

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

DAN KIMBALL

ZONDERVAN REFLECTIVE

How (Not) to Read the Bible

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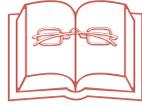
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F O R E W O R D



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

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.



P R E L U D E



BECOMING ATHEIST BY
READING THE BIBLE

Reading the Bible is the fast track to atheism.

—PENN JILLETTE

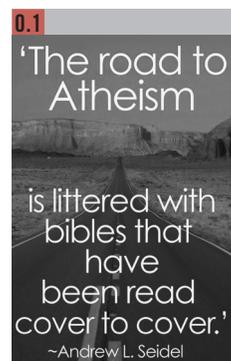
Sitting on my desk is a printed email from a university student who, after growing up in a Christian family and being active in his church, is no longer a Christian. The email lists several reasons why he went from being a Christian, and even a leader in a campus ministry, to becoming an atheist.

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.



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

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.

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

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.

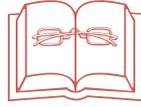
PART 1



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.

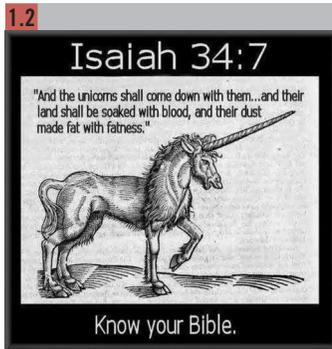
“So, you believe in unicorns?”

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.**



He had seen some online memes quoting Bible verses suggesting that unicorns existed. He thought it was pretty bizarre that Christians believe in unicorns, and he wanted to know if I believe that. Unicorns are mythical horses with a horn and magical powers living in forests. I had never heard the claim that unicorns are in the Bible, but after the haircut, 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.”

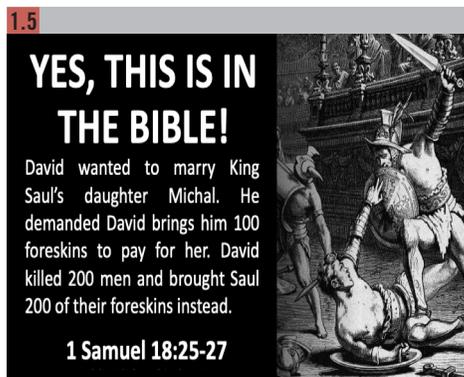
Obviously, these visuals and T-shirts are making a humorous point—that if you really knew what is in the Bible, you couldn’t possibly take it

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



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.”*

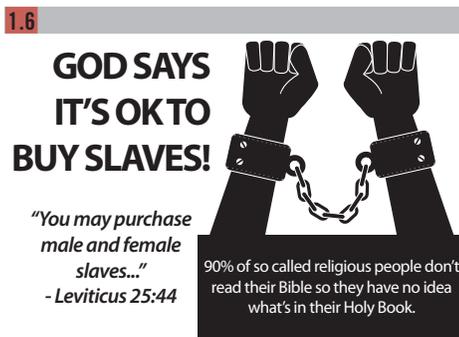
When you look at this picture combined with this quote from the Bible, it’s self-condemning. These are words from the Bible—how can you argue with that? The Bible sounds extremely demeaning to women, and when someone reads this and sees the image, it’s natural for them to believe the Bible is anti-women. 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

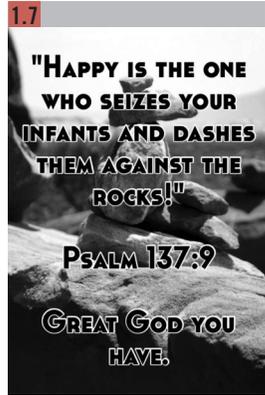
“90% of so-called religious people don’t read their Bible.” The implication is that if Christians really read their Bibles, they would reject what the Bible teaches. If you want to better understand how to respond to what the Bible says about women and slavery, we



* 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.

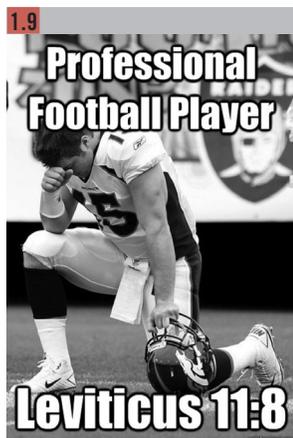
But that's not all. In addition to being anti-woman and pro-slavery, it's not hard to find Bible verses that seem to endorse violence—even against babies and small children. There are memes and websites that quote verses like Psalm 137:9 where it reads, "Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes 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

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.