

The Leap of Doubt: Examining Seven Toughest Objections to God and Christianity
Objection 7: “You can’t take the Bible literally”
November 1, 2009 by Kevin Haah



I. Introduction

Welcome to New City!

We are going to finish off the Leap of Doubt series today. We have been looking at seven toughest objections to God and Christianity:

- There can't just be one true religion
- Christianity limits our freedom
- How could a good God allow suffering
- The church is responsible for so much suffering
- How can a loving God send people to hell
- Science has disproved Christianity

Today, we come to the last question: **You can't take the Bible literally.**

The argument goes like this: the Bible was written 2000 years ago. How do you know that the Bible we have is the same as what was written? How do you know it is reliable? You can't really know that what's in the Bible really happened? Look at all the stories of miracles. Those miracles can't have happened. Also, some of the stuff that they teach is so socially and cultural backward, like the role of women, that you can't live by that stuff. So, how do we respond to this?

We are going to look at three things: (1) what the Bible says about the Bible; (2) why the Bible is reliable, and (3) how to approach the Bible

II. What Does the Bible Say about the Bible?

Before I get started, let me clarify one common misperception about the Bible. The Bible is not ONE book; it is a collection of books. There are 66 books, 39 in the OT, and 27 in the NT. Except for books that are called First and Second Something, they are all different books. Just because they are put together in a collection does not mean that the author knew it was going to be in the collection.

2 Timothy 3:16: ¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Peter 1:20-21: ²⁰Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. ²¹For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 5:18: ¹⁸I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

2 Peter 3:16: ¹⁶He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

2 Peter 3:2: ²I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

1 Thessalonians 2:13: ¹³And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

III. Is the Bible Reliable?

Tests to determine the accuracy and reliability of historic documents:

A Bibliography Test: The Accuracy of Copies We Have

Manuscript evidence of the New Testament: There are now more than 5,300 known Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. Add over 10,000 Latin Vulgate (translated around 150) and at least 9,300 other early versions and we have more than 24,000 manuscript copies of portions of the New Testaments in existence.

B. Internal Evidence Test: The Author's Ability to Tell the Truth

1. Was he in the position to know? How does he know? That's the problem with most of the so called Gnostic gospels like Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Mary, Gospel of Judas, etc. Dan Brown in Da Vinci Code makes a big deal out of these gospels. However, the problem with these books is that they were all written 150-300 years after Jesus. How is that reliable? It's like me writing about George Washington. How is that reliable? But, the Bible is different.
2. The Ability to Tell the Truth

Luke 1:1-3: *'Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled^[a] among us, 'just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. 'Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,*

1 John 1:3: *'We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.*

4. Why this could not be legend:
 - a. The NT accounts of Jesus were written too early to be a legend.
 - Luke said: I checked with the eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1-2)
 - Paul said: Talk to the witnesses who are still alive (1 Corinth 15:3-6)
 - Paul: Quotes a hymn about deity of Jesus in a letter written 15-20 years after his death and resurrection (Phil. 2)
 - b. The accounts are too counterproductive to be made up
 - The first people who saw Jesus resurrected were women.
 - The leaders of the early church--the apostles--look like fools and cowards.
 - c. They are too detailed to be legends.

- The genre of literature of realistic fiction written like history did not exist until about 200-300 years ago. Legends and epics were not written like the way Luke wrote the gospel.
- C.S. Lewis (medieval literature professor at Oxford): “I have been reading poems, romance literature, myth and legends all my life and I know what they are like and I know that none of them are like this. There are only two possible views on the gospel texts: either this is historical reportage or an unknown ancient writer without processor or successor suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern realistic novel narrative. The reader who doesn’t see this simply has not learned to read.”

C. External Evidence Test: Consistent with Available External Evidence

- Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (A.D. 180), who was a student of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (who had been a Christian for 86 years and was a disciple of John the Apostle): Tells us about Matthew, Mark, Luke and John’s accounts of Jesus being credible.
 1. Historical reliability
 2. Archeological reliability

If it wasn’t for the miracles written, there would be no issue on the credibility of the biblical authors. In fact, the stuff you learn in high school history books has far less evidentiary support. So much of them are based on the writing of the emperor’s historian. How credible is the history written by the emperor’s historian who will get executed if he makes the emperor look bad?

V. How About All Those Miracles?

- A. Hume’s Hangover: We can only believe an experience that conforms to normal, ordinary human experiences. Anything that is unique so far as normal human

experience is concerned (such as miracles) should be rejected. In other words, naturalism says that everything must have a natural explanation.

Hume's Argument: "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined . . . Nothing is esteemed a miracle if it ever happens in the common of nature."

- B. Problems with Hume's Hangover/Naturalism: Whether something happened or not at a given time in history can be settled only by historical evidence.

C.S. Lewis: "Now of course we must agree with Hume that, if there is absolutely 'uniform experience' against miracles, if, in other words, they have never happened, why then they never have. Unfortunately, we know the experience against them to be uniform only if we know that all the reports of them are false. And we can know all the reports of them to be false only if we know already that miracles have never occurred. In fact, we are arguing in a circle."

- C. Westphal: "If God exists, miracles are not merely logically possible, but really and genuinely possible at every moment. The only condition hindering the actualization of this possibility lies in the divine will."

VI. How do we approach the Bible?

We don't try to use the Bible to support what we believe; we look to the Bible to tell us what to believe. If you pick and choose what you believe, you have two problems:

- (1) your approach to the Bible is dramatically different than Jesus' approach to the Bible;
- (2) the Word of God cannot transform you. It cannot change you. The Bible just becomes like Stepford Wives (explain).

This doesn't mean to say that there are no difficulties with the Bible.

- Peter, the apostle Peter, reading some of Paul's letters, said 'There are things in here that are hard to understand.'

- So there are difficulties. There are also historical difficulties, moral difficulties.
- You read some of the things in the Old Testament, or even in the New Testament and you say "How could this be?"
 - Well, I would suggest that we deal with it in the same way that, for example, we would deal with the issue of suffering and the love of God. Every Christian believes that God is love.
 - And yet there is this extraordinary amount of suffering in the world. How can we hold on to believing in a God of love, and seeing all the suffering that there is in the world?
 - And What Christians do, is they try to understand suffering in the light of the fact that we continue to believe that God is love. And the more that you explore that, the deeper understanding of God and the deeper understanding of suffering.
 - And I would say it's the same with the Bible: we believe the Bible is inspired by God. It's trustworthy; and yet there are all kinds of problems with that.
 - And we can either abandon that belief, which I think is a mistake; or we can wrestle with those problems.
 - And as we wrestle with those problems, we get a deeper understanding of the Bible and a deeper understanding of the problems.

Mostly, we need to approach the Bible as a love letter from God.

- Before Grace and I were married, we had a long distance relationship.
- We talked in the phone all the time.
- But, there were times when Grace wrote letters to me. You know, I never received any personal letters. I went to the mail box, and it was usually just junk mail and bills. But when I saw a letter with Grace's handwriting on it, I just felt this excitement, this thrill.

- Why? The letter in itself wasn't what it was about; it was because of the relationship: because it was a letter from the person I love. And I wanted to know what she was saying.
- Please turn with me to John 5:39 and 40.

Jesus said this: **You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.**

- What Jesus is saying is that the Bible itself is not it.
- The Bible is only so wonderful and exciting because it's about Jesus.
- It's a love letter from God.
- It helps us to come into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.
- Now, some people have really worn out Bibles.
 - They have really studied the Bible; they've underlined it in feltpen, they have studied commentaries on the Bible, they learn Greek and Hebrew so that they can study the Bible in its original languages; but sometimes – not always- sometimes they miss the point of what the Bible is really meant to be about.
 - A few years ago, we bought a Toyota Prius, a hybrid car: save the earth and save gas. It made a lot of sense.
 - Suppose after I bought the Prius, and I went out and I thought 'Oh, this is awesome!' Looked in the glovebox and there I found the Toyota Prius Owner's Manual.
 - And I thought "Oh, that looks interesting!" and I went back into my house and I started studying it.
 - And I got really interested in the Prius manual started underlining in feltpen some of the exciting stuff about the car!
 - And then maybe – I took it further: I thought 'Well, you know, some of this is so good, I'm going to learn it by heart!' So I copy out bits and put it on the mirror so I could learn it while I was shaving.

- And then maybe, you know, give some expositions on tire pressures or steering.
 - Perhaps find some other people who were interested in the Prius manual. Join the Prius manual club!
 - And then maybe learn Japanese so I could study it in the original language.
 - But the point of the manual is to drive the car.
- And the point of the Bible is to be in relationship with God through Jesus.
 - And if all we do is study it, without that relationship, then Jesus is saying we're missing the point: You diligently study the Scriptures, but you've missed the point because you haven't come to me.
 - Life, he says, is not in the book; it's in a person. It's in the relationship.
- And this is wonderful, because it helps us to experience that relationship.
- God still speaks to us today through the Bible.
- He speaks through what he has spoken. There's a very interesting verse in Hebrews, where the writer quotes a passage from the Old Testament.
 - And you might have expected him to say "The Holy Spirit *said*": but he doesn't, he says "**The Holy Spirit *says***" because God is still speaking through what he has spoken.
 - Martin Luther said this: "**The Bible is alive. It speaks to me. It has feet, it runs after me. It has hands, it lays hold of me.**"
 - What happens when God speaks?
 - Well, first of all, he brings faith to those people who are not Christians.
 - Sometimes people say "Well, I don't have any faith. How can I be a Christian?"
 - Paul gives us the answer. He says faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of God.

- And it's so often as people read or hear the Bible that they come to faith in Jesus Christ.
 - Example of someone who became a Christian by reading the Bible.
 - So God speaks to those who are not Christians.
- He also speaks to Christians.
 - As we study the Bible, it's an amazing thing, isn't it?
 - It never ceases to amaze me that this book, about a person who lived two thousand years ago, we can actually know that person. We can speak to them and they speak to us through this book.
 - And communication is vital to any relationship. That's how we develop a relationship, that's how relationships grow and strengthen.
 - It's like with a child: when a baby is born, they need food, regular food, to grow. When a baby's born it's no good saying "Oh, that's exciting, we've got a new baby!" and then just put it out in the garden and leave it. If you want the baby to grow, you have to feed the baby.
 - If you come to faith in Christ and you want to grow in your faith, you have to feed your faith.
 - And Jesus says this is spiritual food, this helps us to grow.
 - It brings joy and peace when maybe we're going through difficult times.
 - It gives us wisdom, it challenges us, and it guides us.