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#3 Qs on Christmas, the historical Jesus, Bart Ehrman & The Ascension

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom Wright talks to Justin about Christmas and the birth narratives, and answers listener questions on the reliability of the gospels, Bart Ehrman on textual transmission, the dating of the gospels, and whether The Ascension happened as described.

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End music: Bach Christmas Oratorio – Wiki Creative Commons

Transcript

[Music] Well hello and welcome once more to the show where I sit down with leading New Testament scholar Tom Wright and ask the questions that you put to him. And it's brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright online. Tom Wright is research professor of New Testament and early Christianity at the University of St Andrews, a celebrated author and theologian performer, Bishop of Durham of course and I'm Justin Brawley, theology and apologetics editor for Premier and get the privilege of every couple of weeks sitting down with Tom to ask him your questions.

Now as ever we'd love more people to discover this new podcast so do please rate and review us on iTunes or wherever you get your podcast let others know about the show that way and if you'd like more episodes updates or want to ask a question yourself simply register at askNTWright.com we've got some fantastic videos there as well now if you check out the videos tab but there's a special bonus video only available to podcast subscribers who are registered with the website askNTWright.com you'll be sent the bonus material that's available now. There's also still time to enter to win one of three copies of Tom Wright's acclaimed book *Paul a Biography* again sign up at askNTWright.com before the end of December and you'll be entered into the prize draw and we'll announce the winners in January. Let's see what you want to do ask Tom this week.

Well we're back together Tom for another edition of our podcast as we look at some of the different themes that have been coming in on questions great to have you back we're not far out from Christmas now and it did make me wonder are there any particularly highlights of Christmas that you always look forward to? I'm not talking specifically about the church services but generally the whole atmosphere and yes I mean Christmas has always been a rich family time and for me both the family I grew up in and then having my own family it's a wonderful time and I think it's a cliché but it remains the case that the wonder of Christmas on the faces of little children is absolutely amazing and now that I have grandchildren it's a really exciting thing and of course one of the nice things about getting old is to have layer upon layer upon layer of memory which are then easily evoked by one line from a Christmas hymn or one line from the Christmas story and and and one of my favorite things as I love all kinds of music but um Bach's Christmas oratorio the opening of the Christmas oratorio is one of the most amazing explosive moments in all classical music and just says something is happening as a result of which everything is different and you can feel it in the music and feel Bach's excitement and so a translate from the look of excitement and joy and surprise on my two-year-old grandson's face through to Bach saying bum bum bum bum bum bum. Wonderful stuff. I love it.

It seemed appropriate with Christmas approaching to talk about the historical Jesus and the gospels and we've kind of lot of questions in on this something you've obviously done a great deal of work on yourself and sticking with the Christmas theme one thing I've often been asked by skeptics who aren't convinced about the gospels historical reliability is how we should treat the birth narratives particularly in Matthew and Luke right and shepherds wise men and so on. A lot of people claim that they were essentially invented after the fact as a sort of way of giving Jesus a sort of royal arrival on the scene as it were. What's your view on those kind of criticisms? Yeah let me just tell you a little story about that to show where our culture is sitting on that about 15 and 20 years ago I was phoned up shortly before Christmas by a television station saying they were putting together a program which was going to talk about the birth narratives and they wanted a New Testament specialist to come on and say actually probably that stuff never actually happened and this was just a researcher on the phone and I said supposing I was to come on and say actually there's quite a reasonable chance that it might have done and there was a pause and then she said I don't think that's what my producer was looking for so I said thank you goodbye but you know that's that's how our culture is slanted right now they don't want to hear that actually I'm an ancient historian I study texts in which most of the incidents that we know about in the ancient world are described once and once only that's how you get from Tacitus or Suetonius or any of the other great writers and even Josephus the great Jewish historian who tells the same story in the antiquities then he does the small version in the the Jewish war and a bit of it as well in his autobiography quite often he's talking about things only once that doesn't mean it didn't happen and he is of course writing it all 20 30 years later some some kids even

more than that but historians have to say well that's a bit of evidence how do we weigh that what's the probability what's the likelihood etc and so the danger then is that some Christians say well because the Bible is inspired we must believe that it all happened exactly as so and I want to say well yes I am happy to say that the Bible is the book that God has given us and I live with that but if I'm making an argument to a fellow ancient historian who isn't a believer I think I will say well you know perfectly well there's lots of things that happened that you would write into your books which are only in one in one story and may well have been written up a hundred years later so when we're talking about shepherds well yes that's in principle probable possible depending on what you think about angels likewise when you're talking about wise men depending on what you think about comets and so on and of course there's been a lot of work done on what star or comet it was and some quite interesting stuff I haven't followed all the recent research on that but people have said you can actually pin points some things which might help you date when that's going on so I want to say um from the point of view of making a case to a non-believer I would say keep an open mind on that stuff happens interesting having slagged off one particular broadcaster the BBC some years ago did a Christmas thing I think it was a six-part or something well 20-minute or half-hour programs where they they'd got the guy who did the script for his tenders that's right and they they gave him the Christmas stories and said do it it was spectacular and it was thoroughly believable it made sense as a narrative and I thought people need to see that because making sense is what history is supposed to do well I know you've written books on advent and so on so do go and check those out if you want to some some reading ahead of the Christmas season itself but um let's turn to some of the questions that have come in generally on the historical Jesus and the gospels Tom um here's one and I'll ask you to be as brief as this person I'll ask you to be um JD in Los Angeles says what would you say is the most straightforward succinct way to explain the historical accuracy of the gospels the answer is immerse yourself in the world of the first century Jews understand the pressures of Greek culture of Roman Empire of Jewish aspirations and hopes get used to the language in which they framed those hopes and then you will read a story of a young would-be prophet saying it's time for God to be king and you say yep that's the kind of thing that would make sense in the late 20s early 30s um under Herod under uh Tibera Caesar etc now if that makes sense what sort of sense does it make what sort of redefinitions are going on is this what other people meant by God being king and so on and so forth and there's all sorts of things in the gospels which really do make sense and as I said before that's what history is supposed to do now again if you're talking within the family of the church then it's perfectly okay to say God intended us to have these texts that doesn't mean that we necessarily know how best to read them but it's a start but if you're talking to people outside in the world I want to say no this is public truth we know just as well that Jesus of Nazareth went about saying it's time for God to become king and redefine that in terms of his own work we know that just as well as we know that Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BC as we know that Jerusalem was destroyed in 80 70 um and if somebody wants to be skeptical and say actually we don't know

anything about anything that happened before about 1500 then well okay you can pull the house down on top of you but the three point objection I hear is but these sources that you claim are just as you know stand up just as well against other ancient historical sources were written by people invested in this yes were written by the followers so therefore we can't trust them all history is written by people who have agendas there is no such thing as a point of view which is nobody's point of view I tell the students there's no such thing as an epistemological Switzerland there is no neutral ground where you can stand from which you can declare that you're seeing everything clearly I mean David Hume the great skeptic in the middle of the 18th century he had massive agendas Edward Gibbon who wrote the decline of all the Roman Empire he had a huge agenda do we do we think that he is objective do we think that Josephus the Jewish historian is objective no he's got all kinds of stuff going on that doesn't mean that nothing happened right I mean this is what I call critical realism which is I use that phrase in a general sense and the way I defined it is this yes fake news exists but that doesn't mean nothing happened on a related subject Robin Toronto Canada asked you and Bart Ehrman another well-known New Testament scholar probably share the stage of the two most recognized names in New Testament studies but clearly you and he are on opposite ends of the theological spectrum and while this may be a broad question what's your response to Ehrman's assertion that there's very little we can say about the reliability of the New Testament in terms of knowing what the original manuscript said as Ehrman famous he says all we have are copies of copies of copies etc which renders our ability to know what the original text says almost impossible one of the great things about having copies of copies of copies is that we've got hundreds thousands of manuscripts of the New Testament almost all the other texts from the ancient world we know only through one or two medieval manuscripts Lucretius the great Epicurean poet from the first century BC his work was lost completely discovered in one manuscript in 1417 by Poggio Braculini and that has revived Epicurean studies that one manuscript excuse me we've got all these manuscripts of the New Testament going way way back and the fact that we've got copies of copies of copies means that we can jolly well go back to a very solid basis much more solid than for any other ancient texts whether it's Homer and Virgil whether it's Caesar and Cicero whether it's Seneca or Suetonius not a problem guys and I think Bart actually Bart Ehrman would have to admit yes the New Testament text is pretty secure of course there are one or two passages where we say not quite sure if this bit was originally part of the text or not it may have come in somebody may have added a glass or somebody may have accidentally missed a bit out all manuscripts are like that when I write a book and somebody copy it that happens now as well doesn't mean I didn't write it in my experience having done a few of my unbelievable shows with with Bart Ehrman as well I was interested actually when I did sit down to debate this particular issue with him across with another Bible scholar that actually it turned out there were relatively few really contested issues and even in the ones where there were it was contested whether Jesus felt pity or was angry when he saw such and such well Bart had an opinion on which it was yes he felt we could actually know yes yes yes yes

so in a sense it doesn't when you actually get down to brass tacks it doesn't quite seem as mystifying as it's not nearly as much of a problem as people sometimes I think I mean I don't know about very well I've been on panels with him and debated with him here and there and we wanted a I think a podcast debate some years ago but he comes from as he says frequently a very very very conservative Christian background which he's original background which he then threw over for whatever reason but in that very narrow restricted background it's basically all or nothing you either have every single syllable of the Bible is literally true or if the glass cracks the glass cracks and it's like actually some very traditional Catholics who if the pope is wrong on one issue he's quite possibly wrong on everything now I've never lived in that kind of of of of sharply defined narrow world I've never had to break out of it I have been able to make my way as a historian as a believer and to look at the texts and the big picture and and find my way given me stew I think bars told me in his own journey that he sort of went on a journey which took him out of that and I think the thing that really took him away from faith altogether was eventually the problem of evil and that perhaps is a different issue yes well he and I debated that oh 10 years ago actually oh I remember you did it on the pathos network I have of quite possibly it was in San Francisco I know which was an odd occasion and it was quite difficult to debate him a debating but you sort of make a point and then he comes at you from a different angle it's like it's like kicking your football against the haystack it doesn't bounce back the way you expected it but well I would be delighted to preside over any future discussions between you um let's um talk uh about this question David in Newcastle Australia asks skeptics of the authorship of the gospels claim that the four gospels were written after sometimes well after 8070 but if this is the case why do the writers seem like they know nothing about the most momentous event for Jews in the late first century the destruction of the temple um in 8070 could the four gospels have all been written before 8070 asks David the answer is yes absolutely they could but we just don't know that I tell my students that the four gospels all could be as late as the 80s or 90s I don't think they are they could be all as early as the 50s or 60s I'm not sure they are we just don't know over the last two centuries or so scholars have come up with all kinds of theories and usually the thing they peg them on is mark 13 Matthew 24 Luke 21 which is the prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem and they try to read echoes of that as though this is what in the trade we call Vaticania ex-eventu which is a prophecy written after the event okay so this would be the view that those are there because they were in fact written after but there was though there for telling it yes interestingly my friend the late Marcus Borg who disagreed with me about a lot of things but he argued strongly on the basis of Luke 19 um which is a shorter prediction of the destruction that actually that must be a tradition which goes back behind 8070 because when Jesus says your enemies will cast up a bank against you and leave not one stone upon another etc etc that isn't actually how it happened we know from Josephus if you trust Josephus that the way the Romans attacked was not what it says in Luke 19 therefore he says this couldn't be written afterwards so it must be before so there's a lot of debates like that I mean where would you I mean Marcus generally agreed to be the

first no possible probably 75 80 percent of scholars would say that yes where would you sort of roughly date it if I had to get it it's curious I was just I was just recently editing a volume that I and a colleague are doing introduction for students and my colleague had written up some of this stuff and I was going through this actually no I'm not sure about that um because the older I get the more I think there are some things we really do know as ancient historians about this stuff and some things we really don't know and so I would be content to say if some new evidence turned up saying that Marcus Ritten say in the early 60s and that Matthew and Luke were written in the later 60s I would be slightly surprised but not particularly surprised James Crossley interestingly he appreciated it much earlier because he sees all that stuff about the destruction of the temple relating to what the Emperor Gaius was going to do back in the 40s um but you know very early yeah it's very early but in a sense why not is there anything in the gospels which forces just to say no and part of the problem here is the great tradition which has seen the gospels as a more developed tradition and particularly John as this wonderful high Christology so oh that must be much later to which the answer is no sorry John's Christology is no higher than Paul's and Paul has already got it sussed by the late 40s there was tantalizing evidence we thought of possibly a manuscript that might be dated to within the first century and I think it was then um it was decided against in the end I can't remember the specifics yeah this was about 10 or 15 years ago um but doesn't make much difference kind of exactly how early the fragments are that we have no manuscript I mean it is important because as I said in the answer to the previous question um if you're a classical scholar you're often working with medieval manuscripts and maybe one or two or three if you're lucky if instead we've got lots and lots and lots of fragments from the second and even more from the third and even more from the fourth century all converging on this explosive event that's happened then you know this this doesn't happen by accident.

I'm going to take a quick pause here to remind you that the Ask and T Write Anything podcast is brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and NT Write online SBCK is Tom's UK publisher and in honor of Tom Wright's 70th birthday they've launched a special book specifically dedicated to him which has contributions from other significant people in different fields it's called One God One People One Future essays in honor of NT Write and it's available now in fact the manuscript of this Festriff of essays was presented to Tom by colleagues in a surprise ceremony at the Society for Biblical Literature's annual meeting last month in Denver Colorado I know that Tom was very humbled to have received this honor it is available now you can check it out along with Tom's other books at sbckpublishing.co.uk/Tom-Wright if you want to get taken straight to the page. Let's talk about the way the gospel writers put things across sometimes. How about this one from Josh in San Antonio, Texas? How do you account for the different stories of the calling of Peter to Ministry in the gospels? Is it true that Jewish writers would change the details of stories they wrote down in order to make a bigger point? A scholar told me this and it's been bothering me for some time.

If this is true how do we know what's "true" in a western sense each and every detail and what's "true" in a Jewish sense the broader meaning of the story perhaps you could just begin by outlining what the differences are in the stories of the calling of Peter in the book. Well in Luke you have Jesus doing this extraordinary thing telling Peter to go and catch some fish and Peter says look we worked all night hasn't done anything and then he says depart from me because I'm a sinner and Jesus is actually from now on you'll be catching people but then elsewhere Jesus is walking by the lake and simply calls them. James and John and Peter and so on.

That's right but then of course in John 21 when again Peter has gone fishing then it's the risen Jesus who says come and have breakfast and then Simon son of John do you love me and I have no problem saying that actually in real life things may well happen in different sequences. What strikes me about the question is this touchingly almost naive view sorry to the question I don't want to be rude but that we in the west believe in unvarnished facts and that other cultures select and arrange them and as everyone knows who's ever seen anything in the newspaper that they actually know something about the details are wrong and likewise I have taken part in various television news programs and I've been working in public life and to watch how the editors will very carefully present a particular angle and very carefully screen out something else that might just tell a different story. I'm sorry if we think that we know about unvarnished facts then this is a modern bit of positivism that we have to repent of.

This has come to me more forcefully having had the experience of writing a book myself in which I presented some episodes conversations and dialogues I had with people but I presented them for the sake of the way I wanted to make the point so I want to make and I realized as I was doing that as I cut out some individuals who were present in the conversations and so on. These are probably what the gospel writers were doing at various points they had their own reasons for. I mean John says John says at the end Jesus did many other things and if he were to write them all down the world would explode you know it wouldn't be enough room and and this is one of the most basic points to get across to people because people speakers if the gospels are the kind of transcript that you'd get if you'd had a video camera with the camera rolling the tape recorder going and then every single thing gets written down well sorry no Jesus spends a lot of time with the disciples and most of the time I think he was not telling them parables.

He'd probably say oh is it time for supper yet or or you know you look a bit sick what can we do about that and you know there's a thousand different conversations which are not reported and here's the thing all of us all the time select and arrange when I go home after this trip I will sit down for supper with my wife and I will tell her something of what I'm doing but I've been away for more than a week if I were to tell her every single thing I'd done she would be crushingly bored say for goodness sake get to the point so I'd have to select and arrange not in order to tell lies but because that's what we all have to

do and if you ever meet somebody who doesn't select and arrange a young child just blabbing along or somebody who's who's stoned out of their mind and just rambling that's very tedious. So for instance the critic who says oh but the bible can't be true because in this particular gospel you have Jesus in the temple doing his thing now and later on it's somewhere else you're saying they're treating it. If anyone's bothered about this I would say go to the gospels and look at the story of Peter denying Jesus and the cock or the rooster as the Americans call it crowing how often does that happen and what is the precise sequence get hold of Matthew Mark Luke and John and try and line it up and as many people have shown the only way you can make all those stories fit in the way they're told is by having the rooster or cock crowing nine times which is what none of the narratives say so in order to prove they're all true you have to prove that they're all false and you know this is a way of saying lighten up guys.

We'll delve into this in another podcast because I have got questions on your view on inerrancy and that's interesting so we'll come to that another time but but we'll put a pin in that for the moment. Okay how about one last question as we draw to the end of today's podcast Thomas in Washington state number of questions from North America on today's show. How do you visualize the ascension? Do you think Jesus actually floated up into the sky? That's a good question and obviously this occurs at the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts and for Paul and the others they are taking very often Psalm 110 the Lord said to my Lord sit at my right hand till I make your enemies your footstool and they're taking Psalm 8 the Son of Man is now crowned with glory and honor with all things put in subjection under his feet and I think they know perfectly well that these are earthly words about a heavenly reality but more complicated about a heaven plus earth reality.

That's the first thing I think to say about the ascension is that for us because we are innate Epicureans that is to say we live in a world view where heaven is a long way away we imagine that if Jesus goes to heaven he is not relating to us anymore he's gone away and left us by ourselves and the answer is no in the biblical world view heaven and earth are meant to join together and where heaven and earth join together is the temple and to say that Jesus is now in heaven is to make a statement about the true temple being now Jesus own human body. John says that he spoke of the temple of his body then we say well okay how does that work granted that heaven and earth are not fully joined together as they will one day be and then we find that there are some passages in the New Testament which talk in a sort of upstairs downstairs language and some which talk in a secret and hidden but to be revealed language so that for instance in 1 John 3 he says when Jesus appears we will be like him for we will see him as he is when he appears and that appearing is as though he is present but behind a curtain and one day the curtain will be drawn back and we will realize he's been just there all along and Paul says the same in Colossians 3 if you're raised with Christ we are seated with him in the heavenly places but when Christ who is our life appears and it's as though for Paul the

heavenly places are not miles upstairs so I think that the main thing is that we have to realize the last 300 years in western culture we have had an upstairs downstairs heaven and earth vision of how stuff works so then back to the question and naturally I do not know but it seems to me the idea of a cloud receiving him is rather like the transfiguration whether it was a cloud and a voice from the cloud this is like the cloud and the fire in the wilderness this is the living presence of God saying this really is my son he is now with me and if that means that there is some vertical movement then I've no problem with that the danger is precisely because of our culture we think oh so Jesus is some kind of weird spaceman and then of course that plays into the wrong view of the second coming as well that Jesus is going to be floating downwards on a cloud and I just think we have to lighten up about that okay including all those wonderful stained glass windows which have a cloud with two feet sticking down you know no I don't think that's how it was okay thank you so much if this book you would recommend people to dig into of your own or another person if they want to look a bit more into the historical case yeah well a few years ago I wrote a book called simply Jesus which is kind of medium-length and relatively easy I think but sends you back of course to my big one Jesus is the victory of God but simply Jesus is the recent one where I've tried to explore this great stuff thank you so much for being with us on today's podcast Tom I wish you a very happy Christmas thank you as well and and I look forward to hearing from you if you've been listening and you'd like to give us a thought a comment or a question do make sure to get in touch with the show you can do that the usual way of our web page ask nt right dot com do make sure to register there for the newsletter and register so that you can ask your question or send us your comment and we'll be back with you for another edition of the show next time and registering at ask nt right dot com also gets you bonus content and a chance to win one of three copies of Paul a biography again just sign up at ask nt right dot com and go tell your friends about this podcast and about the cool stuff they can get if they sign up we're taking a slightly longer break over Christmas uh back on the first of January with episode four exploring your questions to Tom on mission and evangelism seemed like a good theme for the new year and back by popular demand you'll also get some more of tom right unplugged in the next episode too but we heard tom earlier on in the show describe one of his favorite Christmas moments hearing those booming drums in barks Christmas oratoria so here's just a little of that piece to end today's show and a very happy Christmas from both myself and tom to all ask nt right anything listeners so so so so you've been listening to the ask nt right anything podcast let other people know about this show by rating and reviewing it in your podcast provider for more podcasts from premiere visit premiere dot org dot uk slash podcasts