

HOW (NOT) TO READ THE BIBLE

Making Sense of the Anti-women,
Anti-science, Pro-violence,
Pro-slavery, and Other Crazy
Sounding Parts of Scripture

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ZONDERVAN
REFLECTIVE



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FOREWORD



I love this book. And it's not just because Dan is my friend. I love it because he tackles some of the toughest challenges of our day with biblical faithfulness. Even though I am an apologist, I took a ton of insights away from this book. And I know you will too.

As a college professor, speaker, and part-time high school teacher, I interact with young people regularly. The questions that Dan addresses in this book are exactly the ones that come up frequently in my conversations with both Christians and non-Christians. I'm guessing you have wrestled with these questions as well:

- Does the Bible demean women?
- Is the Bible anti-science?
- How could a loving God command such violence in the Old Testament?
- Does the Bible endorse slavery?

These are real questions that many people today wrestle with. While these questions are not necessarily new, because of technology, younger generations today are bombarded with them like never before. In order to be confident in our own faith, and to help seekers with genuine questions, we must have answers to these questions. (See 1 Peter 3:15.)

Specifically, there are a few reasons I love this book. First, it's practical. Some apologetics books, like *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, offer

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answers and evidence for faith. Other books, like *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions*, are designed to help believers navigate spiritual conversations. Yet this book offers both content and methodology—a rare trait for a book of its kind. This book not only will help you find answers to some difficult questions, it also will help you learn how to read your Bible well.

Second, it's interesting. This is not a dry apologetics book. Dan uses a ton of contemporary examples. For example, in chapter 3, he discusses the importance of reading a particular Bible verse in light of the broader storyline. How does he make this point sink in? He cites this famous line from the Star Wars movies: "Just for once let me look on you with my own eyes." This line makes no sense in isolation. But if you know who spoke it (Darth Vader) and why he spoke it (he removed his mask to see his son, Luke Skywalker, who had just learned that Vader is his father, shortly before Vader's death), then it makes more sense. The same is true for Bible verses.

Third, it's honest. When addressing difficult issues, the temptation is to overstate our case. Dan offers thoughtful and forceful responses to many tough questions. But he doesn't overstate his case. I was really struck by how, in the last chapter of the book, he says that there is no truly satisfactory *emotional* answer to why God commanded the killing of children and infants. There's no escaping it—these passages are jarring. Of course, Dan believes God is just. But the point is that this book is refreshingly honest about the emotional challenges of faith.

A ton more could be said about this book. I hope you will read it. *How (Not) to Read the Bible* is perfect for a small group. And it is ideal to give to a nonbelieving friend so you can discuss the content together.

—SEAN MCDOWELL



A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S



I'd like to adapt an older phrase and add a twist to it: "Behind every church leader, pastor, Christian writer, teacher, there is a strong theologian." I say that after many years of being in church leadership with teaching as my primary role and after writing several books. Theologians and Bible scholars are rock stars. A pastor may have a Bible degree, but most of us who lead or write are dependent on *trusted* (very important word here) scholars who have dedicated their lives to the intense study, constant learning, and use of the biblical languages (long after those of us who have seminary degrees can barely remember the Hebrew or Greek alphabet). These individuals faithfully pour themselves into deep study so we can benefit from their work.

This book is a practical theology book built on the work of scholars and apologists—many of whom have now become good friends as I've pestered them with my questions. I want to thank Scot McKnight (my New Testament guru), Tim Mackie, Gerry Breshears, John Walton, Paul Copan, Sean McDowell, Josh McDowell, Lee Strobel, Greg Koukl, Michael Heiser, Dan Wallace, Stan Gundry, Tremper Longman, Darrell Bock, Craig Keener, Craig Blomberg, Chuck Conniry, and many others who have influenced me in different ways. They have helped me understand the depths of Scripture, which helps me to better understand God. While the Holy Spirit is our foremost guide and teacher, I am grateful the Spirit uses these scholars and biblical theologians through their dedication to truth and as they share their learnings and insights. These

Acknowledgments

are reflected throughout this book. I couldn't have written this book without them.

I also acknowledge my appreciation for Michael Shermer, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the new atheists along with all those who challenge Christianity. I have tried to address many of these challenges in this book. We never want to be closed-minded or afraid to read critiques or mockery of historical Christianity. I appreciate their criticisms because they force me to pause, think, and reexamine the Scriptures to be able to “give reason for the hope that we have.”

I also acknowledge and greatly thank John Raymond and Ryan Pazdur from Zondervan for their patience and most of all friendship while I was writing this book. Also, Brian Phipps from Zondervan for using his careful editing skills with this book. I want to thank Jay Kim and Isaac Serrano, my theologically thinking pastor friends and coleaders of the ReGeneration Project. I am grateful for Western Seminary, where I serve on the faculty, and for their belief in the importance of theology for new generations. I thank Vintage Faith Church for being a church that desires theological thinking and for the encouragement to write this book.

And last, I thank Becky, Katie, and Claire—the book is finally done.



PRELUDE



BECOMING ATHEIST BY READING THE BIBLE

Reading the Bible is the fast track to atheism.

—PENN JILLETTE

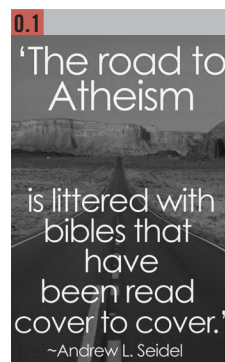
Sitting on my desk is a printed email from a university student who, after growing up in a Christian family and being active in his church, is no longer a Christian. The email lists several reasons why he went from being a Christian, and even a leader in a campus ministry, to becoming an atheist.

It's not an angry email. The student isn't disillusioned by the church, and when we later met in person, he told me he had a positive church experience and is thankful for his former youth leader.

He didn't leave the faith because of boring preaching or irrelevant worship music.

He told me he left because he finally got around to reading the Bible.

Yes, reading the Bible led him to become an atheist.



Prelude

Before going away to college, this student regularly attended church and listened to sermons every week. He attended church Bible studies for many years. He knows all the popular Bible stories—Daniel in the lions’ den, David and Goliath, and many others. He loves Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, where he talks about not judging others and giving to the needy and loving your enemies.

When he left to attend college, however, he began reading parts of the Bible that he had never read before, stories he couldn’t recall ever being preached or taught in the youth group and church he grew up in. The more he read, the more questions and objections he had. I found him to be an extremely intelligent, friendly person, open to discussion, and kind and positive as he spoke about his church experience. He shared that after being active in his high school youth group, in college he joined a study group with an on-campus Christian ministry. They chose the Old Testament book of Exodus for their study, but as he read and studied it, he noticed things he hadn’t seen before, things that horrified him. He encountered disturbing, crazy-sounding Bible verses, and it was his reading of these verses that shook the foundation of his faith.

Why Is It Okay for God to Kill Children like King Herod Did?

In an email to his campus-ministry leader, he listed verses from Exodus 4:21–23 as an example. They cover the story of the last of the ten plagues God visited on Egypt, the plague where God instructed Moses to tell Pharaoh, “[Because] you refused to let [my people] go . . . I will kill your first-born son.” And in Exodus 12:29–30, God followed through on that threat: “At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt. . . . Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead.”

After reading this, the student wrote in his email, “I was devastated to think a loving God could predetermine the death of so many of the innocent.” When we met, he said it’s ironic that Christians recoil in horror and anger when they read the New Testament story of King Herod’s

trying to kill the newborn Jesus by killing all the boys two years old and under who were living in Bethlehem and nearby at the time of Jesus' birth.* Christians rightly see that as a horrendous act of evil—a massacre of toddlers and infants—and they see King Herod as wicked and heartless. Yet he never hears Christians complain about the Exodus story. Why is it okay for God to do the same thing King Herod does, but with Egyptian infants and toddlers? Why is it wicked and evil when Herod does it, but acceptable when God does it?

Slavery and Magical Underwear

As he continued reading Exodus, the student found other disturbing verses. He mentioned Exodus 21:20–21, which reads, “Anyone who beats their male or female slave with a rod must be punished if the slave dies as a direct result, but they are not to be punished if the slave recovers after a day or two, since the slave is their property.” And in Exodus 21:7, we read that a father can sell his daughter to someone else. It angered him to read that God seems to consider a human being someone's property and appears to be perfectly fine with this property being beaten and sold.

He mentioned finding other strange things, like the clothing in Exodus 28:42–43. In this passage, priests are commanded to wear what sounds like “magical underwear” when they approach the altar in the Holy Place to worship God. If a priest doesn't wear this magical underwear, he will die. Understandably, this student began to wonder, “Why haven't I ever been told that the Bible endorses slavery and instructs us to wear magical underwear when we come before God?”

Why Doesn't God Like Women?

As the questions kept coming, he began researching online. But he said that made things even worse. The deeper he dug for answers, the more

* Matthew 2:16.

disturbing were the things he found about the Bible. He discovered websites dedicated to exposing all the crazy and unsettling verses in the Bible. And it wasn't just the Old Testament that upset him. There were several passages in the New Testament. He mentioned 1 Timothy 2:11–12, where it says “a woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.” Another verse, 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, reads, “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.” These verses—right there in his Bible—seemed to be God's endorsement of men's superiority and even dominance over women. Was God commanding gender inequality, chauvinism, discrimination, and the oppression of women? It certainly appeared so.

Connecting with the Deconverting and Deconstructing

Searching online, he not only found other people raising questions about these disturbing Bible verses, he also discovered others like him—former Christians who had left their faith. Many had been raised in a church, but after taking a closer look at their Bibles, they discovered things they had never been taught. For instance, one young woman on Twitter writes, “I read the Bible cover-to-cover twice in my youth. I remember encountering verses that made me uncomfortable, but I dismissed them. I started reading it again last year. I got to the sixth chapter in Genesis before dropping my head and crying. The god I believed in was a monster.”¹

Finding this community and hearing stories that reflected his own experience contributed to his growing loss of confidence in the Christian faith in which he had been brought up. He found he could no longer believe in salvation through Jesus because the Jesus he had been taught about was in a Bible he could no longer trust. Pastors and church leaders regularly encourage us to read our Bibles. Yet here is the great irony. It

was reading the Bible that caused this student—and an increasing number of others like him today—to leave Christianity.

It's Not Only Christians Who Notice This

But the problem goes farther than Christians leaving the faith in which they were raised. The Bible is a stumbling block for many non-Christians as well. The strange and disturbing verses they read prevent them from taking the Bible seriously. One Sunday morning, after I had finished teaching at our church, I stopped by a room where people go when they need prayer. A young woman came up to me, and I could tell she was upset. This isn't all that unusual, since people going through tough times and dealing with difficult issues often come to this room for prayer. But as I listened to her, I realized hers wasn't the typical prayer need. She didn't have a loved one with cancer or a relational breakup. She wasn't losing her job. She wanted prayer to help her understand what she was reading in her Bible. She told me she was exploring Christianity and had been coming to the Sunday worship gatherings for a couple of months. A few weeks ago, she decided to read the Bible for herself, but as she began reading in Genesis, she grew discouraged and found her excitement about Christianity sinking.

What was it that disturbed her?

She shared how right there on page one, the Bible seems to suggest that the earth was made in only six days. She had been taught her whole life in science classes and by the media that the universe is billions of years old. Then, quite unexpectedly, she read on page three about a “talking snake.” She was shocked, thinking this was a fictional story, something like *The Jungle Book*. Farther along she read about people living to be well over nine hundred years old. She also read how the animals of the world followed Noah into a boat, like he was a fantastical Dr. Doolittle, but much worse, because God then killed thousands and thousands of people in a destructive flood, including children. She read about Abraham's being told by his wife to have an affair so they could

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have a baby. She read about the woman turned into a pillar of salt by God. She read about God's telling Abraham to kill his young son as a sacrifice.* She was visibly upset as she described all of this and told me she'd had to stop reading the Bible at this point, fearful of what else she would find in its pages. After all, this was only the first half of the first book of the Bible!

She told me how she had initially been excited about exploring faith in Jesus. In the teachings at church, she had heard about grace and forgiveness and was drawn to Jesus because of what she had heard about him. But she'd had no idea, no warning at all, that these disturbing and crazy ideas were also in the Christian Bible. Apologetically, she admitted that she wondered whether Christianity was a cult because she could not understand how thinking people could believe what she was reading to be true. How could they take all of this seriously? This young woman's interest in exploring faith in Jesus came to an abrupt halt after she began reading the Bible.

A vast number of people aren't exploring Christianity and will never make it to reading a Bible like this young woman did. They see only clever online memes with Bible verses about slavery, women being told to be silent, and talking snakes, and won't likely ever take the Bible seriously or explore the Christian faith.

Bloody Big Toes, a Sneezing Dead Boy, and End-Times Battle Maps

I assume you're reading this book because you saw the title and, like the young people I mentioned, have questions about some of the crazy things you've heard about or read in the Bible. You might be a Christian and find you are growing more uncomfortable as you become aware of Bible verses and stories you never paid much attention to before. And you might be

* Genesis 1; 3:1; 5; 7-8; 16:1-4; 19:26; 22:2.

wondering, “How do thinking people understand and believe the weird and disturbing things found in the Bible?”

You might be reading this because you have a friend or family member who is doubting and even deconstructing their faith. They may have similar questions and you’re reading this hoping for insight or a way to respond.

Or you might be reading this because you’re not a Christian but are beginning to explore Jesus’ teachings and what the Bible says. You may be wondering whether the Bible is credible or whether the Christian faith is built on historical facts or mythology, and why the Bible contains so much of the violence of the primitive people who wrote it.

I can totally relate to anyone who thinks the Bible is strange. I agree that it contains some bizarre and even embarrassing things. When I first tried to read the Bible as a teenager, it seemed more like a work of fiction, a book filled with epic battles and angels, stories of demons, and even a red dragon.* My Bible had paper with this cool, shiny, gold edging, and I placed it on a bookshelf between Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. It seemed like a good fit there with my fantasy and horror books.

During my college years, when I read and studied the Bible more seriously, I was still disturbed by some of the oddities I found, like the talking serpent and a talking donkey too.† At this point, I wasn’t just reading the Bible out of curiosity; I was seriously considering the claims of the Christian faith. Finding these bizarre things in the Bible, including worship rituals that involved killing animals and putting a dab of the blood on your right earlobe and on the big toe of your right foot, caused me to seriously question whether Christianity was really for me. I wondered, “What is this? Do Christians really believe this?”‡ I read the instructions God gives for when your house has mold in it, how when the mold gets cleaned out, in order to celebrate your mold-free home, you are to kill a

* 1 Samuel 11:1–11; 2 Samuel 10:10–19; Isaiah 37:36; Revelation 16:12–16; 12:3.

† Numbers 22:28.

‡ Leviticus 14:25.

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bird and sprinkle the blood of the bird around the house seven times.* I thought, “That poor little bird didn’t cause the mold, so why did God require his people to kill it?” It didn’t make any sense. There is an incredibly bizarre story of a young boy who died and then a prophet climbed on top of his body, stretched out on it, and then the dead boy suddenly sneezed seven times and came back to life.† And like many people find when they are first reading the Bible, I was surprised there was so much violence. Even Jesus, whom I tended to think of as a peace-loving Gandhi figure, appeared at times like a warrior in end-times military battles.

I knew that if the Bible is the foundation of Christianity—a key, even holy, text for Christians—I had to make some sense of these passages. My friends were concerned when they learned I was reading the Bible. There was even an unplanned intervention for me, where they let me know they had concerns that I was abandoning my intelligence and common sense and choosing to believe fables and myths. Ironically, my friends wanted to protect me from reading the Bible because they feared that it would change me in negative ways. They certainly didn’t see it as a positive helpful book to read.²

Yes, There Are Puzzling and Disturbing Bible Verses, but There Are Explanations!

If you wonder about the validity of what the Bible teaches, I want you to know that I can relate to how you think and feel. My friends were worried that the Bible could possibly corrupt me. What if they were right? Christians all around the world see the Bible as a sacred book, but there are other sacred religious books out there. How do we know the Bible is *the one*, a revelation from God? Good and sincere people believe things that aren’t true all the time. Who is to say the Bible and its teachings make sense for us today?

* Leviticus 14:48–51.

† 2 Kings 4:32–35.

We can't just sweep questions like these under the rug and ignore them. They forced me to look at the origins of the Bible and whether there are ways of understanding the bizarre and unusual things in it. Although you may not know me personally, I can say this very confidently to you: I would not be writing this book if there were no explanations for these Bible verses. If there weren't reasonable responses, I likely would have become an agnostic and not taken the Bible seriously as God's inspired words. When I was exploring the validity of Christianity and the Bible, I had to wrestle with questions like these and study to find the truth. I did not want to follow a cult, a wishful religion, or a mindless faith. I wanted to follow truth. I had no pressure from family or peers pushing me to ignore the difficult things or to believe that the Scriptures are true and good if they aren't.

I would never, ever mislead anyone into believing in a faith that is not trustworthy. I can say with confidence that we can intelligently, and with faith, believe that the Scriptures are from God. If you knew me, you would know that I am never closed to learning new information and am always looking at current criticisms of Christianity and the Bible. No Christian should be afraid of or ignore difficult questions.

The Key: Learning How (Not) to Read the Bible

The good news is that there are responses to these bizarre Bible verses and difficult questions. You can be a thinking intelligent Christian and one hundred percent believe in the trustworthiness and inspiration of the Bible. Yes, these verses certainly do seem difficult to comprehend. However, I've learned that when we apply certain study methods and examine verses in their contexts, it can change how we view and read the Bible. That's what I'll be addressing in this book.

The overwhelming majority of the disturbing Bible verses that we read or see on memes are being read incorrectly. Yes, these verses are actually in the Bible. They are strange and difficult to understand. Absolutely. But we aren't taking into consideration how to read the Bible

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to understand their meaning. Applying some basic principles for reading any verse in the Bible makes a drastic difference.

The key to making sense of crazy and disturbing passages is to understand how *not* to read the Bible.

Here's where we are heading.

First, we'll learn what to do when we come across a crazy-sounding Bible passage. We'll start with some critical principles to utilize when we open a Bible or read any verse, and how these can drastically change how we understand a passage in the Bible. These are principles most people who criticize or are confused about the Bible don't know how to use.

Second, we'll look at several of the Bible passages most commonly objected to. We will look at five areas of challenge to the Bible and ways to address them. There are more than just five, but these are the most commonly discussed topics:

1. **The Anti-science Bible.** We'll focus on the creation story in the early chapters of Genesis, which is one of the most commonly mocked sections of the Bible. Does the Bible teach that the earth is only ten thousand years old? Is the only option believing that God created everything in the universe in six twenty-four-hour days? Does the Bible teach that evolution is false, and that we have to either reject the theory of evolution or reject the Bible? Does the Bible really teach that there was a talking snake?
2. **The Pro-violence Bible.** How do we worship and love a God who kills thousands and thousands of people, even children, in the pages of the Bible? If God is loving, how can the Bible, with its stories of violence, really be true? Is the Old Testament God a different God than Jesus?
3. **The Anti-women Bible.** In both the Old Testament and the New Testament of the Bible there are verses that clearly tell women to submit to men and to be silent and not to speak or teach. We see stories of men having multiple wives and even exchanging

women as property. Isn't the Bible just promoting misogyny and male chauvinism?

4. **The Pro-slavery, Anti-shrimp, and Bizarre-Commands Bible.** There are passages in the Bible about shrimp, slavery, and bloody big toes. There are many Bible verses that seem to suggest that the evil of slavery is okay. There are many bizarre verses about commands not to wear clothing with two types of fabric, about not eating shrimp, and about rituals that include dabbing blood on big toes and thumbs as part of worship. Don't these suggest the Bible is a primitive book and not to be taken seriously today?
5. **The Intolerant Only-One-Way-to-God Bible.** The Bible claims there is only one way to God. The world has more than seven billion people, and there are more than four thousand religions, including five major ones. Yet we see verses in the Bible claiming that God is the only truth, implying that all other religions and sacred texts are wrong. Isn't this an arrogant, oppressive, and irrelevant claim today?

While there are *plenty* more very strange and confusing subjects and verses in the Bible that we could cover, we can look at these five to start. They are some of the more frequently pointed out ones. We will walk through not just responses to these topics but, more important, how we get to those responses. That way, whenever other difficult questions and crazy verses are brought to your attention (and they will be), you will have some basic methods for addressing them.

Study Helps for Churches and Groups

Finally, a word to pastors and church leaders. I've organized this book so it can be used to develop a five- or six-week teaching series for worship gatherings, classes, and as a curriculum for small groups. You can find videos and teaching helps as well as the small-group curriculum free at www.dankimball.com.

PART 1



Never Read a Bible Verse

(OR YOU WILL HAVE TO BELIEVE
IN MAGICAL UNICORNS)





CHAPTER 1



Yes, There Are Unicorns in the Bible

God brought them out of Egypt; he hath as it were
the strength of an unicorn.

—NUMBERS 23:22 KJV

And the unicorns shall come down with them.

—ISAIAH 34:7 KJV

Daniel has been my barber for a couple of years, and we've had many great chats. He is thirty years old, very bright, and I love getting my hair cut, not just for the haircut but also for the chance to talk with him. One day I went in, sat down, and he asked me a question.

“So, you believe in unicorns?”

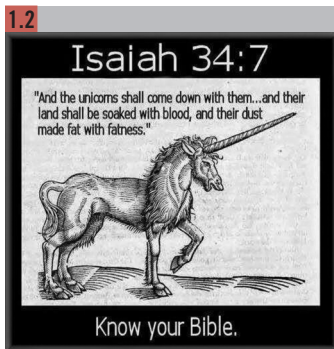
Daniel knows I'm a Christian, and he is very open with me about the reasons he isn't one. We chat about theology, and he asks really great questions. But we'd never addressed the topic of unicorns before.

1.1
**UNICORNS ARE MENTIONED
9X IN THE BIBLE. CATS ARE
MENTIONED ZERO TIMES.**



**AND THAT'S ALL YOU NEED TO
KNOW ABOUT THE BIBLE.**

Part 1: Never Read a Bible Verse



I did an online search and learned there is, in fact, a connection between unicorns and the Bible.

One of the memes read: “FACT: Unicorns existed in the Bible” and had an image of a unicorn with a quote from Isaiah 34:7, which read, “And the unicorns shall come down with them” There was another meme (1.3) with a yellow warning sign and a silhouette of a unicorn on it, indicating a place where unicorns might cross the road.



Underneath the sign, it read, “Because the Bible tells me so.” Listed were several verses, including Numbers 23:22, Psalm 22:21, and Isaiah 34:7. Another meme (1.2) had an image of a unicorn with one of these Bible verses written out followed by the words “Know your Bible.” Digging further, I found online discussions with people joking about this and asking why we don’t see unicorns today if they are mentioned in the Bible. I’ve seen shirts with cartoon images of Noah’s Ark in the distance and a sad unicorn standing on the shoreline, suggesting the unicorns missed the boat and this is why we don’t see them today. I’ve seen another shirt filled with small letters written from the unicorns to Noah, saying, “Dear Noah, we could have sworn you said the ark wasn’t leaving till 5. Sincerely, The Unicorns.”

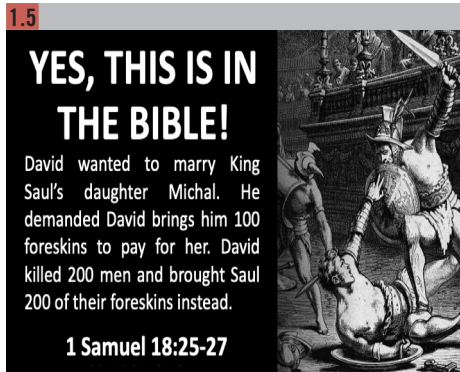
Obviously, these visuals and T-shirts are making a humorous point—that if you really knew what is in the Bible, you couldn’t possibly take it

seriously. And if you do, you must be ignorant to trust a book that teaches that mythical creatures existed. My barber saw the Bible verses suggesting that unicorns existed at one point, and it raised serious questions for him. This wasn't just an attempt to mock Christianity or the Bible. He saw the Bible being quoted in a way that seemed ridiculous and rather unbelievable. How do we respond to challenges like this?

We Have More Than a Unicorn Problem: The Bible Is Being Used to Discredit the Bible

Bible verse memes similar to the ones I just mentioned are all over the internet. They are being used in arguments about the Bible in interviews on television and in discussions on YouTube channels. The intent is to discredit the Bible. Many Christians grew up in Christian families, went to church, heard sermons, read parts of the Bible, and even memorized some verses. Usually these were positive sections with encouraging messages. When these Christians encounter the disturbing Bible verses, it can be alarming, shocking, and even embarrassing.

Memes point out that many Christians don't really know their Bibles. They suggest that if Christians really knew what was in the Bible, they wouldn't be a Christian—they'd become an atheist or agnostic. Consider meme 1.5. It refers to David killing



Part 1: Never Read a Bible Verse

two hundred men and presenting their foreskins as a bridal price to the father-in-law. Notice the headline: “YES, THIS IS IN THE BIBLE!”

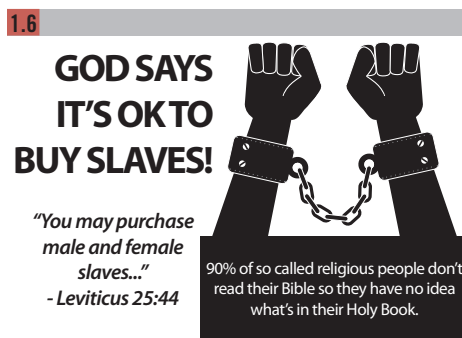
There are many other examples, including variations (such as image 1.4) of a disturbing graphic of a woman with her mouth taped closed and a Bible verse that says, “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak. . . . If they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home.”*

When you look at this picture combined with this quote from the Bible, it’s self-condemning. These are words from the Bible—how can you argue with that? The Bible sounds extremely demeaning to women, and when someone reads this and sees the image, it’s natural for them to believe the Bible is anti-women. Or consider the YouTube video called “Crazy #\$\$! the Bible Says: Selling Your Daughter into Slavery.” The person in the video writes out Exodus 21:7–11 and goes on to claim that the Bible endorses slavery, including selling your daughter as a slave.

“The Good Book” Is Now Seen as “The Evil Book”

Memes like 1.6 use an actual Bible verse to show God giving instruction about buying slaves from Leviticus 25:44.

Notice how the comment in the meme is pointing out that allegedly

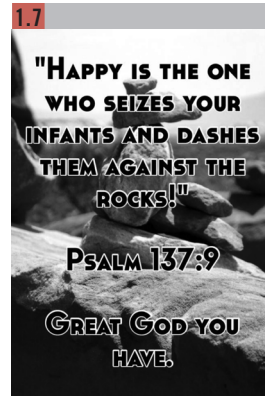


“90% of so-called religious people don’t read their Bible.” The implication is that if Christians really read their Bibles, they would reject what the Bible teaches. If you want to better understand how to respond to what the Bible says about women and slavery, we

* 1 Corinthians 14:34–35.

will look at the verses that seem anti-women and pro-slavery in parts 2 and 3 of this book.

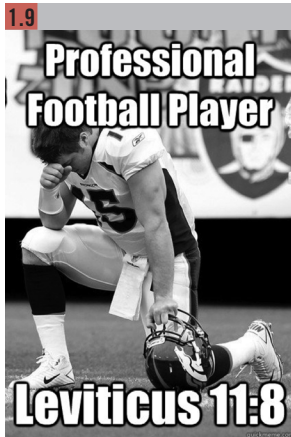
But that's not all. In addition to being anti-woman and pro-slavery, it's not hard to find Bible verses that seem to endorse violence—even against babies and small children. There are memes and websites that quote verses like Psalm 137:9 where it reads, "Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks." Underneath the verse it says, with a hint of sarcasm, "Great God you have," suggesting that the Bible gives people advice on how to smash babies against rocks (1.7). If you are interested in how to respond to these questions, we will address the problem of violence in the Bible in part 6, "Rated NC-17: The Horror of God's Old Testament Violence."



I hear some version of this story over and over again. A person is struggling with their faith, and they find Bible passages that sound disturbing, so they go online to research them. From there, they find websites and YouTube videos dedicated to showing Bible verses that are pro-violent, pro-slavery, and anti-women. Or that highlight some of the bizarre Old Testament laws. One website called "Evil Bible" makes the claim that "God, according to the Bible, is directly responsible for mass murder, rape, pillage, plunder, slavery, child abuse, and killing, not to mention the killing of unborn children."¹ Bible verses are being used to label the Bible as evil. What was once known as "The Good Book" is now considered "The Evil Book."



It's becoming more commonplace to see people quote Bible verses to illustrate how strange, crazy, and primitive sounding the Bible is.



Consider meme 1.8, which points out many of the strange restrictions God places upon people in the Bible.

Another commonly quoted Bible verse is Leviticus 11:7–8, which is used to mock Christians who play football. The visuals that accompany it attempt to show that it is hypocritical for a Christian to play football because the Bible clearly prohibits it (1.9).

In meme 1.9 you have a well-known Christian football player kneeling to pray, with the Leviticus 11:8 reference underneath the photograph. For those who aren't familiar with that verse, Leviticus 11:7–8 says, "And the pig, though it has a divided hoof, does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you. You must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses; they are unclean for you." The logic here is that a football player shouldn't touch the "pigskin"—the carcass of a pig—since the Bible says it is off-limits. This joke about biblical prohibitions on playing football became popular enough that it was mentioned in a Golden Globe award-winning national television show. In the show, the actor portraying the president of the United States challenged a Christian radio show host and asked the host a series of questions about the Bible: "Here's one that's really important 'cause we've got a lot of sports fans in this town: touching the skin of a dead pig makes one unclean. Leviticus 11:7. If they promise to wear gloves, can the Washington Redskins still play football? Can Notre Dame? Can West Point?"²

Millions of people who watched this popular television show heard the Bible quoted and were confronted with how ridiculous it sounds. Does the Bible really suggest that playing football should be prohibited? Some of those listening must have thought about how crazy Christians are for believing in an outdated and bizarre book like the Bible. We will address questions about Leviticus and if the Bible prohibits playing football in part 2 of this book.

I Would Run from the Bible Too If I Saw Only These Verses

In meme after meme, joke after joke, we see a Bible verse or verses quoted to make the same point—the Bible is bizarre and strange, even evil and harmful—and to discredit anyone who takes the Bible seriously. If I were reading these verses for the first time, seeing them in isolation like this, I would feel the same way. Bible portrayals like this make Christianity seem like a primitive, nonintelligent, and even sadistic religion. One blog commenter said, “The Bible contains sheer nonsense. Talking animals carrying on conversations (donkeys, snakes), worldwide floods, virgin births, sun stopping in the sky, etc.”

These Verses Are Confusing Because We Have to Learn How (Not) to Read the Bible

Here is the good news. There are ways to better understand these crazy-sounding Bible verses. We must learn how to, and how *not* to, read the Bible. Most of the examples we’ve seen so far are a result of people who are *not* reading the Bible correctly. If you are willing to look beyond the visual image and explore beyond a literal, out-of-context reading of a verse, you’ll discover the Bible is not “sheer nonsense.” There are many strange things in it, but when we study what it really says, the Bible is an amazing, life-changing book written by people who were directed by God through God’s Spirit. As we take a closer look at these and other Bible passages, my hope is that you will have your questions and concerns answered, and you will come to better know the author of the Bible.

Are Unicorns Really in the Bible?

Before we wrap up, let’s return to the question of unicorns. Are they really mentioned in the Bible? When my barber asked about them, I was confused. I had read the Bible several times, and I don’t recall ever reading the word “unicorn.” So when I searched online and found the memes

and discussions, I knew I had to look into this. Most of those mentioning unicorns were mocking the Bible. There was even a satirical website dedicated to unicorns that said, “Unicorns Are Real. The Bible says so.”

Seeing all these references and quotes from the Bible seems convincing, but when you examine it further, you discover they are all based on faulty and misleading information. Almost any Christian who reads the Bible today never sees the word “unicorn.” Contemporary translations don’t use “unicorn,” they use a more accurate term, “wild ox,” in translation to English. However, you can still find the word “unicorn” in the King James Version of the Bible (KJV), a translation from the year 1611. That translation was authorized by King James I of England and utilized the best Greek and Hebrew texts (the languages in which the Bible was originally written) along with several other Bible translations they had access to at the time. When you read translations from that time period, you’ll also encounter unfamiliar words like “thee” and “thou,” which were common words at that time. Today we use “you” or “him” or “her” for “thee,” and “my,” “your,” “his,” or “hers” for “thy.” Contemporary Bible translations use words that make sense to the readers they are translating for.

So where do you find references to unicorns? The word translated “unicorn” in the King James translation is the Hebrew word *re'em*. This word refers to an animal the original audience of the Bible would have been familiar with, and the best estimate of when that word was written is between 1400 and 700 BC. Scholars who study the Hebrew language and its usage at those times tell us it likely was referring to an animal of great strength that had a prominent horn.

In 1611, when the King James Bible was translated, the scholars translating this Hebrew didn’t know the specific animal the Hebrew word *re'em* was referring to, so they looked at an older translation for help. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek (an older translation called the Septuagint) sometime in the second or third century BC, those translators chose the Greek word *monokeros*, which, when translated to English literally means “one horn.” When the King James

translators encountered this unfamiliar word, they looked to the Greek translation for help and chose the English word “unicorn” (meaning one horn) to represent what they felt the original word meant, an animal with a prominent horn.

To be clear, they did not choose it to represent the mythical, magical, one-horned horse we think of today. If you were to think of a “one-horned animal” or “an animal with a prominent horn” today, you would likely think of the rhinoceros (interestingly, the scientific name for the Indian one-horned rhino is *rhinoceros unicornis*). And when the Old Testament was being written, there were various one-horned and multi-horned animals in existence. The original writers of the Bible would have been familiar with the now extinct but very large and powerful horned oxen the Assyrians called “rimu,” also referred to as “aurochs.” Today, we know there also once existed an animal that is now extinct, *Elasmotherium sibiricum*, an extremely large single-horned bull.

If you read and study the handful of verses that use the Hebrew word *re'em*, we know it refers to an animal of strength, similar to a bull with a prominent horn. This is why today’s scholars translate the Hebrew word *re'em* with the English words “wild oxen.” Cultural changes over time lead to shifts in the way words are used, and all of this makes a difference in translating ancient texts. Today, the English word “unicorn” refers to a mythical one-horned horse, but back when the Bible was written, no one would have put those two things together.

So were there unicorns in the Bible? The answer is yes, there were one-horned animals, a variety of oxen, an animal the people would have been familiar with. But were these animals the white magical, mythological horses with one horn that we think of today? No, of course not.

Here is why this matters. Today there are memes, graphics, and stories that make their way into online discussions—and even into conversations with barbers—that convince people that the Bible is filled with nonsense. These images and verses build a case that the Bible is crazy, and anyone who believes the Bible is crazy. All of this may look convincing, but after you research the original usage of the word in the

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Bible, the context, and where the English translation first appeared, it's easy to see that the Bible does not teach that mythical unicorns existed.

Before We Get into the Strange and Bizarre Passages

This is why the study of the Bible is important today. There are fresh challenges to the Bible, crazy and unusual accusations being made, and most Christians have never had to think about these challenges before. It catches many people off-guard, especially if they haven't read or studied the Bible. In this book I want to show you how to read, interpret, and understand the Bible accurately. We'll look at the makeup of the Bible, because to understand what Bible verses mean we need to understand how these verses fit in the whole Bible. If we ignore this, we will all-too-easily believe that mythical, magical unicorns are in the Bible (along with talking snakes), that churches don't let women speak or ask questions, and many other crazy and very strange and weird-sounding things.



CHAPTER 2



The Bible Was Not Written to Us

We believe the Bible was written for us, that it's for everyone of all times and places because it's God's Word. But it wasn't written to us. It wasn't written in our language, it wasn't written with our culture in mind or our culture in view.

—DR. JOHN WALTON, PROFESSOR, AUTHOR¹

To make sense of some of the rather crazy-sounding Bible verses, we need to first raise the question, “What is the Bible?” How we read and study the Bible drastically changes depending on how we view it. At the heart of all the confusion about these Bible verses is a misunderstanding of *what* the Bible actually is and how it is unlike most any other book you will read.

I'm writing this book with the assumption that not everyone who reads the Bible is a Christian or follower of Jesus. So I won't be giving short answers to complex topics, assuming that a Christian already knows much of this and doesn't need the full story. Even if you already know the answer, I hope this will show you *how* we come to the answers we

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find. I want this book to make you think and stretch you, whether you're a Christian or not.

The truth is that some of the Bible passages in question are not all that easy to explain. There may be multiple opinions. There's not always a clear-cut, simple meaning to a text. I've read books and studied responses to some of the difficult parts of the Bible that are woefully simplistic, lacking real depth. So before we begin problem-solving individual verses, these next two chapters will look at the Bible as a whole. We will first examine four major facts about Bible study methods that we will use again and again throughout this book. I hope they will become a normal part of your own reading of the Bible. Here are the four facts about how to and how *not* to read the Bible:

1. The Bible is a library, not a book.
2. The Bible is written for us, but not to us.
3. Never read a Bible verse.
4. All of the Bible points to Jesus.

But before we dive into these four facts, let's take one step back. Why do we even call the Bible "the Bible"? You'll commonly find the words "Holy Bible" printed on the cover and spine, but that's just a name someone gave to the printed book. The book we call *the Bible* became known as *the Bible* sometime in the Middle Ages, and even more so with the advent of Bible printing and the spread of the King James translation. Calling it the Holy Bible makes sense, as the word "holy" means "set apart." Christians believe God has set apart and made distinct the writings collected in the Bible. They are sacred (a word similar to holy) writings. In the Bible itself you'll see it referring to the writings as "*Holy Scriptures*," which means these writings are sacred, distinct, and set apart by God because they are from him.*

What does the word "bible" mean? The word came from the Greek

* Romans 1:2; 2 Timothy 3:15.

word *biblia*, which means “books.” Note that it is plural—books, not book—and this is important. When I first got a Bible, I considered it a single book. It looked like a book with a front cover, a back cover, and pages in between. It had shiny gold-edged pages and a leather cover. It looked like a magical book, but it was still only a book. But if you really want to understand what the Bible is, don’t think of it as a book. The Bible is a library.

1. The Bible Is a Library, Not a Book

Although the Bible often comes in print form as a single bound book, it is actually a collection of sixty-six books printed in one volume, a library of books. This library is diverse, containing writings of history, poetry, prophecy, and law. This library of diverse books was written in three different languages over a 1,500-year period by a whole bunch of different people from different cultures. Some books in this library were written more than a thousand years before the other books.

Every time I open the Bible, I try to visualize myself entering a library. I imagine walking in and pulling ancient scrolls and tablets (the formats much of the Bible was written in) off shelves from various sections, each dated and categorized by genre. Since we have now digitized the Bible for reading on our phones and tablets, it may be more difficult to visualize it this way. But that doesn’t change the fact that the Bible is a library of books, not a single book. Knowing this really does impact how we study and make sense of it.

Imagine walking into a modern-day library and going to the poetry section. Poetry uses words with rhythm or rhyme to communicate in a way that stirs the imagination and emotions. Poetry often uses colorful words, sometimes exaggerated, to describe ideas or tell stories. Songs are often written as poetry. So when you go to the poetry section of a library and pull a book off the shelf, you would read it differently than a book in the history section. The way a history book is written means it is to be interpreted and understood quite differently than a poem.

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Keep walking through the library and you'll come to a section containing writings from Europe in the medieval period (around 900 AD). The words and the style of writing from that time period, including how the writers understood the world and the struggles they faced, are different from the writing on a sports page in a contemporary newspaper. The terms and language and contexts are very different.

Walk over to the law section of the library. Here you find the thick law books lawyers use to research their cases, detailing the laws from different periods of history. As you read a law book, you pay attention to when it was written and where, as many of the laws change over time, and there may be different laws for different geographic areas (countries, states, cities, etc.). A law book from Germany in 1580 AD contains laws that applied at that time and in that culture, but they may not be applicable or even understandable for us today.

This is our Bible, a library of books written in many different genres and at many different times in history. All of this strongly impacts how we read and interpret individual Bible verses. Much depends on which book we are reading. Law books are read and interpreted quite differently from a poetry book. In the library of books that make up our Bible are books of poetry, history, law, wisdom, letters to specific churches or people, and prophecy written to certain people groups in a specific time period about their future.

The First and Second Testaments Are Combined into One Volume

The “library” most Christians refer to as the Bible contains sixty-six books, all published together in a single volume with two distinct parts. Which of the two major parts you are reading from makes a big difference in how you interpret a book or verse.

The first section, called the Old Testament, contains thirty-nine books. The second section, called the New Testament, contains twenty-seven books. The word “testament” simply means “covenant,” and though it's not a word we use much today, it was very common at the time the Bible was written. A covenant means an “agreement” between two

parties. The Old Covenant (or testament) is the agreement God made with the people of Israel (ethnically Jewish people) outlining in detail how they would relate to God and know him. The New Covenant (or testament) is the agreement God made with all people through Jesus, and in making this agreement, he did away with the Old Covenant (more on this later). The New Covenant outlines how all people today of every ethnic background (not just the Jewish people) can relate to God and worship him.

I don't like using the term "Old Testament" (which was just a name someone made up, as it wasn't part of an original title in the Bible). Saying this section is "old" can make it seem like it's not meaningful to people—which is far from true. The Old Testament is extremely important because it lays the foundation and tells the beginning of the story leading up to the New Testament and the coming of Jesus. I generally refer to the Old Testament as the *First Testament* or the *Hebrew Bible*, as most of it was written in Hebrew. The New Testament was written in Greek. "The Bible" is one volume of sixty-six books containing writings from two different covenants outlining the two major ways God provided for human beings to know him and relate to him.² Not understanding this can lead to much misuse and confusion.

A Library of Sixty-Six Books with Many Authors, Yet Only One

Like any library of many different books, the Bible has many human authors. Unlike most books we read today, the Bible isn't the product of one person. Our best understanding of the history of its writing is that it was written by more than forty authors from various walks of life, including shepherds, farmers, tent-makers, physicians, fishermen, priests, philosophers, and kings. These human authors lived in different time periods and had different life experiences, education, perspectives on the world, and different personalities and temperaments, which are all reflected in how and what they wrote. The Bible was also written in three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek).

This explains why you find different writing styles—these authors

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weren't all writing at the same time in history. The Bible was written beginning around 1400 BC (the time of Moses) through around 100 AD (the time following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the birth of the early church). That's a time span of more than 1500 years! You would never read and interpret something written 3,400 years ago in the same way you would read a book written last week.

Even though it was written by many different authors, the Holy Bible, unlike other books, has something unique. Behind all those human authors is a single author. The library of books in the Bible was written by human authors who each had God's Spirit inspiring and guiding them.* The library of books in the Bible was and still is a primary way God communicates with us, giving us guidance. God wants us to know him, to know our origins and future, and to have guidance for life. So God intentionally and purposely oversaw the process of what was written, using the different personalities and life experiences and situations of each human author to communicate what he wished to say. Every word in the original writings of Scripture was the exact word that God wanted people to have.† So we say there were many authors of the Bible, but only one "Author."³

A Library of Books and Letters Written over 1,500 Years in Three Languages

In image 2.1 you can see what the Bible looks like if you divide the sixty-six books on different shelves of a library. This is overly simplistic, as many books within the Bible have more than one type of writing in them. But this is helpful as an overview of the entire Bible. Just like walking into a library, you will see sections of books in the library divided by genre. In the library of the Bible are sections on history, law, poetry, prophecy, wisdom, and apocalyptic literature.

The original manuscripts that make up the Bible were written on

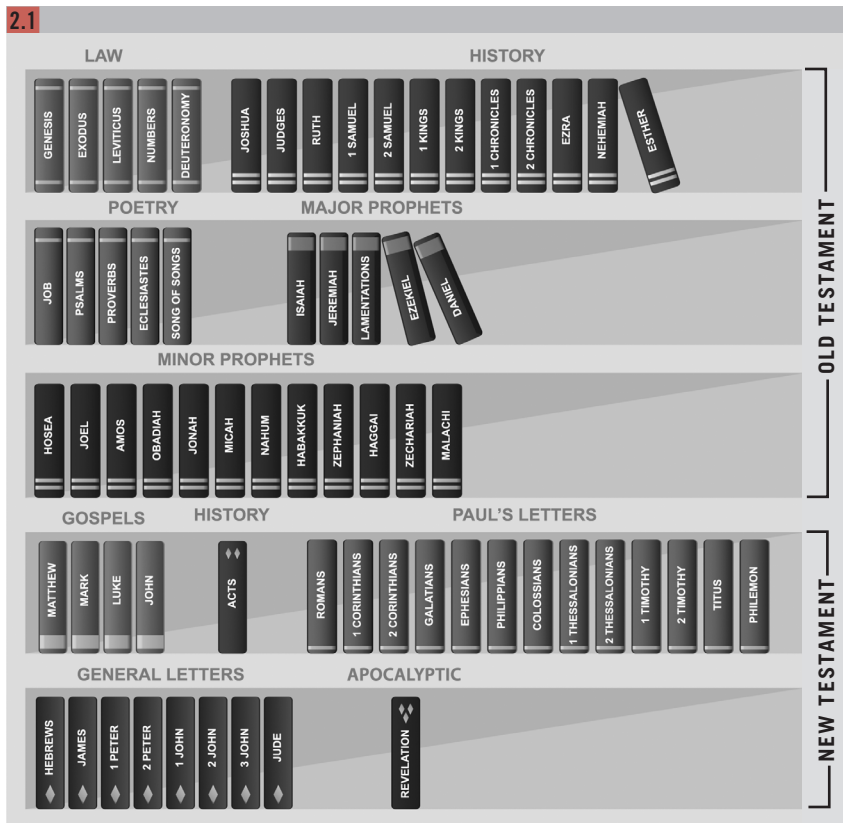
* 2 Peter 1:21.

† 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:20.

various materials, including stone, parchment, and scrolls, so if you saw the originals, they wouldn't look like a shelf of books. And certainly not look like a single book, like we think of it now.

Notice that on the library shelves are the two main sections we mentioned, the Old Testament books and the New Testament books. Within the two main sections are the different types of books. Many of the New Testament books are actually letters written to specific churches or to specific people.

Just remember, whenever you open your Bible to a page, you are walking into an ancient historical library of sixty-six books written over a 1,500-year time period. The author was writing in a specific time period and addressing a specific culture. It may have been written in a specific



genre as well. When you open the book of Psalms, you are reaching into the poetry section of the Old Testament library. Many of the psalms were written between 500 and 1000 BC. The book of Acts in the New Testament is a history book likely written in the late 60s AD. Knowing when a book was written impacts how we read it and helps us to make sense of the parts we encounter that sound crazy.

2. The Bible Was Written for Us, but Not to Us

The second of the four facts you need to know to interpret the Bible correctly is that *the Bible was written for us, but not to us*. When the brilliant and highly respected Old Testament scholar John Walton spoke at my church, he repeated this phrase multiple times: “The Bible was written for us, but not to us.” He explained that the Bible is 100 percent inspired by God, and we can have confidence that every word in the original documents of the Bible is exactly what God wanted it to say. We believe in God’s full inspiration and the total trustworthiness of the Bible. The books in the library of the Bible are *for* all people at all times and places to read and gain wisdom from.

But the Bible wasn’t originally written *to* us. It wasn’t written in any modern language, and it wasn’t written with our contemporary culture and its assumptions and values in mind. To get the most benefit from what God was communicating when he inspired the authors of the Bible to write, we need to enter their world to hear the words as the original audience would have heard them and as the author would have meant them to be understood. We must read the words on those terms.⁴

Though the Bible Wasn’t Written to Us, We Get Instruction for Life from It

All of the Bible—*every* single page and word—has important insight and instruction for us today. Every word of the Old Testament and the New Testament is there for us to study and study from to know God more through what he has communicated. The Bible—taken as a

whole—reveals the story of God, who God is and what he has done. It tells us about our salvation, our purpose, our origins, giving guidance for life, a vision for what is ahead, and most of all, telling us who Jesus is. When Paul the apostle wrote a letter to encourage a young leader, he stressed the importance of the Bible in this way: “From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*

Paul was saying in his letter to Timothy that all of the Old Testament (the portion of the Bible they had at that time) is useful for making Timothy wise and equipping him for day-to-day life and purpose as a follower of Jesus. Today we also include the New Testament writings in the Holy Scriptures, and we believe all sixty-six books in the library of the Bible can equip us for practical living that honors God. However, in the same letter, Paul also gives a challenge to be someone “who correctly handles the word of truth.”† This implies that some handle it incorrectly. There are even warnings in the Bible itself that some of the New Testament books “contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.”‡

I actually find this encouraging. I love that the Bible itself says that some of the Bible will be hard to understand. So when we struggle with something in the Bible, we have to remember even Peter admitted that not all of it is easily understood. It also says that people will “distort” the Bible. This reaffirms what we’ve been learning, that it is critically important to invest time and effort into understanding how to and how *not to* properly read and study the Bible. Failure to do so is one of the primary reasons why people critique it and misunderstand what it says. Their interpretations are distortions of the original meaning.

* 2 Timothy 3:15–17.

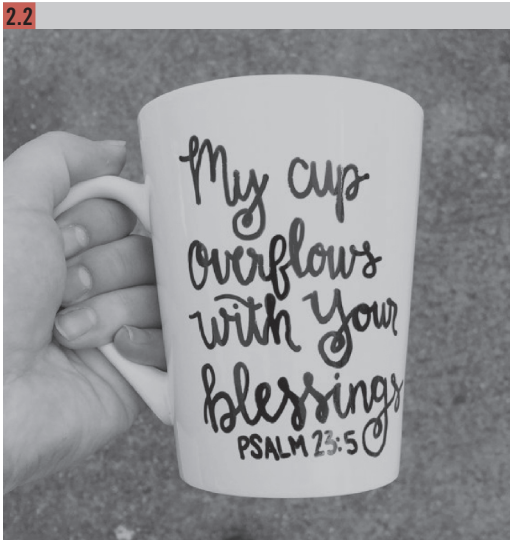
† 2 Timothy 2:15.

‡ 2 Peter 3:16.

We Have to Change Our Dangerous Way of Reading the Bible

Most people, when they start reading the Bible, want to immediately know “what does this mean to me and my life?” This assumes that when we read the Bible, we should read it as if what God was writing is specifically and directly written to us today. We may not even realize we do this, but we do it all the time. And sadly, even the preaching and teaching in some churches unintentionally does this, and it doesn’t help people to understand the Bible. When we read the Bible in this way, we read into it our presuppositions—what we believe and understand based on our experience, worldview, culture, and knowledge. Our contemporary values and way of life are also part of the lens through which we read the Bible. And while there is much it can say to help us, if we view the Bible as mainly a “message for me,” we will be in great trouble. We will end up picking and choosing the things we like reading and want to apply to our

2.2



lives. We often focus on the “nice” and comforting Bible verses, like the one on the coffee mug in image 2.2.

This mug takes a verse from Psalm 23 and offers positive encouragement by restating God’s blessings in our lives through the words David expressed in the psalm (a poetic song) he wrote. It’s encouraging to relate to David in this

way because what he was experiencing of God’s blessings was true, and we can experience that same blessing too. But not every promise or blessing is something we can directly apply to our lives today. We might take Bible verses and promises that are not meant for us and then be disappointed in God when they don’t happen.

The Plans for Us to Wait Seventy Years for a Promise

An example of this is Jeremiah 29:11, a commonly misused verse: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Of course, it’s wonderful to think God has plans for us to prosper. But we have to be careful we aren’t taking Bible verses and applying a promise *to us* that God didn’t make *to us*. It can lead to great disappointment and disillusionment. Jeremiah 29:11 wasn’t written to us. That verse was written to the people of Israel to address their situation at the time. The people of Israel were in captivity, away from their promised homeland, living in Babylon. Their beautiful capital city of Jerusalem was destroyed, and they had been taken prisoner and then taken hundreds of miles away to Babylon. The irony of taking this verse as a promise, even in the original context, is that God is actually disappointing them with these words. He is telling them, “Yes, one day you will be free and prosper again, but the fact is it won’t happen for *seventy years*.”

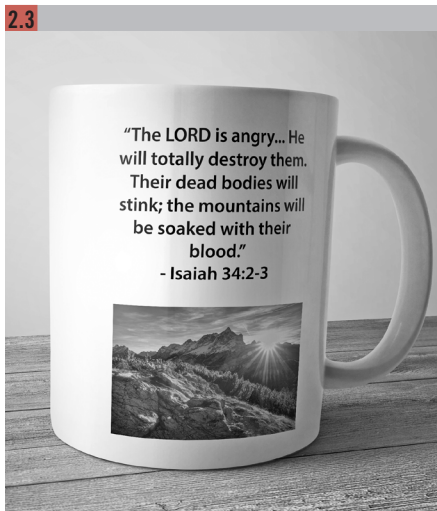
The story behind the verse is that Israel is going to be stuck in Babylon for a while, and many of those hearing this promise won’t be alive when the way back is open again. The people had disobeyed God, and God had allowed the Babylonians to destroy their city, kill many of them, and capture them. They are now prisoners, and God wants them to know he won’t forget about them, but there will be suffering for some time to come. It was a full seventy years before they were freed and allowed to go back to Jerusalem, and most of the readers of that original promise were dead before it happened. I’m guessing that when you take a verse like this out of its original context and apply it to a situation in your life, you hope God doesn’t wait seventy years to keep his promise.

All too often, we take a nice-sounding Bible verse and apply it directly to our life. For instance, Isaiah 12:2 says, “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD himself, is my strength and my defense.” We like to claim that Bible verse and own it. We take comfort in it personally, which is a good thing to do, as God *is* our strength and defense. That verse is truth for all times because

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it reflects the unchanging character and nature of God. But we avoid claiming two verses later in the same book. Isaiah 34:2–3 says, “He will totally destroy them, he will give them over to slaughter. Their slain will be thrown out, their dead bodies will stink; the mountains will be soaked with their blood.”

Can you picture that Bible promise as the theme verse for the annual women’s retreat, with a coffee mug gift for each woman who attends? Not all verses are written to us and apply to us. And we



often pick and choose by taking the nice-sounding Bible verses and claiming they are true and applying them to our lives, while skipping past the negative crazy-sounding ones. We need to stop and ask: who was the Bible verse originally written to and why? As we will discover, many of the Bible verses that don’t make sense to us today usually made sense to

the original readers. If we don’t step into that time and culture, there may be things we’ll find confusing or odd. In the early 1980s, if someone had said, “I’m going to surf the web,” those words would not have made sense. A person hearing that would have thought of someone surfing on a surfboard somewhere in the ocean. They might have guessed that the web was some kind of spider web. But it wouldn’t have made sense because those words had different meanings at that time. That’s true for locations as well. In my town in California we often say we are going “over the hill.” All of us locals know it means we are taking a specific road over the mountain when we go from our town over to San Jose. But if you don’t know the local context, hearing “going over the hill” could mean hiking over a hill in a state park near you or being so old you’re “over the hill,” neither of which has anything to do with the original context.⁵

There was a song that came out in 1963 called “Puff the Magic Dragon” by folk artists Peter, Paul, and Mary. The chorus contained these lyrics:

Puff the magic dragon, lived by the sea
And frolicked in the autumn mist in a land called Honali

The song was extremely popular and even reached number two on the music charts. Around that time, there were the beginnings of a countercultural revolution with a new generation starting to reject the social and ethical values of past generations. Drug experimentation was becoming more prevalent, and in the thinking of younger generations, the song “Puff the Magic Dragon” was rumored to be something more than a children’s song about a mythical dragon. People began interpreting the lyrics based on their worldview and saw it as a song written about marijuana smoking. *Newsweek* magazine even had a cover story about covert drug messages being part of songs.

The rumor, based on the cultural views and assumptions of the time, was that “Puff” was an obvious metaphor for smoking pot. “Autumn mist” (another part of the lyrics) was understood to be a symbolic reference to clouds of marijuana smoke. And the land of “Honali” was interpreted as a reference to the Hawaiian village of Hanalei, which was known for its particularly potent marijuana plants.

Then one day the authors of the song made a statement to clarify what they meant when they wrote the song. They clearly and emphatically stated the song had no reference or hidden meaning whatsoever to drug culture. Cowriter of the song Peter Yarrow said, “When ‘Puff’ was written, I was too innocent to know about drugs. What kind of a mean-spirited SOB would write a children’s song with a covert drug message?”

And the other cowriter, Leonard Lipton, said, “‘Puff’ is about loss of innocence, and having to face an adult world. It’s surely not about drugs. I can tell you that at Cornell in 1959, no one smoked grass. I find the fact that people interpret it as a drug song annoying. It would be insidious to propagandize about drugs in a song for little kids.”

Part 1: Never Read a Bible Verse

I share this to show how easy it can be to take our worldview and then press it into something we read or hear, interpreting it through our lens. We can look at specific words and dissect them and use complicated contemporary analysis to do all this. Eventually, though, we need to step back and look at the more fundamental question: What was the author originally saying? We cannot simply read our own understandings into the meaning of a word or statement someone else wrote or said. And when we look at some of the bizarre-sounding parts of the Bible, we have to try to discover who the original audience was and view the text through their lens, not ours. If we don't, the possibilities for confusion are endless.