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The Bible: Gospel, Guide, or Garbage? | Dr. NT Wright & Dr. Sean Kelly

October 31, 2019



The Veritas Forum

How should we view the Bible? New Testament scholar and theologian NT Wright and Harvard philosopher Sean Kelly discuss one of history's most influential books at The Veritas Forum at Harvard University. Moderated by Dr. Jay Harris. Please like, share, subscribe to, and review this podcast. Thank you! [this is a throwback episode from 2013]

Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is which one has resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with. How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are a mystery, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this involved. In today's episode we hear from New Testament scholar and theologian NT Wright and Harvard philosopher Sean Kelly as they take to the stage at Harvard in a discussion titled the Bible Gospel, Guide, or Garbage.

Moderated by Harvard Jewish Studies professor Jay Harris. [applause] We're going to begin a discussion with a reflection on the nature of the Hebrew Bible and how to think about it. The Hebrew Bible often also known as the Old Testament.

And since Professor Wright brought one, we have a little prop. One of the challenges as we think about it is of course we put it between these two covers and we call it the Bible. But it is in fact a collection of works that span, well people will debate it, but maybe a thousand years, maybe 600, whatever the number may be.

And you know, are really quite different in the ways, the audience that they address, the narrative voice, all these other different characteristics. So how are we to think about the

Hebrew Bible? How are we to think about it as a source of truth, a source of history? Is it mythological? Is mythological a problematic thing? We sometimes use myth as if it meant falsehood, but of course in the field of religious studies we don't use it that way. So how are we to think about this book? And we'll begin with Professor Wright.

Thank you. And am I coming through? Yeah. Okay.

It's very good to be back here in Memorial Church where I've been many times before and always enjoyed the welcome. So thank you for the multiple welcome that we've now had. And great place to begin.

Okay Bible, Hebrew Bible, what's it about? Yes, of course it is a complex and many-sided book. It's rather like at one, as two images which come to mind. It's like walking into a house where people have lived, the same family has lived for a long time, and the house has many rooms.

And in this room they do one thing in that room, they do another, there's a dining room, there's a kitchen, there's a bedroom, there's all sorts of different rooms. And you wander through and you get the sense that, yeah, there are different things that take place in these different rooms, but actually there's a sort of continuity. And you can see portraits on the walls to tell you who used to live here, the people who are now here live in a certain way, which is both different and similar to what's gone before.

But it's then a house which, from the Christian point of view, it's a house in which one finds oneself surprisingly welcome. You know, this is a book which has come from a very particular tradition, a very sort of sharp edged tradition over against many other traditions, although there are, of course, confluences with other ideas, but it retains a sense of family identity. And part of the extraordinary thing that happened in the first century was when people, first century AD, was when people said, actually, you, the great unwashed public outside this tradition, now because of Jesus, you're welcomed into this house.

And so Christians sort of wander around this house looking around, my goodness, can I be part of this family? So that's the first image. The second image is of a journey. When you go on a journey, you're beginning, you're middle, you're continuity, you're end.

They may be significantly different places, but there is a continuity all through, and it seems to me that the way that Jews in the first century read their scriptures, well, they read them in many ways, but one of the ways was to see the first five books, the Torah, the Law of Moses, not just as the back story, the stuff that happened way back when, but in a sense as the whole story because the fifth of those books, Deuteronomy ends with a covenant promise that if you do this, it'll be good, and if you do that, it'll be bad, but then even after the bad bit, God will do something new. And there are signs in the first century that they are reading the rest of the Bible, the Hebrew Bible, within that sense of

a larger story, it's going somewhere, they're not quite sure where it's going, and that's a story then again, which, though it's a very different journey, with lots of twists and turns, becomes the back story and then the ongoing story for the early Christian church as well. That's probably enough to set that ball rolling.

Excellent. So, is this okay? I can hear, people can hear me. I also want to start off by expressing my gratitude to the very Toss group and to the organizers for inviting me to take part in this.

I'm very excited about it. I'm extremely conscious of the fact that I'm probably the least qualified of the three of us up here to talk about the Bible. I'm not a biblical scholar.

I'm not a New Testament scholar or an Old Testament scholar, but I am very interested in the Bible. And so let me just say where I come from, and then I'll try to say something about how one finds truth in the Hebrew Bible as I understand it. I'm situated in the current context.

I'm interested in the current stage that we're at now in the history of the West, and the particular kinds of problems that each of us as individuals and all of us as a culture face, which I think are peculiar problems, problems that people in previous eras in the history of the West haven't faced. Many people, believers and non-believers alike, call our age a secular age. And I think one of the things that that means is that we face and recognize a certain kind of threat that's very foreign to people in earlier eras in the history of the West.

And it goes under a variety of different names. Some of the philosophers that I'm interested in are people like Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish philosopher. He said it's the leveling of all meaningful differences that we face, the possibility that nothing's going to seem significant to us anymore.

Friedrich Nietzsche around the same time said it's the threat of nihilism, the threat that we're not going to be able to recognize any significant meaningful differences in our lives, or in the world. David Foster Wallace, a contemporary American novelist, said he recognizes it as a kind of stomach level sadness that everyone in his generation seems to feel. And I recognize that, and I'm interested in combating it.

And one of the places that I think is really interesting to go to try to combat that is the Bible. And in the context of the Hebrew Bible in particular, one of the things that I'm interested in is that that experience that I think many of us recognize and that we recognize as a part of our culture is just not there. It's a very different kind of experience that they're narrating and that they're expressing.

The kind of phenomena that motivates the narrative that gets told in the Old Testament is a phenomenon according to which you, as a part of the world, which you, as an

individual or as a people, recognize a kind of care that God has for you, a kind of covenant that gets made between you and God that obliges you to recognize the world as a place that you've got stewardship over, as a significant and meaningful place that it's your obligation or your duty to take care of and to take care of yourself by cultivating in yourself the ability to do that kind of stewardship work. That's a very different understanding of who a people are and of what the world is. And I'm attracted to it.

I think if one had that understanding, if one lived in a world where that was the way you understood yourself, then the threat that many people write about as the threat of nihilism or the threat of leveling, it would be a threat that we would be able to combat. So I'm interested in finding a kind of truth in the Hebrew Bible where that reflects something that I can recognize as an understanding of the self and an understanding of the world where it's the world is something that you are obligated to care about, that it's appropriate for you to care about, and that there's something in the world that draws you to it and it cares about you. But that seems to me amazingly compelling and that's what draws me to that part of the Bible.

Thank you. So I'd like to follow up for a moment if I may. I think the image of the house with multiple rooms is a beautiful image and one that I will definitely try to refer to as I move on.

But the other side of that I think, in the 17th century, a Dutch rabbi wrote a roughly 600-page book in Spanish to reconcile all the contradictions in the Hebrew Bible. And of course, like many books of that kind, like the index of forbidden books, which was a bestseller for a long time, in some ways the contradictions that he notes are actually much more compelling than the harmonizations that he offers. And in some ways, it really brings out the extent to which the Bible, for all the imagery of rooms and one leading into the other and so on, it seems to me one has to sort of confront the reality that some of these rooms are incompatible with one another or it's maybe to use Lincoln, the house divided, that maybe can't stand so well.

So how do we work through all of the fact that certainly read literally and even in some cases I think the tools of allegory are not necessarily sufficient. I mean, how do we work through a text that at various moments seems at odds with itself? It will be good to have some actual examples to work on. I don't know if you've got any in mind, but while you're thinking, let me just say a couple of things.

Sometimes the Bible does a very interesting thing, which I think is what's going on in the very first two chapters. Genesis 1 and 2, Genesis 1 and 2 are two different accounts of creation. And they don't map onto one another.

They are not on all fours. And what I think is going on there, and I think actually this is part of the poetry of the Psalms, where the Psalms continually say one thing and then something else which is very like it. It's as though they're putting up two signposts and

the two signposts, one is pointing like this, the other is pointing like that, and there's a kind of interesting, hermeneutical space shimmering in between them.

And it's as though they're saying, we know that what we really want to say is actually unsayable, but here is one signpost, and if you look down that line you won't go too far wrong, as long as you also look down this signpost. Now, that would say there is a compatibility, but it would also warn us against actually trying to say what it is in the middle. Although there are hints and guesses, obviously Proverbs 8, the wisdom as the agent of creation, there's a sort of sense of "ah, the Lord by wisdom made the heavens" and so on.

But I think quite often in the Bible that's going on, but the other thing is very different. The way I read the narrative, and I think this is in line with quite a lot of early Jewish readings as well as a lot of early Christian readings, the narrative is not simply able to be flattened down into a set of moral, either examples or precepts, but it's a story of a people who are called for a particular purpose. And the wrinkle in that is that the people who are called for the purpose of rescuing the world from the message got into are themselves part of the problem.

And you see this, so Genesis 1 to 11, here's the creation, here's the problem, from the garden with the eating of the apple or whatever it is, through to the tower of Babel where human arrogance wants to do its own thing, build a great big fat city so that it's a shaky fist at God. And then God, by contrast, calls a nomad and says, "Through you, I'm going to sort this all out." But the nomad himself, Abraham, is also a child of Adam. He's also part of the problem.

And from then on, and it seems to me this is exactly what the prophets and the Psalms themselves reflect, from then on, there is a sense that this ongoing story is the story of God's great saving purposes and the story of all the extraordinary things that go wrong and they get wrong, and that if you like God himself has to get his hands pretty dirty in order to keep this show on the road. So if you take it and say, "This is a book of moral examples and precepts," then some of them are extremely odd. If you say this is a narrative which, like all great stories, has complexities and then complexities within the complexities, then I think you can see how that narrative works.

Just to round that off, two of the Psalms, you see, I've just written a little book on the Psalms, so I'm kind of buzzing in my head at the moment, 105 and 106. If you just read 105, you'd think that the story of the people of God was a nice, smooth progress. God called us, God chose us, God did this, that and the other for us, and isn't that fine.

And then that sort of smooth, going along smoothly on the top, and underneath, rather like the image of the swans, sailing smoothly down the river, but with the feet paddling like crazy underneath, Psalm 106 is about how they kept on getting it wrong, and God warned them, punished them, and they went and did it again, and they never learned.

And it's as though those two stories are stored, you have to tell them both, even though it's actually quite difficult to put them together. There's a residual ambiguity, and it's one of the early Christian claims that that residual ambiguity is then somehow, strangely resolved in and through Jesus, though of course, Christian history also is shot through with its own variety of the ambiguities.

Since I've been asked for an example, and of course Genesis 1 and 2 is classic, and the dates surrounding Noah and so on, that will lead Augustine to basically throw up his hands on this one, just like a very simple one. In Deuteronomy 14 separated, a 15 round, separated by seven verses we see, the poor will always be with us, I believe quoted by Matthew, correct me if I'm wrong, and then, but eventually, there will be no poor among us. And this goes to the heart of a social vision and how you think about constructing a society, so what does one do with a passage, or those kinds of narratives that may be orthogonal to another, but really what appears on the surface anyway to be a direct contradiction? I think things like that are a deliberate sort of tease, and whoever puts Deuteronomy 15 into its present form, I think was not stupid.

I mean, older biblical theorists used to hypothesize that every time you got something like that, "Oh, that's one source, and that's another source." And I think mostly that's given up now, because somebody actually put this together and thought that made sense. And again, the sort of sense that it makes may well be one of those teasing things where you do need to say that actually God has promised that certain things will eventually happen, but nevertheless we find that this is happening, and this is both a challenge and a warning and a kind of a tease and a puzzle. And again, that is picked up exactly in the Book of Acts where in the early community, there were no poor among them, and the phrase reflects that Deuteronomy, because one of the basic things the early Christians did was to share and to give.

And so there's a sense that they're retrieving the challenge of Deuteronomy and experimenting with how actually that promise might come true. But yeah, there are plenty of things like that. Like in the Book of Proverbs, one verse says, "Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he go on being a fool." And the next verse says, "Don't answer the fool according to his folly, lest you become a fool like him." And they sit side by side.

So you're doing right now. It seems to me that when you have things like that, this is deliberate, it's almost like a Buddhist koan or something. It's a way of saying, "You've got to live with both of these, and then it's up to you how to decide what to do when." So as we look at the Bible as a source of meaning and as a way of understanding our lives in a context that's obviously very different from our own, I don't think we can shy away from the reality that in many ways the Hebrew Bible is a very violent book.

Again, since I mentioned Voltaire, I remember somewhere Voltaire does a calculation of how many people God kills in the Old Testament. And it's a big number. I don't

remember exactly what he came up with.

And there are these genocidal commandments that we find, especially in Deuteronomy and elsewhere. How are we to relate to that side of, and of course it's a question about meaning and an existential orientation to the text as well as a moral one, but let's start with the form. Wherever else you want.

Yeah, so let me try to say something about that question picking up on something that Professor Wright said. I mean, I know that we have these three subheadings in the title of our talk, and in some way I suppose to stand for the idea that the Bible is a moral guide, but that's not what I really think. I don't think that at all.

And partly-- You want Gorbachev's name. No, I don't think that either. I sort of none of the above, I guess.

I'm not sure. But one of the reasons I don't think that is because I don't think there's a rational moral system is capable of characterizing the messiness of human existence. And I think the point of the Bible is that it's aiming at characterizing at least one understanding of what human existence could be at its best.

It requires a recognition that you can't do it all on your own. It requires a recognition that there are meanings and significances that are greater than you that you've got to get in the right relation to. And it requires the recognition that things aren't always going to make sense.

And I think the Bible is not just shot through with these kinds of dichotomies, these sort of-- it says one thing here and another thing here. But there's a kind of-- there's a sense in which paradoxes at its heart. And I think there's something true about that.

Paradoxes at the heart of our existence. We don't make sense in any rational way. I don't think a moral system could tell us the right story about us.

And I'm moved by something that a 17th century French mathematician and philosopher, Blais Pascal, thought. Pascal was a devoted Christian and he had several revelations. And one of them, he wrote down on a parchment and he sewed it into his jacket.

And I don't remember the whole thing. But at the head of it, it says, the main thing that he's discovered is that the God of the philosophers is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And that seems to me deeply important.

The way the philosophical tradition has tried to tell a rational story about the nature of God and about the nature of human existence as understood in the Bible. Pascal thought, "It's just wrong. That's not what the Bible is about."

Human experience is messy. Paradoxes at the heart of it." And these kinds of paradoxes, I think, are part of that too. There is suffering.

And sometimes it doesn't make sense. And that's just true. That's part of the way we experience the world.

I suppose that if there's any comfort in that, there's supposed to be in the background the idea that, "Yes, there's suffering. Yes, it doesn't make sense." And yet somehow we're supposed to be here. We're supposed to be at home.

The world is supposed to be a significant place. And we're cared for. And if you can hold all those together, I think that's a great thing.

That, to my mind, is why the image of the journey is so important that there is a journey. It's not static. It's not that you can freeze a frame at any one point and say you can deduce all of morality or whatever from this.

And I think particularly I'm absolutely with you on Pascal. And it's actually very moving, the stitching into the jacket. You know, this is sort of, I want this is close to me.

It's like a Jewish prayer habits where you actually put on bits of the Bible. But I think that the critical thing then is that we in the now modern world, the post Pascal world and Pascal obviously saw this coming up, have tended to hold a rationalist framework. And then either we bring the Bible to it.

And if we're devout Christians, we're tempted to say, right, I'm going to prove to you that the Bible fits completely and works and does all these things, which often then has been used in the church as a means of beating people over the head. There you are. We've proved this.

Bang, you sit down, shut up and do what you told. And I see a lot of people, I know a lot of people who've reacted fiercely against that because it is actually dehumanizing. But then when you actually take the Bible as what it is, as opposed to what you know, it doesn't offer itself to us as a system.

It offers itself to us as this great, big, sprawling epic with all sorts of loose ends and all sorts of odd bits. And then again, part of the task of the New Testament is not to tie up all those loose ends, but to say, actually, if you put Jesus, and especially Jesus on the cross in the middle of it, precisely, what a ridiculously paradoxical thing to think of the God who made the world becoming human and dying at the hands of imperial bullies. That makes no sense at all.

And Paul knew that that made no sense. And he says, "No, that is the message." And that's where suddenly, "Oh, my goodness, if that's where it's all going," it doesn't instantly resolve all the questions, but there's a sense that the messiness all lands up at

the foot of the cross. So I think the worst part of my job is that I have to keep things moving along when there's so much more we could say on this topic, but it is time you gave us a wonderful segue into the New Testament, and that's where we're heading next.

As we look at the New Testament and the Gospels, in many ways you read the Gospels, and they look very much like standard ancient historiography. The way in which Thucydides will lay out a pericles oration or some such thing, or the way Josephus will narrate events he obviously did not see, and did not know as if he were there, and so on. And the speeches that are presumably created, perhaps out of fragments, perhaps out of one's imagination, and so on.

And when one looks at that, one looks at the Gospels, one imagines one is looking at, as I say, standard ancient historiography. And of course, with the four Gospels that we have and the different narratives and some of the tensions among them, and you have written quite beautifully, Professor, on the ways in which we can think about the Gospels as different voices or different streams of music and some symphonic work of one kind or another, but on some level it seems to me there are those who want to know, "Well, what really happened and what did Jesus really say?" And so to what extent can we distill what really happened and what Jesus really said? Do you imagine? I am looking at you first. That's one of my instructions.

Yeah, yeah, okay. This is obviously a huge question, as we all know, and an enormous amount has been written on it, not least with an mile of where we're sitting, and so that anything I can say now is just a microcosm of that. One of the most interesting books on biblical studies to come out in the last generation is a work by my predecessor, it's Andrew's Richard Borkham, B-A-U-C-K-H-A-M, called "Jesus and the Eyewitnesses", in which he studies within the context of the ancient world, and particularly the ancient Jewish world, the clues and cues in a text which tell you that eyewitnesses are being appealed to, that the way a story is told carries with it the implication that this character in the story is actually able to vouch for this.

The jury is still out, scholars have disagreed quite sharply, I was at a meeting at SBL a couple of years ago, where people were almost coming to blows about, whether this made sense or nonsense, but Borkham is an extremely fine ancient historian, theologian, and the book is not to be sneezed at, and if he's right, then actually on that evidence alone, there is a very high claim being made for the substantial authenticity of the story. Now of course, we all know as historians that no record of any event tells you every single thing that happened, every single word everyone said, that'd be really very boring, you know, would go on forever, and so all historians select, all selection is according to a principle or an idea, and different people have different principles of selection, so they select and arrange, and that's obviously happened in the gospels, and in the sources that lie behind them, though we don't have those sources, despite what

some people try and hypothesize, we actually haven't got access to them, but in my own work, what I've basically tried to do is to say we can see quite a lot about the second-tempered Jewish world, we can tell the story from the Maccabees, 200 years before the time of Jesus, on through, we can understand quite a bit about Herod the Great and what he was up to, we know what it felt like to be a Jew in Palestine after the Romans had come and taken over. We've got a lot of evidence about that, everything from coins and other artifacts to lots of literary sources, and the Dead Sea Scrolls and so on, and out of all of that we can get a matrix within which we can say, "Do these stories make sense as stories about somebody in the late 20s, early 30s of the first century of the common era, or don't they?" And I and lots of others have argued, actually they make very good sense, they wouldn't have made sense about somebody 50 years before, they wouldn't make sense about somebody 60 years afterwards, but they really do fit there.

And the other thing is this, that when we look at the phenomenon which with hindsight we call Christianity, though that is, of course, a modern word which we apply back, we have to ask, as with any great movement, how did this start, how did it begin, what got it off the ground, and if you try to diminish the veracity of the gospels, then what you have to do is to balance, it's like squashing air out of one bit of a balloon, another bit comes bulging out the other side. If you say, "Well, this didn't happen, Jesus didn't say that," or whatever, you have to hypothesize, which is the long academic word for saying "guess" or "invent," that somebody made this up in the early church, and then you have, "Why would they make that up?" And when you look at that, okay, of course things have been edited, Mark says when he's telling about what Jesus said on the Mount of Olives, at one point he says, "Jesus said when you see the abomination of desolation standing where it would not, should not," and Mark says, "Let the reader understand." Now, Jesus didn't say, "Let the reader understand." Mark said that, and there's another passage in chapter 7 where he does something similar. In other words, we can see the editor peeping out behind and thinking, "Oh, dear, they may not get this," and Luke knows that his audience won't get it, so he translates it out for them and says something different.

So we can see that sort of process going on, but at the heart of it, what they're doing is telling a story which offers itself as the reason why this whole show got on the road in the first place. Just a couple of little examples, if I may, people have often said, "There's been a great tradition of people saying," well, the sayings attributed to Jesus are basically controversies in the early church where somebody had a fine way of putting it, and so they said, "Well, as Jesus said, dot, dot, dot," attributed to him. The problem about that is we know quite a bit about the controversies in the early church, and some of the sharpest ones, there is no word of Jesus whatever about them, like circumcision and Galatians.

Jesus says nothing about it. Speaking in tongues, in 1 Corinthians, Jesus says nothing about it. All sorts of things which weren't relevant in Jesus' day, which were relevant later.

So this is just the tip of the iceberg of a much larger discussion, but it seems to me, and I and others have argued this out, that actually, as historians, yes, the gospels really are, biographies of a sort. Now, and you said that like ancient historiography, they are, and actually that was a very unfashionable position, as you probably know. People didn't used to say that until fairly recently, but I think the more we study the ancient world in general, the more they make sense like that.

But they're not just biography, they do something very odd and different, which is that they are telling the story of Jesus as the fulfillment of the story which we find in the Old Testament. And that's why they're such complicated documents, they're doing those two things at once. But again, it comes back to Jesus, and we have to say, whatever you want to say about Jesus, something pretty extraordinary was going on, otherwise none of this would have happened like that.

But doesn't the last thing that you said sort of answer the question, why would they make this up? That is, Jesus as fulfillment, well, that makes, so that's why one might make up a virgin birth story or a genealogy that allows for that fulfillment to make sense, and in the absence of that perhaps less so or not. So as I take the different pieces, why would they make it up, and presenting Jesus as a fulfillment, those two seem a little bit intention, do they not? Well, they might be, they might be, except that we've got several other Jewish texts from the period, which in their different ways offer accounts of things as fulfillment. I mean, the Dead Sea Scrolls is the obvious example, because here's a community that really does believe that Israel's God has reestablished the covenant with them, and that their own life is the fulfillment of Scripture.

So we can see how they do it, and the early Christians do it very differently, and likewise Josephus offers this wild theory about how the prophecies are actually fulfilled with the rise of Vespasian, the Roman Emperor in the 70s, and you think that will have gone down really well in his home synagogue. So we can see different ways in which people are doing that, and the way the early Christians do it is so different. I mean, there is nothing as far as I know in pre-Christian Jewish writings about a virgin birth, for instance.

Okay, Matthew points back to Isaiah 7, but as far as we know, no Jews of the time were doing that, and so, you know, it's a very, very risky thing to do. That's a hostage to fortune, but they make that move anyway. So Professor Kelly, I mean, you have written about the idea of Christianity is really this major shift in some ways from the world of the Hebrews and so on, and yet I take it that you don't read these things literally certainly don't would not affirm the resurrection of Christ, for example.

So how would you help us understand this from your perspective? Well, I hope we'll talk about the resurrection because I'm a little confused about that, and I'm hoping for help. But before we raise that medal later, yeah, we'll raise it later. But before we do, it took a while.

But I'm obviously this question of the historical truth of the events is a deep, you know, question for scholarship, and I think that's an important kind of question. But it seems to me there's another kind of truth that you could ask about, and that's the one that I'm primarily interested in. I'd have thought if you're if you're going to be a reader of a text, you have to take seriously the idea that the world at least seems to the best explanation that people could give of their understanding of themselves and their understanding of the world that they inhabit is found right here in this text.

And so you have to take it very seriously. And I'd have thought then the challenge is to understand how much sort of what phenomena they're speaking out of that we can recognize that would make them say the things that they do. And I find that a very interesting challenge, and I think it seems to me that there are things that I recognize in the New Testament as sort of things that are in the margins of the practices of our culture, whether we're Christians or not, that I think are at the center of the focus of the New Testament.

And in some cases I think they're worth getting in that really worth getting in touch with. So let me give one example. I think the way one of the ways that you can think about the transition from the hebraic, boy we've all got it up here, from the hebraic culture to the to the early Christian culture, is in terms of a movement from a culture that's governed by a system of laws to a movement in which the system of laws is sort of there as a structure, but it's contingent.

Jesus says that he is the law, that there's some sense in which what he does is determines when it's appropriate to act in accordance with the law and when it's no longer appropriate to act in accordance with the law. Now that seems to me like a phenomenon that I can understand, it's a phenomenon that makes an awful lot of sense to me. The way one of the ways to understand the world that Jesus inaugurated is that among other things, it's a world that's organized around a particular mood, the mood of agape love, among other things, that's shared among members of a community, and that draws other people into the community, and that changes the way you understand your obligations and what makes sense to do in the world, and I think moods do work that way.

I think moods really reveal possible truths about the way the world is, and they can sometimes make it seem clear to you that what's demanded in this situation is obviously something that contradicts what the rules say normally ought to happen. So that seems to me a phenomenon that I'm familiar with, it seems to me that that mood wasn't really focused, it wasn't really around until we had the community that was organized around Jesus. That seems to me a radical transition from a law culture, not a completely radical transition, of course, if you look at the Ten Commandments, there's one of them that says it's not about what you do, it's about what you covet, right? And that had to be sort of familiar, it was in the margins of the culture there, it's just all of a sudden there's a

whole world organized around that, and that's an amazing transition, I think in some sense it's right to say, that's not a transition that a mere human being could bring about.

So I think that insofar as Jesus plays the role of the person who brought about this way of life, it seems to me right to think of him as standing in some sense outside the human community, but capable of bringing about this transformation only in virtue of being a part of the human community, and those are all things you have to say, and I recognize them. So I can't resist moving just for a moment from the Bible to biblical interpretation, because you've written powerfully against Christian clateness and Christian Aristotelians, bringing in an inappropriate idiom to their world of wrestling with the Christ event and all of that, and arguably you're doing something quite similar, *mutatis mutandis*, right, that is within your own cultural context and bringing in a vocabulary that I dare say, folks perhaps from a different tradition may not immediately recognize. So how do we work this through? Well I'm not sure I can say what I think is difficult about trying to read the Christian tradition in terms of the Greek categories.

I think a lot of the time, I think the Greek culture is very, very different from the Hebraic and the Christian cultures. It seems to me they do have in say in the stories of Homer, there's an important sense in which gods play a role in the human understanding of the self, but it seems to me that the way the gods play a role in the human understanding of the self in Homer is radically different from the way that Jesus plays a role in the understanding of the self in the New Testament text. I'll just give you one example.

It's not as though the Greek gods never come down to earth, they do come down to earth, they come down to earth and they make it possible for telemachus to stand up and give a speech in front of a crowd, they fill him with courage. They come down and they inhabit Achilles so that Ares inhabits Achilles, so that Achilles is a great warrior. But when the gods do this, Athena comes down and fills up Odysseus.

When they do this though, something interesting happens, the heroes, they become sort of more than human. They are taller and handsome and they smell better and their locks are more curly and they're just as if it's as if it's as if in order for the gods to come down and sit inside a human being, they have to puff the human being out. And Jesus is the opposite, Jesus comes down in the most humble form, he's the loneliest, he's the one who has to suffer, it's exactly the opposite.

And it seems to me that there are lots of other ways in which the Greek categories and the Greek conceptions, which I think ultimately do give rise to philosophy. I'm a philosopher, but I think there are ways in which philosophy goes wrong and isn't able to account for the complexities of human existence. So there are ways in which I think the Greek categories really don't fit the early, the New Testament.

That's really interesting and we didn't rehearse this before, I had no idea what Professor Kelly was going to say there and I'm just fascinated by it because our modern Western

culture is all too often a culture of superheroes, a culture of larger than life people and the whole business of Bob Jeward wrote a book a few years ago, the myth of the American superhero going back through the comics and movies and so on, where it's always the same story, the guy who's the quiet one who then sees something's wrong, so he puts on a mask or a suit and becomes, does the redemptive violence and then goes back to being an ordinary guy again. And that can be strongly critiqued precisely on the grounds of Jew say, and I'd like to inject into there one of the foundational biblical pictures, which is the idea that God made humans in his own image. And people have speculated what does that mean, is it memories, imagination, what is it? I go with people who have argued that it's the idea of an angled mirror that God wants to be known in the world, God wants his stewardship, his care of the world to be flowing out into the world and humans are the people who as you said at the beginning are the ones entrusted with this stewardship, then when humans mess it up, Abraham and his family are the ones entrusted with putting it right, when they mess it up, Jesus is the one.

And the New Testament refers to Jesus as the image of God. And people often read that, people in my tradition read that, and they think, "Oh wow, that's because he's divine." But actually what it's saying is he's the genuine human being, and as you say, he's not puffed up, and one of the most crucial things, and before we even talk about the resurrection, I think this is really, really important, people often in my world and my culture say, "Well, the main thing is we have this God who does miracles." Well, I do believe that God can and does do extraordinary things which you don't expect, but that goes with a philosophical idea of a God who is normally outside the process as in either Epicureanism or Deism, and who occasionally reaches in and stirs the pot, does something wacky and then goes away again. That's not what we find in the Bible.

What we find in the Bible is a God who is actually strangely present, often grieving and groaning because of the mess, but then also making something out of it. And if I say which of those pictures is more like what I find in the Gospels, it's definitely the second one, which is why Jesus faced with the question of power when James and John say, "Please, can we sit at your right and your left like you and I are sitting at your right and your left right now?" I've all these roles tonight. Enjoy, enjoy.

The gentlemen are coming in. They want to be his kind of Foreign Secretary or Chief of Staff or whatever, and Jesus says, "You have no idea the pagan nations, home as heroes and so on." They do power one way by bullying and manipulating and so on. We're going to do it the other way, which is the way of service, the way of suffering, and Jesus says, "And I'm leading the way." The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many.

And so the message of the cross, which Christians have rightly seen in terms of atonement with all that that means, actually nests within the redefinition of power. And I think it's exactly the point you're making. This is an essentially hebraic reaction against the culture of the rest of the world.

It's a deeply countercultural idea, but at the heart of it is this notion of image and this notion then of, "This is what the kingdom of God looks like." When God wants to sort the world out, he doesn't send in the tanks. That's how we do it. When God wants to sort the world out, he comes into our midst, takes the shock and the shame and the horror upon himself and dies under its weight.

That is still the most extraordinary message. The early Christians believed that that was where the whole biblical story was going, and the rest of the world says, "What? You must be kidding." They said it then and they say it now, but a lot of people actually think, "No, this makes sense." So as we move to the question of the resurrection, rather than trying to pose it as, "Is it true? Did it happen?" Although, obviously that may be part of what either of you would like to address, I'd like to sort of frame it a little bit differently and tie it into what I think would be a challenge to each of you beyond the question of the resurrection and into the larger purpose of Christianity as we've been discussing it. With the resurrection in particular, in some sense, the supernatural qualities that in here in Jesus are, I think, made very clear.

And at a certain point, as Kant is reflecting on Jesus as a moral paragon in his religion and trying to think through how this works, we associate the term "demithologizing with both mind," but I think really it's Kant who begins this process of saying, "If you make Jesus God, you alienate him from all of us." He's no longer a teacher to any of us because he's not us, he's not like us, he's not of us. And in some sense, could we look at the resurrection, in the one hand, of course, as a vision of renewal and rebirth and all of that, but at the same time, coming at a very high cost by, in some sense, oddly dehumanizing Jesus. And thus distancing Jesus as a figure from us.

So I throw that out either side. Do you want to start? Well, there's several fascinating things you said there. It makes me think somebody needs to write a critique of pure Kant, if that's what Kant actually said.

And because... I might have made it up. Yeah, well, I'm not a Kant scholar. But the whole point of the resurrection in the New Testament is that Jesus is the new model of human being.

And in 1 Corinthians 15, it's quite clear that Paul doesn't see the resurrection as setting Jesus apart. And you see, this blessed word supernatural. I know a lot of Christians set a lot of store by it.

I've largely given it up. Not because I don't believe in what they were trying to refer to, but because the word supernatural carries so much baggage precisely from the Epicurean culture I mentioned before, so that you divide the world. The supernatural is all that stuff up there, and then the natural is down here.

And occasionally they bump against one another. And in the Bible it's not like that. And

the Bible, heaven and earth, are meant to go together.

They overlap and they interlock, and it's kind of dangerous and confusing. But that's a much harder world view for today's Western worlds to get hold of. And in a sense the secular age, I think, is because we've lived with Epicureanism for so long and that's how it works out.

But in the resurrection, you know, the resurrection is not primarily a very odd event within the present old world, which is on its way to death and decay. The resurrection is the archetypal event and the paradigmatic event within the new world. And when the gospel writers tell the story of the resurrection, what they're telling, and the way they tell it says this, is this is the launching of God's new creation at which people say, "Oh my goodness, something extraordinarily new has happened here.

Jesus is at the middle of it. They don't say, therefore he must be some incarnate divinity who's different from us." They say, "He's actually leading the way into God's future, and he's beckoning us to join him." "Oh my goodness, this is a bit scary." So I mean, that's how the stories work as narratives. And it seems to me, therefore, if that's what Kant said, he was actually very seriously wrong.

And maybe that is the reason. I mean, Bultmann wasn't a co-continent philosopher and part of his makeup. Why Bultmann had to do the demythologizing if that's what he thought was going on? So now's my time to confess that I'm totally confused about something, and I've been worrying about it in preparation for this discussion for weeks now.

And so I'll just admit it. I've been trying to understand, so the way I'm interested in reading the Bible, and maybe this is not the way everyone reads it, but I want to know, what's the conception of themselves and of the world that these people have such that this is the way they have to explain how things happen. This is the way they have to explain the creation, this is the way they have to explain guilt, this is the way they have to explain, and so on.

And when it comes to the resurrection, there's something in the area that I can recognize, but I don't, there's something that I think I can't recognize, so maybe you can help. The resurrection is the story of Jesus after having died coming back in a bodily form. And there's all sorts of things that are interesting to me about it.

One of the things that I find very interesting is the constant insistence that the apostles tended not to recognize him, it took a long time and so on. I think that's interesting, I'm not quite sure what to make of it. But the thing I can recognize is that I can, I mean this is a story about death, and this is a story about what happens when people confront the death of someone who's not just close to them, but's organized their world and is organized their understanding of everything that is.

And so this is in some sense a story about grief, and when I think about the phenomenon of grief, I think that it would be completely unbearable, it would have to be completely unbearable. If in your grieving at the loss of another, it wasn't at least in some sense part of your experience of the other through your grief at their loss, that they're part of your future, that your future makes sense only in the context of their being there, in some sense of being there. So I recognize that, I think that if you didn't have that, then as I said, I think grief would be virtually unbearable.

But the story of the resurrection of Jesus isn't a story about how you're going to understand your future as involved with this person that's now gone and will somehow be there for you. It's a story about how he's now actually there, he's actually there, and really physically there, and that's got to be an extra step that's not just the story about grief, and that's something that I'm fascinated by, but I don't know where to see the phenomenon. Wow, that's fascinating the way you put it, and there are several different strands to what you just set out, and of course some people have taken the quite well-known phenomena of appearances of somebody who's recently died.

My father-in-law after he died, somebody who didn't know he died but who was a close friend, perceived him in the room and didn't know he died and thought funny, what's Frank doing here, and then he disappeared again, he was on the phone and actually he died, and that is a well-known phenomenon, people who've written books about it, it's been studied often enough. And of course, here's the trick, they knew about such phenomena in the ancient world as well, and that's a well-documented, you see an example of it in the book of Acts, and you can go into it, but it's not something that we know about which they didn't. And so whether you call that a grief-induced fantasy or whether you say that actually since the people didn't even grieve yet because they didn't know the person was dead, it's something else going on which is inexplicable in normal modern understanding.

Nevertheless, some have advanced that as the explanation, oh, that's what happened, some very well-known New Testament scholars have basically gone that route. I find that incredible as an explanation because they did know about visions, ghosts, dreams, fantasies, and they're perfectly capable, again as Luke makes clear in Acts of distinguishing between fantasy, dream, imagination and waking reality, actual hard-edged reality. And so I think that without seeing Jesus and without there being an empty tomb, the stories are inexplicable.

If you just have an empty tomb, well, come on guys, somebody stole the body. In the ancient world, people stole bodies, people robbed tombs, especially of well-known or famous people because they were hoping for loot, and likewise people saw visions. So without those two, I find it impossible to explain.

But here's the thing, in Luke 24, the last chapter of Luke's Gospel, there we've got

Griefal right. We have this amazing story beautifully told of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus who had just totally defeated and distraught. And Jesus comes alongside incognito, and you're absolutely right.

One of the fascinating things of the resurrection accounts there and then in John as well, John 21 particularly, is that they don't immediately recognize him. And this is ridiculous. They've been with him day and night for three years.

And the evangelists knew that. And so part of my question there is, if they're not actually reporting it as it happened, would you make it up like that? If after 10 years or 10 weeks or 30 years or whatever hypothesis you want, you think, well, actually we need to tell some proper stories about this to get this movement solidified, you wouldn't make them up like that. There's a magic moment in John 21 when they're fishing and Jesus is on the shore and it's Jesus.

Oh my goodness, what's going on? They come into shore. Jesus is already cooking breakfast for them. And John says, none of them dared ask him who are you because they knew it was the Lord.

You think, excuse me, what's this about? This is very strange. There is a sense that he's the same but different. And they don't have at that stage a worldview which can accommodate that because those Jews who believed in resurrection either like the Maccabees believed you'd come back exactly the same, just the same all over again.

Cut off my hand if you like and I'll get it back again in the resurrection. Or like 2nd Baruch, they believed in people shining like stars in the heavens, which is picked up from Daniel chapter 12. They didn't talk about somebody who was the same and yet different.

And the way that the early Christians seem to get their heads and their hearts around this is to come up with the idea this is the beginning of new creation. You know when somebody is very sick, you say poor old so-and-so, he's just a shadow of his former self. But what the early Christians end up saying quite quickly by the 50s because it's in Paul is that if you're in Christ, in dwelt by the Spirit, you are just a shadow of your future self.

And the reason they were able to say that is they had Jesus in mind. And here's the other thing. We know of at least a dozen messianic or would be messianic or prophetic movements, roughly 100 years either side of Jesus, going back into the 1st century BC and going on to Baruch-Cockfire in the 1/30s.

Routinely they ended with the death of the founder and often with the death of most of the people who pinned their shirts on him as well, who really he was the center of the world for Rabbi Akiva and lots of others. And when Baruch-Cockfire went down, this is exactly as you describe it. How can we live without this person? Now we don't have the full history of those movements, but the options are clear.

If that happens and you survive, either you give up the revolution and you hibernate often, hopefully, if quietly ever after, or you get yourself another leader. And we have evidence of people doing both of those things. We have no evidence for any other movement saying, "Actually I think he's been raised from the dead.

I think he's still with us. I think he's still around." If you'd said that to somebody after the death of Simon Baruch in Titus's triumph in Rome, for instance, or Baruch-Cockfire, they would have said, "Well clearly you must have been drinking something you shouldn't have done, but if you actually think he's still with you well, sing a song, we have poetry that does that stuff, but don't say he's been raised from the dead because resurrection is something that happens at the end of time to everybody, not in the middle of history to one person. So the Christian accounts are deeply, deeply counterintuitive.

They're not the sort of thing that somebody would have just made up to console themselves. That's really the challenge that the evidence poses. Thank you.

See, once again, given me my segue, which is now to Paul, and of course Paul is a remarkable challenge, and I'm going to hazard a guess that you have written in explication of Paul probably 500 to 1000 times as many words as Paul. Correct me if you think I have that number wrong, but that's probably about right. He's notoriously difficult to understand on so many levels in terms of his relationship to the Jewish world that he's coming from, the Gentile world to whom he's spreading the good news and so on.

And you have, you know, Professor Kelly, Sean, you've written about Paul as sort of making Jesus' message intelligible, and I'd love to hear a little more about how you understand that because, you know, Paul's an amazing writer and somebody one struggles with, but, you know, intelligible, it takes a lot of words to make Paul intelligible. I hope I don't offend, but... I mean, yeah, I've written about 10 or 12 words about Paul, so you've said most of them. I mean, so here's the way I understand the phenomenon.

You have a guy comes along, plays the role of a God. I mean, he institutes a new way of a new understanding of what it is to be anything at all. That's Jesus.

There's some sense in which I think when I read the text, it looks like he's living this new way of life and he understands what it demands of him, but he's not that good at explaining what it is. I mean, he has to talk in parables. He has to, you know, he can... And he's not there to explain what it is.

He's there to live it. To be it. That's the better way to say it.

He's there to be it. And when he is it, others get to be it too because they get caught up in this mood that he manifests and they become part of the community and they get to be it. I'm interested in this idea of apostolic succession.

You really have to be there to get caught up in a mood. That seems right to me. I mean, someone tells you about the mood of the party last Friday night just hearing about it doesn't put you in the mood.

You've got to be there, right? You really have to be there. And so I think that I can understand that and I can understand that it would take someone afterwards to come along and say, "Now, here's sort of what it's about. Let me try to explain to you what the basic ideas are." And it's not as if I think that Paul told a systematic and rational story about that.

I don't think there is a systematic and rational story about that. As I say, I think that's one of the interesting things about it. But I do think that he helps us to understand, for instance, in terms of the example that I was giving before, he helps us to understand what it would be to understand the life of Jesus as a life that's organized around this notion of agape.

Organized around this notion of love, that's something that sort of inspires you. You get infused with it and you see the world anew through it. I think of that as among other things.

One of the things that we get from Paul's characterization of what Jesus' life is about, that we wouldn't necessarily get without Paul. I mean, we need his help to be able to focus on it that way. I think that's the way, I mean, there aren't very many phenomena like this, but if there were, I think that's the way they would work.

Someone lives the phenomenon and he's not, he is the thing. And as a result, he's not all that good at saying what it is to be the thing. He just is it and brings other people into it.

It takes someone else to come along and say, "Okay, here's a way that we could understand what was going on there." And that's sort of the way I understand the relation between them. But can I just ask you, Paul's not the only one doing that. Although Paul in the end, I think, would be fair to say one.

You may disagree. I mean, it's almost a cliché in some circles. Paul is the founder of this movement more than Jesus.

And you can obviously agree, disagree, because it seems to me the argument's all over the place on that. But what is it about Paul that in many ways, certainly for Protestants, but even beyond that, that his vision seems so powerful, relative to the others. And again, I would argue anyway, ultimately prevails to the extent that any one way of reading this could be said to prevail.

It's hard to know, as with other things, where to start, and we are covering huge topics tonight, obviously. But I resonate very much with what Professor Kelly said. I mean, if I could just nuance that a bit and then come in from there to your question.

Yes, Jesus' vision of God being king on earth as in heaven. That is absolutely central. And people used to sneer and say, "Well, Jesus talked about God, but the church then talked about Jesus." That was sort of falsification.

But what they forget is that Jesus talked about God in order to explain the things he was doing, why he was healing on the Sabbath, why he was having fellowship with tax collectors and prostitutes and so on. He was telling God's stories in order to explain his own actions, which is a kind of scary thing to do. And yes, the parables.

And I don't think the parables are a sort of folk demure. I can't explain it, so I have to tell stories. It seems to me stories are a primary form of human discourse and not a sort of decorated oddity around the edge.

And Jesus told those stories because he was saying that for which you have longed is in fact happening, but it doesn't look like you thought it would. And the only way to say that is to tell stories. I found myself in my own ministry sometimes trying to explain things to puzzled people, being driven to invent my own parables as this is the only way we're ever going to get anywhere near.

So I don't think it's because he couldn't explain it. However, I like the idea of there being two different moments because people have often said, "Well, Jesus and Paul, they're so different. Jesus talks about the kingdom of God and the Son of Man.

Paul hardly mentions the first and never mentions the second. Paul talks about the righteousness of God and justification, and Jesus only mentions that once. So are they actually in agreement? Is Paul a faithful follower of Jesus or has he muddled the thing up?" The illustrations I've used, I mean, I like yours, but the illustrations that I've tended to use are Jesus is like the composer who writes the stunning symphony.

And Paul is the conductor who gets the orchestra to play it. And if the conductor started to rewrite the symphony, that's not being loyal to the composer. That's being disloyal.

So there are different tasks, but within what you said, there is this idea that Christianity is not, about the teaching of an abstract theory or an ethic. It's about the living God doing something which changes everything. And that's the kingdom of God message.

And that's why it's so difficult for people in the Western world to grasp because we have a narrative which says that world history came to its climax in the 18th century with the Enlightenment. And now people say it on the radio, my country, all the time. Now that we live in the modern world, dot, dot, dot, as they were all signed up to the idea that the great climax of world history was with basically Voltaire Russo and forgive me Thomas Jefferson.

And so, you know, we've then got, and they're getting rid of George III. Let's just, yeah, okay. That helps.

Yeah, absolutely. Which is why Americans find it difficult to talk about the kingdom of God, people say to me, "Oh, we don't have kings in this country, it's easy for you." And I say, actually, actually, your president is much more like an ancient king than our monarchs are, but that's a different sort of, sorry, that's just a polemical aside. So that for Paul, but the other big difference for Paul is that as far as we know, Jesus more or less never except on various select occasions addressed non-Jews.

He didn't leave them at least. He didn't go wandering around. I know there are legends about him going to India or England, but they're much later silly legends.

But Paul believes that it is his vocation to go and do a very particular task. Now, the question did he win? I mean, actually, we just don't know about Eastern Christianity or Southern Christianity. Paul didn't go into ancient Persia, India, etc.

But Christianity got there quite quickly, and it wasn't Paul who took it there. Paul didn't go as far as we know into Egypt and point south, but Christianity got into Southern Egypt quite early. So what we have in Paul's letters and Acts is a different story.

It's a very interesting one because it's of Paul following the main roots through the Roman Empire. And it's as though both Paul himself and his plans to go to Spain, which is the furthest Western outpost of the Roman Empire, and Luke in writing Acts telling that story, they are telling what is covertly and sometimes overtly a counter-imperial narrative. And people, particularly in the world of postmodernity, get very twitchy about that because all you're doing is replacing Caesar with Jesus.

And I want to say, well, Paul sort of is, but the way he does that is entirely under the rubric of the redefinition of power through the cross. So this is not Caesar-type power. These are communities that suffer, that pray, that do good.

Yes, Agape is there all the way through. And when you read my book, not if, but when, you'll see that in those, you'll see that in those, you'll see that in the last few chapters when I'm talking about how Paul impacts on the words of philosophy, religion, politics, and yes, the Jewish world as well. Agape is the strand which we come back to again, but it's not as, here's a nice moral principle.

It's actually, this is something that we've discovered to be a human reality in Jesus and especially his death. And by the way, in case you don't know, Agape is a Greek word which meant love in general. It was a much broader word before, but the early Christians shape and sharpen it so that it's specifically a love which gives itself unstintingly and without seeking a return or reward.

And that is the love which, according to the New Testament, the God who made the world has for all of us. And the love which then sent Jesus to die on the cross, and the love which Paul says can be ours as well, both to experience and then to pass on. So I

did have a Jefferson question teed up, but I'm going to skip that because we're running a bit late.

And we do want to open it up to the audience. So I don't know how are we handling this? The first question is, what compelled you to accept your worldview and your view of the Bible and at what age did you become confident about it? Could you say the beginning, but again? What compelled you to accept your worldview and your view of the Bible and at what age did you become confident about it? Well, not yet. [laughter] And how old are you? Well, I think you can't get away with that yet.

I want to be careful here. The word confidence is sometimes heard in a kind of arrogant or brittle way, and confidence has at its heart the "fid" bit, which is the Latin for "belief or trust". So, as Paul says, we are not confident in and of ourselves.

Our confidence is simply in God. And that's a way of saying, I'm not sure I've got this all together, but I think God has. I had the fortune to grow up in a very understated but practicing Christian home.

Typical British thing. We didn't actually talk much about it. We just sort of did it.

And then when I was about 11 or 12, somebody told me that it might be a good idea to read the Bible every morning, and I thought I'd tried and see what happened, and I've never seen any reason stop. But that has then grown. There have been big crises.

There have been crises where the way I thought I was construing the biblical worldview suddenly would implode and didn't make sense and resulted in all sorts of hang-ups and depressions and things, which drove me back into bits of the Bible that I hadn't really focused on before. I never actually lost my confidence in it. I lost my confidence in my own grasp of it.

I knew that there might be something there which would help me through, and that may happen again. So it's a journey. As I said, the Bible itself is a journey.

So one's life with the Bible is also a journey. It's a journey of trust, not of a brittle self-confidence. Professor Kelly and Professor Harris, what would convince you to change your view to believe that Jesus is God and was resurrected? Why the assumption in the question about prison? I thought my question.

I think I've been saying that there's a sense in which I can understand what it would mean to say that Jesus is God. There's a sense in which I am able to believe that. Like I confess, the resurrection is harder for me to understand.

I think what would convince me would be a sense that there's some phenomenon that I can have a grasp on, that I understand and sort of would understand that if that was at the center of the way you experienced the world, you would have to describe the world

as involving this, namely the bodily resurrection of Jesus. If I had that phenomenon and I'm interested in it, I would like to know what it is. If I had it a grasp of that, then I feel like I would be able to say about the resurrection what I think I can say about Jesus as God.

I don't know if I would mean what other people mean by it. And that makes life simpler for me. This is an extremely interesting conversation because of course the question is Jesus God depends a lot on what you mean by the word God.

And I suspect that that's actually another discussion which we haven't had yet. And the early Christians approach it the other way, for them the question is God Jesus because they believe in the God of the Old Testament. And then they're telling the story about this God coming back and rescuing these people and they discover they have to tell the Jesus story to say that that's how it happened.

But the resurrection thing in the New Testament, it isn't that first you're given a larger epistemological framework within which you can say, "Ah, now I see the resurrection makes sense." It's actually for them, it's the other way around. There's a sort of "humph" here it is, get used to it and then as the dust settles then they see everything in a new light. But here's a trick.

The world that they see in a new light is the same world with extra dimensions. In other words it's new creation. It's not a different creation, it's transformed creation but the resurrection is the epistemological as well as the ontological center of that.

And Professor Wright, what information would lead you to cease believing that Jesus is God and was resurrected? I suppose one can hold in one's mind the possibility that some archeologist would actually find evidence, say the corpse of Jesus in a way which was utterly demonstrable that it definitely was Jesus. I mean that's a big if and a big unlikeliness because archeology doesn't usually come that clear. About 15 years ago somebody discovered an Osuary, a bone box which had been dug up in Palestine which had the name "Issure" on it, Jesus, and which also had other names like Mary and Joseph and so on.

And some journalist in my country had a huge, oh my goodness there was an article that said the tomb that dare not speak its name which was silly because that's actually what it did. But then the Israeli archeologist pointed out that actually they've got lots of these Osuries and that Jesus, Mary, Joseph, James, etc. They have like a telephone book of all the names of these Osuries and those are some of the most common names from the first century.

I'm just saying it would be very difficult to establish if it hypothetically, if it were absolutely certain that Jesus of Nazareth was still dead, physically dead, then the center, as I just said, the ontological and epistemological center of everything that I think I know

about the world would have gone. And I would probably want to go off and play golf and be a music critic. So I believe this question also relates to the previous one.

This person asks, "What about the other monotheistic faiths, mainly Judaism and Islam, that believe in Jesus but not his divine nature? And what about other faiths that do not believe in Jesus at all? How are Christians supposed to confront these respective non-Christian texts? Everyone can't be right." That sounds like it's really a joke. The ball is being passed in my direction. I'm anxious about the word confront.

Confrontation does happen tragically or too often. Sometimes confrontation happens between Christians, just like in some parts of the world confrontation happens between different Muslim groups or different Hindu or whatever groups. But the word confrontation carries with it a connotation of potential violence and kind of a clash.

It seems to me that in a Christian worldview, it is no part of a Christian worldview to say that everybody else is absolutely wrong. It is however the center to say, "There is a God who made the world and this God has revealed himself in and as Jesus." It's therefore no surprise that some of the other major faiths, if that's the right word to use that to is controversial, actually have a place for Jesus. It's always contentious within the Jewish world, whether Jesus is regarded as an honorable but quirky older brother sort of thing, or whether he's regarded as actually a traitor who led Israel as Trey.

I mean, those two and other options, it seems to me, are on offer in Jewish study of Jesus. In Islam, is a prophet, but he didn't die on a cross. He wasn't raised from the dead and he's certainly not divine.

And around the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is inscribed in Arabic, there is one God and he does not have a son, which of course is a political statement against the Crusaders. It's basically we won a new lost. But it also has that, obviously ideological statement.

So you're absolutely right. Over against the world of relativistic modernism, which says that all faiths are just different paths up the mountain, that is a wonderful example of sort of 18th century arrogance. We the philosophers, excuse me, of a certain sort, not you.

We the philosophers, we the philosophers see the whole picture and we can see that all you are just different paths, but we know in fact it's just the one mountain, which is deeply untrue to what Christianity says to what Islam says to what Judaism says. I don't know very much about the non monotheistic faiths. I haven't studied them.

Most of the dialogue work that I've done has been with either Jews or Muslims, or in some cases, both the scriptural reasoning project is a wonderful way of bringing Jews, Christians and Muslims together to study their respective scriptures. As you do that

again and again, the differences emerge as well as the similarities, but they emerge in a way where we can honor one another's differences and then learn from that to have dialogue about meaning about actually truth. So confrontation, no dialogue, yes, respect, of course, yes, but ultimately, either Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead, in which case there is a strong claim that he is Israel's Messiah and the world's true Lord, or he wasn't, and he wasn't.

And there can't really be two ways about that. I mean, that's a huge affront to much in the postmodern imagination, but that is where it is. But I would just say to that, there is a challenge for Christians that goes beyond the question of how you relate to Muslims and Jews, or the other monotheistic faiths, however we would describe them, there are, after all, many dozens of Christian denominations, not all of which are in communion with one another.

So on the question we can't all be right, that's a question that takes place within the Christian community before we get outside the Christian community. And Christian community was and is a scandal, and the fact that the last 200 years we have colluded with it and not even really noticed it is extraordinary. And if you read the New Testament, I think somebody asked me the other day, if Paul were to come back today, what would surprise him most? And I said, "Christian disunity," and more, the fact that we don't even notice it and collude with it.

Thank you. This next question is directed towards Professor Kelly, and this person asked, "Do you draw from any other texts/ traditions, and how would you approach the Quran?" - I'm good. - Well, yeah, I'll go anywhere.

I'm ready to read. I mean, my sense is that we're fortunate to live in a culture that has an extraordinary history, that the history is filled with a range of different, sometimes conflicting, I'll call them, understandings of being, understandings of what it is for anything to be anything at all. And that somehow, at least insofar as the culture we now live in has those as part of its history, some bit of many of those is somewhere in our practices, so we can recognize those.

So my view is that, as I started off saying, we seem to face a threat or a danger that is, as far as I can tell, unique in the history of the world. It's this threat or danger of somehow living our lives in such a way that we dehumanize ourselves and that we fail to recognize meaning and significance in the world. And I think that any sort of culture or any great text that organizes a culture that we've got some relationship to is very likely to not have to face that threat.

So I would read sympathetically and engage with any of the texts that have a way that we can partly grab onto that will allow us to stand in the face of the technologization and the dehumanization of ourselves that I think we're currently engaged in. Taking the Bible as an epic rather than a system, are there any lessons our society can nonetheless learn

from it regarding our most pressing issues? I think one can learn from epics as well as systems, possibly better, because stories give people a framework for understanding. It's why novels and plays are so perennially popular because you live within a story and then you imagine what it would be like to be a character in that story.

And I think the Bible is written deliberately to be that sort of story. And if I want to learn really about how to live my life, I don't actually go and look at a book of rules which says every Thursday you must do this. I live in a family, I live in a community, I was brought up in a family brought up in a community where certain things are taken for granted.

Now sooner or later you may say, well, we need to move on from that or kick over the traces of it or this family may have become a bit restrictive, but the Bible is the big sprawling epic which actually is like the roomy house I was talking about. It's big enough for people to find their own way in, but clear-bounded enough so that you don't actually wander off the rails. And I would take a narrative over a system any day.

Maybe that just means I too am a postmodernist, but actually I think this is reclaiming. I think stories are humanizing in a way which systems can be dehumanizing, not always are not all systems are dehumanizing. Systems can be a shorthand way of grasping the key thing about a story.

I say to students, doctrines are portable stories. That's to say, I'm traveling at the minimum, I'm on the road, I've got a suitcase heading for New York tomorrow, I'll pack up my clothes and put them in a suitcase and books and things. It's a lot easier than trying to carry clothes and books onto an aircraft that they wouldn't let you anyway.

So they go in the suitcase, but at the other end they get taken out and hung in a wardrobe. It's the same way when you want to discuss the atonement, incarnation, those are abstract words, but actually they are suitcases in which stories are contained and the stories are the real thing. And that's what we live on.

This question is for Professor Kelly. Under what paradigm do you understand your life? You've expressed interest in but not commitment to Christianity. What basic truths guide you? What basic truths guide me? Well, let's see.

I guess here's something that I believe. I believe Pascal says this interesting thing. Pascal, who I mentioned earlier, is a Christian writer among other things.

He was a great mathematician as well and gave up on math, which I sort of sympathy that acquit. And so he gave this argument called the wager. If you're a betting person, should you bet whether that there's a god or not? And he says, look, if you look at the probability calculus you recognize, yeah, you're supposed to bet.

It's just in your best interest. And then he asked what I think is the interesting question. The interesting question is, so now you've decided that it would be better for you to have

the belief than not to have the belief.

What are you going to do? Because you can't just have a belief by deciding that you'd like to have it. Beliefs don't seem to work that way. And I think that's a deep truth about us.

So Pascal says, well, here's what you have to do. You have to start getting involved in the rituals of the people who do have the belief. Because somehow actually engaging in the rituals opens you up to the possibility that you might be given the belief.

He doesn't think that you can guarantee it by engaging in the rituals. And I think there's something true about that also. But he says, that's what you should do.

You should go about the rituals. And then possibly with the grace of God, you'll come to have the belief that you've now decided that you think it's best to have. What I believe is sort of the structural part of that.

I believe that it's really, really important to have rituals. It's really, really important to have practices that bring you and others out at their best. It's really, really important to recognize that when you're engaged in those practices and when you're cultivating those practices, you're engaged in the process of coming to understand possibilities for you and for others and for the world that you live in that hopefully are possibilities that will improve things rather than make things worse.

And so I'm busy going around the world gathering up practices and trying to engage in them so that I can help to take a stand on myself that makes the possibility of my life and the possibility of the lives of others better. That's what I believe in. I guess.

This question is for each of you. If you had one challenge for students here tonight, what would it be? I was supposed to ask that question, but go ahead. It depends where you're starting.

If you haven't ever sat down and read one of the gospels straight through, then please do it. It won't take you long. Even going quite slowly, you can get through the longest one in maybe a couple of hours and just read it in precisely the openness that Fesico said that maybe this is actually speaking to me, maybe it's actually doing something.

The text is alive. I mean, this is not just for information. It's for formation or even reformation, depending on where you're coming from.

If you're a student who's already been doing that for years, been reading the gospels, then I've often suggested to people, particularly at the student age, because it's easier, try learning one of the epistles by heart. Start with, if you're acting in a student play this term, by the end of term, you would know most of the play by heart, and it wouldn't have been actually difficult to learn it. It's quite easy to learn stuff by heart.

When you do that, the trick is you have to be thinking about it. You have to understand it. So if you're starting out, if this is totally foreign, take a gospel, any gospel, some are short, some are long, see what you want and just sit down and read it carefully.

If you're already on there, then go to the next level. Actually make it part of you. When you do that, something happens to your brain.

I mean, the neuroscience of learning stuff by heart is quite interesting, and we could all do with more of that. [applause] If you like this and you want to hear more, like, share, review, and subscribe to this podcast. And from all of us here at the Veritas Forum, thank you.

(gentle music)

[buzzing]