

## Blogging With Dr. Barry, Part 1 ( Michael Heiser Responds )

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### Blogging With Dr. Barry, Part 1

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Some readers brought this link to my attention this past weekend. It's a response on the part of Dr. Barry Downing to some thoughts I had on his work some time ago. For those who don't know who Barry Downing is, he's the author of a book called *Flying Saucers and the Bible* that promotes the ancient alien hypothesis using the Bible. He has an earned doctorate (I believe in theology). I'm not a big fan of his work, as you'll figure out from what follows.

I'm actually not even sure when it was, but I'm guessing it's six or seven years ago that I called Barry Downing's approach to Bible interpretation a rape of the biblical text. I can't even recall if it was in print or on radio. That said, my thanks to those who pointed the link out to me. While readers can go right to the link and read it in full, I'll be reproducing it here in installments and blogging through it by way of response. It's long enough that this will take a few installments. My responses are the indented portions (MSH).

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Although I am a Protestant, and have no desire to be a Roman Catholic, there are certain aspects of Catholicism that I envy. Catholics have a Pope, who can speak infallibly according to church doctrine, a doctrine that Protestants reject as a denial of the humanity of the Pope in particular, and the humanity of the church in general. I think this rejection is theologically sound.

MSH: Well, we agree on something!

It is a good part of our Reformation tradition not to believe any church leaders are infallible. Unfortunately, some Protestant leaders didn't get the memo.

In order to claim an authority equal to the Pope, many Protestants hold to a doctrine of biblical infallibility.

MSH: This is a non-sequitur. The notion of placing infallibility on the biblical TEXT therefore removes authority from a human being. All the Protestants I know would claim infallibility resides in the text, not any person, and so it is a fallacy to say this doctrine leads to someone (or some church or denomination) holding the authority of the Pope. The whole notion of the Reformation's clarion call "sola Scriptura" ("Scripture alone") was to void papal authority and human authority for faith and practice. That said, I'm betting Barry is thinking that papal authority is often replaced by the authority of some other person in the real world, regardless of the sola Scriptura idea. He'd be right there. Often Protestants (and "independent fundamentalists") simply have their own popes — their own interpreters that cast themselves as some sort of final authority. I've also read ahead, and Barry tries to portray me this way. That's where he's going to appear kind of stupid to anyone who spends much time reading what I write. It's the last thing I care about. Remember (and for some of you this is before you met me through the web), I'm the guy who posted his income tax returns on the web to show that I wasn't making any money on what I do. I also hold no church office (no church position at all) and do not even have a teaching post. I have no radio or TV ministry. Frankly, I've only ever been invited to speak in TWO (count 'em) churches about alien stuff in the Bible. No THERE's how to spell "empire" (or "pope")! Please, Barry. Spend some time learning about what I do before offering opinions. I do what I do because (a) I find it interesting, and (b) I care that people are not misled. It's not complicated.

This is to ensure the authority of church doctrine. I understand the purpose of this doctrine, but I have serious doubts about its usefulness, because even if the Bible is infallible, how do we know our interpretation of the Bible — our hermeneutics — are infallible? We don't, of course.

MSH: Agreed. Wow, that's twice.

Nevertheless, what the doctrine of biblical infallibility seems to do is to ordain many Protestant fundamentalists as mini-Popes (hereafter Popettes). They suppose if they quote an infallible verse from the Bible, that makes them by association infallible, and able to make infallible papal decrees. I have been cursed (depending on the divine

authority of the Popetts, of course) as a "hermeneutical rapist"; by Michael Heiser, as "downright blasphemous"; by Guy Malone, and as a "wolf in sheep's clothing"; by Gary Bates, all on the Strong Delusion Web Site.

I kind of look with envy at the Catholic Church, with only one Pope authorized to make infallible condemnations.

But far be it from me to say these Popetts have no right to make their decrees of condemnation. Guy Malone delivered a lecture in New Mexico on September 13, 2009, entitled "Evidence for a Spiritual View of the UFO Phenomenon: Why Christian Fundies Think Aliens Are Really Demons."

MSH: I didn't catch this or listen to it, but I've heard Guy often enough to have a good idea of the material. Barry, did you catch the parts about how it was non-Christians who led the way on this interpretation (Vallee? Keel?). Boy, would Vallee be incensed to be called a "Popette"!

At the beginning of the lecture, he identifies himself as a "Fundie," and confesses his faith in Jesus Christ (I also claim Christ as my Savior)

MSH: I would not be a fundamentalist to fundamentalists (the term is sufficiently elastic that I don't want to venture a guess on how Guy sees it). I was fired from a fundamentalist school since I wasn't them — so I really don't fit this label. Again, it would be nice to do some homework (and I'd be happy to share biographical details with you by email). I do have friends in that movement, though, but that's sort of peripheral.

and senses that having made this confession, he suspects that his UFO oriented audience may have some anxiety. Malone comforts the audience by saying, "I'm not going to tell you you're going to hell if you disagree with what I present today, okay?" In other words, ordinarily Malone would claim his authority as divine judge to decide who is going to hell

MSH: Come on. Do you seriously think that fundamentalists believe they can "assign" someone's destiny? I'd recommend that you read Martin Marty (Univ. of Chicago professor who made fundamentalism one of his academic focuses) or George Marsden at Notre Dame on the movement. While a fundamentalist would certainly "label" people as "saved" or "lost", none that I ever met would think they have some sort of ability to assign anyone's eternal destiny or the "gift" of knowing who's going where. But a label mentality is common in the movement. Again, I'm not claiming to know how Guy uses the term and how he'd label himself, but this (apparent) contention of yours is incorrect (assuming I'm reading it right - since I'm not a "Popette", I can't be sure).

but on this occasion the Popette offers a kind of papal indulgence. For today only, Malone will give up his authority to send those to hell who disagree with him. Since in this lecture he pronounced me "downright blasphemous" (Jesus was crucified for blasphemy; Mt. 26:65), you can see that his papal indulgence applied only to his audience, not to me.

MSH: Well, this isn't the only context for

blasphemy in the New Testament. Anyone who would attribute the work of the Spirit to Satan is a blasphemer (Matthew 12:22-32).

I don't want to put words in Guy's mouth, but maybe he's thinking that since you attribute various works of God to aliens, who he believes are demons, that you're doing the same thing the Pharisees did in Matthew 12. If one presupposes aliens = demons (which is the fundy view), then that would sort of make sense. I don't know that aliens are demons. What passes for aliens may be demons. I don't know for sure, but it's in my range of options. Even if they are not, though, the messages they give contactees and abductees are frequently very anti-Christian (in any Catholic or Protestant - or Greek Orthodox sense). But there are other ways to parse the alien question, as anyone who's read the UFO Religions blog knows I've said (another Stanton Friedman and Ryan Wood alert here).

Obviously, it is bad to be blasphemous, and worse to be downright blasphemous, so who could object to Malone's judgment?

Malone and his friends believe they have the authority to make these condemnations (in spite of Matthew 7:1), it is obviously part of their understanding of what fundamentalists are supposed to do. But I do look with envy at a one Pope church.

MSH: Oh, Matthew 7:1, the one Bible verse everyone seems to be able to quote and few have actually read. Too bad Paul never heard it - you know, the guy who demanded that the works of darkness be exposed (Ephesians 5:11), who told young pastor Timothy to rebuke people who lived in sin (1 Timothy 5:20), and who did so himself on a number of occasions (practically every NT book he wrote - and he wrote half the NT; see 1 Corinthians 5 for a sample). And then there's John, the disciple of love, of all people, who tells us to "test the spirits, to see if they are of God or not" (1 John 4:1). How can you test without judging? Hmm. If people would \*read\* Matthew 7:1 would see that judgment is \*not\* what is condemned; it's unrighteous judgment (hypocrisy) that is condemned.

Matthew 7:1

does not prohibit discerning truth from error; it prohibits moral hypocrisy. And this isn't my papal-ette interpretation, either. If you like Barry, I could give you pages of bibliography here, from all Christian traditions. Here's the passage in context so no one has to look it up (I've boldfaced verse 3):

1 "Judge not, that you be not judged. 2 For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. 3 Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. The point is that you should never judge someone for doing something when you are either doing the same thing or are not living righteously yourself. It's a condemnation of hypocrisy, not judging per se. How do I know? (And I always ask readers to ask this question of what they hear from me). Well, Jesus himself tells us that "righteous judgment" is just fine (John 7:24). No, I don't need any contrived papal authority, I just need to read the NT in context and not cherry-pick a verse here and there.

It is difficult to respond to papal decrees, of course. A papal decree may be reasoned, but it does not have to be. Heiser offers an example of an unreasoned decree. He says, "I think what Barry Downing and those like him do to the text is

truly a hermeneutical rape of the text. It's a textbook (and almost farcical) example of reading what you want to see in the text into the text, the text be damned if it gets in the way. Just awful." (Strong Delusion, "The Christian View of Aliens, Part 3: Angels, Demons, Gods, Aliens: Are These Terms Reconcilable?" June 2, 2009)

MSH: Let's talk about the hermeneutical rape comment. Barry seems to think I meant something sexual. He brings up the sexual element a lot in what follows. That's sort of understandable, but maybe he lives in the land where there are no metaphors. Webster (Collegiate Dictionary, 11th edition) defines rape as follows:

1 : an act or instance of robbing or despoiling or carrying away a person by force

2 : unlawful sexual activity and usu. sexual intercourse carried out forcibly or under threat of injury against the will usu. of a female or with a person who is beneath a certain age or incapable of valid consent — compare sexual assault, statutory rape

3 : an outrageous violation

Wow - amazing. There's more than one interpretive option. Who'da thunk that? I don't think it will come as a surprise that my intended referent / meaning was #3 - "an outrageous violation." No, I don't think you're violent, Barry, toward women or anyone else. That would be absurd. I \*do\* think your method of Bible interpretation - say, having aliens visiting Lot at Sodom and Gomorrah, or parting the Red Sea - is "an outrageous violation" of any sort of sound hermeneutical method. So in that sense, your method is hermeneutical rape. But, I'll grant you that the word is inflammatory, and so I won't use it again. I'll try to use something less loaded: "silly hermeneutic"; "hermeneutical nonsense"; something like that.

Well, I need to quit for now. Barry's next section is entitled "THE HERMENEUTICS OF UNREASONED DECREES." That should be fun. So, it's "unreasonable" to say that your insertion of aliens at Sodom or the Red Sea (among other places you see them) is nonsense? That would mean your views \*are\* reasonable. Let's think about that as I close for a warm up of sorts.

At the start of this you noted that no one can claim infallibility with respect to Bible interpretation. I agreed. We don't know when our interpretation is infallible. But I'd suggest we \*can\* know if it's nonsense. For your hermeneutical approach to be reasonable, you need to establish that (a) there really are intelligent aliens and (b) that they came here in antiquity. I suppose you have incontrovertible physical evidence of intelligent alien visitation that would make your interpretative approach reasonable?

That would give it a deserved place at the intellectual table? Why don't you turn it over to the dozens of dedicated UFO researchers (many of whom wouldn't touch religion with a ten foot antennae) who are still wishing they had just that? People have spent their lives searching for proof, so give them yours and reward their search. Problem is, everyone reading this knows that \*hard\* scientific proof of ET life and visitation is non-existent, no matter how much we'd like to have it.<sup>1</sup>

Is it reasonable to base your hermeneutic on data that doesn't exist? Can you produce anyone in the academy (or anyone who deals with evidence and logic in a serious way — say, a lawyer) who thinks your approach reasonable — to use that which you cannot bring forth to act as the interpretive filter for your biblical interpretation?

Let me illustrate. I could say that I believe that the Bible stories are best explained by the visitations of an ET race of speckled goat-beings with advanced frontal lobes of the brain. After their arrival from distant space, they civilized humankind. But alas, earth's atmosphere and environment damaged their genetic code and they began to devolve into the mute, stupid beasts we know them as today. The Dung Gate of Jerusalem stands as a cryptic testimony of their influence over Abraham's seed. Though the Biblical editors have all but erased the story of the great Baa-Baa civilization

that came here long ago, there are seductive hints in the text that can be teased out, like Leviticus 17:7, which hearkens back to a time when the Israelites called them gods, and Deut 14:21, whose moral injunction echoes the terrible demise of this once proud ET race. So, why I can't I use this as my hermeneutical filter? It's possible, isn't it? Anything is possible, right? We can't infallibly say this is nutty. Yeah, everything's possible. Yeah, we aren't omniscient so we can't say we're infallible. But is it reasonable? Just because I can think a thought doesn't mean it's coherent. Like I've said many times on the radio to the question about ancient astronauts ('it's possible, though, Mike, isn't it?'): sure, it's possible, and it's also possible that I could be the next American Idol. How seriously should you take that 'possibility'?

None of us can claim infallibility.

But your approach can't claim coherence, either. You can hide behind the notion that anyone who'd say your ideas are unreasonable is pontificating or being a Popette. But that's a misdirection of the real issue. It's about coherence and data that exist, not anyone presuming infallibility.

In case Barry says that belief in God has the same problem, it doesn't. Christianity and Judaism never claim that God is part of the created world. His existence is therefore not in the realm of scientific inquiry. It's in the arena of logic and philosophy, and arguments in those arenas have been bantied about (and embraced) by some of the greatest minds inhuman history — in the past up to the present. ET on the other hand, IS placed in our material world, and so is subject to scientific scrutiny. It's apples and oranges to treat them the same.

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