

FOREWORD by JUSTIN BRIERLEY

IS IT  
REALLY  
THE  
GOOD  
BOOK?

Restoring Your Faith *in the Bible* by  
Questioning Your Assumptions About It

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John Marriott & Shawn Wicks

Many critics of the Bible misunderstand what the Bible is all about. John Marriott and Shawn Wicks address a number of commonly held false assumptions about the Bible in an intelligent, accessible, and friendly way. I enthusiastically recommend this book not only for skeptics but also for those of us who love the Bible, to make sure that we don't share some of those false assumptions ourselves.

**Tremper Longman III, PhD**, distinguished scholar and professor emeritus of biblical studies, Westmont College

Whatever the causes—and they are many—the Christian church in the West is losing members. Some think the Bible is irrelevant, unscientific, anti-intellectual, or simply obsolete. In *Is It Really the Good Book?* John Marriott and Shawn Wicks challenge this thinking by showing what the Bible really is and how it should be read and understood. This is a timely and much-needed book. I highly recommend it.

**Craig A. Evans**, distinguished research professor, The Bible Seminary, Katy, Texas

Something has been happening in the Western world on an unprecedented scale in this new millennium—people “deconverting” from apparent Christian faith because of problems created for them from close reading of the Bible. None of these problems are new; all have been discussed in detail with good answers suggested throughout history. What *is* new is the internet and its ability to spread misinformation as effectively as genuine information. As a result, this book is needed more than ever before. What kind of “book” was the Bible intended to be? Which negative critiques of Scripture largely or entirely miss its point? Why have a much larger number of people throughout

history responded more positively, even with belief in Jesus, after reading its pages? This wonderful, succinct work debunks a whole raft of misunderstandings about the Bible and explains why it truly is good news!

**Craig L. Blomberg**, distinguished professor emeritus of New Testament, Denver Seminary, Littleton, CO

In recent years, the Bible has come into increasingly hard times. It is no longer the book that is highly revered in society but is fast becoming an object that is criticized and dismissed. It is treated with increased skepticism and seen as out-of-date. Tragically, this is often happening because people do not understand it for what it is. Marriott and Wicks address this confusion by uncovering faulty assumptions made about the Bible and its message. With clarity, warmth, and compelling insight, they invite readers to discover what the Bible truly says and why its contents are attractive and compelling.

**Clinton E. Arnold**, research professor of New Testament, Talbot School of Theology (Biola University)

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for modern persons to recognize their interpretive assumptions. This isn't a Bible saying, but it is a saying about why so many contemporary Christians find it difficult to make sense of their Bibles. *Is It Really the Good Book?* provides a service to both apologetics and hermeneutics in identifying common but mistaken interpretive assumptions and challenging readers to ask themselves, *Am I really reading the Bible the right way?*

**Kevin J. Vanhoozer**, research professor of systematic theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

This book by Marriott and Wicks will be beneficial for people of every affiliation, whether they consider themselves to be among the converted, the unconverted, or the deconverted. This is an important book about the proper interpretation of the Good Book.

**Douglas S. Huffman, PhD**, dean of the School of Theology and Ministry and special advisor to the president at University of Northwestern—St. Paul, MN

John Marriott and Shawn Wicks have given the church—and its honest skeptics—a gift. *Is It Really the Good Book?* doesn't paper over the Bible's thorny passages; it investigates them with historical savvy, pastoral warmth, and intellectual courage. By exposing the unspoken modern assumptions that so often sabotage faith, the authors invite readers into a richer, context-honoring engagement with Scripture's grand story. The result is neither a naive defense nor cynical deconstruction but a thoughtful road map toward resilient trust—one that respects both scholarship and lived experience. Anyone wrestling with doubt, guiding students, or preaching to a disenchanted generation will find this volume indispensable.

**Michael R. Licona**, professor of New Testament studies, Houston Christian University



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# Foreword

Some three hundred years ago, one of the world's most famous skeptics of Christianity was the French writer and intellectual Voltaire. He is reputed to have said that "one hundred years from my day, there will not be a Bible on earth except one that is looked upon by an antiquarian curiosity-seeker."

Of course, that is not what happened. In fact, the great irony of Voltaire's prediction is that, a century after his declaration, Voltaire's own home in Geneva, Switzerland, had become a storehouse for Bibles and tracts produced by the Evangelical Society of Geneva. Likewise, the same printing presses that had been used to print Voltaire's anti-religious pamphlets were being used to print their Bibles.

The Bible has always had a habit of outliving its critics and remains the bestselling book of all time, bar none. Nevertheless, criticisms of Scripture have become increasingly common in our present online age. Many skeptics of the "New Atheist" variety have dismissed the Bible as immoral, unreliable, and irrelevant.

However, the experience of hosting hundreds of radio and

podcast debates between Christians and skeptics has led me to realize that the most prominent critiques of Scripture are often mistaken and misplaced. As John Marriott and Shawn Wicks show in this helpful and timely book, modern culture is dominated by faulty assumptions about what Scripture is and what it is for.

For instance, in chapter 4 the authors pick up on a memorable conversation I hosted on whether the science of the universe provides evidence for God with Oxford professor Peter Atkins. An outspoken atheist scientist, Atkins announced that the Bible might be able to authenticate its divine credentials if it contained an unmistakable scientific hypothesis, such as the second law of thermodynamics, saying, “If I were looking in the Bible, heaven forbid, I would expect to see maybe ‘increase in entropy is equal to  $Q$  reversible divided by temperature.’ If there was an equation in the Bible rather than all this wishy-washy elastic writing.”

How generations of readers would have made any sense of these unintelligible words before nineteenth-century physicists came along to explain them is left unclear! Yet this idea—that the only way the Bible should be taken seriously by modern people is if its ancient writers had been inspired to include predictions about contemporary scientific theories and modern technology—is surprisingly common. Likewise, skeptics often accuse the Bible of failing to live up to modern standards of ethics, morality, human rights . . . the list goes on.

However, what these contemporary critics often forget is that the Bible is arguably the foundation for the development of modern science. Its story inspired the work of the great pioneers of the scientific revolution—all of whom were Christians. Similarly, our modern beliefs in equality, freedom, progress, and compassion are all inextricably bound up with the Bible.

Starting from page one of the Bible, when God creates human

beings in his own image, humans were invested with a dignity and value that could never be derived from science or reason alone. Likewise, when God came in person in Jesus to lay down his life for his creation, his teachings recorded in Scripture and his example lived out in the lives of his followers began a movement that changed the world for good, leading to the development of the rule of law, human rights, hospitals, charities, public education, and much more.

That's not to say there aren't plenty of challenging passages in the Bible—especially when it comes to slavery, warfare, and violence in the Old Testament. We must all be careful students of Scripture as we navigate the history and context of these passages. However, it's somewhat ironic that the Bible's most vociferous critics are usually judging its morality on the basis of a twenty-first-century Western moral framework that derives from the Bible itself.

The fact that the books of the Bible weren't written in a way that satisfies the somewhat arbitrary level of contemporary scientific or moral knowledge demanded by critics like Atkins is hardly a valid objection to a God who may have a much bigger picture in mind than only the concerns of early-twenty-first-century skeptics. This shortsighted approach to Scripture reminds me of a phrase coined by C. S. Lewis. He described the “chronological snobbery” of those in his own age who regarded the thought and philosophy of the era they had been born into as the only one worth listening to.

The reason many of these critiques of the Bible are so shallow is because they are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of Scripture. If we start out with faulty assumptions about the Bible, then we shouldn't be surprised if it doesn't live up to our unrealistic expectations.

However, when we take the Bible on its own terms, seek to

interpret it in context, and understand the bigger story that is being told through the whole sweep of Scripture, we will soon discover a book that defies a purely naturalistic explanation.

What really marks the Bible as unusual is that, despite being the end product of many different authors writing in times and places very different to each other and our own, it still tells a historically coherent and thematically unified story.

Perhaps even more remarkably, it has been able to unfailingly communicate the meaning and wisdom of that story to multiple generations in diverse parts of the world. Whole swaths of people whose lives have been soaked in the words of the Bible have consequently been able to locate themselves and their purpose within a grand narrative of what it means to be human.

This is the miracle of Scripture—not some parlor trick of finding a scientific equation predicted in its pages (as Peter Atkins might wish), nor some magical ability to exist hermetically sealed off from the normal processes of time and history (as even some Christians might like to believe). The miracle of Scripture is that it has spoken, and continues to speak, to every generation, place, and time it encounters. In doing so, its message has transformed individuals, nations, and empires.

I'm grateful for the work of scholars like John Marriott and Shawn Wicks. In this book you will find clear, thoughtful, and honest responses to the contemporary challenges aimed at Scripture. Most importantly, you'll discover why the Bible continues to outlive its critics and remains the bestselling and most influential book of all time.

*Justin Brierley*

*Speaker, broadcaster, and author of Why I'm Still a Christian  
and The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God*

# Introduction

*Bible-believing Christians, those who see the Bible as the perfect word of God, would be horrified to know how often loss of faith is triggered by someone deciding to read the good book and discovering the long litany of slavery, incest, misogyny, genocide, or scientific absurdities there.*

VALERIE TARICO

On a warm, end-of-summer afternoon, four of us sat in my (Shawn's) backyard, shooting the breeze and talking about anything that came to mind. The conversation included a discussion about socialism and capitalism, the Bill of Rights, and the current state of the education system. It was at this time that a close friend of mine since childhood leaned in and pointedly asked my younger cousin, Brad, whether he still believed in God. You could have heard a pin drop.

My friend did not ask this question out of the blue. He asked it because Brad, who had once professed to be a Christian, was espousing opinions that were clearly no longer grounded or informed by God or the Bible.

I knew Brad had been drifting away for some time. It was his habit to drive down and visit our family during Thanksgiving, and it seemed without fail he would want to talk about God or the prevailing culture. However, as each holiday came and went, I saw the light of his faith gradually dimming. It was also during this time that he walked away from church. He told me he could no

longer stomach the hypocrites and the intolerance he encountered there. He found the people he worshiped with to be judgmental and prejudiced. Despite this, he somehow still clung, albeit precariously, to his belief in God and Jesus for another year. But I could see doubts were growing and festering. It was during this season that I noticed a paradigm shift in his thinking. Catalyzed by several major events in his life, he started denouncing the “sin language” of the Bible as harsh and oppressive. He explained that he preferred the terms *ignorance* and *unenlightened* to *sin* and *evil*. He consumed articles and books that attacked Christianity.

The candor of my friend’s question genuinely caught my cousin off guard. Once he had recovered from the initial shock, though, he slowly shook his head as if gathering the nerve to confess out loud what he and the rest of us already knew. He no longer believed in God. But he did not stop there. He added that he could not understand how any intelligent person could believe in such nonsense.

His words still echo in my heart. “The only evidence we have about God or Jesus comes from the Bible,” he said. “And don’t get me started on the Bible. How can any thinking person believe in the Bible? When we read Grimms’ fairy tales, we don’t think they’re true, right? For me, the Bible is just that. Nothing more than a bunch of fairy tales.”

I pushed back. “You don’t really believe the Bible is a bunch of fairy tales, do you? I mean, fairy tales are a specific genre. When you pick up a newspaper or a history book and read it, you don’t think it is *just* a collection of fairy tales, do you? Of course not. Because it’s not. And neither is the Bible.”

The conversation paused there, so I stood up to get a drink. As I made my way to the ice chest, I noticed Brad was following me. While I grabbed some ice for my drink, he revealed that he could

never believe in a book that condones slavery. He even wondered how anyone, including myself, could choose to believe in such an antiquated, immoral book. These, of course, were loaded statements, and I knew better than to respond to him without carving out time to discuss them at length. But Brad was family, and alas, I did not heed my own wisdom.

My first shortcut response was to confront my cousin's accusation with proof texts. I knew the slavery he had in mind was a certain brand of slavery—rooted in human trafficking and racism and reflected especially in pre-Civil War America. I knew I would not get far explaining that ancient customs and institutions do not correspond directly to the modern world, so instead I pointed him to Exodus 21:16 and Deuteronomy 24:7, old covenant laws against human trafficking. Next, I showed him 1 Timothy 1:9-10, which condemns “enslavers” as “unholy and profane” and associates them with murderers. But I could tell my proof texts barely left a mark. So I asked him, “Where did you get the idea that the Bible condones slavery? It's actually quite the opposite.”

“Well, if it doesn't condone it, it certainly tolerates it,” he countered. “Doesn't it tell slaves they should obey their masters? I get that slavery was accepted back then, but you believe this is God's Word, right? So why doesn't God just say, ‘Hey, everyone! Slavery is wrong! Stop it!’ Instead, it tells slaves to obey their masters.”

It was at this moment that I had an epiphany of sorts. My intelligent, college-educated, well-read cousin, who once claimed to be a Christian and regularly attended church, was working from some faulty assumptions and expectations about the Bible. Not only did he not understand the historical context of this verse, but he was also, based on faulty interpretation, drawing wrong conclusions as to what it was communicating. This left me dismayed and grieving.

The thing is, if I believed what he believed about the Bible, I would think it was nonsense too.

## Time to Raise the Red Flag

Shawn's cousin isn't an outlier. Research shows that large numbers of people who once identified as Christians are shedding that label. They have left the church, denied the faith, and stopped identifying as believers. Some identify as atheists, others as agnostics, and still others as spiritual but not religious. When asked on surveys what their religious affiliation is, they select the only option available to them: "none." As a result, sociologists have taken to referring to them as the nones. And the data shows the percentage of individuals who once identified as Christians but who now identify as nones is increasing at a stunning rate. For example, in the 1990s 90 percent of Americans identified as Christians and only 5 percent identified as nones. Today those numbers are radically different, with 64 percent of Americans identifying as Christians and 30 percent as nones.<sup>1</sup> Studies also show that the vast majority of those identifying as nones—nearly 80 percent—were made, not born.<sup>2</sup> They're not the products of secular homes but rather grew up in religious homes and later deconverted from their faith. To get an idea of the magnitude of this shift, consider the Pew Research Center's claim that for every one person who converts to Christianity four depart.<sup>3</sup> Pew also says that if current deconversion rates continue, within one generation those who identify as nones in the United States will outnumber those who identify as Christians. If that's not enough to raise a red flag, then consider the conclusion of a study conducted by the Pinetops Foundation, which found that within the next thirty years, thirty-five million

people who once identified as Christians no longer will.<sup>4</sup> We could cite more studies, but these should be sufficient to make the case that the church in the United States is hemorrhaging the faithful at an alarming rate.

We should acknowledge that the above studies don't do a good job of distinguishing between those who had a robust faith that was central to their life and those for whom Christianity was only a box they checked on a survey. We suspect that many—possibly even the majority—of those leaving the faith were box-check believers. Regardless, there are *significant* numbers who did display a vibrant faith but who no longer identify as Christians.

Consider Gregg. One morning I (John) opened my email to find a message from Gregg, a middle-age Christian man struggling to hold on to what he believed. Gregg asked if I would be willing to chat with him because before he renounced his faith, he wanted to make sure he had turned over every stone in his search for answers. I responded that I was happy to talk with him and asked if he could share with me before our meeting what was causing him to suspect Christianity was a sham. Here's what he said:

I am still very pro-Christian and believe it is the best religion (or tradition?) in its current state for society. . . . I still go to church as I enjoy the preaching and the music and even participate. I also go to a small group meeting every other Sunday and watch much Christian programming on TV. But when I attend or watch these religious presentations, I just marvel at what they actually believe. I am convinced now that after fifty years of being totally immersed in the “faith” and “apologizing” for it, the religion is demonstrably false. . . . But unlike most

atheists and agnostics I wish the salvation gospel was true. Amazing how euphoric and giddy one would be if they really believed there was a God who knew their name before the foundation of the world and that there was a purpose and plan in this veil of tears on earth and someday, they would get to live in eternal bliss, reunited with family and friends in a heavenly city with streets lined with gold.

Far from being a box-check believer, Gregg both was well-versed in the faith and demonstrated sincerity in his actions and desires. I assumed Gregg was local to Southern California and asked him when and where he wanted to meet. To my surprise he said he would have to check for the most convenient flight to Los Angeles. “You’re not local?” I asked him. “No, I live in Tennessee, but I want to meet with you face-to-face, and I’m willing to pay you \$200 an hour to talk with me.” I told him I couldn’t take his money, but if he was willing to fly across the country, I would give him all the time he wanted. I met Gregg on the campus of Biola University, where I teach. He was soft-spoken, kind, and thoughtful. As we talked, it became apparent what was causing him to have serious doubts about Christianity. You guessed it: the Bible.

Both Christians who have shown little serious engagement with their faith *and* folks like Gregg, who are willing to do almost anything to retain it, often share something in common: The very book that should have strengthened their faith has undermined it. For them, the Bible being called the Good Book is the height of irony. How, they wonder, could a book filled with so many problems ever be good?

## The B-I-B-L-E, That's Not the Book for Me

If you spend any time reading deconversion narratives, you'll find many stories from people like Gregg. While the details differ, the general contour of their stories remains the same. Often raised in a Christian home, they took for granted that the Bible is God's Word and learned many of the major stories in Sunday school and through sermons. But they were largely unaware of the less-popular parts until they read the Bible for themselves. Surprised by the apparent contradictions they discovered, dismayed by the miracle stories they had never given much thought to, and troubled by the violence commanded by God, they began to suspect the Bible wasn't what they were told it was. How could a book from God legislate slavery, get basic details of history wrong, conflict with established science, command genocide, and warn of eternal separation from God for not believing the right things? It's as though a light bulb went on causing them to ask, *Why haven't I ever thought about this before? Do I really believe this stuff? Should I believe this stuff?*

These are all questions David asked himself. Standing in the baptismal tank at his church, David was ready to identify as a disciple of Jesus. Recently converted and active in the youth group and church worship band, David believed he had found the meaning of life. As he stood in the cold water waiting to be dunked, the pastor whispered to him, "You know, Son, you can't just say you believe—you have to *know* it to be true to your heart." David thought,

I don't know it. I have so much research to do. This is weighing over my head, I do not deserve this team [the church]. I better go figure this stuff out. And I ran

home, grabbed a bottle of water, flipped open the Bible, and I read, and read, and read. I was probably the only fifteen-year-old on the planet reading Genesis to Exodus. Reading entirely the Bible! And in every little step, stuff was falling apart for me. My goal honestly was to get so close to God that I could defend him. But I got so close I saw there wasn't one.<sup>5</sup>

David's story is a good example of what Rodney Wilson, professor and coordinator of the history and political science department at Mineral Area College, discovered when he surveyed nearly 1,600 former conservative evangelical and fundamentalist Christians about why they had left the faith. The catalyst for the clear majority was reading the Bible for themselves. Here are what a few respondents had to say:

- “Reading the Bible through in a year is what led to my deconversion.”
- “Honestly what made me change my views was simply reading the Bible! Now, I believe it is a document that is very much a product of its culture and time period, like the *Epic of Gilgamesh* or any other ancient/old document. I think it was created by humans (men, to be precise), and was in no way influenced by any god.”
- “I sat down and read the Bible from cover to cover out of genuine interest and the desire for something more. Little-by-little it became impossible for me to believe in the mythology I was raised with.”
- “While reading it from cover to cover, I began to discover that the character Yahweh and I had some pretty strong disagreements on morality. I didn't like his jealous,

murderous nature and so the doubts were born. Then it hit me. ‘Talking snakes and donkeys?!? Every species of animal from every continent on a ship?!? For real?’”

- “Once I started really reading the Bible, my faith started to wane heavily. Too many contradictions, too many unbelievable things. The more it was pressed as God’s truth, the more I questioned it.”
- “After reading a bit more I realized there were so many fairy tales and inaccuracies in the Bible and that there is no way they could be the product of some all-knowing God.”<sup>6</sup>

The above quotes are representative of thousands of similar ones you’ll find on the internet.

What is it about the Bible, the so-called Good Book, that so many former Christians discovered and that caused them to leave their faith? While we don’t deny the Bible is a complex book with a lot of challenging passages, we’re convinced that the problem for many former Christians lies not so much with the content of the Bible but with the assumptions they brought to it. Specifically, assumptions about what the Bible is and how to understand it.

Assumptions about the Bible act like eyeglasses. They’re the conceptual lenses through which we see the Bible. In the same way that glasses with the wrong prescription will distort our vision of the physical world, wrong assumptions about the Bible will distort our understanding of what it is and how to read it well. The main difference between eyeglasses and assumptions is that when it comes to glasses, we’re aware that we have them on and how they affect our vision. But we are almost entirely unaware of our assumptions. That’s because we don’t really think about them. We take them for granted because they allow us to think in the first place. Assumptions are like deep ocean currents that

are undetectable on the surface but whose power determines the destination of anything caught in their flow.

We're convinced the assumptions that many Christians—current and former—have about the Bible tend to distort rather than clarify its message. When the Bible is left on the shelf or passively heard preached on Sunday mornings, it doesn't matter what glasses we have on. If we don't personally interact with it, those wrong assumptions go unnoticed. But if we take the Bible off the shelf and seriously read it, the incompatibility between our mistaken assumptions about the Bible and what the Bible actually is becomes painfully evident. It's no coincidence that a significant theme in former Christians' stories is that when they got serious about reading the Bible, their crisis of faith began.

We want to be crystal clear: We are not blaming former Christians for their faulty assumptions. In fact, many Christians in the United States share those faulty assumptions. We did, too, and they caused us great frustration as we tried to be faithful to Jesus and at the same time maintain intellectual integrity as we wrestled with the Bible. We share the sentiment expressed by the son of a pastor who needed to have his view of the Bible corrected: "Reading about the Bible . . . and the ways in which it's helpful to read it . . . saved me from walking away from the faith altogether. . . . I had to go outside the Bible to understand what the Bible was to save me from ditching the whole thing."<sup>7</sup>

We're not promoting some novel way of reading the Bible, nor do we claim to possess any secret knowledge that unlocks its "real" message. Rather, when we suggest that a new set of lenses will help you read the Bible, we mean that by reading resources like the one you have in your hands, you will recognize the ways in which you are imposing your own mistaken assumptions on the Bible and instead allow the Bible to be what it is on its own terms.

## The Church's One Foundation Is . . . ?

The place and role of the Bible in the Christian faith can't be overstated. Well, actually, it can be. Sometimes it's said that the Bible is the foundation of Christianity, but that's not quite true. The foundation of Christianity is Jesus Christ. Christianity is centered on a person, not a book. Theologian Greg Boyd puts it this way:

We do not relate to a book, or a list of doctrines that are rooted in that book. We relate to, and our faith is founded upon, Christ and his love for us. Participating in this love that is centered in Christ is the end to which all beliefs about the Bible point. This relationship is what gives significance to everything else the Bible teaches.<sup>8</sup>

While Boyd is correct, there's no denying that we learn about Jesus from a book. Perhaps a more accurate way of stating the roles of Jesus and the Bible is to say that Jesus is the foundation of the faith, and the Bible is the foundation for what we know about Jesus. Because of that, Christians have placed a high priority on believing what it says. Unfortunately, the church hasn't always done a good job of communicating what the Bible is and how to read it well. Some common misunderstandings Christians have about the Bible are that it is . . .

- A lawbook, a source of commands that believers must follow.
- A book of blessing, a collection of stand-alone promises that can be claimed by believers to make their lives better.
- A puzzle to be solved, a metaphysical riddle that, when cracked, will provide truth about the nature of reality.

- A storybook, full of comforting stories about people interacting with God in a warm, fuzzy way.
- A how-to guide, a manual on how to live a life that God blesses.
- A contemporary book, one that ought to align with current moral sensibilities and scientific knowledge.

These problematic views lead to assumptions and expectations about the Bible, which in turn set believers up for a crisis of faith when the Bible doesn't meet those expectations.<sup>9</sup>

## What to Expect from This Book

This book is not so much a defense of the Bible as it is our attempt to provide you with a new set of lenses for looking at it. It's a guide to help you truly understand what it is saying (and not saying) so you can evaluate its claims fairly and appropriately. We do this by identifying eight faulty assumptions that lie at the heart of many deconversion stories:

1. The Bible is an ancient fairy tale
2. The Bible must be error-free
3. The Bible is simple to understand
4. The Bible is written to me
5. The Bible is a rule book
6. The Bible is a history book
7. The Bible is a science book
8. The Bible is a social justice book

We don't claim this book solves all the problems people have with the Bible. However, we do think that when the Bible is seen

for what it is, many of those problems get resolved on their own. We believe that when the Bible is approached in the manner outlined in this book, it stands on its own merits. Blaise Pascal once observed that “we are generally better persuaded by the reasons we discover ourselves than by those given to us by others.” We could not agree more. So if you are someone struggling with doubts about the Bible, or know someone who is, it is our hope that after reading this book, you’ll have the foundation necessary to discover your own good reasons to trust it as a source of divine wisdom, power, and goodness and be able to pass on that foundation to others. But before we address the eight faulty assumptions that often lead to a faith crisis, we need to address three preliminary matters: what the Bible is, what the Bible has done, and who the Bible belongs to. We turn to those matters now, in part 1.



PART 1

PRELIMINARY  
MATTERS



# Never Judge a Book by Its Cover

*The Bible. It's just not working for me. I wish it was. Wouldn't it be great if it did work for me and I had the peace one gets when knowing the universe is just and kind and guided by eternal intelligence? Maybe I'm reading it wrong.*

JUDD APATOW

Almost everyone is familiar with the saying “Never judge a book by its cover.” It expresses the idea that we should not judge someone or something based upon what we see on the outside only. It’s an appeal to give someone or something a chance before completely dismissing them because they might surprise us. Actually, there are several English idioms that express this sentiment. For example, “Clothes don’t make the man” or “Looks can be deceiving” or “Things are not always what they seem.” There is great wisdom here. When I (Shawn) talk to my teenage son about girls he is attracted to, I am constantly reminding him it is what is on the inside that matters. I warn him regularly of the dangers of being shallow-minded and encourage him to get to know someone or something before passing judgment. This wisdom, of course, is

not only for freshman boys. It is suitable for everyone, for we are all prone to pass judgment without truly appreciating and valuing something first.

## Stating the Problem

Sadly, many people today have judged and dismissed the Bible without truly getting to know it. They have tossed it aside without hearing what it actually has to say. Considering the bad experiences some have had with Christianity, the slew of strange and embarrassing verses skeptics have passed around the internet, and a rising secular culture that pushes against the Bible's core values, it is not difficult to see why this is the case. There are, of course, those who have genuinely *studied* the Bible and concluded there is nothing holy or sacred about it, but in our experience, this is the exception, not the rule. Many people—being products of a culture that is averse to thorough, in-depth study, especially when it comes to exploring and investigating religious thought and expression—have dismissed the Bible not because of meticulous research, insightful articles, or compelling arguments but because of something they saw in a meme, or read in a book, or heard from a so-called expert. The problem with this approach, besides the obvious dangers of being manipulated and misled, is that it is not concerned about the truth. It is judging something without truly getting to know it.

Making things more complicated is that this view of the Bible has become trendy, spreading like wildfire through social media. It is far easier to mock and discredit an idea or belief system than it is to explain or appreciate it, especially if we think we won't agree with it or don't understand it fully. Combine that with the ability to spread (mis)information from one person to the next through a

simple click of the mouse, and you can see how distorted views of the Bible might develop. The result? People have come to see the Bible at best as a strange, unenlightened curiosity and at worst as a weapon from the past used to bully others. Even though this view of the Bible is neither fair nor accurate (which we will make plain throughout this book), it has proved rather effective at rattling the faith of many Christians.

Unfortunately, some preachers and Bible teachers have unwittingly contributed to this perception. One of the primary reasons why so many Christians and ex-Christians have only a surface knowledge of the Bible is that the majority of sermons, Bible studies, and Sunday school lessons are geared to be inspirational or moralistic in nature. Preachers cherry-pick what passages they share from, often ignoring the more scandalous and less flattering stories. When those struggling with their faith later become aware of these passages, they feel shocked and betrayed, concluding that either their pastors are not aware of them or are hiding them.<sup>1</sup> Thankfully, many preachers and teachers are realizing that skipping over these troublesome passages is no longer prudent. They are seeing that their failure to preach the entire Word of God from cover to cover has left a generation of Christians vulnerable to the attack of modern skeptics.

## Open and Sincere

If your faith in the Bible has been shaken, we invite you to read this book with an open mind and a sincere heart. If you have come to associate the Bible with fantasies and horror novels or see it as a book of bigotry, violence, and superstition, we ask you to rethink your assumptions. If you are settled in your unbelief, our book is unlikely to persuade you, but it might help you see ways

you are misrepresenting the Bible or unfairly condemning it. A sincere critic who cares about their integrity should always want to properly represent what they are critiquing. And if your faith in the Bible is sound and unshakable, this book will help you present the Bible in such a way that you do not needlessly push others away from it by spreading poor or misleading information about it.

We should say from the outset that what you will not find in this book is a robust study of the Bible and its doctrines. And though we will use many Scriptures throughout the book as examples, this is not a reference book where you can quickly look up specific Bible difficulties and find easy solutions. Instead, we believe your nagging doubts about the Bible are worthy of a foundational response—one that addresses the core issues and gives you the tools to properly interpret the Bible. As the old adage goes, “Give a man a fish, feed him for a day; teach him to fish, feed him for life.” We will do this by first reacquainting you with the Bible (chapters 1, 2, and 3) and then sharing many of the faulty assumptions and unwarranted expectations people have placed on it (chapters 4 through 12). We will show how those have led to skewed interpretations that have wrongly (and unfairly) put the Bible in a bad light. We believe if you are a sincere Christian with honest doubts about the Bible, your appreciation for it will be renewed and your faith in it will be restored. We believe this because we have experienced it ourselves.

## What Is the Bible?

We all have an idea of what the Bible is. For many, the Bible is the written Word of God and the ultimate guide to life. For others, it is a human work full of made-up stories and teachings that people use to justify bigotry and condemn others. Some of

these assumptions are rooted in our upbringings. Some of them are rooted in what we have learned about the Bible from school, books, or other people. Wherever we got our ideas about the Bible, though, it is important to put aside our assumptions. We will come to see that some of our beliefs about the “Good Book”—whether positive, negative, or indifferent—are true and accurate, some are mistaken or erroneous, and some are imprecise or incomplete. But if we aren’t intentional about letting the Bible speak for itself, our preconceived ideas will have a way of overruling or dismissing new information.

The first step to becoming reacquainted with the Bible, then, is to gain a right understanding of what it is. How we answer the question “What is the Bible?” determines how we will approach and apply it.<sup>2</sup> Determining what it is will also help us answer what it is about, what purpose it serves, and what role it should play in the lives of Christians and even the world. And once we have reacquainted ourselves with the nature and purpose of the Bible, we will be free to explore it at a deeper, more insightful level. Only in doing this will we expose our wrong assumptions about it and unravel the seemingly bizarre, antiquated, and troublesome verses.

The English word *Bible* has its roots in the Greek word *biblos*. This word was used to describe a scroll made of Egyptian papyrus that was imported to Greece through the Phoenician port city of Byblos.<sup>3</sup> The plural form of the word *biblos* is *biblia*. The word *biblia* was adopted into Latin and gradually became specifically associated with the collection of Christianity’s holy texts. It was during this time that the word gradually transitioned from a plural word into a singular word, referring to the collection of books as a single unit

From the origin of this word, we quickly discern that the Bible

is not merely one book but a collection of books. These books were written in several languages—Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic (though loanwords from other languages are not uncommon).<sup>4</sup> The Bible is an anthology of texts compiled by God’s historical people over a span of roughly 1,800 years (1400 BC–AD 400). It is composed of sixty-six books, written by over forty authors of disparate cultures and backgrounds. By design it incorporates a variety of literary genres, including creation stories, genealogies, history and biographies, laws and customs, liturgies, poetry and songs, wisdom, parables, prophecies, and letters (among others). These genres are usually grouped together, but multiple genres can be located within individual books.

The Bible as a whole is divided into two major sections, which represent two epochs in salvation history. The first section is referred to as the Old Testament; the second is the New Testament. Ancient Jews broke the Old Testament into three sections: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. In English Bibles, the texts are grouped according to genre into four subsections (Law, History, Poetry, and Prophecy). The New Testament is grouped according to genre into three subsections: History (the Gospels and Acts), Letters (written by the apostle Paul and others), and Prophecy (Revelation).<sup>5</sup>

To refer to the Bible as a simple anthology, though, is misleading. God’s people believe it is more than that. Yes, it is a collection of books, but it is a collection of books that are connected in such a way that they are often treated as one unit. The common threads that bind the books together as a unified collection are the divine character Yahweh (usually translated “Lord” in most English versions of the Bible) and his covenant bond with humankind, especially his people.<sup>6</sup> While Yahweh is not mentioned by name in every portion of Scripture (for example, there is no direct mention

of him in the book of Esther), his unmistakable presence looms over every story and verse. His bond with humankind is rooted in *hesed*, a Hebrew term often translated as “mercy,” “steadfast love,” or “lovingkindness.” It is what moves Yahweh to act on behalf of his people and all humankind. Specifically, he acts in order to bring about peace and salvation.

So then, for God’s people, the Bible is more than an anthology. It is a collection of sacred texts. They are sacred because they reveal God’s nature, plan for salvation, and will for his people. They are sacred because they share through a variety of genres how people have experienced God throughout history. These texts have been widely recognized and accepted as such by the community of faith, though not always immediately.<sup>7</sup> The process by which they were accepted was more organic and less formal than most Christians today realize, but this should not lead us to think the Bible was formed without thought or rationale. And while it is outside the scope of this book to detail or defend this process, it is worth noting that while Jesus disagreed with the Pharisees (religious leaders of his day) about many things, he never disagreed with them about what Old Testament books should be recognized as sacred texts.<sup>8</sup> Not only did he recognize them as sacred texts, but he also claimed they were ultimately about him.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus also gave his disciples the authority to pass on his message. This message is recorded in the New Testament. He promised to give them the Holy Spirit to guide them in remembering, understanding, and sharing his words.<sup>10</sup> The fulfillment of this promise was later confirmed “by signs and wonders and various miracles” (Hebrews 2:4). This provides Christians with a firm theological basis for accepting the books of the Old and New Testaments as Scripture.

So, what is the Bible? It is an anthology of sacred texts that

record how people in the past have experienced or encountered Yahweh (the God of Israel and the early church). Of course, not everyone discovers God in the exact same way, but the majesty of the Scriptures is that people have been “finding God” in them throughout history. It is for this reason Christians recognize and honor these texts as sacred and holy even today. They refer to them as prophecy and revelation because they bring to light things about God and his plan of salvation that people would otherwise not be able to discern on their own.

### What’s It All About?

God has now revealed to us his mysterious will regarding Christ—which is to fulfill his own good plan. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth.

EPHESIANS 1:9-10, NLT

When we survey the collected works of the Bible from a bird’s-eye view, we are able to see its overarching, unifying story. The Bible is the story of God’s redemption of humankind, rooted in his deep desire to commune with his creation—the men and women he made in his image for that express purpose. This story is not a children’s tale or some Hollywood movie. It is a story acted out in history with real people, real circumstances, real experiences, and real events. From creation to the fall, from the fall to redemption, from redemption to the final consummation, it is the story of how God saves those he loves.<sup>11</sup>

That the God of the Bible is identified as a historical figure whom people of diverse backgrounds and cultures come to know

intimately and worship makes the Bible unique among sacred texts. While other holy books speak about god or gods, none of them describe God primarily in that way. So what is the Bible about? It is about God's desires, plans, and actions to make peace with (fallen) humanity for all eternity. We call this salvation history.<sup>12</sup> This idea is key to understanding the heart of every chapter and verse. This idea is clearly seen in passages like Psalm 105 and the speeches recorded in Acts given by Peter, Stephen, and Paul.<sup>13</sup> Of course, salvation history finds its greatest realization and expression in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup> So then, when we call the Bible sacred revelation, we are saying that it is a unique and trustworthy source by which a person can encounter Yahweh, the God of Israel and the church, and draw close to him.<sup>15</sup>

## Interpreting the Bible

Whether you believe in the Bible or not, everybody has a method or way of interpreting it, even if they are not aware of it. Some people say, "I don't interpret the Bible. I let it say what it says." But this is a way to interpret the Bible. When someone picks up the Bible and starts reading it as if it were written to them yesterday by a friend, without any further context, this is a method (albeit an unsound one) of interpreting the Bible. When someone uses this approach, they are not avoiding reading into the text at all. They are actually doing the opposite. They are imposing their own context and meaning onto the text (this is akin to the psychological phenomenon of projecting, where a person unconsciously attributes their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors to another person). This is true whether their interpretation leans more progressive or traditional. When this happens, they end up reading the Bible through their own self-made glasses, and this often leads to

misreading and misunderstanding the text, despite the perceived purity of their method and intentions. If we are to truly grasp what the Bible is saying, we must work to avoid this imprecise and inconsistent method of interpretation. We must replace it with a more reliable and scientific approach (yes, there is a science to interpretation; this science is called *hermeneutics*).

The desire of any student or fair-minded critic of the Bible should be to adopt the best interpretive method in order to comprehend, apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what they are reading in a dispassionate and accurate manner. This is especially important when trying to decipher controversial or contradictory passages.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the reason why particular verses and passages seem strange, out-of-date, vindictive, or petty is usually because we modern-day readers are so out of touch with the context and heart in which they were originally written. It is a goal of this book to address biases and false assumptions about the Bible that poison the well and taint the way we interpret it.

For example, in the introduction, I (Shawn) talked about how my cousin Brad understood the Bible to condone, or at least tolerate, slavery. He came to this conclusion after reading the following verses:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with deep respect and fear. Serve them sincerely as you would serve Christ.

EPHESIANS 6:5, NLT

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything you do. Try to please them all the time, not just when they are watching you. Serve them sincerely because of your reverent fear of the Lord.

COLOSSIANS 3:22, NLT

It is easy to see how he interpreted the Bible the way he did, especially considering our modern sensibilities. The United States has experienced the horrors of slavery. We have seen the ugliness of racism and cringe when we encounter people who are ignorant to its evils. And although ancient customs and institutions do not correspond directly to the modern world, no one can deny that slavery in the ancient world could still be cruel and dehumanizing. So we ask, *Why doesn't the Bible simply say slavery is wrong instead of telling slaves to "obey [their] earthly masters"?* That is a fair question, so long as we are open to understanding the Bible in its historical, literary, and theological context. If we don't, we will likely misunderstand what the Bible is saying.

It is *not* saying that God endorses or condones slavery. How do we know this? Because this interpretation contradicts everything else the Bible has to say about the value and dignity of all human beings, regardless of their race, gender, abilities, and social status. For example, look at what Paul—the same person who wrote the verses quoted above—had to say elsewhere:

There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.

GALATIANS 3:28, NLT

In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.

COLOSSIANS 3:11, NLT

He [Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave] is no longer like a slave to you. He is more than a slave, for he is a beloved

brother, especially to me. Now he will mean much more to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

PHILEMON 1:16-17, NLT

Clearly, we have misunderstood something in the first set of verses if we think they condone slavery. To get to the heart of the “slave” passages cited above, then, we need to ask several other probing questions. Who is Paul referring to when he mentions “slaves” and “masters”? How does this passage fit into the rest of Paul’s letter? Why does he bring up this subject at all? What are we reading into the verses that might be causing us to walk away with the wrong message? But for now, we’ll point you to the key to understanding many passages like this. It comes by answering this essential question: How does this text fit in with the overarching theme of salvation history?

The answer might surprise you in its simplicity. Paul wants *Christian* slaves to obey their masters for the same reason Jesus wants his followers to “not resist an evil person,” and turn the other cheek, and go the extra mile (Matthew 5:39-42, NLT). When Jesus said these words, he was not saying it is permissible for someone to slap another person on the face or compel them to walk a mile. Rather, he was teaching his followers how to win over others by loving and respecting them. And they would do this by doing what Jesus said: “Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you” (Luke 6:27-31, NLT). As Martin Luther King Jr. once commented, “Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.”<sup>17</sup> He also famously said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do

that.”<sup>18</sup> Jesus and King are by no means approving or tolerating the behavior of their abusers or enemies here. Neither is Paul condoning, or even tolerating, the institution of slavery. We know Paul has something more subversive in mind, because only a few verses after exhorting slaves to obey their masters, he writes these revealing words:

Pray for us, too, that God will give us many opportunities to speak about his mysterious plan concerning Christ. That is why I am here in chains. Pray that I will proclaim this message as clearly as I should.

Live wisely among those who are not believers and make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone.

COLOSSIANS 4:3-6, NLT

What Paul is saying is that the right and proper response of a Christian slave is to obey their master, not because God condones slavery, but because in choosing this approach, they are planting the seeds that will eventually uproot the evil of slavery that marred the Roman Empire—and they are doing it without raising a single sword.<sup>19</sup>

It should be clear now that these verses found in Paul’s letters do not condone the institution of slavery, nor do they ignore it. Rather, they subvert it. They show a Christian how to live the good news of Jesus in such a way that they could win over even their enemies. Of course, you might ask, *Why does he tell masters to be “just and fair to your slaves” (Colossians 4:1, NLT) instead of simply commanding them to set their slaves free? Great question!* We will discuss this later in the book.

## You Be the Judge

The origin of the quote “Never judge a book by its cover” is typically credited to George Eliot, author of *The Mill on the Floss*.<sup>20</sup> In the novel, the character Mr. Tulliver, while discussing the book *The History of the Devil* by Daniel Defoe, says, “And there’s a lot more of ’em,—sermons mostly, I think,—but they’ve all got the same covers, and I thought they were all o’ one sample, as you may say. *But it seems one mustn’t judge by th’ outside.* This is a puzzlin’ world.”<sup>21</sup>

He says this to explain how he came to possess the book—he purchased it accidentally because he didn’t look inside but judged it by its cover.

This scene and quote are far more profound than most casual readers realize. In context, Mr. Tulliver’s daughter, Maggie (the novel’s protagonist), is presented as an inquisitive and impetuous girl who loves to read. And when the opportunity presents itself to discuss Defoe’s book with one of her dad’s friends, Mr. Riley, she engages in a lively discussion with him about it. Mr. Riley is taken aback by her “cleverness,” and his response is reflective of the times: “I advise you to put by the ‘History of the Devil,’ and read some prettier book. Have you no prettier books?” Obviously, the quote “But it seems one mustn’t judge by th’ outside” takes on added meaning, as Mr. Riley has wrongly judged the girl in front of him. He has judged her without getting to know her. This scene takes on *even more* added meaning when we understand that the name of the author, George Eliot, is a pseudonym for Mary Ann Evans. Evans had several reasons to hide her identity as the book’s author. Without a doubt, one of them was that she wanted to avoid the stereotypes associated with women’s writings at the time. She wanted her book to be judged on its merits. More

specifically, *she* wanted to be judged on her merits as an author, not on her gender.

It is in the spirit of Maggie Tulliver and Mary Ann Evans, then, that we sincerely invite you, no matter where you are on your spiritual journey, to do the same with the Bible. Judge it on its merits. Get to know it before you dismiss (or embrace) it. Put aside for the moment your feelings about religion and sacred texts. In fact, we encourage you to start reading it as a sacred text and a witness to salvation history (even if you doubt its veracity). Read it as revelation—an ancient text by which people even today claim to encounter God. See it as a collection of various texts written by diverse authors of every kind of background that tell the story of redemption. This will mean letting go of some major assumptions, but in doing so, you will slowly grasp what the Bible teaches.