

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 134

Conference Interviews, Part 6

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Guests: Stephen Huebscher (SH), David DeSilva (DD), and Craig Keener (CK)

Episode Summary

During the recent annual meetings for biblical studies scholars held in San Antonio, Dr. Heiser interviewed a number of scholars about their recent work. In Part 6 of those interviews, we chat with Stephen Huebscher (PhD candidate at Clarks Summit University), David DeSilva (New Testament professor at Ashland Theological Seminary), and Dr. Craig Keener (New Testament professor at Asbury Theological Seminary).

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 134, "Conference Interviews, Part 6." I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey Mike, this is our last day. This is it!

MH: Well, I have to admit it's been fun—it's been chaotic and fun—but I'm looking forward to going home and seeing my pug. (laughs)

TS: I'm sure he's looking forward to seeing you, as well. Yeah, this has been a full week! This is a long conference.

MH: It is. I should add, I'm definitely looking forward to going home and seeing my wife, too! (laughter)

TS: What are you trying to say? You're going to miss me; I know you are. I need to post some of those pictures of us going on our dates, when we go out to dinner. I've got a good picture of us on the river walk together.

MH: Well, my wife sent me a picture of the pug sitting like a sad sack underneath the desk where I work with his toy, so she's kind of tormenting me with that.

So this time around—to wrap up our interviews—we are going to talk to Stephen Huebscher. He has contributed to the Naked Bible Blog with his series on Celestial Worship and Divine Liturgy. So we'll spend a little time with Stephen. Listeners can meet him, get to know a little bit more about him. He's in the advanced stages of his own doctoral work. So, again, I think you'll benefit from that.

Then we'll talk to David DaSilva. I have referenced David on the blog several times. His focus is on Second Temple Judaism, Second Temple Literature like the apocrypha, the pseudepigrapha, Josephus, all that sort of stuff—and the New Testament, of course. But we take a little bit of a different turn with David. He has written a period novel, so we're going to spend a little time talking to him about his novel that's set in the Second Temple period. And then, lastly, we had a conversation with Craig Keener. Craig is a New Testament scholar. He would be in the Pentecostal orbit. He's an important figure for some of the stuff that we do here on the podcast and on our own blog because of principalities and powers (taking that sort of thing seriously), but Craig is also really well-known for his work on miraculous events—sort of compiling a compendium of miracle stories. We tend to think that after that first century that stuff all just sort of went away. And Craig is a scholar whose actual focus has been for many years on that sort of material. I think listeners will enjoy all these interviews and get something out of them.

MH: We're back at SBL and we have with us as our guest Stephen Huebscher. Stephen's going to be familiar to folks who follow the blog. He produced a series on Celestial Worship, Divine Council, Divine Liturgy that's gotten a good response from people. So we're glad to be able to talk to him so that you meet him. We'll start off by having him introduce himself a little bit and telling us how in the world he got interested in the kind of stuff we're interested in.

SH: Thanks, Mike. I'm Stephen Huebscher. My interest in the Divine Council is tied up with meeting Mike a number of years ago when I was in college. It's kind of funny how things work out because it was actually my little sister who had Mike before I did, and she was telling me that he was a good teacher that was like another mutual friend that we have. But I didn't get to meet Mike for a couple years after that. I honestly don't even remember the first time we met.

MH: Probably at a conference or something. I can't...

SH: Probably. I know that I stopped by to try to meet you one summer and your wife was the secretary, so I got to meet her but you had stepped out. I know that somehow by the time I got to Dallas Seminary that we were in touch because when I had a paper to write and my sister said (or you said)... Somehow I knew that you were working on some of the stuff in the Old Testament that I thought

5:00

you called the "Divine Council," and at that point it was pretty much a strange concept. But I was interested in whatever you were doing. This was really before... It's hard to imagine this, but nobody had email back then or web pages (laughter), so I really had a hard time keeping in touch with you because all we had was snail-mail or landlines. But somehow I found out to read these books, like John Day's book on the dragon and the one on the cosmic mountain, and maybe Peggy Day.

MH: Richard Clifford, yeah.

SH: Clifford. And so that was kind of my first go-through with some of this stuff, where I started reading what was out there and seeing there was real academic research to this. It was still a bit separated in my mind, but I could see there was the potential there to really bring it together.

MH: So where has this led you? You should tell people a little bit, too, not just your academic background, but also your pastoral background. Flesh that out a little bit.

SH: I've had an academic interest in worship for a long time, and how music fits in with that. And so in my life, my undergrad was in Church Music, and then for seminary my specialty was on a related subject: Media, Arts, and Ministry (I think that's what they called it). So after I graduated from seminary, I spent the next decade or so in ministry, serving as a youth pastor and choir director, and then as solo senior pastor of a small congregation in rural Ohio. And then working in health-care chaplaincy, in which I was part-time in a small hospice in Ohio for three years. And then I spent a very intense year as a chaplain resident in O'Claire Wisconsin, working with a Level 2 trauma hospital there that was affiliated with Mayo. So I've done a lot of the things in ministry—I've spent a lot of time with dying people, with the families of people who have died. I think my favorite experiences are leading in worship and preaching and (as strange as it might sound) being with the families of those who might die. Especially when they're Christians, you really have a sense of unity, that you can do something with them as believers that you just don't have when you don't have that communion in Jesus Christ.

MH: So how did your focus... It's been a focus, like you just mentioned... worship and liturgy, and you are a musician, and those two things have been dove-tailing for a while academically for you. Our followers, our listeners, have gotten the benefit of that through your series of posts. Don't rehearse the content of the post, obviously, but tell us sort of what drew you into that interest, and then a little bit about what you're currently working on.

SH: I said to Mike, "I'm interested in worship. You're doing this Divine Council stuff, and that sounds interesting, too." And Mike said, "Well, it's all the same thing." And I said (laughing), "What do you mean it's all the same thing?" And he

said, "As in heaven, so on earth. Go figure it out. (laughter) Go find it, Stephen. I'll bet it's there. Everything fits into this somehow. I just haven't seen it all yet, but you go figure this out and it'll work out. I'm telling you it will." So that's what got me going, then. It's how I was able to bring a curiosity in the Divine Council and an interest in worship together.

MH: You accepted the challenge.

10:00 **SH:** I did. Part of it is that I think that how we worship God tends to have an effect on people and therefore, on our beliefs and on our practices. In theology, for hundreds and thousands of years, they have called this principle called the *Lex orandi* Principle, that the rule of prayer or worship is the rule of belief. What you tend to do tends to affect what you believe about God. So I think that how we worship God has an unseen (often unrealized) corollary effect over time on our doctrine. All of that to say that this was a great opportunity, then, for me to try to figure this out and see what was there.

MH: Here in San Antonio we had an evening get-together for podcast listeners. Someone asked a question during that meeting (one of the people who really appreciated your series), and I said, "I'm going to go ask Stephen. We're going to have him in a couple days. So you'll get a better answer when we do that." In essence, they were wondering how these heavenly choir scenes and the heavenly liturgy, the celestial worship and all this stuff... Since the Church is essentially this microcosm of the Council (as it were), sort of the Council on earth or Council-in-training (all those sorts of ideas), how should what we see in the Scripture in these descriptions—how should that affect what we actually *do* in our own worship? Even, really, in a given church service. How should we let this impact us in what we're actually doing? So how would you approach that?

SH: I think that there's a few key ways that make it a difference that really grounds what we do. I think the first thing to realize is that you are in the presence of God, and that this becomes, then, the defining factor for the rest of worship. Worship really is a response to the Person, the Presence, and the Word (the message) of God. And if we take that and we ask, "Who are the people in the Council?" Those are the believers that worship. If we're being specific, worship really is something that believers do. This is *our* time. That's not to say that unbelievers can't be present when we worship. I think it's in one of the Corinthian letters that Paul even mentions this: "What about if unbelievers come in?"

MH: Right, right.

SH: But that's not my point. My point is that it's not designed for them. This is really *our* time to be in God's presence.

MH: All right. Now what you just said is kind of an explosive thing, as you well know! (laughing) But it makes sense. If there's this symbiotic relationship between the heavenly Council and what happens with believers in worship, and this is our time (and again, your line: "It's really not designed for unbelievers"). I guess I'll let you riff as much as you want on that! (laughing) You're shaking your head no! Try to be restrained here, I guess. I'll let you police yourself. I could tell that the person asking this in the evening, that this was part of the concern, because a lot of worship today is done for the unbeliever or is sort of self-focused. I told them, "Look, I'm a music idiot. I can't really think well about this because I don't have any background or knowledge of this." Which is why I said I was going to go ask Stephen. But go ahead and talk a little bit about that whole idea that this is for us: this is our time, and it's not designed for the unbeliever, even though they're welcomed in. So how does that relate to what's going on today or what we ought to be thinking about?

15:00

SH: I think maybe in a couple of ways. I'll say about myself that in my own personal journey, I have come to see that if these things are true that the model of worship that actually incorporates and reflects them better is what typically in my circles has been called "liturgical worship." And there are varieties of that. That was something that was hard for me to get used to at first because I had grown up with the idea that this was the boring, vain repetition kind of thing that we don't want to do. And I wholeheartedly agree that we don't want that for our worship. Worship is not about just rote...

MH: Yeah, uttering mantras or something.

SH: Right. But when you have this idea of a heavy presence of the Word of God, of people responding to God's Word, and being in the presence of God, they're already set up with that mindset: that we're praying and stuff (when it's done at its best). And there are varieties of it, too, and I recognize that because I've been in Roman Catholic services, in Orthodox services, a variety of Lutheran services, Episcopalian... I think that congregations will have some variety in how this is played out. It's not necessarily all going to look the same. But I think that even... Like Al Potter said a number of years ago, "Even a little bit of truth, if you apply it, makes a big difference." I think that when we start saying, "Okay, we're really not going to focus on unbelievers at this time and we're really not going to focus on ourselves primarily. Neither are we going to try to have some kind of mystical experience by totally focusing on God, because that would be a wrong application of this idea, as well." So it's in something of a combination of those things where it starts coming together.

MH: It's kind of interesting that if we were... I'm not trying to deliberately dichotomize our time as believers, but if we were with greater regularity engaging the lost during the week and supporting each other in various ways... If we were genuinely a community, then that would sort of normalize, "Okay, this is the Lord's Day now and we're going to take an hour or so now (or whatever it is) to

not do those other two things, but to focus on God as the complete object here." That would seem to be normal. Again, I don't want to caricature too much of what goes on today because, personally, I doubt that people are thinking intentionally about, "Oh, we don't want to have God as the object here, we want the Law." You're not really making those conscious decisions so much. But it's easy to look at it and think, "Hey, why can't we have this one particular focus for an hour or half an hour or whatever it is, and not do this other stuff?" Whereas, in the contemporary model we seem to do those other two things. That seems to be what it's about. But having said that, for the sake of the conversation I need to play the devil's advocate here (a little push-back). So what is the role of celebration? Because you do have these celestial, liturgical scenes (Revelation 4 and 5), where there's a celebratory element there. So how does that work itself into what you're saying, what you're describing?

SH: And you have not only celebration, but you also have lament, and there's a place for both of those in worship. I think that you're definitely celebrating the work of Christ and the fact that he has won the decisive victory over the fallen forces, and we're celebrating that his rule is not... Revelation 4 and 5 is pretty clear. Even though the nations are rebelling, he's sitting there on his throne and it's not bothering him. Nobody's kicking him off! (laughter) So, I think it's pretty clear, and those are real things to celebrate. That's reality.

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I might say that (taking Paul's thought), what if unbelievers come in? If we have this focus and God is working in their hearts and they see, "There really is something going on here. These people are in the presence of God." Other people might come in and it might be a little bit strange to them. Kind of like in the Ancient Near East they'd say, "Where's your god? You don't have any image here. You can't have a god." And that's always going to be a bit of a weird thing. And yet this Bible tells us we *are*—we *image*—God. And when people start picking up on that through the Holy Spirit and through what we're doing, I think that becomes a powerful witness.

And let me throw in just a couple other things here on worship. You mentioned the "Lord's Day," and that's a small but a powerful reference to how we understand the whole function of Sunday within worship and its role in our lives as believers and the effect that it can have on us. Tying in with the Day of the Lord, it's a little bit of the future. When we come together, then, as the Church, this is a little bit... In one sense, a little bit of heaven. This may be the closest that you get to heaven until you get there—or to being in the Lord's glorified presence, whether that's in heaven or on earth in the future. That's how I like to present it to people. That this is a little taste of heaven here before we get there. This is practice for heaven, in a sense.

One question that comes up, then, is "What about the music and all the cultural variety that we can have with that?" I think that when you look at the commands and the uses that we have in Scripture, we have Paul saying (and it's pretty clear

in Ephesians), "You *were* in the realm of darkness, now you're in the realm of light. You need to, therefore, *sing*—and this helps to bring you into the realm of the light." It doesn't make you a Christian more, and that's not a very good way to say it, "to bring you into the realm of light," but Paul is very clear there. Another way to say it in my tradition is to say that it helps with our sanctification. When we are all singing together there, God uses that as we're responding to him. In singing, it brings together emotions, our mind, and our physical body. So we're acting as a unified being there in communion with other believers in the presence of God. Paul says, unlike some of the ascetics who said "Don't do that kind of stuff," Paul said, "No, you *need* to be doing this! You were being hardened by the presence of sin. You need to be softened up to God's presence and to responding to him."

Music, and specifically congregational singing [helps with that]. I think a key part of music in worship that we see in the Bible is that it's congregational singing. That would be the first thing. The second thing is related to having accompaniment. It doesn't have a clear statement on that. What we do see in Revelation is that the elders have harps, which were quiet instruments used for accompanying singing. So you could make an argument there that the Council members are having instrumentally-accompanied singing there in the presence of God, which I think is a fair thing to claim. So I think it's fine to use instruments in worship to promote and to help congregational singing. But you say, "What kind of music is good for congregational singing?" Because most of the music in the Western world that we would listen to that's out there on the radio, it's not suitable for congregational singing. It's not suitable. The music is not suitable for worshiping God. There's just not a good mix: "a wedding of text and tune" is how I would say it.

MH: Yeah. As a lay person here, I'll be honest. One of the things that really bothers me about what happens in church in terms of music is it's very evident when the congregation cannot follow. Essentially, the congregation becomes sort of the weak background singers for the people who are really good and really can do what it is they're doing. To me, if that's the situation it's kind of missing the point because of the congregational connection, that sort of thing.

25:00

Well, before we go, I want to ask you to tell people why you are here, specifically. What are you working on? You're in the advanced stages of your terminal degree, so just get us up to date there.

SH: I'm working on a PhD in Old Testament. The topic that I'm writing on is a grammar and linguistics study of the Old Testament. So I'm studying the verbs—the verbal system—in the book of Zechariah. Zechariah is one of the later books. It's after the exile, but it's not quite as late as Ezra and Nehemiah. Just like the English language has changed since the time of the King James until now, even in the Old Testament we have some changes within the Bible that the English kind of smooths over. But there are differences there as you're reading through.

That's what I'm studying: "What was it like? How were they writing and talking after the exile, and how was that a little bit different than before the exile?"

MH: So basically, verbal aspect, how we handle the verbal system there, how we translate this or that that might be different than some other place in the Hebrew Bible?

SH: That's right. For those who have looked at this, I would actually take the minority view. I think Hebrew is not aspectual language. I think it's more of a tense and mood kind of language. So my study does not directly have anything to do with the Divine Council, or with worship either.

MH: Shame on you! (laughter)

SH: I didn't think I could get that topic approved. But I jokingly tell people that I'm doing it because I want to learn to read words on a page. (laughter)

MH: Well, thanks for spending some time with us and helping our listeners to get a little more familiar with who you are, again, since you do contribute to the blog. This was a good time to do it.

SH: Mike, it's been great to be here with you, as always. Thanks a lot.

MH: Yep. Thank you!

MH: We're back at SBL, and with us we have David DaSilva. David is a New Testament scholar, a scholar of the apocrypha and Second Temple literature. I'm going to let him do a little bit of self-introduction for the audience, and then we want to get into something a little bit different... something special.

DD: Thank you, Mike. Yes, I am a professor of New Testament at Ashland Seminary in Ohio, where I've taught for 21 years now. Most of my work has been in the critical study of Scripture. I've written commentaries on Hebrews and on some work with Revelation, and more broadly, textbooks on the apocrypha and the New Testament. I've especially been interested in the cultural world of the New Testament. I work with honor, patronage, things like that. And, of course as you mentioned, feeling a desire to promote knowledge of the apocrypha—especially among faith communities like my own (Protestant communities) that tend just to overlook the literature and even be suspicious of it.

MH: (laughing) The "hermeneutic of suspicion." That's always good stuff. Well, you've written what I think (and I've told people in our audience) is the best introduction to the apocrypha. So we want to definitely alert people again that this

is the guy who wrote that. We've mentioned it. I have it on my Recommended Books on the website, so you can go and certainly check that out. I would highly recommend it. But you've taken a bit of a turn here in your latest literary output. David has written... Is it fair to call it a period novel?

DD: Yeah, absolutely.

MH: So it's set in the ancient world that he's devoted a lot of his life to studying. So tell us a little bit about your novel. Give us the title. What's the story about?

DD: Sure, thank you. It's called *Day of Atonement: A Novel of the Maccabean Revolt*. Out of my study of the apocrypha (especially 2 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees)...

MH: That's the grimy and gritty stuff right there.

30:00 **DD:** It is indeed! I became really interested in the tensions that were alive in Jerusalem in about the decade leading up to the Maccabean Revolt, and of course, precipitating the Maccabean Revolt—a time in which elite Jews were trying to figure out how they could position Jerusalem better to be a player in the international political and economic scene, and how this really became a snowball rolling down toward the repression of the traditional practice of Judaism in Jerusalem, and really our first martyrdom accounts. So this a kind of a spoiler alert going into this novel: Be careful to whom you get close! (laughter)

Our sources really have very good and evil characters—a very black and white view of things. But it was far more complicated than that. There was a lot of attraction that Hellenism offered. There were some real advantages, and there were attempts to negotiate being faithful Jews while also embracing that which was embraceable as faithful Jews from Greek culture and networking with this larger environment. Many of these characters are much more "gray" as they're trying to sort out the questions that were being sorted out in the period. So it's an attempt to provide an entertaining point of entry for the reader into this world of 175 to 166 B.C. and what it was really like.

MH: I'm curious. We actually had a discussion a few days ago about different responses the Jews had to the gods. Because of what we'd call the "Deuteronomy world view," the gods of the nations were assigned to them, they were allotted to them by Yahweh (Deuteronomy 4, all this language). So some Jews took the attitude of, "When you go into these places, that's just the way it is. Our God is Yahweh, but our God set up this system so it's not going to be too bad if we participate in this or that." Again, these gray areas. And then others, of course, reacted the other way. So do you have any of that sort of thing—this whole "how do we approach Gentiles" and those sorts of things built into the plot?

DD: Absolutely. Many points along the spectrum are represented by the different characters and their movements, from Menelaus who will go all the way and has no particular loyalties to any god—doesn't really care! Just the way forward in terms of power and economics is what interests him. To characters like the young Meir, who tries to hold on to both and wants to be monolatrous in all of his dealings and wants to set the boundaries and be very respectful of his identity while also trying to embrace all that this world has to offer. And really the novel takes a different approach from the conversation you were just remembering, in that we're in Judea. We're in Jerusalem and its environs for the whole novel. The question is, "What happens when you try to make Jerusalem a multi-national city?"

MH: When you're bringing it in as opposed to going out and finding it.

DD: Exactly. And in the name of hospitality, how much do you allow these Gentile "colonists" to import their gods, to build public shrines, and then eventually, of course, to devote part of the temple and even rededicate the altar itself to make everyone who's a citizen of Jerusalem feel at home in Jerusalem.

MH: (laughing) Sounds a little familiar, actually.

DD: It does, in a way.

MH: Now, I have to ask you this because I've written science fiction. Was there any censorship of what you wanted to do? Because the 4th Maccabees thing makes me think of the scenes there that are really... visceral... Pun intended! (laughing)

DD: The scenes that make the end of Braveheart look like a fraternity!

MH: So were there any boundaries on you? How did you handle that?

35:00 **DD:** Actually, the editors were amazingly open. Yes, there were issues raised. An outside reader really questioned the level of graphic depiction. But the in-house editors were really supportive. You cannot make this event come alive without being true to what happened to Jewish bodies in this time. So I did, out of some sensitivity, take out some of the things. It was interesting. The comment was, "You engage so many senses with the description of what's happening to these bodies. Can you tone that down a little bit?" That was a good observation, so I took out some of the notes of smell, for example, and just tried to be somewhat responsive.

MH: There's a particular scene...

DD: Spoiler alert!

MH: We're going to get people to read 4th Maccabees! (laughing) There's a particular scene where smell would be really relevant, yeah... let's just put it that way. We don't want to take away too much of the detail here. But I'm glad to hear that, because you're right. I think, again, in some of the things I've written, this just needs to be there because of the response or what it leads to in the mind of a particular character—how it molds them and makes them who they are the rest of the way. You just have to have those sorts of things. You can't really fudge that. So I'm glad to hear that.

Give us the elevator speech version of the plot... if you could, describe it in a few sentences to convince people it's a good read. We already know we're going to learn something, and anyone who's familiar with period fiction knows this is the kind of thing you read... and you're not reading a textbook, but you're probably going to get more out of it than you would a textbook for whatever period it is. But what's the plot? Can you get a little more specific there?

DD: The novel follows, essentially, the path of three brothers of a widowed mother. Each brother follows a path that is a major strain in Judea. The oldest brother remains conservative. This is typical for the oldest child, right? He remains more traditional and reliable and what have you. The middle child goes the furthest astray in terms of wanting to strike out and find a way that the family has not gone. He's the one who really becomes involved in the Hellenizing circles and is taken under the wing of a patron who is the very good friend of Jason, the High Priest. And then the youngest son becomes friends with (and is taken under the wing of) Judas Maccabeus before he is "The Maccabee." So as we follow their stories, we really follow what happens in the senate of Judea, what happens to the temple, what happens in the outskirts as rebellion is brewing in Modin... really, the delicate balance that even some strongly Hellenizing Jews try to maintain in the face of the pressure of even more radical. Maybe that was more what you learn than the plot, but that's the tension of the whole story.

MH: That's a good strategy, though, to have the brothers go these different directions, because you're going to be able to follow them and why they're doing what they're doing and what the influences are. That's a good strategy to do that. That sounds really interesting. Lots of people are fans of historical fiction, and honestly it's about time somebody has done this for this period. Obviously, it's going to be informed by good scholarship. This is your baby. This is where you camp out. If you can transmit that in terms of storytelling... Yeah, there's going to be the story and it's going to be entertaining, but that will live in your head. That'll help especially Christians in our audience who care about being able to think contextually, it's going to be a big help to them. So it sounds like a really good idea. So where can people get it?

DD: Well, it's available through every online venue: Amazon, barnesandnoble.com. It's published by Kregel, so one can always get it from their website, as well. Christian Book Distributors.

MH: Is it in Kindle, digital form?

DD: It is in digital form. I believe Kindle.

MH: Okay, so hard copy or Kindle. Paper or Kindle, whatever you prefer. I'm sure it'll be a great read. So we're happy to recommend it because we know you!

DD: Thank you, Mike.

MH: Thanks for spending a few minutes with us.

DD: My pleasure. Take care.

MH: You bet.

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MH: We're back at SBL and we are thrilled to have with us Craig Keener. Craig is a professor of New Testament. I will let him tell you where and a little bit of his background.

CK: I'm a professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary, where I've been teaching for about five years at this point. Before that, I taught at Palmer Seminary for about 15 years, and some other places, as well.

MH: Where did you do your doctoral work?

CK: I did my PhD at Duke University and finished in 1991. I used to be embarrassed to tell people that because it made it sound like, "Man, he only got out recently." But now that it's many years later, I'm embarrassed to tell people that because they realize how old I am!

MH: Well, you've done a lot of (I think it's certainly fair to say) important work. On our podcast, our listeners are used to hearing me drone on and on about the importance of contextualizing. Of course, with my own book (*Unseen Realm*), we're very predisposed here to see the importance of the supernatural as not just part of the Biblical worldview, but fundamental to the biblical world view. I've alluded to your work on different occasions, either on the blog or on the podcast. I'd like to talk a little bit about that, but we want to leave it open to whatever you would want to tell our listeners about in terms of your work (things that you want to plug). We have an audience here that wants to listen, wants to get good material.

But I want to start off with your work that's become, I think, pretty well known on miracles. So how did you... That's a huge amount of work. (laughs) I don't know how else to put it! This two-volume set... It's two, right?

CK: Yes.

MH: Two-volume set on miracles [*Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*]. So tell us a little bit about what drew you into that and what the response to that work has been.

CK: I actually wrote the book by accident, in a way. (laughter)

MH: You were having an accident for a long time!

CK: Yeah, it was a long accident. Originally it was going to be a footnote in my Acts commentary, which also was ACTsidental (which is also kind of a pun... I was going to say "no pun intended").

MH: (laughing) We'll forgive you for that.

CK: It was originally going to be a footnote in that commentary, but what happened was I started doing more research and got really intrigued. The reason it came up in the Acts commentary... About one fifth of all the material in Acts consists of accounts of miracles or exorcisms, and similarly, about 30 percent of Mark's Gospel before the Passion narrative consists of miracle accounts or exorcisms. So it's really important when you are talking about the reliability of the sources: is Mark really a biography? Is it a *good* biography? Is Acts really historiography? Is it *good* historiography by ancient standards? So one of the questions people raise is, "Well, this can't be eye-witness material because we know that eye-witnesses don't claim these sorts of things." Well, that's *purely* a Western bias.

MH: It's a modern bias, too.

CK: A modern bias. There was a Pew Forum study done around the year 2006 of Pentecostals and Charismatics in ten countries. And just of Pentecostals and Charismatics in those ten countries alone, you had (broken down in the percentages and trying to translate that into hard numbers) something like 200 million people who claimed to have witnessed divine healing. And then for the people who *weren't* Pentecostal or Charismatic but who were Christian, the figure was about 39 percent of them. And that's just in the ten countries. We could go on and on with that. I was just going to have a footnote. I was going to cite something to show, "Eyewitnesses do claim this, don't be naive," but I didn't find once source that compiled or documented a whole lot of them. As time went on, I started collecting more and more material. Finally, I did find some good sources like that, but eventually the footnote grew. After it was about 200 pages I

proposed it as a book. By the time it came out, it was about 1,100 pages. If it hadn't come out then, it would have kept growing. I've gotten even some better evidence since the book.

45:00

MH: That's pretty remarkable. Even if a fraction of that number... You just start to do the mental math and it's pretty meaningful. How have people responded to it, both in terms of... Let's just put it this way: "people outside your immediate tradition and the Academy." Let's just go with both of those directions.

CK: Well, outside my own Christian tradition, it's been well-received pretty much almost across the board among Christians. The response among cessationists... I'm not a cessationist, but the response among those who think the gifts have ceased is normally, "We're not saying that miracles have ceased, we believe God can still do those." The ones I know have welcomed the book as evidence that God does do miracles and the miracle accounts in the Gospels and Acts are plausible. And also, Catholic and Reformed scholars have given good reviews. Of course, Pentecostal scholars loved it. But outside the Christian tradition, I have an Orthodox Jewish friend who teaches at Vanderbilt and he liked the book. In terms of atheists on the internet, they were not very happy with the book at all. (laughter) I'm a former atheist. That's been decades ago, but before my conversion I was an atheist, too, and I would have been scrambling to try to figure out what this stuff was about.

MH: Right. "You're raining on our parade here." Our presumptively self-evident alternative belief system here.

CK: Trying to read all the evidence out there through the grid of an 18th century philosopher's circular argument can force one to explain away an extraordinary amount of evidence or call an extraordinary number of people liars because they don't fit one's paradigm.

MH: And that's really what it comes down to: "Okay, you're an atheist, but are you an honest one?" Because that's really what you have to do. You have to either say this evidence isn't real or everybody who gives you the evidence—they're all simultaneously unethical liars. It really defies coherence.

CK: And then when you've got medical documentation, as we do for some of the cases (especially some of the recent ones I've gotten), then you can call them anomalies or coincidences, but the accumulation of coincidences itself would be an extraordinary coincidence. You can't calculate the odds exactly, but it's just extraordinarily improbable, all the material we have on people even being resuscitated through prayer after they've been (as far as anybody could tell) dead for a number of hours. If that's just coincidence and it just coincidentally happened when they prayed and I just happened to have ten people in my own immediate circle who witnessed things like that, it seems to me that we must be burying an inordinate number of people prematurely.

MH: (laughter) Wow, yeah. That would be a problem.

Well, let's talk about some of your other work. What would you like to talk about? Either something that's a fundamental product of your scholarship that pastors and interested laypeople really would benefit from, or maybe something very recent, or something in the pipeline. Whatever you want to talk about.

CK: I guess first I'll talk about some of the scholarly work, but not to try to get pastors to go out and buy it, because unless they're a really scholarly-oriented pastor, some of that wouldn't be as relevant. But just so that they'll know that my other work is backed by research. So the Acts commentary is about 4,500 pages. It cites somewhere around 45,000 extra biblical ancient references, just putting the text in its ancient context and showing how it's historically reliable, and so on. That comes from having read through most of ancient literature. So the reason I mention that is so when I mention some of the other work people will know what goes into it. For instance, the *IVP Bible Background Commentary* (New Testament) has sold like half a million copies. It's used by many pastors in their sermon preparation. They tell me... I don't expect them to mention that every time they use it... but it gives cultural background, like what was going on in Greek or Roman or Jewish or other kinds of circles back then that helps shed light on the text.

50:00 **MH:** On the podcast, we like to harp on really profound statements like, "The right context for interpreting the Bible isn't ours—it's the one that produced the thing." So that's the perfect kind of tool that people should be aware of and get and use.

CK: Yeah. And actually, when I first realized that we needed cultural background (that we didn't have to require all women to wear head-coverings or greet one another with holy kisses in our culture)... When I began realizing these things, that's when I just got a passion for studying the background material. But it also had... It was ten years before I had enough of it and felt comfortable enough with it to be able to begin writing on that. I think that everything in the Bible is for all time, but not everything in the Bible is for all circumstances. So we have to understand the cultural circumstances to which something most clearly applies and then try to get back at the principle and see how we can apply that in analogous ways today to recontextualize it (to use a missions kind of terminology).

MH: We had a few minutes with John Walton and Tremper and a few other people. (My background is Semitics.) I asked them, "Do you run into people who will actually sort of be perplexed at why we would bother to do this?" We sort of know why that is, but they're taught, "Well, the Bible is God's Word for all of us and it never loses its relevance." So people tend to think they can just sort of dive into it and intuitively understand everything that's in there. "Surely God would do

that." I'm wondering if you've had that experience. Do you run into people that just wonder, "Why are we even talking about context? Why do we need that?"

CK: Sure. When people don't want to take into account the situations that the text addressed... I'll ask them things like, "Well, I hope that you took up an offering or set aside some money for the church in Jerusalem last week (1 Corinthians 16:1-3)? Oh you didn't? You liberal! You heretic!" (laughter)

MH: Where's that in your budget? I want to see the line item.

CK: Or, "I hope you have a fence around your roof so your neighbor doesn't fall off, lest you incur bloodguilt (Deuteronomy 22)." It actually helps us to understand the Bible and apply it more concretely. You mentioned John Walton. There's actually something less cumbersome than using the Bible Background Commentary, and that is Zondervan has just come out with the *Cultural Background Study Bible*, and John Walton edited the Old Testament. I edited and wrote most of the New Testament notes (except for some of the sidebars). It's a bit more selective, but it's also more up to date and gives a lot of useful perspectives on the text.

MH: We talked a little bit about that and how it's a great tool for people to get their feet wet, and then they can graduate to something like the Bible Background Commentary—the bigger set. It's nice to have sort of graduated references like that, especially that cater to this. So anything else you want to talk about?

CK: Yeah. This one is really basic. It works from the ground up, although it's the material I actually used when I was teaching biblical interpretation in seminary for years. When I actually would go listen to students preach after they had taken my Biblical Interpretation course, I realized that I really needed to focus on these basics. It's kind of an interpretation manual. This wouldn't be for people who have already been to seminary or something, but it could be used for people in the church. It's free. I wrote it so I could actually make it free. I didn't want to compete with the resources that are already out there on a more academic level. It's called *The Bible in Context*. It's free, under the Free Resources on my website (www.craigkeener.com) And so, it's also available there in Spanish and Portuguese and some other languages (French). It starts with basic context skills. Everybody says we believe in context, but then you take a few proof texts that people often use... "The thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy" (John 10:10). Who is the thief? Well, you actually read it in context and it's not who people usually say it is! Of course, I do believe there are other texts that talk about the devil, but that's not one of them (at least not directly). After going through some of those and kind of helping people to work through context, it deals with "whole book" context (tracing the themes through a book of the Bible), and then goes to cultural context, and then goes to specific genres (or the specific types) of writings.

55:00

MH: So that's craigkeener.com. Do you have anything in the pipeline? Anything that's not an academic resource or wouldn't be a reference tool that you want to bring up that we should know about?

CK: I have a Galatians commentary that I'm writing with Cambridge. It's on a higher level than the *Background* commentary, but it should be readable, useful... I've done some other shorter commentaries like that. Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and the Revelation NIVAC commentary (*NIV Application Commentary*). *Mind of the Spirit* that came out recently—probably people could use it if they don't mind hearing a lot about ancient context and don't mind a lot of footnotes. You can skip the footnotes. But that one is a little more technical.

MH: We'll have lots of people who won't skip the footnotes! (laughing)

CK: And *Spirit Hermeneutics*. The publisher for that said, "It's pretty readable. We'll just make it endnotes instead of footnotes so people won't be distracted." There's one book that my wife and I wrote together that's not a scholarly book at all. It's something that anybody can read, whether or scholar or non-scholar. Just if they're interested, it's called *Impossible Love: The True Story of an African Civil War, Miracles, and Hope Against All Odds*. My wife was a war refugee during the civil war in Congo. She was a refugee for 18 months. That was the second time she became a refugee. So it tells the story of how we got together, so there are things about interracial and intercultural issues there, but really, I think, the exciting part of the story is when she and her family are fleeing from one place to another, and just how God was with them. The heart of this book is just the faithfulness of God and God's grace in taking care of us in hard times.

MH: Well, that's a great idea. I have to say I'm surprised that the two of you didn't tackle that earlier. Was there something that prompted it at this time?

CK: No. I had done work on ethnic reconciliation before we ever got married, but the reason that we wrote the book when we did... When we first got married, Médine was like, "Nobody's going to be interested in my story. There are so many refugees around the world. Why would they be interested in *my* story?" I said, "Médine, you kept a blow-by-blow account of it in your journal... (laughs)

MH: That's a little different, yeah.

CK: "...and you're here." (The trade language—the major national language, apart from the local language—of Congo is French.) "But you're multi-lingual, including English, so we can do this book." It took awhile for her to catch the vision that anybody would be interested in it, but after she was telling the story sometimes, people would request it and seeing how intrigued that they were... So we wrote the book. Some publishers said, "No, people aren't interested in hearing about Africa." Which I thought was kind of sad.

MH: That just seems really—the nicest word I can think of is "odd." Why not?

CK: Yeah. And it doesn't all take place in Africa. I'm from the U.S. and she studied for 8 years in France. In any case, once the book was ready and went in print, so many people have told us that they read it in one sitting. This is not one of my longer books, obviously!

1:00:00

MH: That sounds like quite a story! I can't imagine your wife's response, "Who would be interested?" People just love a good story. We get enough (and I don't want to be pejorative here too much), but we get a lot of Christian fiction that's very contrived, and here you go with one that's real. So why wouldn't that appeal? I would think that would be pretty obvious.

CK: A lot of people have said, "This is a really good story." And it's a true story. And especially how much it has touched them spiritually to think about God's faithfulness in a new way, and the nearness of God in the midst of trouble, and so on.

MH: Absolutely. Well, thank you for spending a few minutes of your chaotic afternoon with us. I know you had to come a long way by foot to just make it here (laughter), but we're grateful that we got to interview you and introduce you a little bit more to our audience.

CK: Thanks so much, Michael. It's been a privilege to be with you.

MH: Thank you.

TS: All right, Mike, those were interesting interviews! I'm looking forward to David DaSilva's novel, *Day of Atonement!* It's too bad they ran out here so I can't get it right here. I enjoy historical fiction. Especially since you know the scholar, so you know it's going to be accurate. I agree with you when you say you get a lot more out of historical fictions than you do reading a textbook or something. It's more entertainment, and I think you do walk away at the end of the book retaining more of the history than you would in a classroom.

MH: I think that's true. Like we said in the interviews, it's just a good idea. It's kind of overdue. I wish biblical scholars would do more of this. You have some of it in the popular Christian world, where people are trying to set novels in particular biblical eras, but David is a cut above that. This is where he lives academically, this is his career area, and so this is the kind of person to be writing period fiction. I think it's long overdue.

TS: Absolutely. Well, Mike, this has been a nice break from Ezekiel!

MH: Yeah, it has.

TS: I hope everybody has enjoyed a week-long...

MH: Are you saying nobody misses Ezekiel? (laughing)

TS: No, I'm sure they're waiting to get back into it. It's just such a *long* book.

MH: It is. Well, our listeners picked it! They knew how long it was, so we can't take too much blame for that.

TS: Absolutely. Well, this is it Mike. This is the last of the conference interviews until next year, so we hope everybody has enjoyed what we've done here this week. It's been fun for me, so I appreciate being a part of it. It's been a lot of fun to meet everybody at our live event here in San Antonio, Texas. That was fun, that everybody that came out. We appreciate that. This is why we do this, Mike! Bringing scholars like yourself to us laymen.

MH: We're going to have to do it again. Like you said, it was fun. Next year the annual meetings are in Boston, so we may show up in your neighborhood before that. You never know, so pay attention to the website. If Trey and I are able to do this at a different location before next November, we'll let you know.

TS: Sounds good, Mike. It's been fun!

MH: It has, it has in many ways! (laughter)

TS: All right. We thank all of y'all for listening to all of these episodes and I hope you've enjoyed it. And I just want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God bless.