

OpenTheo

#78 What did the apostles do after Acts? And Qs on the historicity of the New Testament.

August 12, 2021



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Do the earliest Gospels lack a divine Jesus? Who authored 2 Peter? What do we know about what happened to the Apostles after the close of scripture? Tom answers questions on the historicity of the Gospels.

Support the show – give from the USA or Rest of the world

- For bonus content, the newsletter, prize draws and to ask a question sign up at www.askntwright.com
- Exclusive podcast offers on Tom's books and videos from SPCK & NT Wright Online
- Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast via your preferred podcast platform

Transcript

Hi there, before we begin today's podcast I want to share an incredibly special resource with you today. If you're like me, life can get pretty hectic pretty quickly, but one thing that helps me slow down is connecting with God in new ways, and I'd like to share a resource that has really helped me do that. It's called Five Ways to Connect with God, and you can download it for free right now at [premiere insight dot org slash resources](http://premiereinsight.org/resources).

I think you'll find refreshment for your soul. So go right now to [premiere insight dot org slash resources](http://premiereinsight.org/resources) and download your copy. That's [premiere insight dot org slash resources](http://premiereinsight.org/resources).

The Ask NT Wright anything podcast. Hi there, and welcome back to the show. It's Justin Briley, Premierious Theology and Apologetics editor.

Once again, bringing you the thought and theology of Tom Wright, well known New Testament theologian and Bible scholar. He's currently resides in Oxford with his wife Maggie, where he teaches for Whitcliffe Hall, but he appears all over the place, doesn't

he? And if you enjoy Tom on this show, you'll certainly want to hear him on episodes of Unbelievable, the other podcast that I host. But if you enjoyed today's show, why not rate and review us like Oscar did, who said, I just love the way this podcast is presented.

Real life questions about a wide range of topics thought through and answered with a pastoral heart flowing throughout. Thank you. Thank you, Oscar for leaving that review helps other people to see and discover the show as well.

And just before we get into your questions on New Testament historicity today, let me say that we're running this podcast competition right at the moment. You could be in with a chance of winning one of five signed copies of Tom's latest book, Broken Sign Post. If you'd like to be in with a chance of doing that, simply register at our website, ask NT Wright dot com.

Everyone who's registered, all the names go into the big competition hat and we'll draw one out in September, well, five out in September. And the copies of the book will be on their way to you. So, can't say far in that, can you? Let's get into today's edition of the show.

Welcome back to today's show. And today, we're diving into a few questions you've had on the historicity of the New Testament and even beyond that, what we can know about the history of the early church beyond the New Testament. So, always get questions of this sort.

It's always hard to choose which ones to go for. But let's start with Matthew in Washington, USA. And Matthew has been watching the other podcast and video show that I present unbelievable, which included a debate.

And this is going back to 2019, actually, between Bart M and well-known New Testament, skeptical New Testament scholar and Peter J Williams of Tindale House in Cambridge. And wants to know how you would respond to a claim that Bart M and made in that debate with Peter Williams. Dr. Emmon claims that the understanding of Jesus changed as time went on from the early Christians believing in a solely human messiah to later on believing that Jesus was God.

And Emmon argues from textual criticism that the earliest gospels and the hypothetical Q source lack this understanding of Jesus being God, whereas later gospels such as John are much more explicit. So, how would you respond? It's a well-worn question this one, Tom. So, what would you say? I would say there's two or three authors that you should read on this.

One is the late great Larry Hurtado, H-U-R-T-A-D-O, who was professor in Edinburgh. He's actually American, but was professor in Edinburgh for many years. And he wrote several books, including a big one called Lord Jesus Christ, came out about 25 years ago, but

really changed the discipline at that point, arguing for the belief in the divinity of Jesus as very early and very Jewish and coming straight out of a Jewish matrix.

The old theory which Emmon is still ascribing to there is that, well, the first Christians didn't really think Jesus was divine because after all they were Jewish and they were monotheists, that would be very difficult for them. And it was only later when the movement became more Hellenistic out in the Greek world that then they had lots of gods and divinities and so on. So, it was easier to think of Jesus as divine.

I remember, well, only sort of 40 years ago, that sort of thing was said routinely by quite eminent scholars who actually should have known better. But the best evidence is actually in Paul's letters themselves, where we see again and again the monotheism of the Jewish faith of the time expressed in things like the Shema prayer, here Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is one. Paul takes that prayer in 1 Corinthians 8, 6, and discovers and discerns Jesus inside it within Jewish monotheism.

The same is true for Philipians 2, 6 to 11 and so on. So, Dariha Tadeh is one. Richard Borkham, Jesus and the God of Israel is another.

Richard is a fine scholar, narrow tyrant living in Cambridge who's done amazing things on all this. But then particularly on the Gospels, Richard Hayes, Richard's last big book, Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels, where Richard shows that it isn't just John, but that woven deep in the structure of Matthew, and Mark, and Luke is the way of using the Scriptures of Israel, what Christians call the Old Testament, to show that each of those Gospel writers talks about Jesus in a biblical way, and the biblical way they're talking about is this is the sort of thing that God himself does. And that's quite a substantial book, but as Richard himself would agree, you could take it much further.

That's just the beginning of a whole project. So, I don't know which particular bits of textual criticism Bart Ehrman was relying on, and the so-called Source Q has been a matter of enormous debate over the last hundred years, and different scholars think very different things about that. So, it's not a safe place to build on.

But Hertado and Borkham and Hayes between them have made a massive case that right from the start, the early followers of Jesus hailed him in ways which, as monotheistic Jews, put him within the meaning of the word God. And of course that then, at once, generated questions to which the doctrine of the Trinity is one answer, though that wasn't formulated in that philosophical way for three centuries or so. But the roots of it are right there in the earliest documents in the New Testament.

I mean, I've had Bart Ehrman on in other contexts to discuss these very questions. He had a book out a few several years ago now called How Jesus Became God, which made this claim. But interestingly, he admitted himself actually in the course of researching that book, he actually, his views became more conservative, rather more liberal, in

terms of how quickly Christian started claiming their divine status to Jesus.

So, in a funny way, even in the various of writing that book, Bart's views actually kind of shifted a bit more. I didn't know that. I last debated Bart about 10 or 12 years ago, and I decided having done it a couple of times, I didn't want to be.

Well, I had it been a conversation with someone who had been part of a book that was a response book that was edited by your friend Mike Bird, which was, you know, obviously called *The Opposite Way Around How God Became Jesus*. So, there is not so good literature out there, and you've mentioned some great books yourself, Tom, that you could go and look into for the side of that case. Okay, let's keep going.

Andy is in Kent in England and says many scholars have questioned the traditional authorship of New Testament books. Their case seems particularly strong in regards to second Peter, in the light of its style, probable use of Jude, calling Paul's letters scripture, and it not being referred to until the time of origin. I've come to accept that the evidence suggests it's very unlikely that Peter wrote that letter.

However, the letter clearly states it has been written by Simon Peter. So, how should we regard scripture in the light of what appears to be an untruthful claim, said Andy? I think the sting of this question is in that last bit, how should we regard scripture in the light of an untruthful claim? And I think underneath that question, I detect a sort of sense that the Bible is the Bible is the Bible, or is it really? Can we really trust the Bible as a whole? And part of me wants to say, you know, I really think we have this book, the New Testament, because this is the book God intended us to have. I really do believe that.

That doesn't foreclose questions of what it meant or indeed who wrote different bits of it. It rather opens them up. If this is the book that God wanted us to have, and if, as we read it, we find serious puzzles, then we need to go with that.

Now, I have to say, I've spent my life crawling over bits where scholars have said, oh, this is very puzzling. And then I've come across, say, Jewish texts in the light of which I've been able to say, it's not puzzling at all. We're just looking at it the wrong way around.

And it's perfectly possible because we actually know comparatively a little about the first two centuries. It's perfectly possible that somebody will turn up a whole new text from the sands of Egypt or something that happened with the Dead Sea Scrolls. It happens with all sorts of other stuff in which we will find all sorts of things which might make us change our view about what was actually possible, what was thinkable ways in which people wrote.

So I would always want to be quite reverently agnostic about this kind of thing. On to Peter, I am not a specialist. When Mike Bird and I did our big fat book, the New

Testament in its world, I allowed Mike to take the lead on things like that.

He's talked more about that recently than I have. And I want to say, actually, I'm staying agnostic because yes, I understand it doesn't look much like first Peter. It does seem to have a curious relationship with the letter of Jude, possibly a dependent relationship.

And yes, I see that it isn't referred to till later, but that actually doesn't tell me very much because we don't have that much literature from the second century. Yeah, it would have been nicer than it had been in Araneus or Polycarpa or somebody, but that's not a big deal actually. So I'm not sure we can say it's untruthful.

The more curious question is, was there a time in the late first or early second century when early Christians reckoned that it was okay to write something and ascribe it to an apostle? Perhaps people who had been followers of that apostle, who had known Peter, who had worked with him, who had heard his teaching, who had prayed with him, and who after his death would say, actually, we should make that stuff available because there's some important things there. But it would come out perhaps in a different idiom, but they would want in honoring Peter and saying, we didn't dream this up, we heard it from him. They would want to ascribe it to him.

I don't know if that's what happened. It's perfectly possible if they did it then, and if that's how God used it, then so be it. But I don't think we can actually say that for definite.

In doing this, I know that there's a range of scholarship on this from those who want to say it really was by Peter, who was just writing in a somewhat different idiom as we can all do. Many of us write in several different idioms, according to whether it's a letter to a friend or a family member, or whether it's a draft chapter of a book or a lecture course comes out quite differently. So why not? But then all the way to equally faithful and devout scholars who say, actually, I think this comes from the 130s or even the 150s or whatever.

I do not have a fixed position on this myself. It's not something that I've spent hours and hours pouring over. But those are the ranges of options that I would be thinking of.

Thank you. That's really helpful. Hi there.

Before we go any further, I want you to know about a very special ebook we're releasing this month called Critical Race Theory and Christianity. This ebook draws from two unbelievable podcasts with Neil Shenvie, Razzleberry, Owen Strand and Jermaine Marshall, addressing questions like, "Has so-called woke ideology taken over parts of the church, or is white privilege a problem in the church?" And, "Is critical race theory compatible with the gospel?" I'd love for you to have a copy of this powerful ebook as my special thanks to you for your gift to Premier Insight today, the ministry that brings you

this podcast each week. You see, all of the conversations, insight, resources and encouragement that you get from Premier Insight programs, like this one, are only possible because of the support of wonderful friends like you.

Without your generosity, none of this would be possible. So please go to premierinsight.org/give and make a donation today. That's premierinsight.org/give. And don't forget to download our newest ebook, *Critical Race Theory and Christianity* as my special thank you.

Final question then, and this takes us a bit beyond the New Testament. Andrew in New York City asks, "I've always been curious to learn about what the apostles did in the years after what's recorded in the Bible. There are all these legends about where the apostles traveled, what they did, how they were martyred.

But some of the stories I've heard sound pretty over the top. I'd love to hear your take on what you consider to be historically accurate and how to find reliable sources for this sort of history. How do we know what actually happened versus what were legends spread by the early church?" And finally, since Andrew was one of the very first disciples along with his brother Peter, why isn't there more about Andrew? Heck, did he also write letters in the same way that Peter and Paul did, but they just weren't considered inspired enough to include in Scripture? As someone named Andrew, I had to ask that one.

Don't know what order you want to take those in. What do you want to talk about Andrew first and then move on to the sort of... I would like to talk about what a wonderful place New York City is and wish Andrew well and I'd love to sit down in one of those street side cafes and have a coffee with them and talk about it. But sadly, that's not an option at the moment.

Yeah, we just don't know. And actually, this is typical of so many things about the first two centuries. I'm an ancient historian by original training.

You see around me the books which tell me about the ancient world and there are lots and lots and lots of gaps. I mean, we know a lot about Julius Caesar. We know a lot about Mark Antony.

We know a lot about all sorts of characters from the first century BC. We know a lot about Claudius and Nero in the first century AD in the time of the Apostles. But at every point, whether it's the story of Rome or Athens or North Africa or whatever at the time, there are huge gaps we just don't know.

And in the story of early Christianity, the people whose writings we do have from the second and third and fourth generations, people like Clement of Rome, people like Ignatius of Antioch, people like Polycarp then on to Arneus and Tertullian. They've got particular things they want to talk about. And those do not usually include very much

about the first Apostles.

Later, Eusebius, when he writes his ecclesiastical history, which is a splendid, extraordinary piece of work, though a lot of people get a bit cross with him for some of his biases, he does track some of the stories and legends and martyrdoms and so on. But again, as with anything in ancient history, if you only have one source, then you've got nothing to check it against. Normally, historians like to have two or three or more sources so they can get a rounded picture of what happened.

So if you just get one legend, well, I want to say, all sorts of funny things do happen in real life. It's perfectly possible that this legend actually goes back to historical reality. But we've no means of checking it.

But that simply means this is part of ancient history, along with everything else. It doesn't mean that everything that comes afterwards is based on the tissue of lies. One of the most interesting stories to me because of friends who've been in that world is the story of Thomas, my namesake, who went supposedly to India.

And Old Bishop Stephen Neal, who wrote the history of Christianity in India, came to the conclusion that there was no counter evidence. It was perfectly possible that Thomas had gone to India and that the Indian church, which exists to this day, which thinks of itself as the St. Thomas Church, the Martoma Church, that it really does go back to Thomas' original preaching. But there is no historical evidence for the continuity from the first century to when it occurs a century or three later.

And so that's typical of the whole thing. Of course, St. Andrew is the patron saint, both of Russia and of Scotland. Did he go to either of them? I simply don't know.

Did he go to New York? I think I'm afraid that's improbable. Yes. But thank you very much.

I mean, that final question of Andrew's. What about him being one of the disciples but doesn't get much in the way of any letters attributed to him? Is that just a... Yes, that's true. But then most of them don't have letters attributed to them.

Not because they couldn't write perhaps, but just because well, they weren't engaged in that kind of ministry. But it's very interesting in the gospels. Andrew does pop up a few times and he's just recognisable that it's Andrew who has discovered that there's a lad in the crowd who's got five lobes and two fish.

Things like that where Andrew seems to be an enabler, somebody who is on the lookout. We can help with this one. He's that sort of a person rather than his brother Peter, who's always out front making big mistakes and then making big statements as well.

So it's interesting that we do get a flicker of a three dimensional character there. Yes.

Well, look, thank you very much for your thoughts and yes, postulations about what might or might not have happened to some of these characters after the Bible.

But it's great to have the questions. Thank you very much, Tom. Pleasure to be with you as usual.

Thank you. We'll see you next time.

[Music] Really hope you enjoyed today's show.

Now's a great time to send in your questions, by the way, if you'd like more questions from Tom answered because we're going to be doing some more recordings very soon with Tom on all kinds of areas. So do feel free to get those in by registering at AskNTRight.com. That gives you the link to ask a question. It means you get hold of the regular newsletter.

It means you get additional bonus resources and of course you get entered into competitions too. And if you'd like to be entered with the chance of winning one of those five signed copies of Tom's latest book, Broken Signpost. Again, just get yourself registered.

Your name will go in the hat and we'll be drawing that in September. So thanks for listening to today's show and we'll see you next time.

[Music]