

Did early Christians have good reasons to believe? A response to Hector Avalos, Richard Carrier, Landon Hedrick, and Robert Price

Recently a grad student in philosophy and atheist with whom I've been dialoguing, Landon Hedrick, posted a critique of a comment I made in The Truth Behind the New Atheism on what Christians mean by "faith," in the context of early Christian believe in the resurrection. He invited three historians and critics of Christianity to comment: Richard Carrier, Hector Avalos, and Robert Price. All three agree with Hedrick that early Christians lacked good grounds for faith.

These three have become popular among skeptics lately. (All three, for example, contributed in various ways to an upcoming anthology called "The Christian Delusion," which I was asked by the editor to blurb.) They have respectable credentials, and offer some of the most radical criticisms of Christianity on the market. I've debated both Dr. Price and Dr. Carrier in the past, and found Price amiable, though he argues for a "Christ myth" that I see as rather loopy. Carrier, on the other hand, leans towards the edgy (to put it positively), both in what he says and how he says it.

Landon began by courteously introducing me. He then gave a bit of history to our dialogue. I'll skip the first few paragraphs (the blog can be found here: <http://landonhedrick.blogspot.com/2009/06/david-marshall-on-christian-martyrs.html>), and begin with a few words on Carrier's Sense and Goodness Without God. Then I'll address his critique of my book, and respond to the skeptical critique of the early Christians.

On Richard Carrier's approach to the Bible

Landon Hedrick: I . . . began recommending to Marshall that he pay more attention to Richard Carrier's work (especially his criticism of Christian apologetics). He eventually did take me up on that challenge and purchased *Sense and Goodness Without God*, though his initial

response to one section of that book left much to be desired. I continued encouraging him to read further and he finally did offer some meatier critiques. I may post about some of these later, but for now I'll simply link to what he thinks is [one of his best critiques](#).

DM: *Here were my conclusions after reading the first two chapters of Carrier's book. They were, I still think, well born-out by the rest of the book, and provide a useful précis of Carrier's approach to Scripture:*

"Richard Carrier finds great eloquence and deep wisdom in the (Taoist classic) Dao Dejing. He apparently fails to find any of that in the Bible, pointing only to irrational thinking and poor writing. But THE SAME wisdom, presented in equally eloquent, and far more vivid terms (and sometimes almost the same words!), is in fact present in many key passages of the Bible. Carrier is, therefore (whether through bias or incompetence), probably a poor reader, when it comes to the Bible. His starkly black-and-white but informed rhetoric favor the former explanation. The rest of his argument is therefore probably best read with strong skepticism, but not without hope of finding some things of value."

Landon's critique of *Truth Behind the New Atheism*

LH: Today, however, I want to resurrect some of my old comments on his book *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*. I informally reviewed the book in Amazon forums, giving it 3.5 stars. But there were still plenty of significant problems with it, in my opinion. His writing was often vague (especially when discussing the issue of the Bible being inspired by God), full of irrelevant comments and needlessly abstract metaphors, and peppered with unwarranted claims.

DM: *As a philosopher, Landon apparently prefers a drier form of exposition. I don't stake a position of Biblical inspiration in this book, because I am writing a response to Dawkins & Co on behalf of Christians in general. I do recommend the perspectives of C. S. Lewis and Nicholas*

Wolterstorff as alternatives to the "fundamentalist" positions the New Atheists prefer to attack.

Finally, few of my claims were "unwarranted," though Landon may not always be aware of the warrant, as we will see.

LH: One in particular that jumped out at me was on page 17, where Marshall writes that the disciples of Jesus were given "enough firsthand evidence of his resurrection that they were willing to die for him."

This wasn't the first time I've heard such a claim, as it's been repeated endlessly by Christians who defend their faith. For example, in his book *More Than a Carpenter*, Josh McDowell asks "who would die for a lie?" The implication of that question is that, since the disciples were in a position to know whether or not Jesus was resurrected, and since they were willing to die for the belief that he was, then he really must have been raised from the dead.

Response: There are two major initial problems with Landon's comments here. First, the claim he is responding to is off-hand in the context of the book – far from being one of my main points, it is only fourteen words long, and of tangential significance in its original context. Second, Landon has changed the meaning of the original contextualized comment dramatically.

The subject of the chapter is the meaning of faith, not evidence for the resurrection. More specifically, I am responding to Dawkins' claim that for Christians, faith means believing "not only in the absence of evidence, but in the teeth of evidence." Here's a fuller version of the passage Landon debunks. I had just quoted scientist Hubert Yockey, who cites the story of "doubting Thomas" to argue that Christianity promotes "blind faith." These two paragraphs are my reply. I'll put a slightly longer version of the passage Landon objects to at the end in red:

"The story of doubting Thomas is often cited to prove Christianity demands blind faith. When the other disciples reported they had met the risen Jesus, Thomas (true to character

as developed in the Gospel of John) found the story hard to swallow. 'Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails . . . and put my hand into his side, I will not believe,' Thomas famously retorted. When he met Jesus he was told, 'Reach here with your finger, and see My hands, and reach here your hand and put it into My side, and do not be unbelieving, but believing. By contrast, Jesus blessed those who do not see, and yet believe. Dawkins cited the same text in *The Selfish Gene*: 'Thomas demanded evidence. The other apostles, whose faith was so strong that they did not need evidence, are held up to us as worthy of imitation.'"

"There are several problems with taking this passage as a general repudiation of critical thought. First, **Jesus did give Thomas – and the other disciples – enough firsthand evidence of his resurrection that they were willing to die for him . . .** Second, Jesus often did miracles, calling them 'signs,' which . . . show strong evidence of historicity . . . "

So the issue here is not, contra Hedrick, the resurrection. Nor is it the value of evidence for the resurrection. The issue is what Christians mean by faith, and how Christians should interpret a key passage of Scripture theologically. In that context, my comment disproves the point Dawkins and Yockey are trying to establish. The passage shows Jesus giving the disciples first-hand evidence of his resurrection. That is the main point, and from within the discourse of Christian theology – which alone is the issue here – it is sufficient to undermine the "blind faith" interpretation of this passage.

The words Landon cited are part of a throw-away a fortiori argument.

That leading disciples died for a faith that was supported by evidence is not a major argument here, but seems well established from several early sources.

But the basic problem with Landon's criticism is that he has not read my comment accurately – perhaps because he himself has been focused on the issue of evidence for the resurrection. My comment is about the Christian idea of faith.

Worse, all four skeptics badly misread the early Christians on the same subject, as we will see.

Faith & the Resurrection

LH: New Testament scholar Robert M. Price gives an immediate counter-example by referring to Joseph Smith, writing that "non-Mormons believe he had concocted the whole Mormon religion, yet he was willing to die for it. Does that make it true?"

DM: *This is a deeply flawed analogy. Joseph Smith died when a lynch mob broke into the prison where he was being held, and he had a shootout with them. He was imprisoned after followers wrecked a press that criticized him. There is no sign he went to death willingly. Anyway, Joseph Smith was well-rewarded in this life for his fables. I would not think to dispute the proposition that a man will risk death for sex – it is the theme of much of world literature, from the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Iliad to half the movies on TV.*

Landon: Nevertheless, some sort of deeper analysis of the issue is required.

DM: *Here I agree wholeheartedly!*

Landon: Putting the argument into a logically valid form, it looks like this:

(1) If the disciples of Jesus were willing to die for their belief that he was resurrected, then they must have had good evidence that he was.

DM: *I made no such claim. Jesus in fact DID give the disciples evidence that He had risen, but I didn't claim that was a necessary condition for them being willing to die.*

(2) The disciples of Jesus were willing to die for their belief that he was resurrected.

This appears to be true.

(3) Therefore, the disciples must have had good evidence that Jesus was resurrected.

Again, Landon makes my argument work to an historical conclusion that was in fact its theological premise. I am not here trying to establish that the disciples had good reason to believe – I am assuming it to show that the Christian idea of faith involves reason.

Just How Gullible Were the First Christians?

Landon: “If David Marshall, Josh McDowell, or anybody else could show that (1) and (2) are true, then it would follow that the disciples had good evidence for the resurrection of Jesus--which entails that there *is* good reason to believe that Jesus was really raised from the dead (since having good evidence for something is a good reason to believe it). Can David Marshall show that the premises of the argument are true?

“Regarding (1), he would have to show that it would have taken good evidence to convince the earliest disciples that Jesus really was raised from the dead. Of course, it *would* take good evidence to convince the scientific community that somebody was resurrected, and I would be impressed if someone like James Randi was given enough evidence that he was willing to die for such a belief . . . But what reason do we have to think that ordinary first century Palestinians would have required good evidence to believe such a thing? Were they generally skeptical people who would have demanded solid evidence before believing extraordinary stories?

“The New Testament itself seems to refute this notion. Acts 2: 1-42 says that Peter gave a speech to a large group of Jews, and on the basis of what he *said*, (note: Landon’s emphasis) three thousand people converted that day.”

DM: *In other forums Landon has shown that he can read carefully. But here Landon misreads Luke even more badly than he misread me. It wasn't just a sermon. Peter referred to the widely-recognized miracles of Jesus ("as you yourselves know"), the eyewitness news of a resurrection that had just happened 40 days before in that very city, and spectacular signs that had just happened in front of everyone – tongues of fire falling on the disciples, them preaching in dozens of languages. Is it really likely that it was just on the basis of what Peter SAID that some of his audience converted? Certainly that is not what Luke is trying to convey! Landon appears to have read this story with no attempt to enter into it, as if it were a fictional anecdote told in the course of a philosophy paper.*

LH: "If it were the case that people, in general, were skeptical of claims about extraordinary events, then why would such a large number of people believe the resurrection merely on the basis of Peter's speech? (*Note the word "merely" here – underlining Landon's original misreading of the text – DM.*) Historian Richard Carrier writes of this passage:

"Thousands of people, we are told, decided to convert immediately. Not a single one of them checked a single fact. These converts do no other research, make no other inquiry, make no effort at all to interrogate Peter or any other witnesses or check any of the material facts. The authorities are not consulted. No one asks to hear Joseph of Arimathea on the matter, or indeed any other Christian besides Peter. They simply trust what Peter says--which is woefully ambiguous and short on details..."

DM: *I'm afraid what this proves, Landon, and not for the first, or the tenth time, is that you should be careful when reading Richard Carrier. He has again led you off a cliff, intellectually speaking. His comments here are, again, patent nonsense. These people convert based on (a) remarkable miracles enacted before their eyes; (b) knowledge of more such miracles, (c) the passion, and witness to the resurrection, (d) and only then, Peter's powerful sermon.*

LH: "Of course, Marshall could claim that Carrier is reading too much into the text here, because it doesn't explicitly say these things about the converts."

DM: *Actually, the problem is he's reading too little – he's overlooking the most patently obvious things about the scene Luke describes. To rework an apt metaphor from C. S. Lewis, he's tripping over a herd of elephants in the room in his eagerness to pick fern seed out of the carpet.*

In order to make such a colossal misreading, one has to remove oneself from the scene. One wonders if, having misread Acts so badly, Dr. Carrier EVER enters into an ancient text realistically.

Landon: "Or look at all of the other examples from Acts that Carrier provides in the above link. The author of Acts records numerous conversions where people hear a speech, see some sort of healing miracle, and are convinced that Christianity is true (i.e. that Jesus rose from the dead)."

DM: *Here Carrier moves from a single text in Acts, to Acts as a whole. And here his error is multiplied many times over.*

Actually, the response to Christian sermons in Acts is far more mixed, and often less positive. Usually the positive response is more like, "We'd like to hear more about your beliefs." Or "they earnestly studied the Scriptures to see if these things were true." The negative responses begin with scoffing, and end in stoning, beating, imprisonment, etc.

And let's not overlook the persuasive power of a good healing. Even with that, the folks in Lystra ended up stoning Paul and Barnabas. But let Carrier hang himself with a little more apostolic rope before we explore the full folly of this position:

Carrier writes: "Never once does Acts report *anyone* checking *any* facts pertinent to the Resurrection before converting. To claim they did such checking, but that Acts simply doesn't say so (not even once), is circular reasoning... Indeed, Acts rules out any such tactic, since Acts says again and again that conversions are won on the very same day the gospel is preached--there are rarely any delays of days, weeks, or months, as would be required for evidence to be gathered, witnesses sought out and

questioned, and letters exchanged. And even when any such duration is mentioned, there is still no indication that any such efforts were engaged in that time. None at all."

DM: *Carrier seems to hold an unreasonable image of what itinerant evangelism is like. I have done a little of it. It usually involved a lot of critical questioning. Of course the audience doesn't immediately run out and set sail for Israel to check sources. But it is simply untrue to imply they treated the claim of the resurrection uncritically. They engaged the witness, the person who had claimed to see the risen Christ. Personal testimony IS evidence for most of us when the witness seems credible – and we know that Paul often spoke of how he met Jesus. No doubt later some had opportunities to talk with more witnesses, as other apostles filtered up from Palestine – Jews seem to have been fairly mobile within the Hellenistic world, as Rodney Stark shows in Cities of God.*

More generally, Carrier's depiction of evangelism in Acts is simply false. Acts is full of arguing and reasoning. Believers "refute" or "baffle" (συνεχυνεν, 9:22) opponents; "debate" (συνεζητει, 9:29); "speak effectively" (λαλησαι ουτως ωστε πιστευσαι, 14:1) and "prove" (διακατηλεγχετο, 18:28). These are verbal marks of pervasive, many-sided appeals to evidence (signs, natural theology, the resurrection). Why would that be necessary if ancient audiences were so gullible?

And indeed, read Acts – or the Gospels – carefully, and you find they are NOT that "eager to believe," even with all the miracles. Jesus is, for instance, subject to all kinds of criticism in the Gospels. As I put it in Why the Jesus Seminar can't find Jesus, and Grandma Marshall Could:

"All four gospels contain nit-picking, suspicion, entrapment, barbed comments, and angry denunciations, directed by respectable citizens at Jesus. He is accused of being a commoner, a sinner, a 'Samaritan and a demon,' of breaking Jewish law, the Sabbath in particular, not paying taxes, lack of education, blasphemy, insanity, and black magic." (106)

Their categories might be a little different from those of Richard Carrier, but to claim the Gospels portray the ancients as gullible rubes who lap up any wild supernatural claim, is, well, a pretty wild and superstitious claim.

LH: "It is hard to believe that Marshall would want to claim that the disciples were paradigm examples of skeptical thinkers--and I don't imagine he would actually claim this (though he does seem to think that there is good historical evidence that they were pretty skeptical)."

DM: *I don't "seem to think it," Landon. It's one of the most obvious characteristics of the Gospels and Acts. Read them through and underline expressions of doubt, and appeals to reason and evidence. Don't overlook any more elephants – they have a habit of stepping on peoples' toes.*

LH: "Surely Marshall knows that there have always been people who will believe things without good evidence."

DM: *Yes, and unfortunately you and Richard Carrier seem to be two of them, in this case. You've followed Richard in falsely asserting that Peter persuaded his audience in Acts 2 purely by the power of rhetoric, even though spectacular miracles are recorded in vivid detail in that very same chapter. And then you follow him in overlooking the many expressions of skepticism, doubt, and critical thinking that pervade the writings of the evangelists.*

LH: "Some of the most confident Christians I have encountered cite nothing other than the scriptures (and, sometimes, the inner feeling of the Holy Spirit) for their belief that Jesus conquered death. And people in the ancient world were no different. If anything, they were even *more* gullible, and *less* skeptical."

DM: *Do you recognize the trick you've just played? You went from "some Christians" to "people in the ancient world." In other words, you're specific in the first case, and general in the second – without warrant, and overlooking evidence for skepticism.*

You also casually dismiss both the good sense of ordinary Christians (a common failing among academics) and the probative power of the Christian Scriptures, which I defend in (the title is relevant here) Why the Jesus Seminar can't find Jesus, and Grandma Marshall Could.

LH: "So even if it is true that the disciples were willing to die for their faith, that does not entail that they had good evidence for it. "

DM: *This is another false step. A few people in Acts expressed faith quickly, as a few do in itinerant evangelism – Luke gives a very realistic account. But you've neglected to point out the basis for their faith, which is not just words, but powerful supernatural signs, in most cases. You've also leaped from "express belief in" to "die for." Luke does not say these people died for their faith right off the bat.*

I think you have Josh McDowell wrong, too. It's been a decade or two since I read him. But as I recall, his argument is that "Lots of people die for a falsehood. But no one dies for what they know to be a falsehood." In other words, the disciples claimed to have seen Jesus, and were in a position to know if they really had or not. It is hard to understand why they would die for what they were in a position to know was untrue. That's McDowell's argument – not that willingness to die in itself entails warrant for faith.

LH: "Biblical scholar Hector Avalos confirmed this to me, writing:

"There is a lot of evidence that people did believe in resurrections with very little evidence, and one is in Mark 6:14-16 where it states that Herod was convinced that John the Baptist had resurrected. Note how little evidence he needed to believe that. Apparently, Herod just "heard" about miracles, and witnessed nothing himself."

DM: *Now here's an interesting argument. Avalos takes Mark's account of Herod's REMARKS at face value – though it could hardly have been first-hand. Yet he rejects his account of the most climactic weekend of his life – the passion of Jesus and apparent resurrection. Apparently third-hand rumors of off-hand comments from a single Gospel are worthy evidence, when they support your view, but plausibly first-hand reports of the most*

cataclysmic event in Mark's life, confirmed by other early reports, should be thrown out, when they undermine it.

But I don't think this scene much supports Avalos' point, anyway. Herod has murdered John, against his will. He's feeling guilty, like Hamlet's uncle. In response to rumors of Jesus' miracles, he makes a revealing comment – perhaps he has heard a rumor about Jesus bringing other people back to life. Whether or not he believes it, is another matter.

LH: Robert M. Price, in a private communication, revealed another important point:

"One must keep in mind the great power of "cognitive dissonance." History has shown that there is pretty much no extreme people will not go to in defending that which they have a great stake in. If you had spent decades defending the proposition that Jesus rose from the dead, even if you had originally merely surmised or guessed it, even had you made it up, you might well give your life than back down from the claim, to save face, because otherwise your life would be revealed as one big joke, and some people simply cannot live that down."

DM: *Price's words cut both ways, since Christians and atheists are made out of the same mortal cloth. But given the manifest and chronic mis-readings chronicled above, the skeptics here might usefully apply this to themselves first. There's plenty of cognitive dissonance in evidence in comments by skeptics here. They badly misread not only a minor point in my book, and a major argument by Josh McDowell but, more importantly, repeatedly misrepresent the central texts they attempt to comment on. They fail to recognize enormous and obvious facts that stand directly in front of them, like elephants in full trumpet – Pentecost, miracles, the fact that Christians offered rational reasons for belief, and the deeply expressed and still familiar skepticism of their 1st Century audience.*