



Bible Truths for Unbelievers

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This oral essay began as a request. I am always deeply grateful for all the suggestions I can get^[1].

Many liberal thinkers are at a loss to know what to think about the Bible. We realize that it has played an important role in the development of our culture, but the Bible contains angels, miracles, prophesies, and also an ancient, unscientific world-view. It is an old book in our present world.

Often our relatives and friends tell us that they are not confused. They know exactly what to think. They sincerely believe all the promises of The Holy Bible. For them the Bible is the Word of God. Trying to be helpful and being concerned for our immortal souls, they ask us, "Surely God wouldn't lie, would He? Jesus would not lie, would He?" At this point the volume of their voices usually raises a decibel or two, and they step in a tad closer. Now they have us trapped. We must either admit that we believe that God and Jesus would lie, or we must agree with the word-for-word, cover-to-cover, true believers.

But it is not that simple. There may be some middle ground between thinking God lied and thinking scripture is absolutely true from cover to cover. The UU does not want to insult or offend the friend or relative, and so speaks cautiously, "Well, actually, Cousin, to tell the truth, I don't believe everything in the Bible."

"You don't believe the Bible, the Word of God?"

"Not everything," we reply.

"You can't believe just what you want to believe."

"I think I do," we UUs reply. "I don't mean to suggest that my religious and philosophical ideas are capricious and arbitrary, but I do believe some parts of the Bible and I reject other parts. And I observe that many other people do that. In fact, I think that it is impossible for a person to really believe something he or she doesn't want to believe, doesn't actually believe."

Our UU continues, "Take for example, slavery. Slavery is approved by the Bible. It is mentioned many times, and there is not a chapter or verse against it. For instructions for selling one's daughters into slavery, see Exodus 21:7-11. The age of the girl doesn't matter as long as she is not sold to a foreigner. See Nehemiah 5:5 for an example of poor families being forced to sell their children as slaves. See 2nd Kings 4:1, for an example of a widow selling her children into slavery. In the New Testament look up the letter of Paul to Philemon, all 25 verses, for an account of Paul's sending a run-away slave, Philemon, back to his master. In the United States of America our 'Bible Belt' is also the States of the Confederacy. If anyone has doubts about whether the Good Book approves of slavery, she or he should read Exodus 21:20-21, "When a slaveowner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner's property."

The UU continues, "Do you, Dear Cousin, think that the statement, 'the slave is the owner's property,' is part of the Word of God?"

At this point I interrupt myself to confess that this oral essay is really a work of fiction. It is certainly not a tape recording of an actual conversation. I have never in all my life met a UU that had gone to the trouble of memorizing all these Bible verses and their exact location, --book, chapter and verse. But I have met plenty of these Bible believers, including many if not most of my Texas relatives. I love them and respect them, but I do not agree with them. And I think that everyone here has gone through a similar conversation, a similar intellectual struggle at some point in her or his life. But to continue with this imaginary conversation- - -

The Bible believing friend or relative and our UU ended temporarily their discussion and agreed to finish it some other time. Meanwhile the believer consulted her or his pastor who said that the reason the UU got into all this trouble was because the UUs were using the wrong translation of the Bible. He said, "They should have been using the King James Version."

He explained this to our believing cousin who repeated to our UU, "In the King James Version there are no slaves. It tells it as it really was; these were man servants and maid servants."

"Wait a minute," said our UU, "the King James Version was a good translation in 1611, but during the last five centuries the English language has changed and other ancient manuscripts have been found. Whether these were slaves bought and sold like house-hold pets or were servants working for an hourly or yearly wage, the Bible says that their boss or owner could beat them if he wished to do so. He was only required to refrain from killing them immediately. If they lingered a day or two there was no penalty for the beating. Would the AFL-CIO allow this beat-them-almost-but-not-quite-to-the-point-of-death be included as a working condition in their next contract? Even the King James Version talks about buying and selling these man servants and maid servants. When a father sells his daughter to another man, and collects the going price for a virgin, then it really doesn't matter whether the new owner calls her his slave, servant, daughter, mistress, concubine or wife, she still must stay with him and do as he says for as long as he wants her. The point is that I do not think this is a divine law that came straight from God. What do you think?"

The Bible believing cousin thought for a moment and then replied, "I think you are wrong but I will have to go back to my pastor and ask him why."

So the next day the believing cousin came back with the orthodox explanation, saying to the UU, "My pastor pointed out to me that in those days, slavery was accepted everywhere.^{ii[2]} The ancient people wouldn't know how to organize their societies and governments without slavery. God had to wait until a later time to tell people that slavery was wrong."

Our UU smiled and said, "That was a pretty good answer, but I noticed that you are now arguing on my side. You are saying that for some reason God did not express the way he actually thought. Society was too primitive. Or the people wouldn't understand what he was talking about. All these verses about slavery do not express the wisdom of God, but they reflect the ideas, values and opinions of the people living in those ancient times and places. That is exactly what I think. I think that everything written on this planet was written by human beings, and each human author reflected the ideas of his time and place. So you and I agree that not every passage of scripture..."

“Wait a minute,” the believing cousin shouted, “I have not changed sides. I still believe the Bible is the Word of God.”

“You still believe the Bible is the Word of God, but it is just not true word for word. Each verse doesn’t express the mind of God.”

“One little thing, slavery. And you throw it all out. Wait and see, you will burn in Hell.”

“My friend, are you suggesting that slavery is the only idea in the scriptures that is inappropriate for our age?”

Our Bible believer hesitated, saying, “I think I better go now.”

“I understand. But before you visit with your pastor, it would be better if you and I figured out a little list of things for him to verify.”

“Well, maybe.”

Then we should include polygamy. If a father could sell his own daughter, then the only limit to the number of a rich man’s wives were his financial resources and the available supply of women. ^{iii[3]}Gideon had 70 sons, “for he had many wives” (Judges 8:30). David had eight wives individually mentioned and probably many more unmentioned. When he fled from his son Absalom, he left ten concubines in Jerusalem (2nd Samuel 15:16). In this regard, Solomon wins the prize, he had “among his wives seven hundred princesses, and three hundred concubines (1st Kings 11:3). Anyone who claims to believe that the Holy Bible is the Word of God will have to explain the practice of polygamy.

And also explain the biblical rules of lending and borrowing money. Exodus chapter 22 verse 25 NRSV reads, “If you lend money to my people. . .you shall not exact interest from them.” Deuteronomy 23:19 reads, “You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent.” Loan without interest! I am not sure that our national economy could exist by following this rule. This is not a rule against exorbitant interest; it is a prohibition against any interest whatsoever. It rules against house mortgages and business loans. Bankers would be bankrupt.

At the grocery store, our laws require that the basic nutritional facts be printed on each package of food: the calories per serving, the total fat, the saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrates, fiber, sugars, protein, vitamins and minerals. But when we open The Good Book we are in a different world. We are told that we can eat four-legged animals only if they chew their cud and have parted hooves. Thus we cannot eat pigs. Ham, bacon and pork must be removed from our diet (Leviticus 11:1—8). When we enter the seafood restaurant we must be careful to avoid sea creatures that do not have fins and scales. Catfish, lobsters, clams, crabs, oysters, shrimp, and scallops must not be ordered (Leviticus 11:9-12).

The point here is that there are millions of good men and women, the salt of the earth, who profess to believe the Bible and follow its teachings, and yet they make no effort to abide by these dietary laws. They try to tell us that they have a new covenant with God. But Jesus himself said, “whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments will be called least in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:19, cf.5:17-20)

Anyone who has tried to read through the Holy Bible will discover the story of Noah in the Seventh chapter of Genesis. At this early stage of history or mythological history, God saw that the earth was corrupt and he was sorry he created it. His solution was the big

flood. Everything died in whose nostrils was the breath of life,--birds, animals and humans. "Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark" (Genesis 7:23). This was a mass killing, ordered and committed by God. Is a mass killing any way for a god to act? I don't think so. Every teacher knows that punishing the whole class is an inadequate pedagogical method. But the big flood is not an isolated example. One Bible scholar has gone through the Bible and counted the number of mass killings that were ordered, committed or approved by God, and found seventy-three.^{iv[4]} Our limitations of time forbid me from dwelling on each one, but I have included the biblical references, all 73, in my footnote. Anyone who believes all these stories must believe in a blood-thirsty god.

There is one thing in favor of the notion of a blood-thirsty god, and it is that god's character is at least consistent with one who would prepare hell and keep it handy, waiting for us to die. Hell! What a horrible idea! People in terrible pain, and yet they do not lose consciousness, nor are they ever in line for a possible parole. What is the purpose of Hell? Is it supposed to be therapeutic or educational? If you can imagine a reasonable purpose for Hell, please share it with the rest of us in our discussion period. Our friends the Roman Catholics have imagined (or had revealed to them) a place called Purgatory for people who are too good for Hell and not good enough for Heaven^{v[5]}. In a few years or a few thousand years one can move out of Purgatory and into Heaven. The people who are "saved", a limited number, 144,000 according to Revelation 7:4, go to heaven and join the heavenly chorus.

According to my most recent almanac^{vi[6]}, there are now 6,234,250,000 people on earth. That means that the population of the Earth is now 43,293.4 times greater than the revealed population of heaven. But there is more. To arrive at the true statistical probability of entering heaven we would have to add to the present population of the earth, which is greater than six billion (6 + 9 zeros, to round it off) the number of people who were born on earth and died before this year. I do not have this figure nor do I know where to find it. All we can conclude is that heaven is a very exclusive neighborhood. By the year 2050 the world population is estimated to be over 9,000,000,000. The chance of entering heaven grows less and less with the passage of time. Good luck to all our grandchildren.^{vii[7]}

Anyone who believes the Holy Bible is inerrant is also absolutely certain that it has no contradictions. True believers tell us, "Would God contradict himself?" They hand us a Bible and say, "Show me a contradiction!" And in many instances we UUs have not gone to the trouble to memorize where a contradiction is found.

Here is my favorite example: When the women looked into the empty tomb on that first Easter morning, what did they see? We are about to encounter four different answers, each one contradicting the other three gospel writers. And it is easy to remember the location. This is the end of the life of Jesus. He has been crucified and put away in a tomb. The women go to the tomb, but they do not find Jesus there. The Christian Scriptures has four gospels telling the story of the life of Jesus,--Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Thus we look at the end of the gospels, at the beginning of the last chapter. We find that according to Matthew they saw an angel (Matt. 28:2), according to Mark they saw a man (Mark 16:5), according to Luke they saw two men (Luke 24:4), and according to John they saw two angels (John 20:12). One little complication is that in the

gospel according to John this Easter story occurs in the next to last chapter. You may have already learned that Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the three synoptic gospels because they are quite similar. John is quite different. His gospel starts not with the birth of Jesus, but with Jesus creating the world. John's Easter story is found in the next to last chapter. John's last chapter is the meeting of Jesus and the disciples by the shores of Galilee. Incidentally, each gospel has a different list of women who came to the empty tomb that Easter morning.^{viii[8]}

Of course, the Bible Believers have heard about so-called Bible contradictions. They maintain that there are no contradictions, there are only Bible problems. If you think and pray over a Bible problem you will probably discover the true solution to that problem. And even if death should interrupt your praying and thinking, God will reveal the correct solution to you in heaven.

In this case, they tell us, the solution is rather obvious. When we read that Matthew saw an angel and Mark saw a man, there is no contradiction here. They saw a male angel. And when Luke and John reported seeing two male angels, there is no contradiction here. There were actually two male angels, but only one did the talking. Matthew and Mark chose to mention only the one who spoke.

And when one considers the different lists of women who went to the empty tomb, -- Matthew mentions two women, while Mark and Luke mention four or more women, and John's list contains the single name of Mary Magdalene, --there is no contradiction here. John did not write that there was only one woman and no one else.

By the application of human ingenuity all apparent contradictions can be explained away. It appears to me that what we are seeing here is not a characteristic of ancient manuscripts, but a certain method of interpretation, which rules out the possibility of any Biblical contradictions. The True Believers mistakenly criticize historical and scientific studies because Bible Believers think these liberal writers assume before studying the facts that there can never be any super-natural miracles, and historical and scientific scholars criticize believers in an inerrant Bible because they disallow any contradictions, either of other Bible verses, or of matters of facts, or ethical principles. I have never seen a supernatural miracle, but I have seen hundreds of questionable statements in our sacred scriptures. I do not think that any event that someone calls a divine miracle is impossible, but I do want all strange and unusual reports to be sufficiently verified.

Gleason Archer, Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and who was Acting Dean at Fuller Theological Seminary, has written a book, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Difficulties* (Zondervan Corporation, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982). Gleason Archer is an intelligent and scholarly believer in the inerrancy of the Holy Bible, a man who is highly respected in conservative evangelical circles. His book, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Difficulties*, is a collection of 2144 apparent contradictions^{ix[9]}, each one explained to be something other than a contradiction. Explanations for 2144 Bible problems! Amazing!

The Ten Commandments have recently become an item of news for the radio, television and newspaper. The Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, Roy Moore, placed a 5,280 pound granite monument of the Ten Commandments in the lobby of the state judicial building, installed in the dead of night. The federal Supreme Court ruled that it had to be removed as its presence was a violation of the First Amendment, "Congress

shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The presence of the Ten Commandment monument showed a governmental preference for one particular religious tradition and led the federal court to threaten Alabama Chief Justice Moore with a fine of \$5,000 a day until “Roy’s Rock” was removed. Hundreds of loyal supporters descended upon Montgomery, Alabama equipped with candy bars and bottles of water prepared for a long siege. In their eyes there was nothing wrong with the Ten Commandments, which they thought was the basic foundation of our government.^{x[10]}

Apparently these good people did not know that there are three examples of the Decalogue in the Bible. Two are almost alike, the only difference being in the sabbath commandment. Exodus 20:8—11 based it on the day of rest following our six-day creation, while Deut. 5:12—15 based the Sabbath upon the Hebrew escape from Egyptian bondage. Exodus 34:1—28 is quite different and primitive, but it is the only one called The Ten Commandments by scripture (34:28).

It is interesting to notice that not all prophets thought the Decalogue was perfect. Both Exodus 20:5 and Deuteronomy 5:9 say “I the LORD YOUR God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me.” Notice that both expressions of the Decalogue declare that the children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren will be punished for the sins of the father.

The prophet Ezekiel says explicitly that this is not true. “The word of the LORD came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb. . . ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’? . . . Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die. . . A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent for the iniquity of a child” (18:1—4, 20).

Here is a conflict of ideas, the punishment by God extending to four generations versus Ezekiel’s ideal of individual responsibility^{xi[11]}. I can understand how church leaders through the centuries have adopted the notion of a perfect truth, fixed and unchanging, a theology, philosophy and ethics not invented by humans but revealed by God. Just teach the church members as young as possible that the Bible is inerrant, and all the other religious ideas will be accepted.

The Bible is a fascinating library of books that has been immensely important in the development of our culture and civilization. But it is an ancient library, written when religion, science, history and philosophy were in the morning of life. Many passages are attempts to describe the past and preserve it, but the writers had no newspapers, and most had no libraries or official documents to consult. If you and I had lived then, we could not have done any better.

^{i[1]} I have taken it upon myself to ask Jeff Harper to act as a one-man pastoral relations committee whose duty it shall be to pass along to the speaker the thoughts and opinions of the friends of the fellowship. .

^{ii[2]} The fundamentalist-evangelical pastor consulted two well known sources, --Archer, Gleason L. *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*. (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982), p 86b. "It must be recognized that it [slavery] was practiced by every ancient people. . . Slavery was as integral a part of ancient culture as commerce, taxation, or temple service." The second source is Elwell, Walter A. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984), cf. "Slavery" pp 1021-22 ."Slavery was an accepted fact in the ancient world and a significant factor in economic and societal life. . . ."In the OT slavery was a legally prescribed institution and generally more humanitarian than in the Near East." Notice that both sources say essentially the same thing.

^{iii[3]} An additional limitation other than supply and demand of women was that the husband was not allowed to have a mother and her daughter as his wives at the same time. Cf. Leviticus 20:14. Also, owning two sisters as wives at the same time was forbidden. Cf. Leviticus 18:18. It is difficult for us to determine the extent to which these restrictions were followed. Leviticus is traditionally ascribed to Moses as part of the 716 laws surrounding the Ten Commandments. Several centuries later according to Biblical history,-- "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes"(Judges 17:6).

^{iv[4]} Green, Ruth Hurmence: *The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible*. Chapter 5, p 102-111. For the 71 other examples see #2 Gen 19:24, #3 Ex. 12:29, #4 Ex. 14:14:27-8, #5 Deut. 7:1-2, #6 Ex. 17:11-16, #7 Ex. 32:27, #8 Num. 14:37, #9 Num. 16:1-40, #10 Num. 16:41-49, #11 Num. 21:3, #12 Num. 21:25 and Deut. 2:34. # 13 Num. 21:34-35, #14 Num. 25:4-9, #15 Num. 25:16-17 and 31:7-8, #16 Num. 32, # 17 Deut. 2:19-21, #18 Deut. 2:22, # 19 Joshua 6, #20 Joshua 8:1-30, #21 Joshua 10:10-11, #22 Joshua 10:16-26, #23 Joshua 10:28, #24 Joshua 10:29-30, #25 Joshua 10:32, #26 Joshua 10:33, #27 Joshua 10:34-35, #28 Joshua 10:36-37, # 29 Joshua 10:40, #30 Joshua 11:11-17 and 12:24, #31 Judges 1:18-19, #32 Judges 3:29, #33 Judges 1:4, #34 Judges 3:31, #35 Judges 4:16, #36 Judges 8:10, #37 Judges 9:5 (one escaped), #38 Judges 14:19 (The spirit of the LORD came upon Samson), #39 Judges 15, #40 Judges 16:27-30, # 41 Judges 20: 35, #42 1st Sam., 6:19, #43 1st Sam 7:13, #44 1st Sam.14:12-20, #45 1st Sam. 11:11, #46 1st Sam. 15:3-7, #47 1st Sam. 18:5-7 and 23:5 and 2nd Sam5:25 and 8:1, #48 1st Sam. 18:27, #49 1st Sam. 27:8-9, #50 2nd Sam. 5:6-8, #51 2nd Sam.8:2-14, #52 2nd Sam. 10:18, #53 2nd Sam. 11:1, #54 2ndSam. 12:31, #55 1st Kings 11:15, #56 2nd Sam. 4:7-12, #57 2nd Sam. 24:15, #58 1st Kings 18:40-46, #59 1st Kings 20:28-30, #60 2nd Kings 1, #61 2nd Kings 2:23-24, #62 2nd Kings 8:1, #63 2nd Kings 9:8 & 10:1-11, #64 2nd Kings 10:12-17, 30, #65 2nd Kings 10:18-25, #66 2nd Kings 19:35, #67 2nd Kings 23:20, #68 2nd Chronicles 13:16-18, #69 2nd Chronicles 25:11-12, #70 2nd Chronicles 28, #71 Esther 3:5-8 & 7:10 & 9:1-14, #72 [Purin] Esther 9:16, and #73 Job 1:13-19.

^{v[5]} "For those who find themselves in a condition of being open to God, but still imperfectly, the journey towards full beatitude requires a purification, which the faith of the Church illustrates in the doctrine of 'Purgatory' (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1030-1032*). Pope John Paul II goes on to say "Purgatory is not a place but a condition of existence." <http://www.petersnet.net/research/retrieve.cfm.RecNum=1185>

^{vi[6]} *The World Almanac and Book of Facts 2003* (World Almanac Books) p. 587

^{vii[7]} On the brighter side, Isaac Asimov, *Asimov's Guide to the Bible* (Doubleday, N.Y., 1968-69) suggests that the number should not be taken literally. Until the Middle Ages the "thousand" was the largest number for which there was a word. There was no "million" or "billion" etc.

^{viii[8]} Which women were at the Tomb? Matthew 28:1: Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, Mark 16:1: Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James and Salome, Luke 24:10: Mary Magdalene, Mary, mother of James, Joanna and other women, and John 20:1: Mary Magdalene.

^{ix[9]} By my count there are 2144 verses of scripture in his book, based on Archer's Index of Scripture References, pp 464-476.

^{x[10]} "Faithful Flock to Protect Ten Commandments" by Jeffrey Gettleman, The New York Times, reprinted in the Tampa Tribune, p. 10 of Nation/World, 21 August 2003.

^{xi[11]} The Apostle Paul has extended the punishment of God far beyond four generations. All human beings are said by Paul to have inherited the original sin of Adam (eating the forbidden fruit) and thus deserve to spend eternity in Hell unless they are "saved" by the blood of Jesus. Gimmeabreak!