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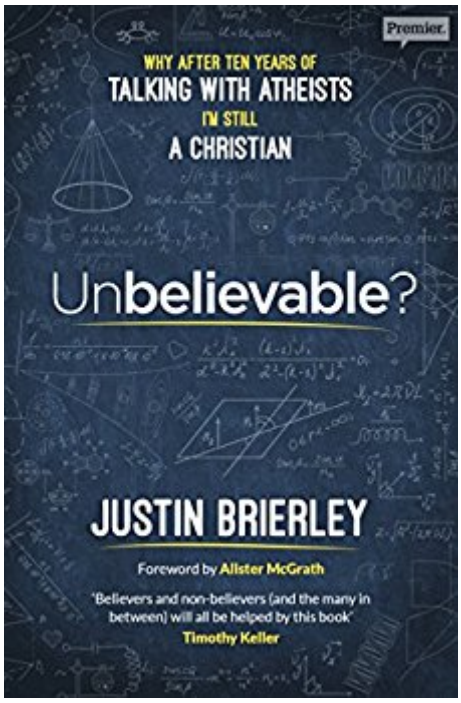
Unbelievable?: Why After Ten Years Of Talking With Atheists, I'm Still A Christian



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Synopsis

No one likes to be told they are wrong; but is that any reason not to listen? Seeking to burst the ’Christian bubble’ that many believers find comfort in, Justin Brierley began to invite atheists, sceptics and non-believers onto Premier Christian Radio to unpack and understand the so-called ’unbelievables’ of the Christian faith.Now, over ten years later, Premier’s Unbelievable? podcast continues to captivate hundreds of thousands of listeners and has even spawned its own annual conference. But how has ten years in the atheist-argument-firing-line affected the presenter’s faith?Taking the best from conversations with Richard Dawkins and many more, Unbelievable? the book, will invite readers to look behind the scenes at how ten years of talking with atheists, sceptics and non-believers has stirred, shaken but ultimately strengthened Justin’s own belief in the not-so-unbelievable Christian faith.Suggested contents:Bursting the Christian bubble God: The best explanation for human existence God: The best explanation for human value God: The best explanation for human purpose When the internet tells you Jesus didn’t exist A few facts that only fit the resurrection Making sense of suffering What about the other religions?My 5 minutes with Richard Dawkins Faith: Choosing to live in the Christian story of reality

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Customer Reviews

Justin has been kind enough to invite me on his show to debate from three continents so far, most recently with Richard Carrier over my book Jesus is No Myth. I'm hoping some day to field his cheerful inquisitions from Antarctica: perhaps I can debate a penguin over whether hell is hot or cold. As we've talked, I've sometimes wondered what Justin was thinking himself -- he always seemed quite fair-minded to me, one of the few things that Carrier and I agree about -- so I was glad to read this book and find out! A good analogy to Unbelievable? would be Lee Strobel's series of arguments for the Christian faith: both are wide-ranging, simply and engagingly written, and adopt a journalist's first-hand investigative perspective, reporting, summarizing, and chewing over what "the experts" have to say, then adding additional insights. But Strobel's books have often been criticized by skeptics because he only interacts with Christian scholars. Brierley improves on that, because for more than a decade, he has been refereeing debates between top Christian and non-Christian scholars. He is thus able to cite both sides, in an interactive way, retaining the first-person style that made Strobel's books so popular, but including leading (and often famous) skeptics in the conversation. Also, even while mildly criticizing a few guests (or more often, describing what trouble he has with their arguments), Brierley is invariably a gentleman. This book may therefore appeal to some skeptics more than Strobel's books. (Which is not to say that Strobel's experience as a legal reporter and his posture as a skeptic being persuaded to faith do not carry their own rhetorical advantages.)In both cases what this means is that you may not get in technical depth what you get in sweep and scope. Not every question is answered, and I would anticipate challenges on certain points say, from the Carrier faction of skepticism. (Having read a few of the very points Justin makes questioned in fact.) But if you go into this book with an open mind, I think you'll find it reasonably persuasive -- and dig further if you like, you'll find more. Brierley begins by telling his story and the story of his show. He argues for God's existence, then for the reality and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. (A fairly natural progression, but one that is always original and interesting, because of all the stories Brierley pulls in, and because of his evident sincerity.) Justin has been deeply influenced by the writings of C. S. Lewis, who is probably named more often than Bart Ehrman, one of his most common skeptical guests. (And I sometimes seem to recognize Lewis' ideas even where his name fails to appear.) I think most of Justin's arguments are essentially sound. And I love it when Justin

digs down to where life is lived, as he often does:"On a more practical level, what hope does the statement, 'Stop worrying and enjoy your life' offer to the drug-addicted prostitute when it rolls past on a London bus? Or to the widow in sub-Saharan Africa who has lost her husband, children, and livelihood to an AIDS epidemic? Stop worrying and enjoying life may not be an option for them. For many people, God may represent the only possibility of a hope of ultimate redemption and justice in a world in which they drew the shortest of straws."Justin is, indeed. particularly good at the Problem of Pain, which has always troubled me.Some skeptics may look askance, but my major criticism of this book is actually that I think Justin's case for the gospels is sometimes too conservative. First of all, I'm a little surprised he didn't mention Craig Keener, who has written a long book detailing often credible and first-hand reports of miracles in the modern world. Keener is a New Testament scholar who happens to have experienced some of those miracles. This is a little secret of modern missions: one reason Christianity has spread so far, is the experience of convincing miracles that have drawn millions of people to faith. (I have met many people who have experienced them myself, on the mission field.) Keener has been on Brierley's program, but perhaps this point is less important to Brierley either because it's hard to argue publicly (those who haven't had such experiences may scoff at such "anecdotal evidence"), or because the experience of miracles in the modern world is less important to Justin himself, and this work is partially auto-biographical . This is important, because I can see a skeptic reading Justin's case for the resurrection, which relies on the "Minimal Facts" approach of Gary Habermas and Michael Licona, and responding:"All right, then, let us concede that there is some decent evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. I'll even concede that, on the historical facts alone, there may be (say) an 80% chance that Jesus rose from the dead. But the historical facts are not alone. One can't just ignore the fact that dead people usually stay in their graves, for solid chemical and biological reasons. Evidence for the resurrection cannot be considered in isolation, as if this were a neutral historical fact whose credibility depends solely on the weight of the evidence, like -- Brierley brings this up -- the crossing of the Rubicon." Justin does mention what is called "prior probability" at one point, background facts that make the story of Jesus more likely. He also offers other considerations which I agree make the overall case for Christianity much stronger. But the gospels themselves, I think, are much richer in positive historical evidence than the "minimal facts" approach may suggest.This can be seen, first, from a negative comment Brierley makes about certain on-line skepticism, which could just as well apply to the two "skeptical" guests he mentions most often when it comes to the gospels. (Who happen to be among my own targets in Jesus is no Myth.)Brierley notes that "mythicists" cite a number of supposed parallels between the Egyptian god Horus and the story of Jesus. He then warns readers:"If you go and

properly research the story of Horus rather than relying on the online articles peddling such claims, you'll find that none of the 'facts' I just listed are actually true. They are either completely fabricated, or versions of the Horus story twisted beyond recognition to create the parallels."Brierley then writes of "the most serious voices in mythicism," by way of introducing his some-time guest (and my two-time debate partner, once on Justin's show), Richard Carrier. Later on he brings Bart Ehrman, whom he frequently speaks of with respect. But in fact, both Carrier and Ehrman play precisely the tricks that Brierley rightly decries of unnamed mythicists, and for the same reason. Both men cite other phony parallels to Jesus exactly as those anonymous mythicists cite Horus. Brierley's comment just as accurately describes Ehrman's repeated use of Apollonius of Tyana and Baal Shem Tov as foils against the miracles of Jesus:"If you go and properly research the story of Apollonius rather than relying on Ehrman's books and class lectures peddling such claims, you'll find that none of the 'facts' he names to support the supposed parallels are actually true. They are either completely fabricated, or versions of the Apollonius story twisted beyond recognition to create the parallels."This may seem a strong charge to make against so eminent a scholar. Yet as I show, Ehrman frequently cites some ten "facts" about Apollonius to make him sound more like Jesus. But read Life of Apollonius of Tyana, and not one single one of those "facts" turns out to be true. Ehrman makes them up, or twists them "beyond recognition," just like the uncouth Internet rumor-mongers whom Brierley dismisses. Ehrman similarly grossly twists "facts" about the 18th Century Polish rabbi, Baal Shem Tov, to make him sound more like Jesus, ignoring differences the size of white whales. And Carrier (and Reza Aslan, another fellow whom Brierley respectfully mentions) is also reckless in his pursuit of phony parallels to Jesus in ancient fictional literature. Yet leading scholars teaching New Testament in major universities like Ohio State and Rutgers use Ehrman's books to introduce the historical Jesus. What does this tell us? That even among eminent scholars, no one can find anything like a genuine parallel to Jesus in the ancient world or even in the early modern world. That's why even elite, respected professors like Bart Ehrman have fallen into the bad habit of playing "let's pretend." I retain far more respect for Gary Habermas and Michael Licona. But to be fair to skeptics, I can see why some might view the Minimal Facts approach they employ (and Brierley borrows) to prove the Resurrection as insufficient. It is enough to show that all else being equal, belief in Christ is reasonable. But all else may not be equal: even reasonably strong historical evidence may seem weak to persuade a strong materialist that a man really rose from the dead. (Especially if he has not read Keener's book, or finds reason to dismiss some of Brierley's other arguments -- though he shouldn't do that!) This is why I prefer a Maximal Facts approach to the gospels. Following C. S. Lewis as well, I attempt to forensically analyze the gospels

for clues to their historicity, then compare them to ancient fictional and quasi-fictional writings. In doing so, I have found 30 separate strands of evidence within the gospels which I argue demonstrate their strong historicity. Brierley mentions three of those qualities: the fact that we have multiple sources for Jesus, that they are surprisingly early (within the plausible life-spans of Jesus' first followers, and therefore credibly eyewitness accounts, as Bauckham argues), and embarrassing facts within the gospels that no one would likely have reported if they didn't really happen, like Jesus' death on the cross itself, and (Brierley also mentions) the fact that women first report his resurrection. But those three facts (even if accepted, and people like Carrier will debate them till the cows go home, with an eminent scholar riding on each cow) is only the tip of an iceberg of evidence. (The analogy is more apt than usual in this case: 91% of an iceberg is below water, while those other arguments for the gospels make up 27 of 30, or 90%.) Apply "maximal facts" to the gospels, and you will find no ancient fiction of any kind -- not hagiography, or novels, or legends, or myths -- which even remotely matches the gospels for credibility. (I have searched high and low for credible parallels.) In fact, by many of these standards the gospels also stand far ahead of most ancient history and biography. Now let me dismount my hobby horse, and return to the book under review. Unbelievable is an excellent one-stop introduction to the Christian faith, not only why to believe it, but how it makes sense of life. (Which, Brierley recognizes, is a big part of reasoning.) If, having read it, you have further questions -- there are more answers. Justin explains why he continues to believe with sensitivity, humor, and a personal touch both about his own life (I especially enjoyed the way he wrapped the book up by talking about his year in Namibia), and the lives of famous Christians and atheists. The vein of truth that he exposes goes down deeper than any one book can mine.This book is a good start to what can be a sincere reader's life-long exploration.

Atheists tell us that they are champions of reason. If so, how does a man who each week hears the arguments of the worldÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s most articulate atheists remain a committed Christian? Unbelievable? No, Justin Brierley is just marvelously well informed (and well mannered). Here he takes us behind the scenes on his popular debate radio show between atheists and Christians to show us why his Christian beliefs are stronger than ever. A beautifully written cure for doubts, and a spirited defense of Christianity.

If I had to characterize this book in a phrase, it would be "apologetics light". And I love that is it written that way. As expected in a book of this nature, I found myself strongly agreeing with some

points while equally strongly disagreeing with some others. In fact, one of the things that I liked the most about this book is that I was not indifferent to any of its points; the book was that well written!For example, one of the points which I found myself wholeheartedly agreeing with was the critique of the usual atheist reply whenever the topic of "meaning" is raised, namely that if God is out of the picture one has to create such meaning. I have always found this reasoning quite silly because it is as if I would award myself an academic degree or as if I named myself "husband of the year". Both propositions are nonsensical for (I hope) obvious reasons. You get the picture.In more than one instance I found myself misty-eyed when reading passages of the book. For example, one of them was the allusion to when "... every tear is wiped away..." (page 84). This happens to be one of my favorite biblical passages. Another sentence that touched me deeply was: "For many people, God may represent the only possibility for a hope for ultimate redemption and justice in a world in which they drew the shortest of straws" (page 83). There are many such gems in the book, and I do not want to mention any more of them lest I spoil the book for you. Have fun finding them! Also, in addition of being very well written, it is a very easy read: conversational, personal, and engaging.One thing that I did not like about the book was that it did not include an index. This fact made the writing of my review more difficult, but most importantly, the lack of a proper index limits the book’s usefulness as a resource for study groups or any related activity. Perhaps an index could be included in the reprint edition? Also, I am not sure that an ironclad case for the truth of Christianity can be established based solely on the arguments exposed in the book. This book will not convince any "serious doubter" (like yours truly) to embrace the Christian faith, and in fact this is ok because this is not what the book is about. Its main purpose is to make readers think, and hopefully initiate conversations based on the points raised; and in this sense, it suceeds beautifully. Highly recommended!Note: A slightly longer version of this review was first posted in my personal blog.

I have been listening to Justin for several years now. He has a gift for popularizing complex scientific ideas and honestly addressing difficult questions that theistic and atheistic worldviews both raise. The book does not disappoint. It is a straightforward and eminently readable summary of essential Christian apologetics that will resonate with most seeking souls, believers and non-believers alike. Some chapters are, of course, better than others: I still do not see theodicy, the problem of evil, as an issue for the reductionist materialist, but rather a burden for the theist to bear. Nonetheless, as a father of three and a Christ follower myself, this is the book I will be asking my daughter, who sees no reason to believe, to read. Thank you Justin!

I just finished this captivating, excellent read. As is its namesake radio show, it is positively equally for unbelievers and believers alike. Amongst many jewels between the covers, Justin's last chapter is about the most impressive summary of the Christian faith I've ever encountered! This makes me even more proud to be a Christian and a budding apologist.

Two thumbs up!

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