1 to be “great lengths,” then, *a fortiori*, my evidence for disallowing time for your speculation that the women went home to go to sleep at that point should be taken with even more seriousness, as even *greater* lengths.

As I already mentioned, I’m not arguing against a Saturday visit by the women. (There was also a Friday visit by the women, six verses earlier.) I’m arguing that either way, the story of that visit is a contiguous, nonbreakable element.

At the bottom of page 36 you call Easter Sunday “history’s most important day.” What you mean is “Christianity’s most important day.” Just because you believers attach great importance to a date in the past does not mean the rest of us have to agree. I understand you are speaking for yourself, but I can’t help commenting on the over-importance you assign your religious beliefs. I think the day scientists came up with the germ theory of disease (with no help from Jesus) was a more important day. Or perhaps the day the Civil War ended. Or the day the printing press was invented, or the day women got the right to vote, or the day Watson and Crick discovered the double-helical structure of DNA. Or . . . many other days beside Matthew’s favorite day. To most people on the planet, the New Testament is irrelevant.

I belong to the Delaware (Lenape) tribe of American Indians. We have a long tradition on this continent that goes back at least 7,000 years, long before Christianity or Judaism. What if I were to say that “history’s greatest moment” was the day the Lenape hero Nanabush vanquished the trickster snake Manetta, driving it under ground, turning into the Manetta Creek? (Today that is where Canal Street runs in Manhattan.) Would you be impressed? I doubt it. You would certainly consider that to

be a mythical event, as I consider the stories of the New Testament. You would think it was presumptuous of me to assume that the whole world should be impressed with *my* religious story.

On page 40 you talk about the suggestions that Jesus was crucified on one day or another, and again, you seem to overlook another obvious contradiction. (This is technically outside of the Easter Challenge, but since you bring it up, I feel free to comment on it.) Mark tells us Jesus was crucified at nine o'clock in the morning on Friday, Passover, the day before the Sabbath, the morning after they had eaten their Thursday-evening Passover meal. But John tells us Jesus was crucified on Thursday, the "day of preparation" for the Passover, sometime after noon, before the Passover meal was eaten. (Bart Ehrman, in his new book *Jesus, Interrupted*, points out that John, who called Jesus the "lamb of God," wanted the crucifixion—the sacrifice of the lamb—to happen on the Day of Preparation, which was the day the lambs were slaughtered. It is unforgivable for us not to allow John to say what he wanted, even if it contradicts Mark. John had a theological point to make, and erasing the discrepancy destroys John's message.) This is one of those clear contradictions that has not been answered. (Ehrman handily dismisses some of the apologetic attempts to square those two discrepant facts.)

A small point, but on page 42 you quote John 20:10 saying "So the disciples went away again to their homes." If John thought it was important to say that the men went home, then why didn't Matthew think it equally important to tell us that the women went home, as you speculate, after Matthew 28:1? I think this is evidence that since Matthew did *not* tell us this, while other writers did say such things, then it didn't happen.

Another small point. On page 42 you claim that Jesus told Mary Magdalene "not to cling to him," yet the verse you quote from John 20:17 reports: "Jesus said to her, 'stop clinging to Me'." There is a difference between "Don't cling to me" and "Stop clinging to me." The first means she had not touched him, while the second means she had indeed touched him.

Your Chapter Five is, quite frankly, wildly speculative. None of your armchair

psychological guesswork would have occurred to any average reader of the New Testament. It certainly never occurred to me. To me, it looks like a simple discrepancy. If you have to go to such strained lengths to invent a scenario that “explains away” the contradiction of Mary Magdalene appearing not to know what you think she knows, that is really a sign of desperation. And what’s worse, if such interpretive tactics are permissible, then anyone could use them! I bet I could dream up a number of “plausible scenarios” that you could not disprove. It is quite obvious that you are reaching here. When Jesus told Mary to tell “my brethren,” he did not say she could not tell anyone else. Peter would have known that Jesus (if the story is true) held women’s testimony in high regard. Peter knew that Jesus was breaking all kinds of rules. So it doesn’t make sense that Peter would *not* have believed Mary. I suppose you are suggesting that those men were representative sexists of their patriarchal age, but it seems to me you may be acting even *more* sexist by pretending to psychoanalyze the fragile nature of the first-century female mind. You ask: “After all, the specially chosen male disciples did not believe her story, so would she want to risk the same rejection by the women?” Well, why not? The very reason you cite for the male rejection of Mary’s story is the built-in sexism of those days, a sexism that existed between men and women, but not among women themselves. It strains credulity to the utmost to imagine that Mary would think her female friends would not want to hear her story. They were her friends! Maybe she was uncomfortable around the patriarchal male leadership, but if she had *really* seen Jesus alive, I can’t imagine her keeping her mouth shut to her female friends. Can you?

If we accept your creative psychological speculations, then anything goes. There would never be a contradiction anywhere that could not be “explained” by supposing this or that. We could equally well imagine all sorts of psychological explanations for why the New Testament writers felt compelled to make up fantastic miracle stories, yet I bet you would discount them as special pleading.

On pages 50 and 51 you place the three synoptic accounts next to each other, but you do not integrate them into a single coherent narrative. This is nothing more than what the canonical New Testament does. If you want to fulfill the conditions of the

Easter Challenge, they need to be put together in a single plausible form. For example, as you point out, in Matthew 28:5 the angel is sitting on the stone talking to the women, but later (according to you) the women were “looking up” (Mark 16:4) and “saw that the stone had been rolled away.” How could they have not known that the stone had been rolled away if the angel were sitting on it at a different location from where they had known it was before? (In Matthew 27, they had already scoped out the place.) In your notes on page 52, you claim that the angel was *not* sitting on the stone when he (or it) gave the message: “Concerning the seated young man [angel] on the right side in Mark, he is clearly the same angel of Matthew that earlier [between midnight and 3:00—event 2] rolled the stone away and sat on it.” This doesn’t make sense. What was the point of Matthew telling us that the angel sat on the stone if not to set up his speech to the women? You are trying to break Matthew 28:1–8 into even *smaller* separate pieces, compounding your error. It seems you have more work to do here.

Another small point (with big consequences), on page 52 you write: “Though complex, Matthew 28 is easily resolved by acknowledging the existence of a gap of time of several hours between vss. 1 and 2 . . . and another gap between vss. 4 and 5.” You use the word “acknowledging” when you really mean “imagining.” You cannot “acknowledge” what is not known to be true. You cannot “acknowledge” that for which there is no evidence. You cannot “acknowledge” that for which there is contrary evidence. You can “assent” or “agree” or “argue for,” but you cannot “acknowledge” an unknown gap of time. The fact that you use such a word is an indication that you are begging the question. Or at least, you are trying to persuade with rhetoric that overreaches the actual facts.

On page 53, you report Mark 16:8: “And they [the women] went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them . . .” Does the word “they” include Mary Magdalene? If Mary Magdalene had indeed already seen Jesus alive (as you imagine), then why would she be gripped with “trembling and astonishment”? And why would they be frightened? (Is this another sexist depiction of female hysteria?) Why would Jesus show himself to them in a way that caused fear and

trembling? What kind of spook show was he putting on? And why is “being afraid” a reason for not talking to anyone? If a normal person is afraid, even if they are temporarily “scared speechless,” this is usually only a very brief instant of time. Those women were talkers! The other accounts say they spilled the story, as they were commanded. I don’t think your speculative explanation of this discrepancy carries much weight—unless we are required to interpret Mark as saying “And they said nothing to anyone for a couple of minutes, for they were afraid.” And, of course, Mark doesn’t say that. He says plainly, “they said nothing to anyone.”

On page 55 you write: “Jesus did not spend a lot of time with his disciples during the forty days between the resurrection and ascension.” How do you know that? How do you know he did not live with them continuously, and that the gospel writers are only telling us a few of the high points? John says Jesus did “many other things” than what are reported in his story, and how would he know that if Jesus was not around to do them? But if you are right, then what was Jesus doing all those days? Did he sit by a river and daydream? Did he travel to the future location of Los Angeles to preach to the American Indians? He needed to eat, obviously, since he begged food from the disciples on at least one occasion, so where did he shop? Did he disguise himself and wander the markets of Jerusalem for forty days, pretending to be a visitor passing through town so that nobody would recognize him? He had not ascended yet, so his physical body was *somewhere*. Do you really think this scenario is plausible?

I might equally argue that Jesus was *nowhere* during those 40 days. If, as I show in other writings, those “appearances” were really understood to be visionary, not physical, then that can explain how Jesus disappeared into thin air and passed through a solid door. (Certainly, the appearance to Paul, at least, was not physical. Yet he uses the same word “*ophthe*” (“appeared”) for all of the meetings.) It can explain why Jesus didn’t need to eat. (If he really did eat with the disciples in that upper room, then what happened to the food he had swallowed after he disappeared into thin air? Did it stay in the room?) It can explain why he didn’t have to live anywhere during those 40 days. (Unless he truly went to Los Angeles!) It can explain why nobody else reported that they “saw” Jesus except for his close followers. And what is wrong with that hypothesis?

Why is it any less valid than your speculation? After all, most religions teach visionary appearances, so why would the New Testament writers be any different? I don't know for certain what happened, but neither do you.

The story in Matthew 28:11–15 (reported on page 55) of the chief priests bribing the Roman soldiers to lie about the body is not plausible. On their face, before you attempt any harmonization, some stories in the New Testament sound like flimsily manufactured alibis. The Roman guards would not have reported to the Jewish priests. They would have reported to their superior officers. We are supposed to believe that on Sunday morning, right after two violent earthquakes, the chief priests and elders assembled together with some of the Roman guards and collected money to pay them to tell a lie? First, the guards were risking death with such a breach of military rules. Second, the Jewish priests and elders, representatives of the true religion of Yahweh, would not bribe people to tell lies. Third, those Jewish priests would have no authority to “win over” the secular authorities, asking the Roman governor to join a conspiracy of deception. Fourth, the Jewish priests must have believed the soldiers' original story. Fifth, Matthew tells us that “this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day.” In other words, the conspiracy was leaked—everyone knew the lie. Neither the Roman guards nor the chief priests could have any confidence that their little scheme would go undetected, so why bother? If I were one of those guards, I would definitely *not* trust the Jewish authorities. And if I did trust them, it would be the other way around. I should have bribed *them*. Wouldn't it have made more sense for the Roman guards to have reported to their own superiors? This story is simply not plausible.

But this anecdote does even more damage to the resurrection claim than you might imagine. Who were the actual eye witnesses to the actual resurrection? It was not the women: Mary only saw the empty tomb and the angel(s) and a man they later “recognized” as Jesus. It was not the disciples: two of them saw an empty tomb (if it was indeed the tomb of Jesus). According to Matthew (or anybody else, except the Gospel of Peter), the only people who were actually present at the time the body of Jesus supposedly came out of the tomb were those Roman guards, and they tell us that “His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.” Of course, this

makes the whole scenario even *more* ludicrous! If they were asleep, how did they know what happened, or who took the body? How would they remain asleep during a “violent earthquake”? Those (supposedly) highly trained Roman soldiers were on watch, on military orders, and were to remain alert and vigilant, otherwise what was the point in assigning them to the tomb? Admitting they were asleep would be confessing to dereliction of duty, resulting in a harsh punishment, if not death. At least one of them had to be awake (in order for their lie to be plausible) to know that the disciples stole the body—and then why not wake up the others and subdue them? Jesus did tell his disciples to buy swords (if you believe Luke 22:36), but I doubt they would be a match for skillful Roman soldiers! Or if that did not happen—if the Roman guards truly saw the actual miraculous resurrection of Jesus—why did they not convert? If I were one of those Roman guards, with a front-row seat on “history’s most important day,” then *I* would have converted! But the main point here is that the *only* eye witnesses to the actual resurrection tell us that the body was stolen. It seems to me that this “historical” testimony is just as valid as any other. The fact that a Christian (Matthew) would claim that the Jews would later circulate the story of the illegal and unethical bribery could have been one way to explain why the Roman soldiers said what they said. The only eye witnesses tell us that Jesus did *not* rise from the dead.

Another small point. On page 59 you relate Luke 24:16: “But their eyes were prevented from recognizing him.” Eyes do not recognize. Brains recognize. If Jesus was not wearing a disguise (why would he?), then somehow God or the Holy Spirit garbled their brains so that they would not know who it was (and why do that?). Maybe saying “their eyes were prevented” was an idiomatic way of saying “it never dawned on them that they would see Jesus” (or something like that), but does this seem plausible? These men supposedly lived, slept, and ate with Jesus for years. If anyone would recognize Jesus, *they* would. So what is going on here? Why this cloak-and-dagger mystery? What did Jesus actually look like, if not himself? I think a plausible explanation for this story is that Jesus actually did not rise from the dead, but the disciples and later Christians believed he had risen from the dead, but since nobody else in the country saw Jesus (how could they?), they had to invent some mechanism for the fact that it was only his

close followers who “recognized” him. This little phrase, “eyes were prevented,” is a tiny sermonette directed at all of us who choose not to believe, very similar to what you said about Ralph Nielsen being “spiritually blind.” If the Holy Spirit would only “open our eyes,” then we would see Jesus everywhere. Maybe he’s the guy who took my money at the Illinois tollbooth last month! (And don’t laugh. If it happened on the road to Emmaus, it could happen on the road to Chicago.)

Another more likely explanation for why the disciples did not recognize Jesus is very simple: it wasn’t him. They may have met another stranger, and after a while, their faith being so strong and their desire to “see” Jesus alive being so fierce, they actually made themselves think a person who bore a resemblance to Jesus actually *was* Jesus. This is not implausible in light of all the people who have claimed to have seen Elvis Presley alive after his death. Human nature is human nature. (Of course, I don’t think we have to go that far. I don’t think any scene like that encounter on the Road to Emmaus actually happened in history.)

And two verses later, Luke 24:18, Cleopas tells this “Jesus” person: “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which have happened here in these days?” (See, Jesus must have been disguising himself as a visitor, a wanderer.) According to Cleopas, and all the other disciples, by midday (you say it is 9:00–2:00) on Sunday, everyone in Jerusalem has heard the news! In the midst of all the cleanup and doctoring and burying of dead bodies resulting from the “violent earthquake,” in the space of a few hours the whole city and environs knew the story? And into the midst of this hubbub wanders a “visitor” who should have (according to Cleopas) had ample time to have learned of the events, but did not, which surprised Cleopas? If the women’s story was not yet believed by the disciples, and if they were so frightened that they told no one, and if Mary was so psychologically traumatized (as you insist) that she kept her mouth shut, then how on earth did all earth know what had happened a few hours ago? If the rumor mill in Jerusalem were *that* strong, then what confidence would the Roman guards have had that their Jewish-inspired lie would not be uncovered?

Is any of this even remotely plausible? Doesn’t it sound more like a tall tale, a hastily constructed scenario of what later Christians imagined happened on “history’s

most important day”? No matter how you slice it, a half-baked cake is still half-baked.

On pages 62 and 63, notice the small discrepancies in the the stories about Sunday evening as told by Luke and John. It is obvious that in at least one (maybe both) of these accounts we don't have exact quotes, only a rough reconstruction. When Jesus showed up in Luke, he said, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your heart?” but in John he said, “Peace be with you.” I suppose he could have said both things, but then why did one pick one wording and the other another wording, especially since they were roughly close in meaning? In Luke Jesus says “See my hands and my feet” and he showed them his hands and his feet, but in John Jesus showed them “his hands and his side.” Small point, but a discrepancy nonetheless. If you think he showed them all three—hands, feet, and side—then why did they both not mention all three? Obviously, the reporting is not first-hand but some kind of rough reconstruction of what went on in that room, if it happened at all. John does not report that Jesus ate anything, or the words about the fulfillment of Scripture that Luke reports. In John, Jesus tells the disciples that they have the power to forgive or not forgive sins. Doesn't it strike you as strange that these stories would be *so* different? (And do *you* think the disciples had the power to forgive sins? You are a pastor, an ordained disciple of Christ. Do *you* have the power to decide whose sins are forgiven?) Your narrative did not actually integrate this scene into one coherent piece. You simply put them side by side, another indication that you did not fulfill the conditions of the Easter Challenge.

Notice also that John has the disciples receiving the Holy Spirit that evening, on Easter Sunday: “And when he said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (John 20:22) But in Luke, Jesus told them to remain in the city (until the Day of Pentecost, presumably) “until you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49) John got it completely wrong.

On page 65 you speculate that the eleven post-resurrection appearances of Jesus “seem to be spaced out somewhat evenly over the forty day period.” I wonder how you know that. In your chart at the front of the book, you give no precise times of day, and you guess at the way things are spread out over those forty days. And where do you get

the eight days? Mark simply says “Afterward.” In Mark’s gospel, “afterward” could have been (should have been) that same day. In Mark you make the same mistake you made with Matthew and Luke, imagining a gap of time where no gap is allowed. At that meeting (let’s suppose it was indeed eight days later, though it was more likely on Easter Sunday), Jesus gives them a speech, starting with “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” The speech goes three more verses until it ends at 16:18. The next verse (16:19) says, “So then, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven . . .” But you are insisting that 16:19 happened forty days after the resurrection, not eight days! What do you think “So then, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them” means? It is obvious to any average reader that what happened next occurred immediately after (“So then . . .”) his speech was over (“ . . . had spoken to them”). Mark does not say, “So then, thirty-two days later, after a bunch of other appearances . . .” He says that when the speech was over, Jesus ascended. You make the same mistake here that you made between Matthew 28:1–2 and Luke 24:49–50, inserting a nonexistent gap of time into a seamless narrative. I don’t think I need to spell this all out again—as the disciples were slow to get the message of the resurrection, and since you consider yourself a disciple, I hope you are finally getting the message of your faulty reconstruction.

But even more amazing is the fact that you seem not to know that the final 12 verses of Mark’s gospel are inauthentic. They appear in none of the reliable ancient documents. Most modern translations of the bible either omit Mark 16:9–20 entirely, or they add a caveat that most scholars, for good reason, consider those verses to be a later interpolation. Even if you believe in the existence of the “Word of God,” those 12 verses are not part of it. I know that my Easter Challenge does not exclude those 12 fraudulent verses (assuming that since they are there, some Christians still treat them as authentic—and in my book I do point out the problem with Mark 16:9–20), but you, at least, should have known not to include them. Or you should have pointed out my “error” in a side comment. Instead, you give the impression that you actually believe those verses are Holy Scripture.

The final authentic ending of Mark, the earliest gospel, is 16:8: “And they went out

quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid.” (Mark 16:8) Notice that in Mark there are no post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. There is not even a *belief* in the resurrection of Jesus. See how verse 16:9 (the beginning of the phony addendum) seems to jump backward in time, as if someone hastily patched up what they assumed was an unfinished story. Since those verses are indeed absent from the oldest reliable manuscripts, something like this must have happened at a later time. A well-meaning but dishonest Christian tampered with the New Testament, and you report it as if it were reliable history, even the “Word of God.” You made many mistakes in your Easter Answer, but this may be the most embarrassing. (By the way, someone should tell the snake handlers and poison drinkers that they are off the hook.)

Also, although this is admittedly irrelevant to the Easter Challenge, I can’t help pointing out that a physical ascension into the clouds (as reported in those phony verses) is a pagan, flat-earth concept, as is the idea that Jesus “sat down at the right hand of God.” This makes God the Father also a physical being, with a human-size throne, a left hand and right hand. It was the *body* of Jesus that ascended in that passage, after all, not the *spirit* of Jesus.

Although this is not strictly related to the “telling of the story,” I can’t help commenting on another pagan influence in the verses you cite. In John 21:11 we are told that Peter caught exactly 153 fish in the presence of the resurrected Jesus. The number 153 must be important or it wouldn’t be mentioned. John could have just said “a unexpectedly large number,” but he gave us a specific count. Presumably, they emptied the net and counted each fish to be certain of the exact number. Why is this important? This is indeed a “fish story,” but I don’t mean to suggest that they were exaggerating. (“You should have seen the 265 that got away!”) There is a very good reason the author of John would give us that exact number. Peter Freke and Timothy Gandy show us in their fascinating book, *The Jesus Mysteries*, that the Christian fish sign comes from an ancient Pythagorean mystical fish symbol that was based on a secret mystery number. If you take two circles and intersect them so that their edges meet at the centers, you have what the ancient Greeks considered a sacred fish shape. The ratio

of the width of that shape to the height is 265:153, which they called “the measure of the fish.” The Greeks had discovered this powerful tool of mathematics, 265:153 being the nearest approximation of the square root of three and the controlling ratio of the equilateral triangle. But Pythagoras kept the magical fish number a secret—those cosmic numbers were part of the mystery cult that only a privileged few initiated men (not women) could understand. There was a Greek story/play of Bacchus helping his disciples find some fish, and he indeed tells us they caught a great number, but he doesn’t reveal the secret. But in the New Testament, John spills the beans! John, who writes very much like a Gnostic (“In the beginning was the Logos”), is clearly adapting the story from pagan mythology (a story that the non-gnostic evangelists don’t tell us), but in his eagerness to evangelize, he reveals the secret pagan number. In all the years I preached from the book of John, I never knew I was advertising the secret number of the mystery cult of Dionysus (Bacchus). This strikes at the issue of plausibility, a borrowed story being less historical than a true story.

Regarding Chapter Eight, your attempt to integrate Paul’s list of appearances, I have written in great detail about those verses from I Corinthians 15, showing that those were not physical appearances at all. The earliest Christians did not believe in a physical resurrection; they believed only in a spiritual resurrection and ascension, much like modern Christians think Grandma died and went to heaven. It was the later writers (starting around the 80s when Matthew and Luke were written) who started transforming the spiritual belief into a physical belief. I won’t devote space here to developing that argument, but you are welcome to read about it in my book *Godless*. But the point is important that many (or most) of the appearances of Jesus are just that: “appearances.” This is a very strange way of describing a meeting. Notice that in John 21:1 we are told that “After these things Jesus manifested himself again to the disciples.” He “manifested” himself? In Mark 16:14 we are told that “afterward he appeared to the eleven.” What if you and I were to meet someday—an occasion I would look forward to and enjoy—and later I were to say, “I went to Idaho and Stephen appeared to me. He is a wonderful person. I hope to return someday so that he can manifest himself to me again.” Doesn’t that seem like an odd way to phrase it?

This is not the way we talk about a physical meeting. It is more like how we talk about dreams, visions, or ghosts. In Luke 24:37 this is exactly what they assumed: “But they were startled and frightened and thought that they were seeing a spirit.” In Mark 16:12 we are told that “after that, he appeared in a different form to two of them.” (A human being can change forms?) Jesus did not just walk up and pat them on the shoulder, like a normal person. He “appeared” to them, and this time “in a different form.” What in the world does that mean? Exactly what “form” was it? Whatever it was, it was not a normal encounter. This is the stuff of apparitions and haunted houses, not a report of a historical physical visit.

Paul wrote of his own encounter with Jesus on the Road to Damascus that God “chose to reveal his son in me.” (Galatians 1:16) Why does the bible characterize these meetings with Jesus as “appearances,” “manifestations” and “revelations”?

[Note: The following four paragraphs were added May 31, 2009]

We see the very same “appearance” wording mentioned in Matthew 27:50-53, in a fantastical passage that sounds more like Halloween than Easter:

“Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost. And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.” Although this passage is technically outside the scope of the Easter Challenge, it does mention that the bodies came out of the graves “after his resurrection,” so it fits within the same time frame. Presumably, Matthew moved these resurrections to a time after the resurrection of Jesus, since Jesus was supposed to be the first person to have done such a thing: “But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.” (I Corinthians 15:20, written before Matthew and relevant to the Easter Challenge since it immediately follows Paul’s account of the events.)

It hardly needs pointing out that this amazing passage seems extremely implausible. A huge earthquake (like the one in Matthew 28:2, not mentioned by anyone else) causes the rocks to split apart and graves to open, and bodies to come crawling out and start

walking around Jerusalem, appearing (“Boo!”) to many people in Jerusalem. What were they wearing? Were they walking around in their rotted graveclothes? Where did they live and sleep after that? Did they go back to their families? Did they take up with their (possibly remarried) spouses? Did they want their old jobs back? Did they live for a while and then die again? (Although the bible clearly says in Hebrews 9:27 that this is impossible, for “it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.”) An event like this, if it truly happened, would have been noticed by many people, not just the inside group of believers. It would be historically (not just literally) earth-shaking! Why does no one else mention this “trick or treat” story? Is it possible Matthew is exaggerating, manufacturing a mythical fantasy to impress his readers?

And notice that he uses the word “appeared,” the same word Paul and others use to describe the post-resurrection appearances by Jesus. If these Halloween zombies walked around Jerusalem and then disappeared after a while, like ghosts, then why not think the same about Jesus? (Although Matthew does mention their “bodies,” not just their ghostly “spirits.”) This is all completely phantasmagorical, not historical.

I do quibble with your accusation on page 73 that we skeptics are “eager to fault the accounts on every conceivable point.” That is simply not the case. We skeptics (including many believing Christian critics) are only “eager” to know what is true, not to find fault. This is not a war. My criticisms are not a game where I am anxious to score as many points as I can—“Ha! Gotcha!”—or a drive to be a troublemaker. I am not your enemy. I sincerely want to know what is true. You make it seem like we critics are crazed, ravenous attackers who are out to destroy all that is good. When you make such blanket comments you overstep honest, objective dialogue.

At the end of the book, in your Conclusion and Afterword, you present us with a sermon, which is your prerogative, since it is your book. But your sermon is irrelevant to the Easter Challenge. It also contains some unwarranted speculation, and some outright untruths. You write on page 79 about the bible: “No one can read the Book without looking within to think about themselves in relationship to the story and its history.” Excuse me? Millions of people have read the bible without “looking within.” I have many friends who say that reading the bible turned them into atheists. They did

not look within; they looked askance. I read the bible all the time, certainly much more often than the average pew sitter, in preparation for articles, books, and debates. We can learn a lot from the bible, but what we learn tells us more about human nature than about the actual existence of a jealous God of war who has to kill his own child in order to appease an unstable vanity and satisfy his bloodthirsty wrath.

Conclusion

The sermon at the end of your book places an exaggerated importance on the New Testament stories, but you are not the first to do this. The very last verse of the last canonical gospel does the same thing. John 21:25 (as you report on page 69) gives us this whopper: “And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books which were written.” That is clearly *way* over-the-top hyperbole. I have read a large number of biographies of men and women who lived much longer than Jesus, who (if he existed) died in his early thirties. I have read multiple large biographies of some of these people—George Gershwin and Irving Berlin, for example. They do take up a good chunk of space on my bookshelf. But there is no way anyone’s life could have so many details that “even the world itself would not contain the books which were written.” John is exaggerating, and an exaggeration is an untruth. The gospels end with an untruth. This should not surprise us because John admits in the previous chapter that he is not writing objective history. As you report on page 66, John has an admitted agenda: “Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:30–31) John is not an objective historian. He would not be allowed on the jury. He is telling us that he is writing religious propaganda, “that you may believe.” No wonder he caps off his final chapter with hyperbolic untruth. Everything this man tells us should be taken with a very large grain of salt.

I could preach a sermon too. We modern humans are not obligated to embrace the primitive, uninformed religious views of ancient preachers. Just because *they* believed in their gods, just because *they* held a pessimistic view of human nature, just because *they* invented the concept of “sin,” just because *they* were afraid of the unknown, just because *they* imagined a father figure who would bail them out of their responsibility by killing his son, just because *they* believed in miracles and demons and talking snakes and hell and

heaven and angels is no reason *we* must do the same.

Jesus is reported as saying, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick.” (Mark 2:17, NASB) Christians consider themselves “sick.” We atheists do not. Since there is no such thing as “sin,” there is no need for “salvation.” Christianity offers to solve a problem of its own making—a religious solution to a religious problem. (How much respect should we have for a doctor who runs around cutting people with a knife in order to sell them a bandage?)

Suppose you were convicted of a horrible crime, sentenced to life in prison, but after a couple of years you learn that you are being released. That would feel wonderful! You would be liberated, “saved.” But what would make you feel better: learning you were pardoned because of the good graces of the governor, or that you are being set free because you were found to be innocent of the crime in the first place?

We healthy atheists have much more dignity than you sick sinners. We have not committed any sins, and are not guilty of any cosmic “crime,” therefore not in need of the death and resurrection of Jesus to get us off the hook. (Besides, if I truly were guilty of a crime, then I would accept the responsibility myself, not pawning it off on Jesus or anyone else. If I deserve hell, then I will suck it up and pay the price. But, of course, I do not deserve hell, and neither do you, if you will think for yourself.) Even if the resurrection narratives were entirely coherent and plausible, they are irrelevant. We don’t need them.

If salvation is the cure, then atheism is the prevention.

There is much more I could say about the defects of the bible, the benefits of doubt and the superiority of atheism and humanism, but this is not the place for it. I have shown you what is wrong with your well-meaning, intelligent, civil (almost), yet fatally flawed Easter Answer. You failed to meet the conditions of the Easter Challenge. You omitted details. You did not put it all together into a single coherent narrative. You did not present a completely plausible narrative—you seem to assume that if the bible says it, it is automatically plausible, which is begging the question.

My hope in issuing the Easter Challenge was to get people to do exactly what you have done, and I admire you for getting on the horse in defense of the “king of kings.”

But I think now that you have helped us turn a more focused spotlight on the problems, you have done the average reader a great service. We can see more clearly now that all the king's horses and all the king-of-king's men cannot put the resurrection stories back together again. Your Easter Answer omitted details, failed to integrate many details, and side-stepped the many implausibilities in the New Testament narratives.

I am certain you don't think you were being unkind when you said that we skeptics are "spiritually blind," so I hope you understand that I feel the same when I conclude, after reading your Easter Answer, that I am not the one who lacks eyes to see or ears to hear.

* Richard Carrier has since retracted that claim. In a June 17, 2009 email he wrote: "Avalos has convinced me there is wiggle room, albeit awkward."