

If God exists then how do we understand the hard passages in the Bible?

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Texts: Lev. 19:19, 20:9-10; Ps. 137:8-9; 2 Timothy 3:16-17

Theme: The Bible does contain several very difficult passages but there are ways to still read this holy text in order to learn God's ways and discern God's will for our lives.

Have you ever asked the question how do you make sense of some of those Old Testament laws and if they were ordered by God then do we need to obey them today? Or, why does it seem that in the Bible God condoned the mistreatment of women and slaves? Or, how can I believe in a book that seems to have a great number of factual errors?

Have you ever wondered questions like this? Well if you have, then listen closely because I am going to try to make sense of some of the difficult passages in the Bible this morning. Let us pray...

(Prayer)

Today I am going to be preaching the fourth sermon in the series "If God exists," and I will be addressing one of those delicate and dangerous topics that pastors love to avoid at all costs. I would like to take a critical look at the Bible – the Word of God – and answer our atheist critics who call it a book that is filled with errors, violence, and conflicting moral statements. Listen to a statement written by Richard Dawkins in his book "The God Delusion."

"To be fair, much of the Bible is not systematically evil but just plain weird, as you would expect a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted, and 'improved' by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors, and copyists, unknown to us and mostly unknown to each other, spanning nine centuries. This may explain some of the sheer strangeness of the Bible. But unfortunately it is this same weird volume that religious zealots hold up to us as the inerrant source of our morals and rules for living."¹

So how do Christians like you and I defend this sacred text that brings us so much comfort and guidance? How can I stand in front of you and say with confidence that instead of being chaotically cobbled-together, I see the Bible as a two volume library of 66 books filled with inspired history, correspondences, law, revelation, and holy teachings that have a unity only possible with divine assistance. For me the very fact that hundreds of authors, editors, and copyists worked on this book over many centuries with all the possibilities for destruction and distortion and the fact that the central message is still able to transform lives speaks to the power of the truth of God that is contained in its pages.

This morning I would like for us to look at four criticisms aimed at the Bible and Christianity by atheists. They are written on the front page of the handout that I would ask that you pull out now. I have left plenty of room for you to jot down notes and have also added questions on the backside so that you can continue this conversation later with your family or friends. The criticisms are:

- The Bible contains factual errors and internal contradictions therefore removing its claim of inerrancy.
- The Bible condones social practices that are destructive and oppressive.
- The Bible describes a God who is vengeful and violent.
- The Bible contains laws that don't make sense or are repugnant to modern culture.

Sound like a good list to discuss this morning? Let's start with the first one about factual errors. I remember one of my first encounters with a literalist after really studying the Bible for the first time and he told me there were NO mistakes in the Bible. He dared me to point one out. So I turned to the first two chapters of Genesis and showed him glaring discrepancies between the first two creation stories. The conversation came to a quick end and he went off to consult with his spiritual guru only to come back a couple weeks later with his response. "They are not errors and they are not discrepancies. We are just not wise enough to understand their meaning right now."

Did God create all the world and then as God's final act create humankind – man and woman – together? Or did God change the order of creation and get so excited about having a partner that God scooped up a clump of dirt and created man first and then woman from his rib? One of my sister clergy friends reminds me that God created man first and then rested and said let me create woman and this time get it right.

Or I like the story of the pastor who was doing children's moments and told the story of Eve being created from Adam's rib and one of the boys in the front row got really worried. She finally asked him the source of his concern and he said, "I have a pain in my side and I think I am going to have a wife."

Seriously, to look at the poetry of these two stories and imprison the words in literalism destroys the beauty and the truth. But there are other mistakes. Later in the book of 2 Kings 8:26 Judah's king Ahaziah was 22 years old when he came into power. But in the parallel text of 2 Chronicles he is 42 when he starts to rule. Some might say that it was a typo by one of the copyists along the way or that Ahaziah was really 42 but looked really young for his age. Regardless of how you try to explain it away this text and many others contain discrepancies.

The most serious of all conflicts comes in the four accounts of the resurrection. In Matthew Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb and the guards were still at the entrance and there was an earthquake and an angel comes and rolls back the stone. In Mark different people come and the stone is already rolled back and there are no guards to be seen and a young man dressed in white inside the tomb tells them not to be afraid. In Luke two men in dazzling clothes stood beside the women and told them about Jesus' resurrection. In John just Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb and finds it empty and then runs back to get Peter and John. But Mary lingers at the tomb and the risen Lord talks to her and calls her by name.

Our critics would say that when we are recalling the most pivotal story of our faith then shouldn't we have our facts straight? They might have a point, but how often do four of us go to any event and remember and recall it is the same way? I would rather have four different versions than to have one because if they all agreed it would appear as if there was an orchestrated effort to present a consistent message. It is not the incidental details of the story that I am most concerned about for I am interested in the consistent truth revealed in each story. Christ rose from the dead. Christ was victorious over death and sin. Christ was our hope for life eternal with God. I could care if there were one or two angels at the scene. The bigger story is Christ's victory.

Let's look at the second criticism that the Bible condones social practices that are destructive and oppressive. Our atheist critics say that if the Bible is the book to which we turn for our rules and morals then how can it condone social practices like slavery and the oppression of women that we find contemptible today? Both the Old and the New Testaments condone slavery. There are instructions in the old Levitical code about how they are bought, sold, and freed. Paul tells slaves in his letters to serve their masters and not complain or disobey.

Women were looked at as both loved and treasured but also as dispensable property. They were used to seal bargains, to satisfy debts, to be in marriages with more than one wife, and were often

mistreated. Many of us read the story of Sodom and Gomorrah only focusing on the men wanting to “know” the male angels and the sin that is represented in that act, but for me the greater sin is that of the father offering his daughter in exchange. If that story is not bad enough then later turn to Judges 19 and read the story of the mistreatment of that woman.

How do we deal with the fact that the Bible, or the religious leaders of the time didn’t stand up to the injustice of the day? Even more important, how do we not let the text that describes a cultural practice 2,000 years ago not become something we repeat today? There were two things that I learned in seminary that helped me answer these questions

The first is a term called “historical, cultural relativity.” It was a term that when spoken in some quarters of the seminary would drive the more literal folks crazy. It means that each story was written in a period of time defined by the cultural practices of that period. As readers of that text today we need to make every effort to discover the historic and cultural practices and to read the text relative to that knowledge. Then we need to look for the message of grace, compassion, or justice hidden within. I will admit that in passages like Judges 19 there is little chance of finding grace and compassion, but when you look at the Levitical code and some of the boundaries it puts on slave ownership and the revolutionary notion that there were time limits on slavery then you can see reform and justice.

The other thing that I learned was the notion of progressive revelation. This is not new to many of you and is not something only taught in seminary. Basically it means that God reveals God’s truth and will in stages as humankind is able to embrace and accept it. It is very much like the teaching of our children. We don’t sit down with our two-year-old and talk about the complexities of forgiveness and unconditional love. We tell them not to hit their sisters or brothers and to share. In the case of the biblical text we see progressive revelation from the earliest dealings with Abraham and Sarah and the simple notion of you are blessed to be a blessing, to Moses and the more complicated Ten Commandments and the 600 other laws, to the evolving message of social justice and mercy with the prophets, to finally the word of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

The Bible is a wonderful example of moral evolution with the ultimate expression being Jesus who presents the clearest and purest picture of how God wants us to live our lives.

Thirdly, the Bible describes a God who is vengeful and violent. If you were here last week you will remember that I addressed this point when I described the “God on our side” rewriting of history that so often happens when the victorious nations want to justify their actions. If you were not here last week then please download a copy of the sermon.

As I said last week it is hard to read the Bible with all the stories of God destroying nations, or holy ordained genocides, or merciless judgments against those who worshiped other gods. Literalists and fundamentalists would say that is the way God acts so get over it and that is the way God continues to act and will bring about judgment and destruction right now on the unfaithful. I tend to gravitate away from that position and return to those three golden words spoken in seminary – historical, cultural relativity. In the age when these stories were written gods were seen as warriors and defenders of the righteous. In the cultures surrounding Israel when the gods looked with favor upon you then your crops were fruitful, your armies strong, and your offspring many. That was definitely how they looked at God as they developed in their faith.

But as they matured they learned it wasn’t about sacrifices made on the altar that counted. The prophets taught them about sacrificing their hearts and being merciful and just. They learned that righteous living did not guarantee prosperity but that suffering and hardship were part of the universal mystery of living and that God would come in the middle of that mystery and walk with us and strengthen us. They learned that we are called to a higher ethic of dealing with our enemies and

treating those who are alien and marginalized. The texts of the Old Testament simply show a people maturing in their faith and understanding of God who is no longer warrior but compassionate seeker of justice.

Finally how do you make sense of the fact that the Bible contains laws that don't make sense or are repugnant to modern culture? Let's face it there are dozens of Levitical laws that used to make sense back in the time when Israel was supposed to act, eat, and dress differently so that they could stand out from the other cultures. So we have strange laws about not cutting the hair around your temple or the edges of your beard, or not getting tattoos, or what kind of food you could or could not eat. One of the strange laws of the day made it a sin to wear clothing made of two fabrics which would make every one of us in this room law breakers today. Again those three blessed words "historical, cultural relativity" rescue us. We understand that the law was create an outward reminder for all Israelites that they were the chosen people and not to mix their blood line or holy seed with others.

In that day when you broke the law there was a quick remedy – public stoning. Some today might say it was a very effective system of justice because it did away with long protracted trials. But did you know that you could be stoned for working on the Sabbath, worshiping other gods, committing adultery, or cursing your mother and father. I don't know about you but I confess that I have worked on the Sabbath and in my rebellious youth I cursed my parents. I have to think that we would run out of rocks or people to throw them if we were going to enforce these laws and others like them today.

So are the critics right when they call these laws immoral and ridiculous? Yes and no. They can be critical about the old code but don't let them forget the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery. The men are ready to stone her and Jesus intervenes with those famous words, "He who is without sin can cast the first stone." He didn't end the law he rose above it. He moved to the next level, demonstrated the universality of our sin, and the offered forgiveness to the woman and told her to go and sin no more.

This is another example of progressive revelation. Yes the old law seems irrelevant and even immoral to us today but Christ came to fulfill the law and to raise our obedience to a new level. Our critics are quick to then say that we have just turned the Bible into a book of convenience and that we are just picking and choosing what we want to believe and what we don't. They would contend there is a danger in this selective picking and choosing and say that to do so puts us dangerously close to the slippery slope of sin. But they pick and choose as well but they don't like to admit it. I don't see lines of conservative Christians stoning the adulterers in their congregations even though there would be several cheated on spouses that would love to do it. I don't see holy fashion police standing at the door ready to punish those who are wearing polyester clothes even though my wife would punish me if I got out my old plaid polyester sports jacket. So how do we choose? What filter do we use to make sense of the conflicting rules and commandments of the Bible?

Let me quickly share my technique. I use the Sermon on the Mount as a filter for everything that preceded and followed Jesus' great words. I believe these sayings are the greatest collection of wisdom ever assembled and redefine all the other laws and stories in the Bible. His repeated mantra of "you have heard it said in the past.... But now I say..." provides for me the formula and the expectations for Kingdom living.

I also believe in the words of Paul that were read this morning from 2 Timothy. "All scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, correction, reproof, and the training up of righteousness." Now I do not go with the fundamentalist interpretation of this text and say that God inspired means that all scripture was dictated by God. But I believe that the Holy Spirit guided the process of writing, editing, and selection and that the Holy Spirit guides us and provides inspiration as we read the texts today. I

believe that it is the Holy Spirit that frees us from literalism and allows us to wisely use the filters of historical, cultural relativism and progressive revelation to make sense of the troubling text.

I believe the Holy Spirit enables us to see the Bible as a window looking out at the Kingdom and gives us the wisdom not to worship the window or to spend unnecessary time examining the scratches but to see the glory that lies behind.

The Bible – with all of its flaws, inconsistencies, harsh and antiquated rules, and bizarre stories – is still a book of great truth and insight. When it is read with the invitation of the Holy Spirit as an inspired guide it comes alive. Its holy wisdom is transformational. It is through this book that you and I get a chance to engage in the mystery of God and to experience it through the raw rhetoric of those saints who have gone before us.

¹ Richard Dawkins, "The God Delusion," Houghton Mifflin Company, NY,NY 2006, p.237.