Besides being friends, A. David Lewis and Julian Darius are a natural pair. Both hold a doctorate and are known for their comics scholarship. Lewis has made a name for himself by specializing in the intersection of comics and religion, while Darius has addressed religion in his fictional work. The two come to the subject from different perspectives, although both as cultural outsiders in America: Lewis is a Muslim, while Darius is an atheist.

In February 2016, A. David Lewis interviewed Julian Darius for the website Sacred and Sequential about religion in Martian Comics, with special attention to the second Lazarus story (“What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem?”). Many thanks to A. David Lewis for allowing it to be reprinted here.

LEWIS: Perhaps you could outline what “Martian Mythology” is, and what was involved in producing these works?

DARIUS: The “Martian mythology” is essentially the backstory of the whole series. Back when I founded Martian Lit, I thought it would be funny to have it actually run by Martians, and I worked up this backstory of planetary orders, an enlightenment program (that included Jesus and others), the cloaking of Mars’s cities, and the sort of vague threat that the Martians are still debating and split over whether to invade. There was a lot of detail for what was essentially a complex joke.

When Kevin Thurman pitched me on what became “The Girl from Mars,” it was wedded to this backstory I’d worked up for Martian Lit. As we collaborated on the early “Girl from Mars” chapters, I began expanding this backstory and writing these other Martian stories. It’s kept growing. It’s really because of this that the series is called Martian Comics — a throwback to titles like Adventure Comics and whatnot — and wasn’t titled The Girl from Mars. Initially, “Martian mythology” was a way of separating this backstory I’d created and was exploring in these side stories from “The Girl from Mars.” “Martian mythology” is kind of the backbone of the series — “The Girl from Mars” is the first story, the first window into that mythology.

But this “Martian mythology” has kept growing. There’s a map of stories waiting to be told, whole arcs of Martian history, ways in which themes echo throughout the stories and into the various more narrow stories, like “Girl from Mars.” It’s a pretty vast thing, which I’ve kind of put together over the past several years and keep adding to.

LEWIS: Let’s zoom in on a detail you mentioned there, how Jesus was part of a Martian “enlightenment program.” This is a callback to Martian Comics #1 and your story “The Galilean,” right?

DARIUS: Right. The idea that Jesus was a Martian emissary goes back to that original backstory for Martian Lit. It was just in a parenthetical about how badly Earth has treated these emissaries sent to enlighten us. It was a bit of verbal cleverness, just kind of throwing this one emissary out there in this context. But once it’s established, it’s part of the mythology, and the mythology kept growing.

In the main “Girl from Mars” chapters of issue #1, the main character — apparently possessed by a Martian — is trying toexplain this whole possession-and-enlightenment business to her sister, and she mentions Jesus. It’s a point in the conversation, a way for the main character to explain this concept. The sister says, basically, “If you’re trying to convince me you’re not crazy, it’s not a good idea to compare yourself Jesus.” And then the issue ends with this short comic that — surprise! — depicts this.

LEWIS: So, when we come to Martian Comics #3, two stories particularly stand out in terms of the intersections of religion and comics. The first, the short, three-page piece “Ezekiel,” named presumably after the story’s protagonist, the prophet of the Old Testament. Was Ezekiel chosen for a particular reason? That is, it could have been Jacob’s angel revealed to be an alien or Obadiah’s Elijah. Is there something inherent to the story of Ezekiel that attached him to this story? Or is there the implication that any one – or all – of the prophets were similarly visited by extraterrestrial rather than divine presences?

DARIUS: “Ezekiel” is only a three–page story, and it’s one of the first “Martian mythology” stories I wrote. The original idea was just to illustrate this earlier paradigm, in which Mars had visited Earth and exploited humans, prior to possessing humans as part of its softer “enlightenment” program. I’m not a fan of “ancient aliens” theories — I find them fascinating, but I’m repulsed by the idea that humans couldn’t build their own pyramids or figure things out on their own. That’s really a medieval, anti-Enlightenment notion, and I don’t want to perpetuate that — any more than the bare minimum, necessary for story purposes. One of the most famous “ancient aliens” theories is that Ezekiel’s “wheels” were alien spacecraft. I’d already written a short story in which Jesus was a Martian, part of the Martian enlightenment program, so it made sense to use Ezekiel to illustrate this earlier, more exploitative paradigm.
So that's why it's Ezekiel. As far as whether other prophets were similarly inspired, or which ones, that's up to you. And I don't think it's fair to say all prophets were inspired or directed in this way. However, there is this period of Martian history in which at least some Martians were doing this kind of commanding of humans. Those Martians were – quite reasonably – interpreted as divine by primitive people who were inclined to think gods governed anything they couldn't understand, in a time when all human understanding about the natural world was far less than a grade-school child knows today. But exactly whom the Martians inspired or commanded like this, and the nuances of their agenda, I'll mostly leave to readers to think about.

I did look at other Biblical prophets and other potential alien / angel encounters that I could explore. But part of the problem is that these prophets, at least in the Bible, are so obviously concerned with very local, tribal concerns that I can't imagine an extraterrestrial caring about. We sometimes imagine extraterrestrials really caring about things like local customs of dress or eating, and I don't think that makes sense – those are transparently human values, bound to our particular concerns as humans grounded in a historical place and time and society. And the Bible is mostly so obviously – at least to me – bound in this way. There are a few counter-examples: Job is a searching metaphor for our relationships – it powerfully explores the paradoxes of faith, and the Beatitudes are moving to me, although I'm a non-believer.

I also dig early Genesis, from a historical point of view – I wrote a lot about Milton, after all. But as cool as Eden is, there's no Satan there. God simply isn't omniscient (he can't see where Adam and Eve are), and there's no original sin as we understand it. What's most remarkable is that almost everything we think we know about that story is provably wrong. That's because we've been reading this into each other. You and I have both talked about before – initiated by later versions of this story, and we're taught them before we read the original, and we force these preconceptions onto the original in ways the text doesn't support. We're dealing with stories here, and those stories get revised over time.

So one problem I would have, were I to really focus on a prophet's larger story, is that it's hard to imagine that extraterrestrials would care. And that's true of most of the Bible, and I'm not just being snarky to criticize the Bible or to colonize or control a portion of Earth's territory, and wanted humans to do it instead of just using alien technology, which would be much more efficient. And this might explain the astounding level of enthusiasm aliens are likely to show in these stories. Or perhaps it wouldn't care about that, from a moral point of view. But it's impossible for me to imagine the vast majority of the Bible as a moral document. It really isn't. Nor was it conceived that way – again, with rare exceptions. It's a collection of stories, some poetry, and a mythology. And that's only true if you look at it as fascinating to study, by the way). But it's just not possible to imagine extraterrestrials inspired any of this for moral purposes, because there's simply so little moral concern in the text. And there's a weird predilection in the text for minions, or minor supernatural events that are more bizarrely chosen than impressive, and which usually work in an immoral way. It's like reading an early super-hero story, in which the hero summons a lightning bolt that kills some children, and you don't know how to take that, and it's pretty clear that the author really wanted you to think this cool and that this hero is powerful, and didn't want you to think more deeply about whether this made sense or was moral. That just wasn't the point. I do think the Bible is fascinating, and you can see the way history weaves in and out of it, where the writers embellished and what they were reporting, how God evolves from a polytheistic, amoral being into a monolithic one. It's all right there in the text. But taking it literally and trying to square the circle by making a specific prophet's life – at least, as recounted in the Bible – fit a specific set of Martians' agendas (or a god's agenda, for that matter) doesn't seem like a particularly fruitful way. I did try to keep my eyes open when I was writing this story and afterward, when I was considering further Bible stories, but I realized it's not something I want to do.

Like I said, I'm fascinated by the Bible, and I've written this kind of material before and will again. I live in the West and have degrees in literature, so the Bible's kind of in my blood, both directly and by innumerable proxies. I keep going back to Biblical material, probably because I've spent so much time with it. But it's not that fertile to me, at least to my specific brand that I think of this specific point in my life, for the Martian stories. Maybe another writer will come along and write a whole bunch more Martian Biblical stories focusing on the prophets, but it won't be me.

I do understand that someone who's a Muslim, a Christian, or a Jew might disagree with some of the above characterizations. And I want to be clear: I'm an atheist, but I'm not of the camp that religion is intrinsically evil, or is the cause of all war. There certainly are parts of the Bible that are moral, but it's mostly a few lines here, a few lines there. Outside of Job, I don't think there's an entire book that's concerned with moral questions, and it's instructive to realize that Job is so ambiguous in its moral conclusions, so ad hoc, that the fact that there are moral remainders. And there are certainly parts of the Bible that are immoral. The "no survivors" litany in Judges springs immediately to mind. But that's not written as a moral document. We're not supposed to question it, from a moral point of view. It really is just "our tribe returns to praise God." But I don't consider the Bible – or religion, generally – to be immoral. I think it's incorrect, to the best of our knowledge, and in places factually incorrect, but it's not primarily a moral or immoral document.

Sure, we can ask moral questions of it, the same way we can of any story. But it's like the Greek myth of Leda and the swan – you can question Zeus's actions, but that's not what the story's about. It's simply not designed to prove that. You're just supposed to accept that gods act like this, and it's very much in the model of how powerful humans acted. If Europe had evolved worshippers Greek gods, we'd all see Leda and the swan as a moral parable, because we grew up with that framework and some very smart people devoted their lives to figuring out what the story in that context, parsing out its mysteries. But there aren't any mysteries, just ambiguities and tensions within the text.

All of this is just to say that I'm not personally inclined to focus on the prophets, either as the authors or as speakers of truth, the way you might be. For me, that's not the point of this three-page story. The superficial point is to illustrate this more explorative paradigm, of Martian-human relations. There's also the exploration of the whole "Ezekiel's wheels" idea, in which I'm juxtaposing a similar story that is solely the images of a flying saucer and a Martian, and kind of trusting the reader to see how humans of that place and time might see this flying saucer differently and describe it in terms of their own paradigm. And of course, there's this kind of vacation I've taken with the Martian and someone and something truly other, something he can't begin to understand, which I think is at the heart of the brief story.

To the extent that there's a religious message, it's really about power – about submission to religious authority. Because religion very much served that purpose, binding a people together despite ethnic and linguistic differences, but also binding them to their rulers – to the point that submission to divine authority is the primary "moral" lesson taught in these stories. For example, that's the primary concern of the 10 Commandments, which really isn't a moral document at all – it's really about submitting to God, who is clearly primarily concerned with his own authority, in a very nervous and petty way. So that's what's going on
in "Ezekiel" – this human is encountering something beyond his ability to understand, is interpreting it religiously and according to his own paradigm, and is submitting accordingly, because that was arguably the primary lesson of his religion, as it existed at that time.

LEWIS: Not only is the alien beyond his ability to understand; Ezekiel is awed by the presence of a genuine Martian. "This is the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord," he recounts. What's the message of this scene, of a biblical prophet coming to revere (as holy and divine) an alien visitor?


DARIUS: Well, first, this is Ezekiel's response to his visitation, in the Bible – it's one of awe and submission. I didn't make it up.

But it's important, because it gets at this idea of the Other and of different paradigms encountering one another. At the time, humanity essentially didn't understand or respect the natural world. This was true even in ancient Greece, revered for its philosophical sophistication and for calculating the circumference of the planet (which of course, everyone educated already knew was round). It's easy for us to fixate on the concept of the atom, but other Greek philosophers were far more interested in postulating about the four elements and whatnot. This was a time when you could still just make up what you thought stuff was made of, or how the body worked. There was a kind of logic at work, but it certainly wasn't scientific. So again, we've got to understand that for 99.9% of humanity's history, up until remarkably recently, even the smartest people understood far less than a grade schooler today. It's hard to get our heads around this, but it's true.

If you've ever been away from lights and the city, you've had the experience of looking up at the stars. It's an awesome sight. It's something spiritual, even to me. And we have to imagine that our ancestors did this, night after night, totally unaware of what these were, of why they were laid out like this – let alone that we orbited our sun. It didn't take much to see that these stars rotated in the sky, relative to us, and societies all over the world charted them and found constellations – groups of stars that might be impossibly far apart in three-dimensional reality, but that looked like a group rotating in a giant sphere beyond the Earth. People all over the world named these constellations and saw their shapes as similar to things they knew around them. We projected ourselves onto the heavens, seeing men there – hunters, gods. People often thought the stars were themselves gods. In the same way, they thought there were spirits of rivers, and that something divine ordained the rainfall. In culture after culture, religious authorities swore that such natural phenomena as rain were rewards or punishment for their behaviors – as if gods would be bothered to micromanage clouds and were really obsessed with whether someone committed adultery or whatever. It's all absurd now, but it's wonderful, in this primitive, magical way. And we lived like this throughout our history as a species – in an unknowable world, about which we were unfathomably ignorant from our current point of view, and in which divinities and magic alone seemed to grant certainty in a terribly uncertain world.

Obviously, science has done more to explain the world and the universe around us (and to liberate us personally, and to elevate our living conditions) than any religion or armchair philosopher. Humanity and its religions could tell an infinite amount of stories about the moon and contemplate its beauty and its meaning, but it was science that actually got us there. But it's only been a blip at the very end of our history as a species that we've had writing, let alone science (as we currently think of that term). We evolved in a state of profound ignorance, in which the world around us was governed by magical thinking, and religions – among other things – provided maps to this magic.

Of course, it's not quite this simple. There's some evidence that our brains evolved as animists – that they're inclined to see a rock as a separate thing, with a kind of beingness, and that we see the same thing in the movements of clouds and in animals and in each other, for evolutionary reasons. This may have helped us distinguish objects, and to value each other's lives, but it also can't be denied that we evolved in societies governed by magical thinking, in which this inclination in our brains wasn't exactly discounted. So I'm not saying religion made us think in this magical, incorrect way. It's far more likely we're inclined by our biology to look at the stars and not only to see patterns but to imagine some spirits at work, and every society we've found (to my knowledge) has some sort of spirituality, even if it's shamanic leaders. There's a lot of evidence that religions evolved from this pretty amoral shamanic tradition, and that religions only pretty late in their evolution start addressing morality and ethical questions. Until then, they're a system of power and social cohesion, and our answer to our innate desire to see things as having essences.

Now, let's imagine someone with such a worldview encountering an extraterrestrial. He would have no ability to understand what he was seeing. He doesn't understand that there are other planets, orbiting the sun, or even that Earth orbits the sun. He may not even have a concept of outer space as a vast three-dimensional place (which is very different than a series of spheres, for example). He doesn't understand the concept of celestial flight, outside and beyond the natural human desire to somehow be able to fly freely like the birds he sees, which was often attributed to supernatural beings. So he's having a radical encounter with the Other, but he has no paradigm with which to understand this. He's going to interpret these extraterrestrials and their spacecraft as mythological creatures, whether as giants or monsters who inhabit distant lands or as divinities – depending on his cultural specifics.
This is, incidentally, why dropping a microchip into the past wouldn’t produce a technological revolution. That’s a very silly idea which really is magical. It presumes the microchip (or whatever piece of technology is involved) has a kind of essence, that it’s a sort of technological spirit, which would be reverse engineered. But people a century ago wouldn’t know what the hell a microchip was. If the people thinking it was a decorative item – in fact, that’s how the ancients tended to interpret the potentially revolutionary science, like steam power, available to them. It was cool and great for trinkets, but its potential wasn’t recognized.

This same idea that we interpret things according to our own limited perspective is very dear to me, and it’s certainly not limited to religion or encounters. When I hear Republicans saying Muslims only respect strength, it’s obviously projection. Look at their foreign policy – it’s all ignorant bluster, sounding tough as if that has its own magical power that makes people back down. We all project this, and it’s thematically what the projection tank in “The Girl from Mars” is all about. Really putting yourself in another point of view is very hard. If not impossible, and requires a lot of willingness to self-correct – but it’s the most reliable avenue to understanding another perspective.

So part of the idea of Ezekiel interpreting the Martian as something divine is this idea – that he’s interpreting something utterly incomprehensible to him from his own paradigm. And of course, that’s an illustration of how limited his paradigm really is – and how limited all the paradigms of all our ancestors were.

But beyond this, there’s the idea I was talking about above, regarding the 10 Commandments. Throughout most of human history, we’ve lived under some form of theocracy. Obviously, the idea of separation of church and state was an Enlightenment idea. And to be fair, there’s a whole bunch of things in misguided and a tribe’s leader. But the leader is almost always said to be divinely invested in some way. It’s no coincidence that the 10 Commandments sound like the product of a very anxious, petty human dictator. It’s perhaps going too far to say that the dictator was a religious invention, but it’s key to understand that true totalitarianism doesn’t simply demand your obedience. It seeks to govern your thoughts and feelings too. It often governs what supposedly happens to you, after death. I’m tempted to say that nothing could be more evil – certainly, few things are more damaging than instilling guilt in people for normal human desires, like lust, and to furthermore convince people that this is not only surmountable through adequate faith but that one’s ability to do so will affect one’s afterlife. Talk about how it could do the most harm.

But this is a key part of totalitarianism. And it’s essentially impossible without religion. Even in ostensibly secular totalitarian regimes, the regime co-opts the tools of religion and models itself after religion. Images of the Great Leader just replace those of God. And that’s why, in this material, it’s been that jealous God of the Bible who could in theory issue those 10 Commandments, which could be considered by a very twisted mentality as a moral code but which are in fact the proclamations of a dictator concerned mostly with his own power.

Even Milton knew this. He was a great progressive in his time, but his argument against kings is based on the idea that earthly kings usurp God’s authority. Kingship is idolatry to him. Yet in Paradise Lost, you see that in China, few things are a threat, and it’s supposed to be fine. So even someone who opposed tyrants and monarchs did so because he thought God was an absolute monarch and had every right to be a tyrant. At least Milton took it upon himself to try to explain God’s reasoning, but if you don’t understand God was immoral and cruel, you were still supposed to obey. And that’s very much the presumption of the Bible, most of which doesn’t even entertain the notion that someone would question God’s morality. Obedience is supposed to be absolute.

So when Ezekiel’s response to the Martian is to kneel and to obey, he’s not only reflecting his own cultural paradigm, in which he’d interpret an extraterrestrial as a divine being. He’s also responding in a quintessentially religious way.

LEWIS: How did you and your artistic collaborator Sergio Tarquini come up with the character design for this ancient biblical figure?

DARIUS: I don’t remember how much description I gave him. I tend to want ancients to be depicted as imperfect – as dirty, as missing teeth, as having scars. I don’t like this Hollywood effect, in which ancients look like present-day actors, with straight teeth and whatnot. I also don’t like depictions that are overly influenced by famous Renaissance depictions. I did look at multiple depictions of Ezekiel, in researching the story, but nothing stuck with me. But I don’t recall what suggestions I gave him, if any. I’m sure they were pretty minimal.

I tend to trust artists. If there’s something I really want in there, I’ll include it, and if I have a smart idea for a visual, I’ll put it in there. But I don’t tend to nitpick what they come up with. If something’s really off, I’ll point it out, but only after I consider whether what they drew isn’t a legitimate artistic choice or something I can work with.

So really, all credit for Ezekiel’s depiction is due to Sergio, and if there’s anything amiss, it’s my fault for not putting it in the script. But I was happy with what he came up with, and I think it captures the spirit of what I was after.

LEWIS: In Martian Comics #3, “Ezekiel” is followed by the longer, 11-page, “What Has Athens To Do with Jerusalem?” The title, presumably, comes from the writings of the Church Father Tertullian, yet the story focuses on Jesus and his disciples, not Athens, and not Paul. What’s the connection between the title and the concerns of the story?

DARIUS: The quote comes from a later period. But it’s key to the point of the story.

On the one hand, the story allows us to catch up with Lazarus, seeing how he’s evolved –

LEWIS: Since readers last saw him in issue #2 of Martian Comics, freshly resurrected by Jesus but, in effect, unable to fully live or rejoin what was his life.

DARIUS: Right. Lazarus actually has a cameo in issue #1, but issue #2 is the first to have a story all his own. The idea is to follow the story of the Lazarus story, because the Bible never tells us what happened to him. The point is that Jesus resurrected him, and it’s a miracle – but Lazarus is just a prop, really. He’s a demonstration of Jesus’s power. So I thought “what happened next” was an interesting idea, and I thought this tension – about how much of our image of Jesus once he’s resurrected – should be part of the story.

So in issue #2, Lazarus is resurrected, but he’s been decaying a little, and these rural Jews of the first century, who were pretty superstitious, would have seen him as a supernatural thing. They’re scared of him, and he doesn’t look right. It’s not going to be like “Oh, Lazarus, glad you’re alive again, old chap!” No, there are going to be rumors, and any physical deformity or ailment was seen as potentially demonic or dangerous. That’s why Jesus ministering to lepers was such a thing. And in those days, you really needed a community to survive. So Lazarus is alive, but he’s kind of a pariah. And he sees how this is hurting his family – that, as he says, he’s of no use to them.

So Lazarus is kind of figuring out what being resurrected means. It’s not just that you came back to life. You’re different now. You look different, and you’re treated differently. Jesus does his miracle, and everyone’s impressed, but no one really follows up
with Lazarus. There’s no post-resurrection counselors or anything.

Along with this, what does resurrection mean biologically? Does someone who’s been resurrected return to life and live out a normal lifespan, as if they hadn’t died? Do they get a week and then die again? Maybe resurrection’s not permanent! Or do they live forever? I think we usually don’t ask these kinds of questions, and it’s not a focus of these stories in the Bible, where the point is that Jesus is powerful because he resurrected someone – implicitly encouraging us to believe. We kind of assume that any bodily decay is healed as part of the resurrection, although that doesn’t necessarily follow. And I was interested in exploring all of this. My Lazarus doesn’t have his bodily decay healed, and whatever energy resurrected him is still in him. He’s immortal, although he doesn’t know it at first. He learns it in pretty dramatic fashion in that story.

So Lazarus is alienated, not only from his community but from himself and his body. But he’s also alienated from Jesus. If you think of a miracle as basically a special effect, a demonstration, Lazarus is a walking special effect. But nobody gave him a guidebook for what’s going to happen, or how any of this works. And I think he has a sense that he’s been discarded, in a way – that Jesus has been a little cavalier about this. So he goes to talk to Jesus.

And that’s really the climax of the story, this conversation in which Lazarus confronts Jesus respectfully, and is clearly hurting. Jesus, who’s from Mars, doesn’t have all the answers. I love this idea – we always assume that someone knows all the answers, that the person behind things (whether a writer, or a politician, or a god) has satisfying and full answers for everything, but that’s almost never the way things work. Jesus is very compassionate, but he doesn’t have that guidebook either.

(Actually, in the Gospels, it’s not clear to what extent Jesus had much foreknowledge, except in versions where angels tell Mary what’s going to happen, though Mary doesn’t seem to pass this on to Jesus, nor really act as if she knows this. That’s a pretty clear sign that it, like the virgin birth, was a later interpolation into the story. In Paradise Regained, Milton uses the idea that Jesus doesn’t have a roadmap for himself to dramatize this questioning, which I think makes a Jesus who’s a lot more human, more understandable, and can actually serve as an example for us to follow. I love that honest questioning for answers. And that’s where Lazarus gets to, by the end of the story.)

which is sometimes depicted more literally, even in ways that seem like it’s maybe an outer-space location. In the apocryphal Gospel of Jesus, Judas is the only disciple who “gets it,” and he tells Jesus that he knows Jesus is actually from Barbelo, Mars isn’t Barbelo, but this weird sci-fi moment, in which someone is introduced to things they can’t possibly understand or imagine, actually has roots in religious literature.

At the end of that story, Jesus kind of invites Lazarus to join his disciples, but Jesus is killed, and Lazarus doesn’t fit in with the disciples. So he leaves to find his own way. He’s already learned that he can’t go back to his old life. He has to grow. He’s had this encounter with Jesus, and in some ways been closer to Jesus than Jesus was with the disciples. But with Jesus gone, Lazarus can’t stay there either. And he has the courage to find his own way, in part because of the strength he’s acquired from this whole experience. I can’t imagine Lazarus before his resurrection, whose concerns were very local, having this courage. He’s grown as a character.

LEWIS: So, the Lazarus of issue #2, resurrected by the Jesus of issue #1, meets Paul now in issue #3 and is exposed to Athens.

DARIUS: And, as part of this, we also get to see a bit of Athens and its culture, which further changes Lazarus. And I think there’s this very interesting idea that someone who’s immortal would live to see events they experienced become misremembered, or appropriated by one cause or another. Lazarus is narrating, so we’re in his mind to a certain extent.

But what Lazarus doesn’t know is that he’s witnessing the birth and early evolution of Christianity. We know that, but he doesn’t. At the end of the story, Paul leaves Athens, and Lazarus imagines that we won’t hear about Paul or his beliefs again. It’s a reasonable assumption. Paul hasn’t done well in Athens, and there’s no reason to think what he said there would go on, continue to evolve, and wind up taking over the empire. No one would have imagined that.

And there’s this idea, in the story (and this is historically responsible), that Athens was this kind of proving ground for philosophers. It was like coming to New York City. If you could make it in Athens as a philosopher, you could make it anywhere. Paul didn’t make it. He just didn’t. In the Bible, there’s this kind of half-heartedness to say he was unsuccessful, and that’s reflected in my story, but historians agree that he wasn’t a hit there. He was still evolving his understanding of Jesus, and what’s recorded (even in the Bible) of what he says in Athens is just not very good. In Athens, you can’t just stand on a proverbial soapbox and say, “You’re Ignorant!” Which is really the sum of what Paul’s argument. He doesn’t really have an argument. He just says Athenians are ignorant, and they should worship his god. But Athens had its own concept of a creator-god, and it’s not something to get riled up and yell over. Paul is not successful in Athens. He also can’t adapt to Athenian culture, and he’s essentially put on trial, where he basically recants – all the stuff about Jesus, which is why he was put on trial, he just drops. It’s right there in the Bible, actually, if you read carefully. And then Paul leaves. So there’s this sense that he – or his followers – are embarrassed. In the story, Lazarus concludes that what Paul was offering wasn’t philosophy, and he’s indisputably correct.

And if you look at Christian history, that anti-intellectual strain embodied in the Tertullian quote starts very early on. The whole point of that quote is that faith has nothing to do with logic. You can’t argue about it, you just have to believe it. Screw those academics, we think they’re so much smarter. Screw those philosophers, who think they can find logical flaws. None of this matters. “We sacrifice the intellect for God.” That’s been core to Christianity, if we’re honest, from very early. We like to imagine that Christian hostility towards the academy and science is
new, and its current incarnation is obviously fundamentalist, a reaction against modernity. But putting this story aside (the mistake made by the Catholics. As soon as Christianity gained power in the Roman empire, it started burning books. That's why Europe later had to get so many of its own ancient pagan works from Muslim libraries. We like to praise the Hellenists, but the whole reason they were revolutionary and controversial was that they went against the entirety of Christian history. They're an exception, and that's why they're celebrated -- they fundamentally changed Christianity. Seriously, "philosophy" for a millennium meant squaring the circle, trying to make contradictions make sense -- basically, philosophy was reduced to earning a Nobel Prize for "fixing" continuity errors. And if we know anything about European history, we know this is coming. And it's embodied in that Tertullian quote.

I can't prove this was the moment when Christianity veered in that direction. But it makes sense.

So there's this whole subtext to the story, in which Lazarus isn't only watching the birth of Christianity without knowing it. He's also witnessing the moment when Paul tried to establish Christianity (which was still a work in progress) as a philosophy, and he failed. And there's a bitterness there. The title reminds us that there will be consequences for this, that Christianity is going to be a joke. And, we know he's greatly influenced by Athens too. But the line is also about how Athens has influenced Paul, and through him Christianity.

Thus the story's title.

LEWIS: When he finds Paul, Lazarus seems disturbed by what he feels are inaccurate stories of Jesus being told. To himself, Lazarus notes, "I recognized almost nothing of the Jesus I knew in his words. His life had been a different story. Deformed. I said nothing." How much of your own feelings on Christianity is being voiced here by Lazarus? To what degree does Lazarus represent you?

DARUS: I don't know, honestly. I'm sure a lot of readers assume these are just my thoughts, although they're certainly the thoughts of a lot of Christian scholars and historians. But I'd like to plead that these aren't really my thoughts, for a couple of reasons.

First, Jesus in the story isn't my Jesus. You know there's been a debate about the "historical Jesus" since at least the Protestant Reformation. In fact, the attempt to rediscover and return to the "original" form of Christianity has been a key component, at least ideologically, of the entire Protestant project. That's still an idea that's very much alive, not only in Protestant circles but in debate over the ordination of women. There's an idea, which is pretty central to the study of Protestantism, that Christianity contained the kernel that wound up destroying itself. The idea is that this quasi-Christian (as opposed to the "Christ of faith") wound up producing actual research into what Jesus would have been like and into first-century Palestine. And a lot of that research wound up contradicting the Jesus whom Christianity had worshipped. It's been a huge problem.

Now, in the story, it's clear that Jesus resurrected Lazarus. I don't believe that, and historians, of course, don't believe that. We see Jesus in Martian Comics #1, and he's trying to enlighten people. That story focuses on the Beatitudes, on Jesus's rejection of and by his biological family, and generally liberal stuff like not casting the first stone into the woman. In the first Lazarus story, in Martian Comics #2, Lazarus tells us that Jesus's disciples didn't really know how to handle his death, and they seemed to think he was going to throw Rome out of the Holy Land. I think that's a lot more historically accurate than the very liberal Jesus I depicted. Jesus says, in the Gospels, that the world is going to end in the lifetime of those hearing him (in fact, that's why the medieval Catholic church invented the idea of the Wandering Jew). And it's pretty clear that one of the expectations of the messiah, especially in the rural provinces (not Rome, but the big cities), was that he was going to start a revolution and throw the Romans out. That was what people expected, and I don't personally believe that the historical Jesus didn't have this aim. It's pretty clear that his followers believed this. I mean, he was followed by zealots, who were armed revolutionaries, and that wouldn't have been the case if he was telling people "my kingdom is actually in Heaven, guys." Then Jesus dies after heading into Jerusalem on a donkey, in order to consciously fulfill prophecy, which sent a clear message of "yes, I'm the messiah, and I'm finally coming to Jerusalem to throw the Romans out." Everyone would have understood this message, at the time. Then Jesus follows through, bringing his armed followers to the temple, where he assaults the money-changers. Of course, he was by now the Jews as Roman collaborators. This was a revolutionary act, and the Gospels have him saying in this context that he comes not to bring peace but a sword. It's because of this that the Romans -- not the Jews -- arrested Jesus and executed him publicly. He was a revolutionary. Personally, I like the Jesus I depicted -- Lazarus's Jesus. He's kind of a liberal Jesus most of us would like. But I suspect that I wouldn't like the real Jesus, if I'm being honest. For one thing, he wasn't concerned with gentiles. I would have no time for his eschatological predictions. I'm not sure I'm comfortable with the idea that the Messiah was the Messiah. It was Paul who had an epiphany in which God told him this sect of Judaism was suddenly for gentiles too -- an unprecedented idea in Judaism, and one that both the historical Jesus and the Jesus as recounted in the Gospels clearly and unambiguously disagreed with. Then Paul goes around to the Greco-Roman world, preaching his Jesus for all people. Reading Acts, you can see how this vision of Jesus evolved. Is he God? Is he the Son of God? What does that mean? Paul's still working this out, to some extent, in Athens. Historians recognize it, and it's true. Also, Paul was summoned back by Jesus's followers, who objected to what Paul was teaching. They knew Jesus, and Paul was taking liberties. Which isn't a surprise, since Paul was preaching to a Greco-Roman audience that wasn't immune to liberal ideas. Paul also took liberties isn't in historical dispute, and of course it's not disputed that he never met Jesus. He learned about Jesus second-hand (at best) from Jesus's followers (whom he had persecuted), and then he took liberties with the story.

Incidentally, this isn't a problem for plenty of believers who accept history. They usually just believe that Paul's epiphany was indeed from God, and God (or the Holy Spirit) steered what Paul said while preaching.
Therefore, it isn’t a problem that he diverged from those who actually knew Jesus — those people must be written out of history, it seems to me. This isn’t a very reasonable scenario, but it’s not a view that’s inconsistent with history. Others would say that it doesn’t matter what Paul said, in the same way that missionaries often altered aspects of Christianity in order to please the pagans and spread the faith. The Christian vision of history can be cast in any way. A lot of Christians justify this by saying that one approaches people where they’re at. It’s a kind of royal lie, or way of justifying changing some things around the edges. Of course, this gets believers into the problem of whether the Bible is literally true, but that’s an untenable belief anyway, given easily identifiable contradictions (e.g., two conflicting genealogies of Jesus). The truth is that, despite the constant focus on Biblical accuracy and literalism, most Christians today just aren’t super concerned with the accuracy of everything the Bible, for them, the faith is a living thing, and if they do good and believe Jesus is the Son of God, they’re doing okay. That’s actually a pretty good solution, because it focuses on the Christ of Faith and isn’t so concerned with the historical Jesus. My point is that what I’m saying isn’t incompatible with Christian belief, and there are plenty of educated Christians who accept these things and go right on believing without trouble. And for the record, that’s fine with me.

Returning to the idea that someone who had known Jesus, as Lazarus does in my story, would see discrepancies between what Paul is preaching and the Jesus he knew? That’s pretty indisputable. The people who had actually known Jesus made this same objection, after all.

However, the specific language Lazarus – which is a little strong, but certainly in line with what’s historically responsible – has to do with the larger themes of the story. First, I think it works better dramatically for Lazarus to recognize the contradiction and then start talking about. There’s this weird disconnect there, this way in which Lazarus is alien to his own experience, that ties into this continuing theme of otherness. The words you quoted refer to how people and events get appropriated and distorted over time, so that our understanding of them shifts. That’s how history works, and Lazarus is seeing it happen in real time, because he’s immortal. That fascinates me. There are those lines in there about how he hopes to see the patterns and shape of history, and it all ties back to Greek dramatics and the idea of fate. Of course, what he’s watching isn’t the unintended consequences of divine intervention – it’s the unintended consequences of Martian intervention. This idea of unintended consequences, rippling through history, quote fascinating, and not only aligning the unintended consequences of the Martian who was Jesus, but we’re also witnessing another event – Paul’s visit to Athens – which will have unintended consequences (as the title and the story’s ending suggests).

And of course, Lazarus has changed too. He’s a rural Jew who was raised from the dead, is immortal, and has grown greatly from his time in multicultural, polytheistic, philosophical Athens.

So Lazarus isn’t parroting my thoughts, I can’t separate my own studies of history and fascination with how it works, but Lazarus’s Jesus isn’t my Jesus, and what he’s saying there is more determined by history and the needs of the story.

As for whether Lazarus represents me, I don’t know. There’s something of me in everything I write. I don’t know how it could be otherwise. I do think that, when I was young, I was possessed by magical thinking. I think it innate to our brains, and I wasn’t effectively inoculated against it. My parents were kind of raised culturally Protestant. My parents rarely took us to a church, and what they told my brother and me about God was sporadic and contradictory. Still, I was interested in the paranormal and alien visitations. I was a believer in that kind of stuff. I guess I believed there were souls. But these were all vague beliefs and research interests. My senior research in high school was about the history of the war and the war in heaven. My undergraduate honors project was a novel that involved Jesus. My master’s thesis was on Milton. I think by that point, I was drifting away from magical thinking. I had started to realize that there weren’t stories I could accept and I didn’t realize I had to know what Heaven was like, or to argue about Milton’s depiction of gunpowder used during in the war in Heaven (which of course had nothing to do with the fall of Satan, from a Biblical point of view – it’s retcons all the way down). In the later half of my 20s, my brain was working and I was kind of disbelieving all these things that had been mysterious to me – including social and romantic human behavior – were actually not that complex. I could feel moments in which I would have thought magically in the past, or been superstitious, and I felt ashamed at how much time I’d wasted with that kind of thinking, despite my intelligence. Especially in my early 20s, I was very solipsistic, and I spent a lot of time preoccupied with extreme relativism. In my later 20s, I realized this wasn’t very productive, and the world around me might not be "real," but it’s certainly the closest thing to "real" that we have. It has reliable rules, and it might not be meaningful, but it’s all we can be sure we have. It was a tough transition, but soon my world became a lot simpler, my thinking a lot crisper, and my life a lot happier and more productive.

Let me try to express this another way. Before this shift, I thought the famous Shakespeare quote "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy" was a legitimate, meaningful point. It’s a wide world, and who knows what’s out there? Ghosts? Aliens? Gods? Ancient technology-sophisticated civilizations? I would have said there was some evidence for all of this. After this big shift in me, I realized that Shakespeare quote was bullshitty. But I thought it was fantastically realistic in an otherwise realistic play. It’s basically the equivalent of someone in the movie Thor quoting Arthur C. Clarke to justify super dumb shit, which is how that Clarke quote about sophisticated technology being indistinguishable from magic is almost always used. (Also, in that Shakespeare quote, Hamlet’s just seen a ghost with his own eyes, so the quote is at least evidence-based. It’s saying there’s a lot we don’t know, but at least Hamlet is modifying his stance based on having literally just interacted with a conscious, talking ghost. That’s just not fair. It’s just whatever bullshit you want to believe, which is how people cite that quote. It’s like saying you believe dear gods are actively creating our universe, and then adding when challenged that “hey, all truth is relative.” Well, yes, but that doesn’t mean that. Relativity doesn’t mean that. There’s no evidence acupuncuture or homeopathy or faith healing works, but their believers will say there is, and who are you to say otherwise? When they’re logically completely defeated, out comes that Shakespeare quote.

After this big shift in me, it was like the scales had fallen from my eyes (to coin a phrase). Occam’s razor suddenly clicked for me. I’ve experienced things moving without explanation, sometimes repeatedly, but that doesn’t prove psychic energy or dead human spirits are involved. It’s certainly not the simplest explanation. I can’t dismiss every account of miracles, but we know humans hallucinate pretty regularly and misremember terribly. Also, even the existence of a miracle wouldn’t prove it was caused by a specific god, let alone the more reported details. They’re all true, let alone that the afterlife and creation myth that are tied to this god are also true. None of that follows. I believe extraterrestrial life exists, based on our best information-based speculation and how science has constantly been way off the mark and not very special or the center of the universe, but I don’t believe aliens have visited us. As a logical person, I’m willing to concede it’s possible, and I’ll revise my belief according to the evidence. I personally think it’s more likely that we’re living in some bizarre virtual reality than that any
of the traditional religions are true, but I don’t believe either. I’ve since realized that I’m an atheist – meaning a non-believer in gods (I don’t say I’m never superstitious, or that my thinking is 100% clear. Our brains are so wired to see cause and effect that aren’t there – I prayer, and the rain came, so I assume a connection (which presumes no one else was praying for a clear day and God had moved the clouds into position in advance). But it’s a wonderful relief to realize the weather just has nothing to do with you. In fact, that person who was mean to you probably doesn’t have anything to do with you either. So I’m a lot happier and more productive now. And I think I’m actually more moral too, because I’m focused on people here and now, and I’m able to more calmly and even coldly assess what messages my behavior is sending. This even informs my teaching, where my approach is very focused on demystifying and presenting information in easily understood forms.

It’s this process that makes me identify with Lazarus, in the “Athens” story. In some ways, he’s a hick from the sticks who’s come to the big city. It’s an old story. But in a more meaningful sense, he’s made a mental journey away from magical thinking. Before his death, he was probably as concerned with Jewish prophecy, arguments over what the messiah meant, and how the world was going to end. Now, he’s been exposed to religions and cultures from a huge area, and he’s picked up a bit of logic. He’s learned to write. And he’s able to look back on this more limited, earlier self, in the story. I’ve changed a lot over the course of my life – and I reserve the right to change again! – so this is something that I identify with. And I don’t think it’s something we often see in fiction.

LEWIS: I wonder. Of all the stories in Martian Comics #3, “What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem?” features the titular Martians the least, perhaps only in reference to the Athenians “Unknown god […] a placeholder the Athenians use, knowing their knowledge of the gods to be limited.” Do readers know from “Ezekiel” (and “The Galilean” and “Lazarus”) what it is the Athenians don’t, namely that aliens have had an influence in the spiritual affairs of humankind? Is this the manner of answer that Lazarus is seeking?

DARIUS: I love that you saw a connection between the Unknown God and the Martians. That’s not my own primary reading, but it’s there. It follows, once you connect this story with “Ezekiel” – the Martians are, in a sense, an unknown god to the Greeks. And you’re right that they don’t know about Martians, any more than the ancient Jews did. There are other Martian stories to come that kind of play with this same sort of thing, in which humans sort of realize there are forces or divinities out there, beyond their ability to understand. So that’s definitely there, and you’re smart to pick up on it, but to me, that’s a layer, rather than the primary meaning.

Paul cites the “Unknown God” in Acts. There’s a historical dispute as to whether it really existed or not, or to what extent. Was there a temple to the Unknown God? Was there a statue or monument? From what I’ve read, some think yes, some think no. If I remember correctly, Paul only mentions an inscription to the Unknown God, and there’s some ambiguity about what he’s referring to. But it’s a wonderful concept, this polytheistic statement of humility. I suppose you could see it as a parody of polytheism – “We hope we didn’t leave anyone out!” And it is that. But it’s also this wonderful admission, by the smartest city around, that yeah, we don’t know everything. Here’s a monument to that idea. Wow.

I was always fascinated by the Unknown God. As a kid, I thought it was funny that Paul said he was going to tell people this out it, because this was the context of Greek polytheism. Saying that, you’re essentially saying that you’re going to add a god to the Greek pantheon. You can’t say this and then preach monotheism, really. It’s at least very disingenuous. It wasn’t until studying Greek history in college that I began really appreciating the humility of the concept and how it fit into the Greek philosophical outlook. So I love the Unknown God concept and this story from Acts, and I included it on that basis. It illustrates more the difference between Paul’s arrogant “you’re ignorant” preaching and the nuances of Athenian philosophy.

But yeah, you’re totally right: you can look at the Unknown God and think, “Yeah, they don’t know about the Martians, who played the role of God to Ezekiel.” And who were behind Jesus in the series.

It occurs to me that probably more people will read the story and think I’m on loose historical ground about how Paul failed in Athens, or in the claim that he was changing stuff, or that he was doing this “you’re ignorant” refrain that sounds a lot more like contemporary Christianity than we’d perhaps think. But I’m on pretty firm historical ground on all of this. But every time I read the story, I get to that panel depicting the Unknown God, and I think it’s absolutely lovely, but I know there’s dispute over whether such a monument existed. Moreover, there’s no reason to think it was a statue like I requested Sergio depict. I think Sergio did an absolutely brilliant job – this kind of incomplete statue, which actually has echoes of that kind of geometric prehistorical Greek sculpture, a form of art I absolutely love. But from a historical perspective, I’ve actually taken more poetic license there than in my depiction of Paul. Although there aren’t nearly as many hardcore Greek polytheists to potentially object!


As far as Lazarus seeking answers, that’s essentially because he’s immortal and doesn’t totally understand what Jesus was. In “Lazarus,” Lazarus talks with Jesus, and Jesus levels with Lazarus as much as he’s able. But Lazarus has no framework to understand what another planet is, or what Martian civilization is like. Moreover, Jesus doesn’t understand the consequences of his own powers. So Lazarus knows as much about his own immortality as Jesus does, Lazarus leaves at the end of that story, so he’s looking for answers about what he is, what Jesus really was, and how to understand all of
often miss, in talking about Scientology, that the space opera stuff is limited to the most upper levels, and of course there's no worship of an alien, despite a lot of jokes. We do know (from court documents as well as testimonials) about what happens at these higher levels, and there's an audio recording of Hubbard talking about some of the space opera material, but it's not a part of Scientology. It's not a part of Scientology for the vast majority of Scientologists, and it's not part of Scientology's public pitch.

Incidentally, Mormonism also contains space opera elements at its higher levels. Then there's the more sci-fi versions of Barbelo, which I mentioned earlier. Or the idea of the afterlife that's taken up in The Fountain.

As for what I think about the involvement of extraterrestrial elements in religions, I think it's unfairly mocked. Like I said earlier, I think it's absurd to think we're alone in the universe, but I don't believe we've been visited. I don't think anyone can deny there have been mass UFO sightings (some recorded), but I don't know what people are seeing. And I tend to think that there'd be better proof by now, if these were extraterrestrial crafts. Also, the fact that aliens tend to differ based on one's culture strongly suggests they're hallucinations, based on cultural images. Unless we think that different alien species have carved up the various regions of the world. Which I think is not a possibility.

Now, we know this is also true of religious experiences. People have visions of Jesus, or Mary, or beings corresponding to whatever religion they believe, and they look the way the person having the vision thinks they're supposed to look. The details are culturally influenced. Of course, a believer can say that this is because these holy beings appear to people as people want to see them, but I think it's a simpler and more likely explanation to say that people are hallucinating, and those hallucinations are informed by their biological brains. If we accept this, it's clear that the distinction between an alien encounter and a religious experience isn't necessarily as different as we might think.

There are a lot of reasons to suspect this is the case. Studies of faith healing are pretty conclusive about what's going on, and that the effects have to do with the human brain. And we know that, whether with magic tricks or car accidents, people can sometimes not see what's right in front of them.

I've personally had religious experiences. I've been moved spiritually by religious things, but I've also had a hallucinatory experience involving Hell and angels, and I mentioned I've experienced poltergeist-like effects — the most dramatic of which was a picnic at the beach, where the table was rotating left, then right, maybe 30 feet in front of me, again and again. I've sensed a presence. I've hallucinated without drugs, and I've hallucinated with drugs. As an atheist, I don't pretend to totally understand these experiences, but I find these scientific studies of hallucinogenic experiences compelling enough that these were "real" experiences of ghosts, demons, angels, and whatnot.

Incidentally, just because I don't think these are "real" in the sense that they involve actual ghosts or spiritual beings doesn't mean they're not real to the person experiencing them. In studies where people have been given acid, they often report profound experiences, and many call them life-changing, even though they totally accept that these were hallucinations. Religious
experience is real experience, even if it's not "literally" a true encounter with something supernatural. In fact, it's very natural to have religious experiences. Our brains may well be wired for them.

And if you think about more primitive societies, it's easy to see how a lot of religious encounters sound like alien encounters. That's part of the point of "ancient astronaut" theories. Even in the Gospels, people misunderstand the star that led the wise men to Jesus. It wasn't the way we picture it. The Biblical description is of a star that comes to Earth and leads the way, I imagine it as a floating ball of light, staying ahead of them, bouncing around. The description is very clear that it's not in the heavens — how could that point the way anyway? And throughout human history, we have reports of spiritual beings in the sky, and things like "Ezekiel's wheels."

Now, some of these are convincingly explained by astrological occurrences. If you've never seen sun dogs, look it up on YouTube and ask yourself how primitive humans would have interpreted this sight of multiple suns in the sky, with arcs or a ring stretching from one to the next. To some, it must have seemed like the world was ending. The most famous European depiction of what look like spaceships battling in the sky was very likely an instance of sun dogs — the depiction was made by someone who wasn't an eyewitness, using written accounts, fusing descriptions of events that weren't simultaneous into a single image. When you read the description, I'm pretty convinced it's a case of sun dogs.

However, there remains a remarkable similarity between a lot of religious encounters and alien encounters. I'd suggest that they're likely related, and that where people once hallucinated religious encounters, or interpreted bizarre events from a religious point of view, some are now hallucinating extraterrestrials or interpreting bizarre things as the consequence of extraterrestrials. It's not an especially sexy explanation, but there does seem to be a connection.

Even when I was a teenager, I never understood why religious people I knew would cite visionary experiences as proof of their religion, because I knew that lots of different religions reported similar experiences. They don't prove anything. And it seems logical to expand this to include extraterrestrial experiences, using written accounts, fusing them, yet we so often still prize eyewitness accounts if they're proof — especially when we're the eyewitnesses.

All of this, to me, seems to legitimate religions with extraterrestrial elements. I think it's very patronizing to suggest that these aspects are ridiculous, yet this other category of religious experience is real. Is it really legitimate to believe that a god came down from the heavens, but illegitimate to believe an alien did? If anything, I think you could argue that the latter is more reasonable. Mind you, I don't believe in either, but I think there's a strange double standard here. Aliens are silly sci-fi stuff, but gods are terribly serious!

I also think we have a more general double standard, when it comes to what's reasonable. I can't tell you the number of people I've heard mock Mormonism, or Scientology, or other more recent religions — who themselves believe older religions with equally bizarre aspects. It's easy to mock Kolob, in the Mormon cosmology. But is this really more ridiculous than believing that the flood really happened, despite the archaeological and geological evidence, and that there was this massive evolutionary bottleneck that's just not there in the evolutionary record?

Evolution itself is so indisputable — you can't understand human physiology without it. Our bodies literally make no sense without it. Yet some deny evolution on religious grounds. I think that's more absurd (and probably more dangerous) than these sci-fi religious elements. Not to put too fine a point on it, but are those elements really more ridiculous than believing we were born with sin we inherited by our ancestors (an evil concept, really), and that because of this we needed God's son — who is also his own father — to be brutally murdered in order to absorb this sin from us? If you weren't aware of this previously, and it were presented to you new, you'd think the person saying it was crazy.

Religions are filled with wacky stuff. I've heard people who believe in Jesus's resurrection and bodily ascension into the afterlife say it is patently absurd to believe he also visited the Americas (in Mormon scripture). That's a line too far! Obviously, what we think is wacky and absurd has less to do with logic than with culture. If you looked at a lot of religious belief objectively, you might be tempted to institutionalize people for a lot of mainstream views. But if someone says he's Jesus, that's nuts. And if someone hears messages from aliens, instead of from God, go directly to the loony bin.

Of course, I'm certainly not endorsing any specific religion(s). And I certainly don't think any religion — whether new or old — should get away with abuse. Whether it's the Catholic rape cover-ups or cults with poison Kool-Aid, it's not cool. I'm simply saying that there's a double-standard against these religions with sci-fi elements.

And really, most religions have some sort of sci-fi elements — we just don't see them anymore, because we call outer space "heaven" and literally extraterrestrial visitors "gods," so it's not sci-fi. That's like calling them "mutants" and saying they're not superheroes.