

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 380

Q&A 46

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Episode Summary

Dr. Heiser answers your questions:

- Is it possible that ancient cultures (like the Assyrians at times) worshipped the one true God like Israel did? [Time stamp 3:45]
- What do you think about the “lost chapter of Acts” found in Constantinople? [16:45]
- What do you make of Ecclesiastes 3:21, where it says, “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?” [29:05]
- Are the new heavens and new earth part of the global Eden, or something later? [30:30]
- How can I stay stable and balanced in my relationship with God when I’m not satisfied by any particular tradition? [44:00]

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 380: Our 46th Q&A. I’m the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he’s the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! What’s going on?

MH: Well, you know, we’re going to have a Q&A here, Trey. And I guess there *might* be something going on. We’re not quite sure yet. But why don’t we get into it? Since this is a Q&A, this is a good place to bring up a couple of questions that we’ve been getting asked and sort of a status update. So why don’t you let everybody know what we’re talking about here?

TS: Alright, yeah, sure. We’ve got *two* things that we’re trying to do. The first thing is that we *are* going to try to have a conference this year! And we’re shooting for October 30, which actually is the exact date for our 400th episode for the podcast. So we’re going to try to do a little 400th episode celebration/Naked Bible Conference at the same time. So we don’t have the details for that quite yet, but we wanted to at least give you all a heads up so you can at least think about it.

MH: Yep.

TS: It's going to be in Dallas again at the same place, all day Saturday. And Friday we'll probably try to do a podcast episode, maybe a live Q&A meet-up or some celebration type thing. But we don't have any details yet planned out for that, but we will here in the coming weeks flesh that out. And we just wanted to give you a heads up for the conference. So this year on October 30th is what we're shooting for in Dallas. So you can start to mentally make your plans for that.

MH: Yeah, we figure we can do *something* this year. And as things get clearer, we'll of course let you all know.

TS: Yeah, absolutely. What better way to celebrate our 400th episode than at our conference? That's one thing, Mike. And the next thing is in 2022. So we're a solid year and a half away from that. But in October (probably the second week of October) we're trying to shoot for the cruise again. So the Naked Bible Cruise in mid-October of 2022. And Mike, it's the same topics, right?

MH: Yep.

TS: Of *Unseen Realm 2* material.

MH: Yeah, same kind of... Yeah, that's going to be the orientation—what we're going to be dispensing as far as content, destination, the same as the old cruise (the one that never came off). So we're going to just take another shot at it in October 2022.

TS: Alright, there you go. Those are two pretty big things, Mike.

MH: Yeah!

TS: Our 400th celebration/conference and a cruise! So we'd love to see everybody.

MH: Yeah, it'll be fun. These things are always fun once they come together. So those are probably... I don't know if those are the two issues that will draw the most attention to Q&A. Probably not. And we have some good questions today. So why don't we just jump into them?

TS: Sounds good. Our first one is from Bryar, who asks about:

3:45

The ancient Assyrians were at times in their history somewhat monotheistic. They worshipped a god named Asshur who in the oldest myths has no genealogy, unlike the gods of Mesopotamia or Canaan. Are there any connections that can be made with the Yahweh of Israel and Asshur of the Assyrians? Also, just out of

curiosity, since they share similar symbolism, i.e. the bearded figure mounted on a pair of wings, can connections also be made between Asshur and Ahura Mazda of Zoroastrian religion, and thus between Ahura Mazda and Yahweh? I'm curious to know if other ancient cultures might have worshiped the one true God like Israel did.

5:00

MH: Well, the Bible certainly presents the human story this way, that originally humanity as a collective had a knowledge of the One True God and so on and so forth. This gets altered at Babel—post Babel—and whatnot. So on one hand, we shouldn't be surprised if there are sort of vestigial ideas that would extend from an original monotheism onward. By the way, if you're interested in this topic, there's actually a book on it by Winfried Corduan. Now he's a philosopher of religion, and I believe of evangelical orientation. But he has a book on this, just in case you're interested, from a philosophical/historical perspective. Again, he's not a biblical scholar, but it's still kind of a major work on this idea, at least probing it.

Now having said all that, the specifics of the question I'm pretty skeptical of, with Asshur and the Assyrians, and Ahuramazda and so on and so forth. The reason is, a lot of the talk of the Assyrians in this regard... And I know the question was worded appropriately: "somewhat monotheistic." I think that certainly is the best way you could describe the situation. But a lot of this talk stems from the work of Simo Parpola, who was a cuneiform specialist—a scholar of Assyriology. I don't know that he's still alive. He probably is. But he published a few things that sort of promoted this idea, specifically two [sources]. I'm just going to give the titles here so that if you're interested in this you could reference them or look them up. One is called "The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy." Again, this is kind of a major work. *Assyrian Prophecies* (1997) is a little later, and that's sort of a full expression. The first one is a journal article and the second one, four years later, is a book called *Assyrian Prophecies*. Now again, this is where a lot of this discussion derives from and really revolves around.

Now the problem is, Parpola's work in this regard has not been... I can't even say it hasn't been widely accepted. It hasn't been basically accepted by most anybody. So it's very idiosyncratic. And there have been lengthy reviews of this that really call the methodology and the conclusions into question. I'm going to mention two of these. And these are going to be in the protected folder for people who subscribe to my newsletter. The first one is by Jerrold Cooper. Cooper was for many years an Assyriologist and he taught Akkadian and Sumerian at Johns Hopkins University. He reviews the book, *Assyrian Prophecies*. Let me just give you the title of his review, and it kind of tells you where he's going: [laughs] "Assyrian Prophecies, the Assyrian Tree, and the Mesopotamian Origins of Jewish Monotheism, Greek Philosophy, Christian Theology, Gnosticism, and Much More." [laughs] So there's a little tinge of sarcasm there. But basically, this

is a 16-page book review, which is kind of unusual. It's pretty long. But he goes through Parpola's ideas pretty systematically and basically says, "I'm not buying it." And his abstract (this review article) concludes this way:

While concurring that some roots of these phenomena may indeed be found in ancient Mesopotamia, disagrees strongly with the author's methodology and conclusions.

So again, he's not buying what Parpola is selling. The other article that I'm going to put in the protected folder is by John Hilber. Now Hilber has been a guest on this podcast before. Most recently we talked about his book, *Old Testament Cosmology and Divine Accommodation: A Relevance Theory Approach*. Now John... Since Parpola's writing at the time of his book, *Assyrian Prophecies...* John is somebody who, for his dissertation and basically his ongoing research, has spent a lot of time in this material (neo-Assyrian prophetic prophecy stuff). Okay, this is prophecy not like what we think of (an End Times prophecy), but prophecy as in the role of prophets. And he did a paper in 2010 at ETS. And I have the paper (and again, this is what's going to be uploaded). So I have some notes scribbled on this paper. I just scanned it so that I could upload it and you could have it. I don't know if you can read my writing or not. But the important point of the content is actually John's paper. And it's titled "Monotheism in Neo-Assyrian Religion? An Appraisal." So this is a nine-page survey of what Parpola is arguing for. And again, John is also not persuaded because of the same kinds of problems. You know, there are just sort of guesses. There are some methodological issues. Sometimes you need to define this or that term in a specific way (Parpola does) for his idea to work. Again, there are just some problems. There are some significant problems with what Parpola is trying to argue.

10:00

So because I'm aware that this idea is at best tenuous, I don't want to say that we can draw any connections between Yahweh and Asshur of the Assyrians, specifically (I'm going with the trajectory of the question here) in regard to monotheism or the status of Yahweh and Asshur within their respective theological systems. Because I just think we're on secure ground to do that.

Now when it comes to Ahuramazda and Yahweh (Zoroastrianism) that as well... It is far from certain that Zoroastrianism was monotheistic. This is actually a big fight within the rather small community that specializes in Zoroastrianism (Persian religion). One of these people is Ed Yamauchi. Yamauchi is now retired. He taught at the University of Miami in Ohio in the history department. He's a specialist in ancient Persia. And he has a really nice book, *Persia and the Bible*. It was published by Baker back in 1996. And so I think this is a good place to go. I'm going to read a few things about the issues with Ahuramazda and this whole monotheism thing. So Yamauchi writes this:

Associated with Ahuramazda were six Amesha Spentas (Pahl. Amshaspands) or “Bounteous Immortals,” who are conceived as semi-personal manifestations of the supreme god: *Asha* = Righteousness; *Vohu Manah* = Good Mind; *Khshathra* = Power; *Armaiti* = Suitable Disposition; *Haurvatat* = Health; and *Ameretat* = Immortality. These appear to be personified abstractions. But they were more than abstractions because they were venerated by Zoroaster.

Let’s just stop there with that first paragraph. So you certainly don’t have anything like this in biblical thought, where other (we’ll just call them) members of the heavenly host—other divine beings—are going to be venerated or worshiped or something like this. I mean, you do have a Trinitarian system. Maybe you have like a double Trinitarian system. But the way Zoroastrian material talks about these six is not the way the Bible would be thinking about a Godhead, like co-equal, co-eternal. None of that is on the board here. This sounds actually more like Sethian Gnosticism—Gnostic cosmology—with the eons coming from the True God. And when they are collectivized they are the pleroma—the fullness of the True God—and all that. It sounds more like that than it does real trinitarianism or Godhead thinking in the Bible. Back to Yamauchi:

The concept of the Immortals is one of the most important and original doctrines of Zoroaster. They are prominent in the Gathas [MH: written texts for Zoroastrianism], which state explicitly that Ahuramazda created the first four Immortals.

So these “Immortals” have a beginning. That’s quite different than Godhead thinking. Back to Yamauchi:

Each of the Immortals is associated with some aspect of creation: *Vohu Manah* with animals, *Asha* with fire, *Khshathra* with metals, *Armaiti* with earth, *Haurvatat* with water, and *Ameretat* with plants. In later times the Amesha Spentas [MH: these six Bounteous Immortals] were transformed into male and female deities. *Armaiti* became the spouse of Ahuramazda. The Parsis [MH: the Persians] now regard the Immortals as archangels [MH: so their doctrine has evolved a bit]... Many leading scholars believe Zoroaster taught not a monotheism, but a dualism, with two primordial uncreated Spirits, a Good Spirit (that is, God) and an Evil Spirit.

15:00 Now, again, if that’s the case (and again, there’s even uncertainty there) you’d have two uncreated spirits. That doesn’t align well with biblical thought as well, because there’s only one uncreated being. And of course, it’s not oppositional. You don’t have two in this dualistic system.

Willard Oxtoby defines dualism as “a conception of the universe which postulates two ultimate principles, seen as opposed to each other and more or less evenly

matched.” A key text is Yasna 30.3: “Now these two spirits, which are twins, revealed themselves at first in a vision.”

So that’s the end of Yamauchi’s section. I’ve also put up in the protected folder an article by Almut Hintze, which is entitled “Monotheism the Zoroastrian Way.” It’s from the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24:2 (April 2014). So it’s fairly recent. And again, that article kind of describes the same sorts of things. But there’s more detail to it. So this really doesn’t align very well. A lot of what you’ll read on Zoroastrianism basically comes down to this notion of, “Well, yeah, it’s kind of monotheistic except where it isn’t.” [laughs] So you have this tension. And again, scholars still to this day disagree on how to characterize it. So the uncertainty of it doesn’t really make it a good platform for comparison.

TS: Our next question is from Marian in New Mexico.

16:45

What is Mike’s opinion on the lost chapter of Acts found in Constantinople?

MH: Well, not much. I don’t know how else to say it. Basically, this is British Israelite nonsense. I did a search for Acts 29 and Constantinople in Google Scholar, and there’s next to nothing in that. I have a digital library with over 30,000 volumes, and I got zero hits. That’s extraordinarily unusual. What that means is that, basically, scholars don’t give this the time of day. And if you actually go out on the web and read about this “lost chapter of the Acts of the Apostles,” you’re sort of going to discover why [laughs]—why it’s just, “Yeah, we have better things to do.”

So this lost chapter is known as the Sonnini Manuscript, basically because of where it’s talked about. It’s a short text that supposedly is the missing last chapter of Acts. And it details Paul’s journey to Britannia, where he preached to a tribe of Israelites on Ludgate Hill in Britannia. It’s British Israelism, okay, which is nonsense for a host of reasons. And people have published.... I mean, I have in my “paranormal” collection here (my FringePop collection in my library) several older books and a few recent things on British Israelite religion (that’s what it is, it’s almost a cult, really) that more or less just tears this apart. So that’s really why nobody pays any attention to it.

If you wanted a little bit more for a description, you could go up to Google and put the name “Edward Goodspeed.” His name is spelled just like it sounds. He was a Greek scholar and theologian in the early to mid-20th century. And he actually has a bit of a write-up on the 29th chapter of Acts. I’m going to read a little bit from it. But if you wanted Goodspeed’s take... This is just so hard to find anything on. So the fact that you can find even this much is really noteworthy, because most people just don’t have any time for this sort of stuff. So Goodspeed writes:

20:00

For many years there has prevailed in certain quarters in England the idea that the Anglo-Saxon peoples are the lost ten tribes of Israel who were carried into captivity by Assyria in 722 B.C. and have never been heard of since. The holders of this “British-Israel” position declare that the national seal of the United States bears witness to our identity with the tribe of Manasseh, the thirteenth tribe, while the royal arms of Britain recall those of Ephraim and Judah. George Washington and King George V are both in fact lineal descendants of King David.

Like, “Who knew?” Elsewhere he writes:

One of their most interesting claims is the discovery of the twenty-ninth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles [MH: so-called].

This “long-lost chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, containing the account of Paul’s journey in Spain and Britain” is said by a recent publisher of it, Mr. T. G. Cole, to have been translated by the oriental traveler, C. S. Sonnini, from a “Greek manuscript found in the Archives at Constantinople, and presented to him by the Sultan Abdoul Achmet.” Sonnini’s translation, we are further informed, “was found interleaved in a copy of Sonnini’s ‘Travels in Turkey and Greece,’ and purchased at the sale of the library and effects of the late Right Hon. Sir John Newport... in Ireland... in whose possession it had been for more than thirty years, with a copy of the firman of the Sultan of Turkey, granting to C. S. Sonnini permission to travel in all parts of the Ottoman dominions.”

Basically, he goes on and says, “Look, there isn’t a single Greek text... There isn’t a single Greek fragment of the book of Acts that has the stuff that’s supposedly in Acts 29 in it. In other words, there’s no primary source data. Now when you get things like this “found in libraries,” “tucked away,” “used as a bookmark for something else,” honestly that’s been done before [laughs] by forgers. This isn’t like a single occurrence of this sort of thing. So without that... And people by this point have gone to Constantinople and asked, “Hey, did this come from this? And did you guys ever have this in your archives? Is there any record of this?” And it’s, “No, no, no, and no.” There’s just nothing to go on here. And the fact that it’s rooted in the mythology of British Israelite thinking answers the question why you can do these broad database searches and *nothing* comes up. No one has considered it even worth time to look at it. So I don’t think a whole lot of it.

TS: Ghost Man wants to know:

22:30

What is the meaning of Ecclesiastes 3:21?

MH: Well, let’s read the verse first so that people listening get a feel for this. I’ll back up a little bit to get a little context here. Starting in verse 18:

18 I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. 19 For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. 20 All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. 21 Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?

So out of the gate, in that context, what verse 21 is asking is, “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward, like to God—returns to God—and the spirit of the beast doesn’t?” Because everything dies. Everything surrenders its spirit. But who knows if humans are going to have an everlasting destiny with their creator and animals don’t? Who knows? So just generally, the verse kind of in context tells you really what the question being asked is.

Now I often get asked about commentaries. And for Ecclesiastes, my go-to sources are Tremper Longman’s commentary, *The Book of Ecclesiastes...* It’s part of The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. It’s 1998, Eerdmans. And Tremper’s specialty is Wisdom Literature. And the other one is Iain Provan. This is The NIV Application Commentary. It’s a commentary on *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*. And I’m going to read a bit from Provan’s about these verses. He actually has a fairly lengthy discussion of this. So here we go. He writes:

25:00

Here in 3:18–22, however, the emphasis falls on the apparent lack of distinction between humans and animals, rather than between the wise and the foolish, in death [MH: again, everything dies]. God enables human beings to see that, in respect of their ultimate fate, “they are like the animals” (3:18)... The similarity of human beings to the animals in this crucial respect is underlined in the fivefold use of Heb. *kol*, “all,” in 3:19–20: “All have the same breath... *everything* is meaningless [better ‘breath’; see comments on 1:1–11]. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return.” That all sentient life is comprised of the “dust” (*apar*) of the ground and the “breath” (*ruah*, often “spirit,” [MH: but it’s the same word for “breath” or “wind”]) as in the NIV translation of 3:21) of life, placed together by God and destined to be separated at death, is the common view expressed or implied in the Old Testament... Qohelet [MH: the Hebrew term for “the Preacher,” the writer of Ecclesiastes] does not commit himself to any particular view on what happens after death (3:21), although he is clearly familiar with the idea that when the human body and “breath”/“spirit” are separated, the spirit does not go “down” with the body into the earth, as in the case of animals, but rather rises “upward” (presumably to God). His stance is agnostic: “Who knows?” He cannot be certain what will happen after death (cf. the same question in 2:19); it is unseen. He rests content with that which, in the grace of

God, he *has* come to see (Heb. *r'h*, 3:18), namely, that death renders pointless during life the quest for “gain” or “advantage” (*motar*, related to the *yitron* employed in 1:3; 2:11; 3:9) over the rest of creation.

So again, it goes back to this “all is vanity.” “We’re all going to die.” If you’ve read Ecclesiastes, this is going to sound real familiar. Which is why the book ends:

This is the whole conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments.

Because ultimately, our destiny after death is going to be in the hands of God. So that’s basically his take on this. And so when he asks in verse 21, “Who knows?” he’s basically saying, “I don’t really know what happens after we die.” And in the Old Testament (as we’ve had episodes on this before, specifically the psalms of Korah and some of the other Korahite things in the Old Testament) you do have a widespread notion that everybody dies. The righteous die. The wicked die. They all go to the same place. They all go to the underworld, the realm of the dead. So on and so forth. But there’s this hope in various texts that the righteous will be taken out of Sheol—out of the underworld—to be with the Lord.

Now this is an idea that’s going to get a lot more attention later (the Second Temple period, New Testament, so on and so forth). But the hope was that this is the destiny of the righteous, that they don’t stay there. So this is what prompts the question—this ambiguity or uncertainty. But it would be saying too much to say that the Old Testament does not have a hope of the positive afterlife. That’s an overstatement that you’ll often hear. And people will often go to passages like this. But then they’ll skip the Psalms and other places that say the opposite—that do express a clear hope. So this is where he’s at. He doesn’t know. And if you read Ecclesiastes, he basically goes through all these questions of life and all the facets of life and basically shows that all is vanity because we’re all going to die. And in the end, what we need to do is, we need to be on the Lord’s side. We need to be righteous. Fear God and keep his commandments, and our destiny is in his hands. So in a nutshell, that’s really the thought he’s expressing here. It’s very much in concert with Old Testament thinking about the afterlife to wonder—to at least express the question—but also express the hope.

TS: Ghost Man has one more question:

29:05

Mike said before that 1000 years is too short for the “millennium”—the global Eden. What does he make of the new heavens and earth? Is that just part of the global Eden, or something later?

MH: I think that the new earth *is* the new global Eden. The new heaven and earth (that phrase) borrows the language of Genesis 1. It’s the totality of material creation that can be experienced in some way by humans. I mean, even outer

30:00 space. We can see the heavens. We may not be able to live there or to live in the sea, but we can see these things. So we experience the heavens and the earth, at least in some way. So this is an expression of the totality of creation that humans can experience with their senses. *All* of that is made new. So that *is* the global Eden. Those two things are interchangeable. The new heavens and new earth is the global Edenic situation. Because we're going to be on a new earth. The heavens are re-created with the earth. Again, it's just a way of expressing everything... The reset button gets hit. Everything goes back to the way God originally made it, except now Eden isn't just a little piece of turf on the earth, it's the whole earth.

TS: Alright. Charles has our last two questions. And the first one is:

30:30 **I feel the more I listen to your work, the more I wonder about people "asking saints to pray for them, lighting candles to honor saints, praying through images," etc., being a form of idolatry. I used to not think much of that, and heard that "the church" had sanctioned that in a "7th ecumenical council." I know you tend to eschew traditions and talk about a "text-driven" theology: in your study, would the apostle Paul have thought of these practices as a sin?**

MH: Yes. Part of the idolatry question really depends on what's going on inside a person's head and their heart. I know Christian traditions like Catholicism do make a distinction between veneration and worship, which to Protestants just sounds like, "Well, those are just two different words that mean the same thing." But Catholics really do make a distinction. If you read Catholic theology, they're going to articulate the difference in ways that would satisfy them.

But setting that aside, the whole idolatry question... I just don't think that Paul is going to have any room for... Certainly not for worshiping (and again, what's the difference with veneration?) anything that isn't God. I mean, even angels in Scripture tell people not to venerate them—not to worship them. Of course, Catholicism is going to try to parse these passages and put one in the worship bucket and the other one in the veneration bucket. But to me, that's pretty telling, that they don't do that. Peter, when there's an episode where someone bows down to him, he says, "Rise. I'm also a man." I think there's just very little room for this.

Now having said that, how is this justified? I don't think there's a real good scriptural justification for any of this. But that's typically not what you find. You don't find these things in Catholic theology justified with exegesis or Scripture. Rather, these things are justified with what we might call "theological logic." For example, praying to Mary. The reasoning is, "Well, what son (Jesus) would deny his mother's request? So Jesus, of course, is going to answer prayers delivered to him by his mother." Well, okay, I see the theological logic, but could I have a

verse please, that we're supposed to pray to Mary? Again, in this case, there's some kind of mediation going on with saints. It's the same kind of logic with saints, whether they're depicted with icons or not. It might be borrowing from the concept of angelic mediation in the Old Testament—the idea that saints (departed believers) are angels now, or something like that. In the Old Testament, some of the angels were called mediators. And that's true. But of course, that ignores passages like in 1 Timothy 2, where it says Christ is the only mediator between God and men. It has to ignore that. But there might be some of that going on. But lest anybody out there think that this is a caricature, I'm going to read a selection from a Catholic theology... And this is an older... I deliberately picked an older one, so it's pre Vatican 2 and all that stuff. This is, like, traditional Catholicism. This is Joseph Berington and John Kirk, *The Faith of Catholics: Confirmed by Scripture and Attested by the Fathers of the First Five Centuries of the Church*. It's 1885. It's a multivolume work. So they write this:

Catholics are persuaded that the angels and saints in heaven, replenished with charity, pray for us, the fellow-members of the latter here on earth; that they rejoice in our conversion; that seeing God, they see and know in Him all things suitable to their happy state; and that God may be inclined to hear their requests made in our behalf, and for their sakes may grant us many favors,—therefore, we believe that it is good and profitable to invoke their intercession. Can this manner of invocation be more injurious to Christ our Mediator, than it is for one Christian to beg the prayers of another here on earth?

35:00

Now let's take that paragraph apart. So you have angels in heaven, and they're happy. They're happy dudes because they're in heaven. And they're thrilled when humans become believers. Okay? And they see God and they know that God's character is part of why they're happy—all things suitable to their happy estate. And so that would automatically mean that God is inclined to hear the requests of angels (or saints) made on the behalf of the living. Again, it's all this... I think this is a non sequitur. Okay? It makes certain assumptions. It builds an argument based upon a string of logical thoughts. But again, could I have a verse please? Now in the book, there are passages that are cited for this. Let me give you a few of these. So let's go to Luke 15:10:

¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Okay! The angels are happy when a sinner repents. Where does that verse tell me that I should pray to them? You know, it doesn't. We're in the book of Revelation. There are several passages in Revelation that are going to be looped into this. Revelation 1:4-5:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne...

Wow, there are spiritual beings before the throne of God! Yeah, yeah there are. That would be logical. They're part of God's entourage. Again, where does it say we're supposed to pray to them, or that we can? Revelation 8:3-4 says:

³ And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, ⁴ and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.

So this angel has this... He's at the altar. He has this thing full of incense. And the smoke of the incense symbolizes the prayers of the saints (the holy ones) going up to God. Again, where does it say that the angel is the object of these prayers? I mean, why can't this just be symbolizing what's going on here?

Now you can talk about angelic priesthood. That's certainly a legitimate idea from both the Old Testament (the mediatorial idea) and then in the Second Temple period where you get the angelic priesthood with the human priesthood—the whole idea of humans being grafted back into the Divine Council. These are biblical ideas. But what's missing from them... The priestly language is there because we render service to God in God's house. That's why there's priestly language. What's missing from all these descriptions is the notion that humans can pray to these lesser beings and these lesser beings mediate the prayers to God. To me, this idea ignores Hebrews 4:15-16 and 1 Timothy 2:5. So Hebrews 4:15:

¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Okay? Now you could say, "Well, that doesn't say that we're drawing near to God and praying directly to God." Well, okay, it's the throne of grace. Singular: throne. Like, who would be on it? And again, you have the high priestly language here, which mimes this Day of Atonement thing. And who's the high priest? Well, that would be Jesus. It's not an angel. It's not one of these lesser beings. So my question is, if Jesus has this role now of high priest, the highest mediator that there could be between God... And the verse says, "Let us draw near with confidence," why do I need to pray to some guy who was here and died? As holy as he was, or whoever, why do I need to do that? There just doesn't seem to be any coherence to the idea. And then you get to 1 Timothy 2:5:

⁵ For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus...

40:00

Again, that would be the high priest of Hebrews 4. Now if you'll notice in the paragraph, the people who wrote the paragraph anticipate the "one mediator" passage and they write this:

Can this manner of invocation [MH: praying to saints and stuff] be more injurious to Christ our Mediator, than it is for one Christian to beg the prayers of another here on earth?

So in other words, when I ask you to pray for me, and Jesus isn't offended by that, the logic is, "Well, we should be able to ask saints to pray for us, too! And Jesus wouldn't be offended at that." Do you see the problem? When we ask someone to pray on our behalf, is that really the same as praying to, gosh... to a dead person? I'm tempted to use the word necromancy (the "N" word) here, but you know, that's saying a little bit too much. But again, there's no verse for this. It's theological logic.

So if you're Catholic in the audience and you're thinking of it on these terms... "Well, just like I would ask somebody to pray for me and that person's going to pray to God on my behalf, and obviously God's not going to be offended by that because we're supposed to pray for one another (the New Testament says this), therefore logically I should be able to pray to dead believers who have gone on and they're with the Lord. I should be able to pray to them. And then assuming that they will do that and God will hear my prayers..." Again, we have a verse for one ("pray for one another"). We don't have a verse for the dead side of it. But if this is how you're thinking about it, to me that isn't *worshipping* a saint. I don't think it's coherent theology, but I don't think you've crossed a line to idolatry. Again, the question is, "What would Paul think?" I think Paul would probably think, "Well, what are you doing?" Like, "Don't you know that Jesus is our high priest? Why not go directly to the Lord?" Why? Why are we doing this? And again, you have the angelic refusal of worship. Okay, you say, "This isn't worship. This is asking the angel or whoever to pray for me." Again, I hope you see the distinction between veneration or at least this idea of using dead believers and angels or whatever as intercessors. I hope you see the logic, and therefore I hope you see the difference between that and worship. Because that's important. But my problem is, we do have Scripture for one side of it (asking people to pray for us). We don't have Scripture for the other. That is an inference that's drawn through theological logic. And this is consistently how you see this idea defended.

Again, if I want my theology to be biblical, I'd like Bible for it. I don't think that's an unreasonable request. I really don't. So that's why I tend to have a negative view of this. But I think it probably goes too far *if* someone is thinking the thoughts that I just sketched out. If they're thinking of what they're doing in practical terms, like

you would think of asking a living human being to pray for you, if that's what you're doing, well, I don't think we can call that *worship*. It's something else. But I don't think there's really biblical support for it. So idolatry, I think, might be too harsh of a way to characterize this. But if you're thinking maybe about it some different way, maybe that *is* a problem. I don't know. It just depends (like I said at the beginning of this question) what's kind of floating through a person's head when they're engaged in this sort of thing.

TS: Charles' second question is:

44:00

I heard a part of Augustine's commentary on John chapter 6 read by a Reformed preacher that seemed to match up well with what you yourself said on the Naked Bible Podcast back on early episodes on the Lord's Supper. It seems some of the "divine council" material is in some way present in the writings of the early church fathers, yet the two "traditions" (Orthodox and Roman Catholic) that love to quote the early church fathers as authorities would also despise your comments on both the Lord's Supper and Baptism. At the same time, the Reformed tradition and even some of the "new perspective" group seem entirely ignorant of the "divine council theology." For someone who has struggled with Catholicism and yet is not always entirely satisfied by the Reformed tradition, how can I have a stable and balanced approach to my relationship with God?

45:00

MH: I would say the only way to really do this is to divorce your relationship with God from those traditions. What I mean by that is, don't define your relationship with God as requiring endorsement of any one tradition. Or don't let it be dictated by any one tradition. There's no reason to do that. These are all post-biblical traditions. Why should they set the rules for you on your relationship with God as opposed to letting Scripture set the rules for you on your relationship with God? Scripture preceded all of these traditions. It's also inspired, where these traditions are not.

And again, I don't want newcomers to the podcast to think that I'm anti-tradition. I don't spend any time shooting on this podcast (or anywhere where I go lecture) at denominations. I also don't spend any time endorsing them. They are what they are. They are post-biblical human exercises and efforts to transmit Christian teaching. And they all have something to contribute. They all have something that just makes me cringe. But again, they are what they are. And trying to be as charitable as I can here, I think the goal is... For most people who are serious in all these traditions... I'm not talking about the people who use Christian office and ministry office and denominational this and that for power. Okay? Those people you can write off. That is antithetical to servanthood. It's antithetical to discipleship. I'm not talking about those people. I'm talking about the people who are really sincere and serious. They want to know the Lord. Okay? And so those

people within these traditions, their heart's in the right place. Their tradition will... Again, there'll be things that are just going to conform really well to Scripture. There are going to be things that don't. But all the traditions are trying to do the same thing (again, in the "sincere" bucket): to have people know the Lord and walk with God and become disciples of Jesus. They just are what they are. Everybody has hits and misses.

So I don't feel any sense of either moral obligation or theological obligation or personal obligation or practical obligation to have to pick one. I don't know where the cosmic rule is that says I have to pick one. So I don't. I'm just not going to do it. I'd rather try to understand the text—the thing that trumps all of those things, the thing that preceded them, the thing that actually is inspired. I'd rather try to understand that and use that as the sandbox (so to speak) to play in, or the laboratory in which to engage and try to figure out what the Lord wants and how I should live.

What can I say, without becoming too repetitious? That's my advice to you. Divorce your relationship with God from endorsing or having it dictated to you by any tradition. You know, I could walk into a whole bunch of different churches and get something out of it. And chances are I could walk into those same churches and cringe on any given Sunday, too. It just is what it is. It's where humanity is at. Give them the benefit of the doubt; everybody's trying to do the same thing. They're going to have hits and misses. So your walk with the Lord shouldn't be something that is sort of malleable by your experience on any given Sunday. You should be able to hear what's being preached in some place, and Lord willing, it actually has some orientation to Scripture. Or see a liturgy and understand it. That should help you in thinking about your relationship to God and being a disciple of Jesus. It should help you in some ways. You get *something* out of it no matter where you're at.

Again, I realize we live in a bizarre day, so I can't guarantee that. But I hope you get the spirit of the comment. Your relationship with God should be something that's working in you internally that is not dictated by your external experiences in places that we call churches. Those things can help. They can hinder. Realize that. But ultimately, it's between you and the Lord. That's the boots-on-the-ground place where all of this should be happening. And so again, that's my advice. Don't link your relationship with the Lord to any tradition.

50:00

TS: Alright, Mike. That's all we have for this week. We appreciate everybody that sent their questions. And I'm looking forward... Don't forget those two announcements: conference this year; cruise next year. Be on the lookout for more updates. With that, we should be good, Mike.

MH: Yep, we'll do our best to make something happen.

TS: Alright, sounds good. Alright, with that, I want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.