

THE BOOK OF DANIEL

Testimony of an Atheist

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I'm being only a little ironic with the title. My name really is Daniel. And I wrote this book.

I'm an atheist. I don't believe that any Supreme Being is watching over us, and I believe that the universe is simply here because it is here, without the need for any "intelligent designer" to have made it occur.

In this book, I've tried to express my own, personal point of view about God and gods, about religion, and about how and why humanity came up with these ideas. A lot of it will consist of things I have thought of on my own, mixed with ideas I got from somewhere else. And facts. And wide consensus of experts that can play the role of facts.

My intended audience is people who are already questioning their religious beliefs, or are not sure whether they have any, or who never did have any, who want to hear from someone who did his own questioning long ago, perhaps to support or give new shape to their own perceptions on the subject of religion. That is, if you want some reasons not to believe, I'm offering some here.

If you are looking for "proof" that God doesn't exist, that's not what this is about. I don't believe it is possible to prove God doesn't exist or to prove that He does, using anything humanity has ever learned, thought, or experienced so far. All attempts to do one or the other have always appeared lame to me. The entire concept of God is outside the boundaries of what "rational proof" is capable of establishing.

Anyone is welcome to read this book. I will often address the reader as if he/she is a religious person, because I will be making arguments, and it is such persons whom I am arguing with --

and I do hope some of them will read this, and offer responses to some of the things I've said here. (It does take two sides to have an argument.) But I am not, in truth, trying to convert anyone from religion to atheism. I am not operating under the delusion I can argue anyone out of their faith in God. Chapter 1, in fact, will suggest why converting anyone is unlikely.

I will cite sources when I feel the need. Sometimes the source will be Wikipedia. People tend to disparage Wikipedia, putting it low on their scale of reliability, but the authors of its most serious articles work very hard and they *cite outside sources*, either books or Web pages to which they provide links, and if you don't hold Wikipedia in high regard, then check out the outside sources and make judgments on *them*. In fact, you're welcome to do your own research on anything I say here.

The level of scholarship here is fairly modest. I haven't tried to bring the work up to professional publication level. I don't see why I would need to. Nobody is paying me for this.

I hope this book is helpful.

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1. BELIEF

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), in *Through the Looking Glass*

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There's a phenomenon I caught onto during a period, a decade ago, when I spent a lot of time on AOL message boards, trying fruitlessly to talk some sense into people with bizarre, unsupportable notions. The phenomenon is that, in general, humans believe what they want to believe.

For an extreme example, you can look at the real conspiracy nuts, who see dark, conscious, evil intent behind every unfortunate occurrence. When such people claim, say, that an American commercial plane crash was caused by the evil U.S. government shooting the plane down (for whatever reason), they are immune to wondering how the hundreds of NTSB investigators sent to the scene to try to "hide" the causes of the crash (while "pretending" to determine them), or radar operators assigned to "cover up" electronic proof of the shutdown, people whose political views are spread across the entire spectrum, certainly in many cases opposed to the political party in power in the government, along with all of their family members and anyone else they would naturally confide in, ALL of these people are willing and able somehow to keep the nasty secret, even though few of them personally have anything to gain by keeping that secret -- and in spite of that, the conspiracy theorist himself somehow knows the secret. There is no logical argument you can make that will cause the slightest dent in the absolute assurance these people have that they know the truth and nobody else does. They *want* to believe their theory, because it would be SO exciting and satisfying to them if it were true and they were privileged to be among the few who knew.

If you are thinking (reasonably enough) that the above example applies only to a small percentage of the population, then consider the following: "Humans only make use of ten percent of their brains." Do you believe that? According to one poll, 65% of Americans do. My source on that poll is *The Guardian*: "The Greatest Brain Myth There Ever Was?":

<http://www.theguardian.com/science/head-quarters/live/2014/oct/02/the-greatest-brain-myth-there-ever-was>

Yet it isn't true. As the above article says in its title, it's a myth. As far as neuroscientists have been able to determine, there is no significant part of our brain that doesn't perform some function. For another source on the myth (in addition to the article in *The Guardian*, above), here is one from *Scientific American*: "Do People Only Use 10 Percent of Their Brains?" <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/do-people-only-use-10-percent-of-their-brains/> (Note that this latter article is from 2008, long before the release of the motion picture "Lucy" that inspired the *Guardian* article.)

There are a lot of false beliefs about science in the general population, but it's rare that one achieves quite the degree of penetration that this one has. Why do so many people believe something that all experts in neurophysiology know is untrue? Well, each of the above articles contains a hint. The *Scientific American* article includes the following comment: "Though an alluring idea, the '10 percent myth' is so wrong it is almost laughable, says neurologist Barry Gordon at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore." To me, the key word in that statement is "alluring." *The Guardian* makes the point even more clearly: "The 10% myth is appealing because it's exciting to think that we have so much untapped potential." Both of these quotes are identifying what it is about the "ten percent" myth that accounts for so many people believing it: there is something intrinsically attractive about it. That is, people believe it because they *want* to believe it.

I am claiming that that is the way it is with *everybody's* beliefs. They aren't arrived at by any intellectual thought process; people believe the things they believe because they want to believe them. There may be a thousand reasons *why* they want to believe them -- perhaps their beliefs reassure them, perhaps their beliefs justify their feelings of inadequacy or incompetence, perhaps their beliefs mirror those of their parents, perhaps their beliefs are in intentional contradiction to those of their parents, and on and on. Sometimes we use logic to shore up our beliefs (and in that case we believe in the power of the logic *because* it supports our beliefs), but the beliefs precede the logic.

If you are reading this, having seen what this book was going to be about, you may well be an atheist or agnostic, and there's a good chance you're thinking, "I take pride in basing my beliefs on the testimony of my own senses." That's not really what I'm talking about. Thoughts based on the testimony of the senses are observations, not beliefs. I'm talking about what's left, outside of observations: the mental constructs you've made about how the world works, or the conclusions you've reached about things you've heard, that aren't purely based on anything your senses have told you directly. And yes, everyone has those. Don't try telling me you've never formed an opinion of any kind about anything anyone has ever said to you. You believe those things, or you don't. As you choose.

I'm not immune to the phenomenon, of course -- I'm as human as any of the people I'm discussing, and this is simply part of what we are as humans. I once stated this proposition, about people believing what they want to believe, in an online discussion, and a woman responded dismissively, "Oh, right, so everybody but you just believes what they want, and you're the only exception. I don't care much for double standards." This despite the fact I had never, at any point in my own comment, claimed or even slightly hinted that the comment didn't apply to me, nor did I have any reason to say it didn't. The woman making the response had simply chosen to believe that I was trying to claim I was special somehow, though that perception of my intent wasn't supported in any way in anything I'd written. So I posted a response to thank her for helping illustrate my point.

Now, on to religion. Religious beliefs are a perfect example of belief caused by wanting to believe. I will explore more deeply into what it is in the human mind that leads to widespread belief in God in chapter 3, but for the present I just want to introduce the general phenomenon of believing what you do about religion because of wanting to.

Religious beliefs, more than any other kind, are almost completely closed off from outside argument. Think about your own religious orientation. Let's say you're a Christian. Can you formulate a logical argument, or point to any concrete evidence, that *proves* you're right and that Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, animists, atheists, and so on, are all wrong? Do you even feel a need to?

(If you are an atheist, you're not off the hook. Re-read the last three sentences in the previous paragraph starting from "Let's say..." and switch the two words "Christian" and "atheist.")

Why do you believe the things you believe, relative to religion? In the end, it comes down to the fact that you want to. It may be that you want to believe certain things due to being afraid *not* to believe them (God might strike you dead or afflict you with warts, perhaps, or your parents might have soundly thrashed you when you were a child if you didn't believe), because duress can be a real motivator. But whether you hold beliefs about religion because they make you feel peaceful, or they will earn you an eternal reward, or they mesh with your conscious values involving being nice to people, or they will prevent inflicted (temporary or eternal) pain, or you are defying all those around you who believe differently, or you had a traumatic experience that pushed you in one direction or another, or you had a mind-bending insight, or for any number of other possible reasons, those considerations have led you to want to believe as you do.

At any rate, that's what I believe.

2. VALUES THREATS

When I'm watchin' my TV / And a man comes on to tell me / How white my shirts can be / But he can't be a man 'cause he doesn't smoke / The same cigarettes as me...

Mick Jagger, in *I Can't Get No Satisfaction*

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We're all internally wired to feel threatened by anyone who doesn't share our values. Possibly it's a survival mechanism -- if we hadn't been that way through the ages, our species would be gone. Possibly it's a holdover from the era of tribalism, when a member of another tribe was often a genuine potential threat. That internal wiring was useful then, and continues to have some usefulness even now. But like any human trait, it has its downside.

I'll define values to be the rankings, according to their importance to us, of certain abstract concepts we carry in our minds. A few examples of these abstract concepts: personal independence; family; religious beliefs; control of others; sexual pleasure; interpersonal peace; responsibility; sobriety; chastity; personal recognition; being entertained... Each of us ranks these concepts, and many others, from most important to least. (As you read that list, you probably mentally dismissed some of them as being unimportant to you, while picking out one or two as being central to your life.) Each of us does this ranking in our own way, in response to our life experiences, our intrinsic personalities, and other factors all working together, and the end result is our system of values. As soon as we perceive that someone in our lives seems to have values significantly different from our own, we feel a threat from them. That includes their presence on television or the Internet, completely removed from any possibility of physical contact with us.

Since no two people have *exactly* the same values, the question arises: just how different do two people's values need to be before the alarm goes off and the defensive adrenaline rush begins? Conveniently, values themselves are the measure that allows precisely those sorts of lines to be drawn. If the values of Sam differ from those of Mike in relatively unimportant areas (the importance to each of them being weighed, of course, by their sets of values), Sam and Mike can get along with each other well enough. But if Sam's values tell him his differences with Mike are important, then from Sam's point of view, Mike is an enemy worthy of mistrust at the very least, and an imminent threat to be battled, if Mike should approach too close.

Mike may not see it the same way, and may not even realize that Sam is threatened by him -- perhaps Sam's way of dealing with threats is to take on protective coloration that allows Mike to think of him as a kindred spirit. If Mike doesn't push it, that can go on indefinitely.

You, yourself, may be a laid-back person who doesn't feel bothered (or you don't believe you feel bothered) by another person's differences from you. That doesn't mean your alarm doesn't go off. What you do about the alarm or what you consciously feel about it depends on what sort of person you are, which in turn goes back to your values. Also, you may be surrounded by people whose values are sufficiently similar to yours (there is a strong geographical component to this) that you rarely run into the problem. But I'm willing to bet that, when your alarm does sound, at the very least you feel uncomfortable.

Politics is an obvious source of values threats. Since any national government is very powerful, there's no surprise in the fact that we'd like to see it run by people who think like us. Political parties form exactly for the purpose of increasing the power of people who have similar values, and party members are conscious, and worried, that there are people out there who don't share their values. The fear of opposing parties spreads out to swamp the complexity of political beliefs: if you have a political enemy, he must be an enemy in every way. Every facet of his beliefs must be wrong. If you are a Republican and love America, say, then any Democrat, being of a different party from you, must evidently then hate America. The more shameful your opponent becomes in your mind, the easier it is to maintain the needed degree of hate for him.

Cultural distinctions are another category of values and a source of values threats, unique in its own way. (Racial differences occupy a sub-category within this category.) We tend to regard members of other cultures with some degree of contempt, often finding humor in the mores of other cultures. The contempt may express itself in bitter ridicule of the affronting culture. The cultural difference may be something as inconsequential as standard dietary tastes. People in Korea eat dogs and we don't? We make jokes about the Koreans. People in India don't eat cows and we do? We make jokes about the Indians. On the other hand, if someone in our cultural group has been attacked by a member of another group, the humor disappears, as the feeling of general threat spreads beyond the person who was attacked and covers the entire group.

Religious beliefs and resulting sensitivities are at or near the top of many people's values rankings -- the belief that your adherence to certain precepts will determine your environment *eternally* is a strong motivation for attaching critical importance to those precepts, generating an assurance that you are right and everyone else is wrong. Some people feel the values threat from adherents to other religions so strongly that they feel a need to murder anyone whose practices violate their beliefs.

Having brought up the subject of religious intolerance, I want to make it clear that no one religion has a monopoly on virulent hate towards followers of other religions. At the present time, many Americans (and Europeans) have the impression that there is something uniquely paranoid in twenty-first century Islam that has turned many of its followers into a worldwide threat of violence and terror. (Or that they always were.) But it is important to acknowledge that there is nothing unique, in that sense, about Islam. To the extent that our religion (or lack of one) is an important value in our lives, *all* of us, not just Muslims, feel threatened by anyone who disagrees with us and feel a motivation, sometimes acted upon and sometimes not, to fight them -- regardless of whether our religion itself tells us, in so many words, not to do that. For many, the religion itself is the value, not anything the religion actually says. Many have been attacked and even murdered in the name of religions of peace -- note the plural, "religions." I'm not talking about a specific one.

An example: I was appalled by a picture in *Newsweek* magazine, years ago, that showed a very striking image of hate. The picture was of a group of terrified, crying schoolgirls and their frightened parents running a gauntlet of vicious, snarling adults throwing stones and bricks at them. The girls' crime was being Roman Catholic. They were simply trying to get to Holy Cross Primary School in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and unfortunately they had to pass through Protestant territory to get there. That is, Christian children and their parents were being physically, brutally attacked by Christian adults for not being the same kind of Christians. See *Wikipedia*: The Holy Cross Dispute:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_Cross_dispute

The reason this image from Belfast really stuck in my mind permanently is that this issue of *Newsweek* was delivered to my mailbox on September 11, 2001, the very day the Belfast story was suddenly pushed to the background of world attention by another, larger story of religious hatred.

Protestants and Catholics in Belfast, Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq, Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem... In these and in so many other places, when populations of believers in (even slightly) different religions come into close contact, each side feels a threat from the other because their highest-priority values are different. In the above-named examples, the danger has often been real enough in the past that feeling at least some degree of caution and apprehension is a reasonable response. But the threat is felt regardless of whether the danger is real or imagined.

There is, for example, nothing surprising about the current outcry, from the far religious right in the U.S., about a "war on Christianity" within the country. In a time of evolving cultural values, people whose values aren't changing will always feel threatened. In this case, even something as innocuous as being wished "Happy holidays" during the Christmas season, a well-meaning attempt to make the good cheer of the season more inclusive, is, somehow, seen as a threat.

I have read claims from people (usually atheists) that religion has been the cause of all wars. The claims have always struck me as ludicrous, since they require ignoring a large number of huge and consequential wars that started for reasons with no connection with religion. But I do feel it's safe to state that a significant portion of all wars result from clashing cultural values. By "cultural values," I mean those values shared in general by the inhabitants of a geographical area, and war can easily break out between two different cultures that feel threatened by each other. Even differences in language, an example of a cultural value, can lead to warfare -- look at Ukraine. And since religion is so often a top priority among cultural values, then yes, it does often lead to wars.

Can anything be done about this? Well, no, of course not. This values-threat system has been with us since the cave man days, when members of one tribe would attack another tribe, just because they were another tribe. The human race survived that era for at least a couple of reasons: (1) There's a limit to the amount of global damage you can do with a club, and (2) the mistrust of others who are not like you has some advantages -- being unlike you, they may be a legitimate threat to you, and it's sometimes a lucky thing you had an internal alarm allowing you to perceive the threat. That is: in Darwinian terms, this reaction to others has survival value. Unfortunately, in the twenty-first century, point (1) above no longer holds: with atomic weapons, biological weapons, chemical weapons, the aptly named "weapons of mass destruction," very small groups can now take major steps towards destroying the entire population of the planet, and point (2) only applies when the reaction to values threats is primarily defensive in nature. Unfortunately, there will always be people who act preemptively against real or imagined threats to their systems of values, and it is probably only a short time until someone disposed to such action acquires the power to do it in a global way. When it happens, our final thoughts can be: Well, at least they were wrong.

3. WHY DO SO MANY PEOPLE BELIEVE IN GOD?

The Gods Must Be Crazy

Title of a 1980 South African film, expressing a Botswana tribesman's puzzlement after seeing a discarded Coca Cola bottle fall to earth.

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A few years ago there were news stories about scientists trying to identify the “God gene” (it even has a name: VMAT2. Look up “God gene” on Wikipedia) -- a theorized component of the human genetic code that predisposes us to believe in God, or gods.

To me, saying that a “God gene” exists in our chromosomes that causes us to believe in God makes as little sense as saying that some people have a specific gene for preferring the 6-ounce size of Colgate toothpaste instead of the 8-ounce size. I believe there is a limit to what part of our psychological makeup can be directly caused by the genetic code, and I think that having a “gene to make us believe in God” is well past that limit.

So if there’s no God gene (as I believe), then why is it that somewhere around 92 to 95 percent of all humans believe in the existence of some sort of god or gods? And if there really isn’t a God, then how could such a universal belief be wrong?

Leaving aside the obvious fact that a lot of universal beliefs have turned out to be wrong (flat Earth, etc.), there are several reasons why nearly every human society has evolved one or more belief systems involving gods. Any one of these reasons may well be sufficient by itself, but they acquire a lot of power working together:

(1) The internal narrative, common to all human minds (and perhaps those of some other animals), the storyteller in our heads that weaves our lifetime of experiences into a “story of me” that is at the core of our self-consciousness. The narrative, among other things, tries to describe the causes of anything that happens to us or around us, including the cause of the universe around us existing to begin with;

(2) The in-born “sense of justice” possessed by humans (and some near relations among other animals), which leads to the hope that some being or beings are in charge of dispensing justice satisfactorily;

(3) The near-impossibility of disbelieving in an afterlife of some sort, which leads to the hope that, again, some being or beings will be in charge of it so that it's not too unpleasant;

(4) The need for a source of comfort in times of stress, and the hope that there is Someone Out There who can always fill that need.

I want to explore these points in greater detail.

To start with (1), above: It is reasonable to suspect that one of the natural consequences of possessing the superbly efficient brain that humans have is that it automatically organizes incoming sensory data into a narrative, including a cause-and-effect commentary ("I am experiencing unpleasant sensations because I haven't eaten anything since noon yesterday"). The narrative contributes to our consciousness of me-being-me, but not *only* that -- I have also seen the narrative given as the reason for dreams: it is believed by some researchers that in reality dreams are just random, disconnected images dumped from our resting mind, but the narrative takes those images and weaves them into a story, because this is what the narrative tries to do: make a sensible story out of *everything*.

Within the narrative, analyzing cause and effect (though we often get it wrong) is one of many things that account for the survival of our particular species through the tens of thousands of years it has existed. All higher animals react to the world in terms of prior experiences rather than only current events (which helps *all* of those animals survive), but the narrative in the human mind takes reactions-based-on-experiences to a higher, more effective level. The cause-and-effect analysis within the narrative is important to us exactly because it has proven so useful, saving us from, say, putting our hand into a fire more than once.

Of course, we do the analysis whether it's going to be useful or not (how can we know in advance whether it will be useful?), automatically. The narrative dislikes a vacuum, anything left unexplained. That search for causes is a basic psychological need, in the same way hunger in the absence of food is a physical one. When we are looking for an explanation, mere happenstance is rarely (for some people, never) enough. It doesn't feed the hunger.

So when it comes to the ultimate question of "what caused the world to be?", we feel a need for an answer. We try out explanations, and share them among ourselves (something language makes possible), sharpening our ideas in search of consensus. It is not at all surprising that the end result is a story of one or more beings -- gods -- with greater powers than we ourselves have, since we ourselves don't have the ability to create the universe (as far as we can tell). The story of the supreme father-figure God, responsible for all we see around us, seems almost inevitable. (Even in cultures with multiple gods there is usually one among them who reigns supreme, though occasionally instead of a father it is a mother.) In most religions this supreme God is said to have all of the characteristics we once imagined that our parents had when we

were children: *omnipotence*, unlimited power; *omniscience*, knowing all there is to know; *omnipresence*, being everywhere (without necessarily being visible).

Some people who believe that a Higher Power created the universe make no further use of the idea, and believe God is no longer around: He made the world, His job is done, end of story. But that need for identifying causes, so that we can fit them into our narrative, is so strong in many people that they refuse to accept that *any* occurrence can fail to have an identifiable cause. Once the existence of a Higher Power has been imagined, it comes in very handy in exactly these cases. For many people, God fills that void left by any event whose explanation proves elusive, because *something* must have caused it.

In 1954, a meteorite, after eons of traveling through space, fell to Earth near Sylacauga, Alabama, and part of it crashed through the roof of the home of Ann Hodges, grazing her side as she lay napping on the couch. Luckily she was just badly bruised but not otherwise seriously injured. The question arises (at the very least in the mind of Ann Hodges, but as the occurrence made worldwide news the same question occurred to many people): why did it happen? Why, after traveling all those billions of miles, did a space rock hit this woman? Because of the way our minds work, for many of us it is not easy to shrug and say, "It had to land somewhere. She just happened to be there." For some people, such an explanation is completely unacceptable: In their minds, the only possible explanation is that God controlled the trajectory of that meteorite, and had His own reasons for having it strike Mrs. Hodges. Interestingly, it wasn't God's theatrical way of ending Mrs. Hodges' life, since she didn't die; it wasn't a peculiarly elaborate plan by God to help bring money into the Hodges household, since after a number of legal battles over the ownership of the rock the Hodgeses were unable to sell it, and after using it for, of all things, a doorstop, they ended up donating it to a museum. The meteorite, in fact, had no obvious consequence at all in the life of the Hodges family except for a lot of very unwanted, and eventually rejected, attention. (Contrary to popular belief years later, it didn't even lead to the composition of the popular song "Stars Fell On Alabama," because that had actually been done twenty years earlier.) So it is hard to come up with a reason *why* God might have wanted to hit Mrs. Hodges with a meteorite, but the firm believer will simply say, "The Lord has a plan for all of us but we won't know what it is. He works in mysterious ways."

For the *very* religious, even clear, understandable causes are rejected in favor of the conviction that God directly made an event happen. If it rained today, what caused that? Was it meteorological preconditions (which could be seen coming days in advance), or was it that God decided to make it rain? If a man dies, is it because stress within his body, which may have been building for years (or perhaps only seconds, from traumatic injuries in a car accident) exceeded his body's ability to cope with it, or did God decide it was time for him to die? (And what caused the car accident?) For many people, the answer, in *every* case, is that the event was a result of God exercising His prerogative to bring it about.

The belief in God the Micromanager is widespread, and is often carried to lengths that defy common sense.

In the 1990s, the television show “3rd Rock From the Sun” was a popular comedy involving a quartet of space aliens who had taken on human form hoping to “blend in” with the local population in an Earthly metropolitan area. One of my favorite TV scenes ever involved the youngest of the aliens, junior-high-aged Tommy (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), who had joined one of the school’s athletic teams. Prior to the start of a game, the team’s coach had gathered his players together for a team prayer.

Tommy, looking across the field: “Coach, the other team is praying too.”

Coach: “Of course they’re praying.”

Tommy: “Ah, but our god is stronger, right?”

Coach, irritably: “It’s the same God.”

Tommy, puzzled, looking around at teammates: “Am I the only one who sees a conflict of interest here?”

I share Tommy’s puzzlement. The somehow commonly-believed notion that God would choose sides in an athletic contest, based on which team prayed harder, or more sincerely, or that He would protect the praying athletes from injury (or humiliation) while non-praying ones competed in greater danger -- I don’t accept any of that, because if it were true it would be so easy to *prove* it true, because every game would furnish clear, tangible evidence that it was. They don’t.

People who believe God *does* answer all prayers cherry-pick their evidence, citing all the times when they got what they asked for and ignoring all the times when they didn’t; or, alternatively, they say of the failures that “God answered my prayer in a negative way. He decided not to grant my petition, because He has something better in mind for me or is testing me,” which they consider a can’t-lose way arguing the effectiveness of prayer: God answered me, whether I got what I wanted or not. I don’t consider it to be a can’t-lose argument: If you can’t show that events would have turned out differently if there were no God at all -- and to date I have never seen anyone able to do that -- then you’ve lost the argument.

For people with extreme religious beliefs, it is important to them that citing God’s will should trump any other possible explanation. For them it is no longer sufficient that events have *some* explanation. The explanation has to be God. That is why religious extremists often search for any reason to disparage “science”, which is a method of exploring cause-and-effect that is

usually seen as competing with God. It surprises such people that many scientists themselves believe in God, but there is no contradiction involved: The scientist who believes in God simply doesn't have that extreme need to have God be the universal explanation for *every* event.

I recall the host of a television news-and-opinion show making an on-the-air attempt to prove God's hand controlled the universe, by claiming that "No one knows what causes the tides." When hundreds of callers pointed out that scientists have *long* known that the tides are a consequence of the gravity of the moon as it orbits the Earth (and to a lesser extent, the gravity of the sun), and that the mathematics that describes the tides is well-known, the host blustered, "Okay, but who put the moon there?" To him, it is crucial that every explanation of any phenomenon whatsoever come down to God eventually.

Moving on to item (2) on the list above: A "sense of justice," which, among other things, triggers an automatic anger reaction when we are treated worse than someone else for no reason, is not unique to humans. Chimpanzees, for example, are known to reject angrily a food treat they usually like if they see another chimp being given a better one.

However, due to our greater capacity for abstract thought, it may be unique to humans to be able to imagine a world in which we are not only always treated fairly, but where in fact everyone, generally, gets the treatment we believe they "deserve." We want to believe we are actually in that world.

I remember sitting in the passenger seat, while my mother was driving through city traffic, when a car passed us driving well beyond the speed limit. My mother commented loftily that it wouldn't do the driver any good: "They always get stopped at the next red light until we catch up, and they don't get where they're going any faster than we do." At age twelve, I was no longer inclined to accept everything my mother told me, and I knew she was wrong: we might occasionally catch up to the speeding driver at a stoplight, but eventually, inevitably, he would pass a green light that turned red before we got there, and he would, as he desired, get where he was going sooner than if he had driven slower. I never cared for face-to-face arguments, and didn't say anything, but I knew in any case my mother wasn't about to give up her "there is justice in the world" point of view. In her eyes, the driver was behaving badly, and deserved to have his intentions frustrated, and she firmly believed there was (literally) a mechanism in place -- traffic lights -- that would make that happen.

She believed in God, too, and was demonstrating one of the reasons the belief in a deity is so nearly universal in all human cultures: we want to think there is an always-present force that will ensure that justice is dispensed, but it should not be a mechanism in the sense of being cold and emotionless, like a traffic light; we want it to have humanizing traits so that it will recognize that we are *trying* to deserve to be treated well. The result of our desire for justice: God.

Of course, we observe that the world is *not* always a just place. Bad people -- for example, greedy people who have acquired money, legally or illegally, that should belong to others, or violent people who have injured or killed others for no acceptable reason -- often die unrepentant and unbroken. They even often die *happily*, the worst of all possibilities from our viewpoint.

So death itself is not allowed to end the possibility of justice being meted out: if justice does not come to a person in their lifetime, it is crucial for us to believe it will come later. That requires an afterlife.

So let's consider (3), the afterlife. Why does nearly everybody believe that we will go someplace and, at the very least, observe the universe, after we die? We believe that because it's almost impossible *not* to believe it. When we try to picture what will happen after our own death, we are unable to imagine a universe that doesn't include us in it imagining it. The mere act of our visualizing such a place puts us within it doing the visualizing. (It's important to note that I didn't say it's impossible for the universe to exist without us; just that we can't *imagine* it existing without us. Our imagination has been known to fall short in a wide variety of other ways.) Most of us fear death exactly because we believe that, after we die, the narrative will continue, and that we're going to lie there motionless in our coffins thinking, "Damn, this is really boring. And dark. I wish I could do stuff." And that we'll remember, since it's the freshest thing in our minds, all the pain we went through during the dying process. All very unpleasant. So we construct stories of it being much more enjoyable than that, and picture it according to those stories instead (though the coffin is still there in the backs of our minds, maintaining the fear). To be in charge of the after-death experience, we nominate the same Higher Power who created the world since, with those superior powers He has, He can handle it. So we picture Him around in the afterlife, being the boss of it.

But our sense of justice adds structure to the afterlife that goes beyond the mere fact of afterlife existing. Since we see justice not sufficiently evenly distributed in life, that leaves only the afterlife as the place where it can finally be handed down. We imagine two poles of existence in the afterlife, one in which the good people (including, presumably, ourselves) experience endless pleasure, and one where the bad people suffer eternal agonizing punishment. The poles go by many names. In our own English-language culture, we most often call them Heaven and Hell. And the gatekeeper, the great Decider of who goes to which place: who else but that superior being, God.

The belief in Heaven and Hell is near-universal. Not only religions followed by most of the world's people accept them as real places, but the existence of such places even frequently draws people *into* those religions: so badly do we need that assurance of complete, permanent justice that many of us will follow anyone who offers them to us.

To anyone reading this, I can't offer proof that these places, Heaven and Hell, don't exist. I can only point to the complete absence of any tangible evidence that they do. Sometimes people claim to have "died on the operating table and seen Heaven" only to be "brought back to life afterward." My response: the fact of doctors *thinking* they were dead does not imply that they actually were -- the medical profession has famously struggled with even trying to define exactly what "death" is -- and I haven't seen any reason not to think that what these people saw while they were "dead" was really something all of us experience nearly every time we sleep for an extended time: a dream. Meanwhile, for various reasons, the experience of visiting Heaven is sometimes a complete fabrication by people who *know* they have made no such visit: Google "Alex Malarkey" for a perfect, if sad and innocent, example.

The fact that a lot of people point to these afterlife claims (made by people they don't know and have never met) as "proof" of the existence of Heaven or Hell owes to the fact that they want to believe in the afterlife SO badly.

Addressing the final item (4) on the list: We all went through a period of infancy, in which we were utterly, completely dependent on other people to take care of our needs -- it may be the *only* universal experience shared by all of the billions of humans on Earth. For some of us, the meeting of our needs came with nurturing and love, while for some it was accompanied by relatively cold neglect, with everyone's experience falling at some point on the scale between those two poles. But for all of us, it taught us that it is possible for our needs to be met by someone else.

We grow up, we become less dependent. But any of us who experience stress (sometimes mild, sometimes severe) know the relief that we feel when we find out that the burden can be shared, lessening its weight, or even taken away from us entirely. Admittedly there are those among us who find it a psychological necessity to fight through the stress entirely on their own, but such a need is rare.

Consider, then, the advantage of being able to say that an all-powerful and ever-present being who loves us and knows everything we are going through is available to take our burden away, if only we ask for the help. Just read the words of the Christian hymn "What A Friend We Have In Jesus":

<http://library.timelesstruths.org/music/What a Friend We Have in Jesus/>

Of all of the reasons why so many people believe in God, this need for a comforter may be the strongest of all, the most attractive and satisfying. The possibility that such help doesn't really exist is very scary for some, so much so that they can't imagine considering the idea.

* * * * *

The idea of a God, or gods, is a perfect example of the subject of my chapter on “Belief”: People believe in God because they really, really want to, and there are, as we’ve seen, many reasons *why* they want to. The mere act of believing, in itself, satisfies so many needs.

To me, it’s clear that the (near-)universality of belief in God doesn’t require that there actually be a God, nor in any respect prove that there must be one. For our species to evolve beliefs in a higher being is natural and inevitable, simply because of how our minds work (points (1), (2), and (3)) and a very natural reaction to our experiences and environment (point (4)). For all of these reasons, the vast majority of humans do believe there is some sort of God or gods -- despite having no physical evidence for it.

Of course, in the matter of specific details, those beliefs have taken wildly different forms, and questions about the nature and the policies of God will be answered *very* differently by different people. Nearly all followers of most religions are absolutely positive that the adherents to other religions are wrong, and in far too many cases feel that those adherents to other religions are, as I said in chapter 2, a threat. My question is: If there is a God out there somewhere, then why has He not cleared up those disputes among rival theologies so that people at least don’t continue killing each other over them? That He has never done so is, to my mind, a strong reason to believe that there is no such being.

4. THE MAIN EVENT: GOOD VERSUS EVIL

Don't be evil.

Official corporate motto of Google

* * * * *

Following on the inevitability of a widespread belief in some sort of god (chapter 3), the belief in a battle of good versus evil is equally inevitable.

The reasons I set out in chapter 3 for people believing in God (cause of our world, dispenser of justice, host of an afterlife we hope will be enjoyable, source of comfort in stressful times) imply that, in general, God would be seen as a positive force, a force for niceness and pleasant experiences: a force for Good, the creator of our knowledge of what Good is. But in our search for explanations for everything, it then becomes necessary for us to have a way of understanding why bad things, ranging from unpleasant to tragic, happen. So the religions followed by most of the world's people attach crucial significance to the existence of a force for Evil, outside of God, and an ongoing battle between Good (represented by God) and Evil.

Some see the battle as equal, the outcome uncertain. In the world's largest religions, however (I'm thinking of Christianity and Islam here, two religions that, combined, are followed by about half of the human race), God is an all-powerful force, His victory inevitable -- which makes it hard to explain why such a God would tolerate the existence of Evil to begin with. This is, of course, not something I just thought of that everyone else has overlooked. It is simply a statement of the famous "Problem of Evil," a name for the pesky question of why an omnipotent God would allow Evil in the world. One of the earliest critics of Christianity, the Greek philosopher Celsus, said in the 2nd century: "It is blasphemy... to say that the greatest God... has an adversary who constrains his capacity to do good," and went on to say that Christians "impiously divide the kingdom of God, creating a rebellion in it, as if there were opposing factions within the divine, including one that is hostile to God". (From Wikipedia: "Satan"):

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satan>

(Keep in mind what I said about Wikipedia earlier: If you don't like Wikipedia itself as a source, then trace back the various references given in the article to their original sources.)

For thousands of years the argument has persisted, and rather than summarize all of the points and counterpoints here (which would probably make this book three times longer than it

currently is, and I don't know what the purpose would be of doing so), I'll just direct you to Wikipedia again: "The Problem of Evil".

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Problem_of_evil

Instead of examining the arguments, I'll take a step back and look at the *outcome* of the arguments: nothing. Nothing is settled, or even close to settled. No significant number of believers have ever been convinced by any argument explaining why the existence of evil proves God doesn't exist (or at least not in the "omnipotent" way His worshippers picture Him); no significant number of non-believers have ever been convinced by any argument explaining why God tolerates the existence of evil.

I'm in the latter set, of course: I have not seen any reasoning, addressing how an omnipotent God and a frequently-successful contrary force can coexist, that makes me think, "You know, there's something to that." I believe that good and evil exist, but not a Force for Good and a Force for Evil: those forces simply come from our internal search for a narrative (again: chapter 3), in this case a story that explains the good and bad events that occur in our environment. As part of the narrative, we have a habit of personifying things so we can assign credit or blame for events in our surroundings. In the case of good and evil, God and Satan (or various other names for the same things) are the personifications we establish to account for those good and bad events.

Of course, as is our custom when we have centuries of time on our hands to give thought to an idea, the human race has expanded the concept. Good and Evil are not only forces; they are also teams, of which any of us can be members -- good people are members of Team Good, bad people are members of Team Evil.

Some people take this idea of teams to such an extreme that they believe no one can ever be on the sideline: they see everyone as being intrinsically on Team Good or Team Evil. Groups and organizations of people, as well, must belong to one or the other team. As these people see it, each team member actively works for his or her own team. That is, according to the belief system of people holding this view, evil people do bad things, and it's never because of (say) desperation caused by the stress of financial misfortune, or a prolonged period of unjust treatment (see "sense of justice" in previous chapter) -- when members of Team Evil do bad things, it's always simply because they are evil and it pleases them to do bad things.

Having, or not having, such a viewpoint is completely unrelated to intelligence. If, like me, you are *not* one of the many people who perceive everything in terms of membership in Team Good or Team Evil, you're wrong to dismiss people who do see things that way as "simple-minded" and "not very bright." I once knew a woman who was clearly *very* intelligent: she completed a university degree in mathematics with straight A grades throughout. I don't just mean A's in math. She got A's in *every* college course she took: not just higher-level university

math, physics, biology, and so on, but also English composition, world history, art... everything. So she functioned intellectually on a far-above-average level. And this woman, once, expressed puzzlement to me over the official name of the country of China: she couldn't understand how it could be "The People's Republic of China." She said: "Isn't a 'republic' a good thing? Why do they call themselves a republic?" And you had to be there; you would have seen it was only puzzlement and nothing more. She wasn't trying to score a political point. She just wondered how they could use that word. I tried to explain to her that nobody, anywhere, ever sees *himself* as the bad guy. I didn't get a feeling it was getting through. In her way of thinking, a country that was a member of Team Evil should know which team it was on, and it appeared to me that she honestly, truly had expected the government of China to refer to their own country as the "Evil Repressive Dictatorship of China." She couldn't figure out why they didn't. It's just how she saw the world.

In the U.S., it's also how the National Rifle Association sees the world. As the NRA puts it, "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun." Underlying that statement are two assumptions: (1) that everyone is either a bad guy or a good guy, and that, as I said above, the bad guys are intrinsically, permanently bad, and do bad things because they like doing bad things, and that similarly the good guys are intrinsically, permanently good and like doing good things, and (2) that you can always tell the good guys and bad guys apart, as if they all wear team uniforms. Brushed aside are any examples of people who commit crimes, with guns, that no one ever saw coming, even though the news media are constantly full of such stories ("He was always so quiet, so sweet, so thoughtful. I never thought he could do anything like this!"). The NRA wants all the good guys to have guns, despite all the undeniable evidence that, once a person that everyone thought was good (qualifying them for gun ownership, in the eyes of the NRA) gets a gun, that person might then do a bad thing with it. An evil thing. No, no, the NRA will tell you, impossible. The teams are set in stone. There are no gray areas in between, no reason anyone ever commits an evil act except that he or she was visibly an evil person.

I am one of those people who believe that the human race is not, and has never been, organized into such a clear-cut and permanent dichotomy of good and evil. It might be, if the teams had captains: God in charge of the Good, Satan in charge of the Evil. But I don't believe there is any force out there making Good and Evil happen. They just happen, and always for reasons far more complex and transitory than many people want to believe, or sometimes for no underlying reason at all.

5. MORALITY FOR ATHEISTS

...so you'd better be good, for goodness sake...

Haven Gillespie, in the song *Santa Claus Is Comin' To Town*

* * * * *

One difficulty atheists experience, if we “come out,” is that our society (at least in the U.S. -- I can't speak to what happens in other countries) regards atheists as charter members of Team Evil. That is, because we are atheists, people expect us to do bad things. They believe we don't act in accordance with any moral code, because we have no motivation to do so, since we don't believe in God and thus have no expectation of being punished for anything we do.

If you Google “atheists immoral,” you will find more articles than you can ever read about atheists being immoral, starting with (at least Google put this one first) an article in *Pacific Standard*, by Tom Jacobs, April 15, 2014 (online) noting that “Americans Intuitively Judge Atheists As Immoral.”

Says Jacobs in the article: “After reading a description of someone committing an immoral act, participants in five experiments ‘readily and intuitively assumed that the person was an atheist,’ University of Kentucky psychologist Will Gervais reports in the online journal PLoS One. ‘Even atheist participants judged immoral acts as more representative of atheists than of other groups.’”

(Ironically, Dr. Gervais, whose field of study is the supernatural, religion, and atheism, is not related to Ricky Gervais, one of the entertainment world's most outspoken atheists.)

“The findings,” continues Jacobs, “suggest our instinctive belief that moral behavior is dependent upon God -- as ethical arbiter and/or assigner of divine punishment -- creates a belief system strong enough to override evidence to the contrary. It leads people many to look at non-believers and reflexively assume the worst.”

A belief system strong enough to override evidence to the contrary. I love that phrasing. To me, that is the very definition of religion: Religion is a belief system strong enough to override mountains of evidence to the contrary.

It's hard to account for atheists themselves perceiving atheists as immoral, other than theorizing that they have been so fully immersed in the Christian culture surrounding them that they have absorbed the prevailing thought patterns.

Complicating the issue of morality, there are two different types of morality. Well, that's not exactly true: of the two types, people who subscribe to either one firmly believe the other doesn't exist. So everyone who discusses morality will tell you there is only one type. "Moral relativism" may be defined as the idea that the moral code that any society observes comes from the society itself, which builds a consensus over time that states how its members should behave, and that the code can be different in different places and in different times, as societies evolve. "Moral absolutism," or "moral objectivism," is the idea that there is only one universal morality, and that it is permanent, not subject to the whims of any society nor the passage of time. Some believers in moral absolutism say the source of this universal morality is that it is instinctive in humans, part of our genetic makeup, but those who claim that have a tough job making their argument, in the face of the wide variety of moral codes in different places and the fact that they do change over time. (But these people, like all people anywhere, believe what they want to believe, and generally ignore such contradictions.) More often, moral absolutists cite God as the source, and say that when a society changes what it regards as the moral code, it is defying God.

The ultra-conservative website "Conservapedia" says that a morality not based on God can't be a morality at all. According to its article "Atheism and Morality": "Not possessing a religious basis for morality, which can provide a legitimate basis for objective morality, atheists are fundamentally incapable of having a coherent system of morality." Conservapedia's position is that morality can *only* be an absolute, because it can only come from God. (This, from an organization whose founder and leader, Andrew Schlafly, says he believes that the Bible can be rewritten to conform to an earthly, human political philosophy, as we will see in the upcoming chapter on the Bible. It seems some absolutes are less absolute than others.)

On the question of whether morality is absolute, unchanging, and is given to us by God in the Bible, let's take a look at some of the laws therein.

Do you believe that the ownership and trading of slaves is immoral? Our present-day Western society believes almost universally that it is. Any Bible-based moral absolutist will be forced to tell you that it is not. It's not just that the Bible states no prohibition of slavery, anywhere in the Old or New Testament -- far to the contrary, the Bible actually goes so far as to prescribe how slavery should work. Consider, for example, Leviticus 25:44-46, in which the Lord is speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, giving Moses yet another installment in a lengthy list of rules and regulations: "Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your

property. You can bequeath them to your children as inherited property and can make them slaves for life, but you must not rule over your fellow Israelites ruthlessly.” This is just one of the *many* Biblical statements setting laws for slavery. Some Bible apologists have claimed that in those many statements, “servant” was mistranslated as “slave,” and that the verses were simply talking about people who work for you, but that obviously can’t be the case in these just-quoted verses: the entire content of the verses, speaking of buying people and considering them as your property, can’t be talking about anything but slaves.

As I write this, in 2015, many U.S. states are passing, or considering, “Religious Freedom Restoration Acts,” with the unstated but clear goal of allowing business owners to discriminate against gay people and claim their religion tells them to. I would love to see someone in a state with such a law declare himself to be a slave-owner and defy the state to prosecute him, basing his claim to immunity from prosecution on the Bible’s sanctioning of slavery.

Is it moral or immoral for a woman to occupy a leadership position? In the U.S., many women have been governors of states, twenty of a hundred U.S. senators are women, and women have headed federal executive departments including (several times) the Department of State, which oversees all matters of U.S. relations with the rest of the world. Outside the U.S., women have headed the governments of entire countries, as presidents, chancellors, or prime ministers, including Great Britain, Germany, India, Indonesia, Liberia, Australia, and (in the Western Hemisphere) Argentina, Brazil, and Canada -- those are just the ones I could recall without looking anything up. (Notice those examples are on all six of the world’s inhabited continents.) But before you answer the question at the start of this paragraph, consider this verse from one of St. Paul’s letters to Timothy, 1 Timothy 2:11-12 -- “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.” Paul was not God himself, but his writings are in the Bible, and come with the usual presumption that God guided his hand, so that Paul wrote what God wanted him to write. (And Paul had more than the usual degree of connection with God -- Jesus, after his resurrection, spoke directly to Paul from a blinding light on the road to Damascus, converting him to Christianity on the spot.) So the absolute morality established by God in the Bible clearly holds that women can’t be leaders -- or even teachers! Admittedly Paul may possibly have had a more specialized type of “teacher” in mind, one who gives religious instruction. But now several Christian denominations accept female priests, and Judaism allows for female rabbis these days.

Are you of a mind to defend Paul by pointing out he was “merely reflecting the standards of his time”? Yes, thank you. That is my point exactly. Societal standards change. But if we are to be moral absolutists, then the Bible is clear here: we’re going to have to change back. Out with the noisy female leaders.

Do you believe that if a woman (unmarried, not engaged) is raped, then the rapist and victim should be required to marry? (What a happy day for the bride.) I have a feeling that if that question were asked in a public opinion poll in a Western country, it would come as close to 0% as any question on any poll ever does. So read Deuteronomy 22:28-29 -- "If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay her father fifty shekels of silver [Note: I am not sure what the exchange rate today would be on that]. He must marry the young woman, for he has violated her. He can never divorce her as long as he lives."

I could go on, but I think that's enough. If you want to see an amusing, satirical, but very thought-provoking piece on the subject, look at the webpage, "Why Can't I Own A Canadian?" http://www.humanistsofutah.org/2002/WhyCantIOwnACanadian_10-02.html

Obviously there are problems with using the Bible as a guide to absolute morality, in that any community following it would have to reverse many rules that our Judeo-Christian society, as a whole, observes almost universally.

Of course, as an atheist, I don't attach any significance to any of the content of the Bible. Does that mean, as most people seem to think, that I have no motivation to observe a moral code at all?

That contention is so wrong-headed that it leaves me speechless. (So I will have to sit here typing instead.)

I try to behave in a good way. I can't say that I am always successful, but no one else can truthfully say that about themselves either. (Indeed, Christians believe that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" -- Romans 3:23.)

Why do I try to do the right thing? One reason is that doing so gives me a nicer environment to live in, and I would have to be a complete idiot not to recognize that. When you smile at someone, they smile back. When you help someone, they smile in gratitude, and might in return do something nice for you. When you hit someone, they hit you back and inflict pain on you. When you observe the standards of behavior in your society, you are accepted and welcome. When you break laws, you live in fear of being caught and punished. Living in fear is unpleasant.

None of the above observations are *always* true, but that's not important. I *expect* them to be true, and that is a motivation for behaving in a way that will, in general, make my own life more pleasant and livable. It has nothing to do with God.

A second reason has to do with empathy, the ability to imagine, sometimes in a vivid way, the physical and emotional sensations of another person. Some people have a lot of empathy, some very little. I have a sufficient amount that it causes me to want to make things better for others. To say that empathy is completely unrelated, in any way, to any religious precepts is, to me, an understatement, considering the number of political figures, claiming to be Christians, whose stated positions on a number of issues having to do with those less fortunate than themselves give no evidence whatsoever of empathy -- and these politicians maintain those empathy-free positions because they sense that a majority of voters in their states or districts, also mostly Christians, feel the same way. It is true that some Christians have empathy in an amazing degree, and act on it. They impress me. But it is part of who they are as people. It's not caused by their religion, or all Christians would be like that. Empathy is, in fact, far more compatible with humanism, "an outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters." (Type Humanism into Google.) Very religious people see humanists as the enemy. Yet having a humanist outlook, joined with an empathic sense of the need of others, is an undeniable motivation for observing a moral code, entirely independently of any belief in the existence of God.

I have a moral code, and it was established by my society. Yes, that is moral relativism. There isn't any other kind. My motivations for following it are a combination of self-interest (making my own environment better for me) and empathy (making it better for other people).

And I am puzzled about something, relative to Christianity. In the U.S., the overwhelming majority of citizens label themselves as Christians, and they are the ones, for the most part, who say they believe atheists have no reason to behave according to a moral code, because atheists don't think God will punish them for anything.

Yet it is a clear point of Christian doctrine, the most central point of all, that no human on Earth is capable of behaving sufficiently blamelessly so as to earn entry into Heaven -- that no one, no matter how good they try to be, may be saved for eternal life except by accepting Jesus Christ as their own personal Savior.

So I am wondering: What, exactly, is a Christian's motivation to behave according to a moral code, if trying to be good has no effect on their salvation since they can never be good enough, and it all hinges instead on their faith in Jesus? If behaving badly, as the New Testament says everyone does without exception, won't earn them eternal punishment from God, as long as they have that faith? Any Christian who says "If I don't follow God's absolute moral code, God will punish me when He judges me" is ignoring one of the most basic precepts of Christianity. (Nevertheless, nearly all of them say exactly that. So overpowering is the human craving for justice [see chapter 3] that Christians usually ignore the teachings of their faith and believe, instead, what they would rather believe: that everyone's behavior in life, including their own, is the determining factor in ending up in Heaven or hell.)

If you are a Christian, let me know on that: tell me, in terms of the Christian faith, what your motivation is for moral behavior. If it's because you're convinced that your behavior is what determines your afterlife, then you're not a Christian.

And if you are a religious non-Christian: smile at someone today. And ask yourself if you did it **ONLY** because you thought God would send you to Hell if you weren't nice. Or does your motivation actually share common ground with mine?

6. IS THE BIBLE BELIEVABLE?

*It ain't necessarily so / It ain't necessarily so / The things that you're liable to
read in the Bible / It ain't necessarily so.*

Ira Gershwin, in a song from *Porgy and Bess*

* * * * *

Is the Bible believable? Everyone makes an individual decision on that question. All I want to do here is support my own conclusion, and leave anyone reading this to draw their own.

A huge number of Christians assert that they believe every word of the Bible, above and beyond the content of any other text, saying that the Bible is an infallible and unique guide to faith which cannot be questioned. Of course the Bible has to be believed, they say. God wrote it. But that opens up the question of whether God really did write it, or whether it is simply a written-down collection of myths and legends, from oral tradition or taken from earlier writings. If God did write it, then you do indeed have to believe it. So what about that question: Did God write it?

Well, not physically, of course. Few Christians or Jews claim *that*. But it is widely, almost universally believed by the Judeo-Christian faithful that God “guided the hand” of those who did the writing, so that the Bible contains exactly all of the communications God wants to make with the people of the world -- that the Bible is the “divinely inspired word of God.”

According to Theopedia, “*Inspiration* establishes that the Bible is a divine product. In other words, Scripture is divinely inspired in that God actively worked through the process and had his hand in the outcome of what Scripture would say. Inspired Scripture is simply written revelation. ‘Scripture is not only man’s word, but also, and equally God’s word, spoken through man’s lips or written with man’s pen’ (J.I. Packer, *The Origin of the Bible*, p. 31).”

So if I’m to address the believability of the Bible, I need to deal with the question of whether it was Divinely Inspired.

The idea of the Bible having been written by the Hand of God didn’t come out of nowhere. Indeed, the Bible makes this claim itself, most clearly stated in the New Testament in 2 Timothy 3:16 (what is it about 3:16 somehow always being a significant verse?): “All Scripture is inspired

[another translation: breathed out] by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”

In that one sentence, there are actually *two* important claims made by the Bible about itself: not just that God is the author, but also that He had a goal in mind: that the Bible should be a resource we can turn to for proper, upright behavior, a textbook on morality (see chapter 5). So now I have three issues I want to examine here:

1. Was the writing of the Bible inspired and guided by God?
2. Is the Bible believable?
3. Is the Bible useful as a tool for teaching goodness?

I will try to determine the answers to these questions by asking more. As I examine these issues, they will all become intertwined.

IS GOD OMNISCIENT OR NOT?

Bear with me on this. My point here may be different from what you think it is going to be.

There are many references, in both the Old and New Testaments, to the fact of God knowing everything. Hebrews 4:13 echoes the claims made in a number of other Biblical verses in saying, “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” Even our innermost thoughts are within God’s view: as the Sons of Korah point out in Psalm 44:20-21, “If we had forgotten the name of our God, or spread out our hands to a foreign god, would not God have discovered it, since he knows the secrets of the heart?”

So why does God say to Abraham, in Genesis 18, when He drops by Abraham’s house on the way to Sodom and Gomorrah, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.”?

(There will be many mentions of Abraham and his descendants here. Abraham, in a sense, is the star of the Old Testament -- though his grandson Jacob or descendant Moses might also be nominated for that -- just as Jesus is the star of the New. Throughout Abraham’s life he has constant personal interactions, conversations, with God, and when God speaks to other people later, He often introduces himself as “the God of Abraham.”)

As the story continues, Abraham, worried that God might kill a lot of good people with the bad in Sodom and Gomorrah, asks if He will spare the towns if fifty righteous people can be found within, to which God responds he will indeed spare them in that case. Abraham goes on to ask,

what if there are forty-five... forty... thirty... twenty... ten... In each case, God promises to let the towns go if just a minimal number of good people can be found.

Now, there is an obvious answer to the question of why the story displays God not knowing something. I thought of it myself, and then discovered that one David J. Stewart, on jesus-is-savior.com, had arrived at the same explanation: that by eliciting Abraham's pleadings, God was just making sure that Abraham would understand, in the aftermath of the destruction, that there really hadn't been any significant number of good people in the doomed area -- that God knew Abraham wouldn't be happy if he thought the innocent had been condemned with the guilty. I'm sure Stewart is not alone in using that as a justification of the apparent lapse in God's omniscience. (Why God would feel He needed to make Abraham happy is another question.)

But the explanation has one fatal flaw: if that was the purpose of God's bargaining with Abraham, then pretending ignorance is entirely irrelevant to it. God could just have well have said, "I'm on my way to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, because they are so evil," and the entire ensuing conversation could still have taken place. For God to tell Abraham that his mission was destruction, rather than fact-finding, would still leave an opening for Abraham to say, "Wait, what if there are good people living there? Fifty of them?" Nothing in Dr. Stewart's scenario of God trying to convince Abraham of how really bad those towns were requires that God pretend He doesn't know if the stories are true.

I am not saying that believers in the Bible need to discard the concept of God being omniscient (which is just as well, because they are not going to). But I do have an alternative explanation for this particular scene.

The traditional Jewish belief about the first five books of the Bible, the *Torah*, or *Pentateuch*, is that they were written by Moses (including the part at the end of Deuteronomy describing his death and what happened after). But more recent scholarship holds that the Torah was stitched together from several sources. According to [biblica.com's](http://www.biblica.com/en-us/bible/online-bible/scholar-notes/niv-study-bible/intro-to-genesis/) article on Genesis, <http://www.biblica.com/en-us/bible/online-bible/scholar-notes/niv-study-bible/intro-to-genesis/>

"For much of the 20th century most scholars agreed that the five books of the Pentateuch -- Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy -- came from four sources, the Yahwist, the Elohist, the Deuteronomist and the Priestly source, each telling the same basic story, and joined together by various editors. Since the 1970s there has been a revolution in scholarship: the Elohist source is now widely regarded as no more than a variation on the Yahwist, while the Priestly source is increasingly seen not as a document but as a body of revisions and expansions to the Yahwist (or 'non-Priestly') material."

The idea that the Torah had multiple sources, various authors, and various editors (whether or not some adapted their work from others) does fit in with the repetitive nature of the narrative. And of course, it is impossible to be certain even that any one of those four theorized sources was originally written by a single person, and (given the length of these books) it is entirely possible that each of them in turn is the work of several different scribes. So probably a lot of different men had a hand in writing this material.

Multiple authorship also fits with the presence of occasional inconsistencies. One of those inconsistencies is here, in this story of God meeting with Abraham to discuss the smite-worthiness of Sodom and Gomorrah. The scribe writing this story pictures God as a very human traveler, spending a bit of time with His friend Abraham (God even accepts Abraham's invitation to rest, wash up, and stay for dinner) before continuing on to see whether the towns are as evil as He has heard. The fact that this view of God, lacking omniscience to the point of not even being sure of the truth of what people have told him, is entirely different from numerous descriptions of Him elsewhere in the Bible, simply suggests that those other descriptions were written by other people who saw God differently, and also suggests an editing process that lacked an eye for detail. It is the inconsistencies, and the casual editing that allowed for them, that make me wonder about the claim that God "guided the hands" of all these men who put this book together.

It won't be the last time I wonder about that.

CAN GOD GET ALL HIS FACTS STRAIGHT?

There are three nearly identical stories in close proximity in the Book of Genesis, with varying details.

- In Genesis 12, Abram and his wife Sarai arrived in Egypt, where Abram, believing his wife was excessively desirable, became fearful that he would be killed by any man who wanted Sarai for himself. So he told anyone he met that Sarai was his sister -- in a sense throwing Sarai under the bus, since the lie wouldn't prevent anyone from taking her, and indeed made it *more* likely; it would only save Abram from being killed first. Abram's fear was well-founded: so lovely was Sarai that Pharaoh himself became enamored, and took her as a wife. The Lord then inflicted disease on Pharaoh's household, and Pharaoh, on discovering that the Lord's defense of Abram and Sarai was to blame (and that Sarai was, in fact, Abram's wife), banished Abram and Sarai from his land, dispatching soldiers to see to it that Abram and his entourage left the country.
- In Genesis 20 and 21, after the Lord had changed Abram's name to Abraham, and Sarai's to Sarah (all these names have various shades of meaning), Abraham arrived in Gerar, where he told King Abimelek that Sarah was his sister. Abimelek took Sarah as a wife,

and the Lord appeared to him in a dream to threaten him with death because he was sleeping with a married woman. Abimelek, very apologetic, gave Abraham sheep, cattle, slaves, and told Abraham he could have any land he wanted in Abimelek's kingdom to settle on.

- In Genesis 26, Abraham's son Isaac wanted to go to Egypt to escape famine (coincidentally the same thing that drove Abraham to Egypt in Gen. 12), but the Lord ordered Isaac to stay in Gerar, with his lovely wife Rebekah. To anyone who asked, Isaac said Rebekah was his sister, because she was very beautiful and Isaac feared he would be killed by any man who desired her. King Abimelek, from his palace, witnessed a public display of affection between Isaac and Rebekah, correctly interpreted it as a sign Rebekah was Isaac's wife and, incensed, demanded that Isaac tell him why he'd said Rebekah was his sister. Isaac explained, and then Abimelek pointed out that "any of my men might have slept with her" and that if they had, then Abimelek and his men would all be in trouble with the Lord. Abimelek ordered all of his men to leave Isaac and Rebekah entirely alone. Isaac did so well with his crops during the next year that Abimelek, citing widespread jealousy of Isaac's growing wealth and power, ordered him out of the land -- and then Abimelek, worried anew that Isaac's god might get mad at him for driving Isaac away, chased after Isaac to seek (successfully) a mutual non-aggression treaty.

These stories raise some profound questions -- primarily, the question of what God is trying to say by telling nearly the same story over and over. In the stories, there is no real adverse consequence of lying -- certainly not in comparison to the fatal consequence the lie was meant to avoid -- so it can't be that God is trying to teach a lesson about always telling the truth. Aside from an important patriarch lying, what is there in the stories that would make God want to tell not just one of them, but all three of them?

Biblical authorities have argued for thousands of years on that question, without coming to any consensus.

From my point of view, the only conclusion that makes any sense is that, among the various different scribes whose writing became the Book of Genesis, three of them wrote down the exact same story as they were told and/or remembered it, and no two of them remembered it the same way, not even agreeing on who the main characters were.

What strikes me, in the context of thinking of the Bible as the Divinely Inspired Word of God, is that these three scribes came up with details that were not only wildly variant but, in some cases, contradictory. In the first two stories, the outcome is exactly opposite: in one, Abram is driven out of the country by the king; in the second, Abraham (same guy) is invited to settle

permanently on any of the king's land he desires. Isaac gets both treatments: first he is invited to stay, then later driven off.

The fact of Abraham lying seems to have bothered the Genesis 20-21 scribe, so he fixed it so that Abraham wasn't lying: in this version of the story, Abraham defends his earlier statement to Abimelek by saying Sarah really is his sister as well as his wife -- half-sister, that is, having the same father -- a relationship between them not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible, and which in fact seems to be contradicted (by omission) in Genesis 11:31: "Terah took his son Abram [yes, the same Abram/Abraham under discussion in the first two she's-my-sister stories], his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan." If Sarai was, in fact, Terah's daughter, not just "the wife of his son," why on Earth wouldn't it say so here? Of course I am not the first person to notice the discrepancy. One modern analysis of the apparent contradiction quotes writings from around that time that imply Sarah was actually Abraham's *niece*, so that "wife of [Terah's] son" would be accurate and "Terah's daughter" wouldn't be a more straightforward replacement, being untrue. But the source of that information is not in the Bible (hence not held to be the "divinely inspired word of God"), and I find it hard to reconcile it with the clear quote of Abraham in the Bible that Sarah was the "daughter of my father." (More on writings that are and aren't in the Bible later.)

And if Sarah *was* Abraham's half-sister, is incest really a lesser sin than lying? The same God makes it clear later that such an instance of incest is prohibited (Leviticus 18:9), and saying that the prohibition didn't come until later in the Torah misses the point: the Leviticus verse shows that the Lord doesn't like incest, so He can't be happier with Abraham about having sex with his half-sister than He was about Abraham lying. If the Genesis 20-21 scribe didn't know that, then he wasn't being guided by God in his writing.

The strangest incongruity of the entire set of versions of the story is in the Gen. 20-21 version, involving Abraham and Sarah. The narrative leading up to it makes it clear that this one occurs after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (the Genesis 12 story had it before) -- and after the Lord had changed Abram's and Sarai's names to Abraham and Sarah, the latter being the names used in the story. This raises a really puzzling question: why in the world, in *this* version of the story, did Abraham have any reason to cover up the fact Sarah was his wife, considering that Abraham was 99 years old, and Sarah 90, when the name changes occurred (Genesis 17)? Now, years and ages are extremely unreliable in the early parts of Genesis: numerous men live 900 years or more, and father children at ages well past 100 (the record holder seems to be Noah, who fathered his sons at age 500). But gradually the lifetimes attributed to Biblical characters grow shorter and shorter, and the narrative seems to have straightened out the age problem by the time Abraham arrives. When the Lord tells Abraham, at age 99, that he will father a child *with Sarah* (Abram had earlier impregnated Sarai's servant girl Hagar, who gave birth to Abram's son Ishmael), Abraham laughs at the very idea of a man and woman so old

having a baby. Sarah, who is described as “well past the age of child-bearing,” also laughs when she finds out about the promise, and says, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?” It’s being made clear here that ninety years old really does essentially mean ninety years old, as we would understand it. So how does one account for Abimelek having sexual interest in Sarah, and Abraham’s worry that someone would feel that way, which is his only reason for not telling people he was married to her? Again, I am not the first person to notice this. One analysis I found says that Sarah was “apparently still attractive” at her age, but the reasoning was simply that she evidently must have been because the Bible says this all happened. From my point of view, that’s circular reasoning: If I’m questioning the believability of stories in the Bible, I’m not about to buy the argument that “you have to believe them because they’re in the Bible.” And I certainly don’t accept that “Since the story must be true because it’s in the Bible, we can assume extra unmentioned and unlikely facts to explain it.” (Note that this was the one version of the story that doesn’t actually say the woman in question, Sarah or Rebekah, was “beautiful.”)

With the Sarah-is-both-my-sister-and-my-wife twist and the king having the hots for a “worn out” ninety-year-old woman, the Genesis 20-21 version of the story really is a terrible fit with the rest of the Genesis narrative. The scribe appears to have followed the traditional storyteller’s prerogative of embellishing what he’d heard, arbitrarily making Sarah Abraham’s half-sister to present Abraham in a better, non-lying light, and ignoring (or unaware of) facts of age given earlier that render the story nonsense. And the scribe seems unbothered by Abraham marrying his own father’s daughter, and Abimelek is also somehow okay here with the idea that Abraham might have married his sister, despite the fact that, in the *third* version of the story, Abimelek takes Isaac’s sexual play with Rebekah as proof that they can’t possibly be brother and sister.

Students of the Bible have discussed this series of pretending-the-wife-is-a-sister stories quite a lot. The point I want to make about the series is two-fold:

(a) If “God actively worked through the process and had his hand in the outcome of what Scripture would say,” then why is He unable to help the writers get the details of this story straight?

But the larger point is:

(b) When God is serving as a *character* in the Bible, He states things very clearly. For just a couple of examples: [God to Isaac, Gen. 26:2] “Do not go down to Egypt. Live in the land where I tell you to live.” [God to Abraham, Gen. 17:10] “This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.” And on and on, endless examples of God stating His intentions/promises/commands to various people very clearly so that they can’t be misinterpreted. So why can’t God as the *author* of the text do that same

thing? If He is guiding the writers of the Bible, then why can't He say things as clearly to them as He does when He is playing a role in the stories? Why have readers of the Bible spent literally thousands of years disagreeing on why the Bible contains various things and what lesson we are supposed to take from them? In the case of these three stories, the *Jewish Encyclopedia* says "The purpose of the story is to extol the heroines as most beautiful and show that the Patriarchs were under the special protection of the Deity." But needless to say, other sources disagree. Why does God leave the contents of the Bible open to disagreement when He is capable of saying exactly what He means so that anyone can figure it out?

I suspect the one thing all authorities agree on is that the intent of the sister/wife stories was *not* to tell us "lying is okay," but that is certainly one possible interpretation, since in the Gen. 20-21 version, lying did end up leading Abraham to great fortune. Surely that wouldn't be what God wants to be our takeaway from all this, so why would God let the story be written so that it could be interpreted that way? In general, how does the content of the Bible fit with the idea of God exercising complete control over His message, when it so often ends up so unclear what the message is?

DOES GOD LIKE "BAD BOYS"?

Look at 2 Timothy 3:16 again: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."

The prevailing view of the Bible, among Jews and Christians, is that one should turn to the Bible as a guide for good, correct, upright, and commendable behavior. Let's see whether the Bible is really an appropriate resource for that sort of thing.

Early in the Bible, God picks out a family to be especially nice to, for no obvious reason: Abraham and his descendants. He sticks with them no matter what bad things they do, and never suggests to them that they've done anything wrong.

In Abraham, God has a confidant, using Abraham as a sounding board when He gets an urge to destroy a city or two; He visits great harm on anyone who threatens Abraham; He saves Abraham's nephew Lot from the fall of Sodom. It's really not easy to account for God's attachment to Abraham. The man is a liar who betrays his beloved wife to save his own skin, not trusting God to protect him -- the last of those faults being the type of thing that always seriously annoys God, except when it doesn't. The lie eventually led to great riches for Abraham, on the land Abimelek gave him to calm down Abraham's God, who, while not being mad at all at Abraham for lying, threatens Abimelek for buying into the lie. (Abraham laughing in God's face when God tells him he will father a son at 99 could also hardly be expected to endear him to God, yet God didn't smite him for that either.)

Isaac, Abraham's son, was a liar like his father, and, like his father, was rewarded in consequence of the lie. (After his success on land Abimelek had apologetically let him settle on, Isaac was chased off temporarily, but then Abimelek apologized for *that* and let him off the hook again.)

Jacob, Isaac's son... You really shouldn't get me started on Jacob. But I'm trying to make my point here, so I will proceed.

Jacob can be held up as an example of the advantages, and the blessings from God, that result from cheating your way to success. Jacob impersonated his not-at-all-identical twin brother Esau, so that his aged, blind father Isaac would give Jacob his dying blessing, under the impression he was Esau. Isaac's blessing came with considerable wealth. When Esau showed up later, and requested the blessing Isaac had intended to give him, Isaac explained "I have made [Jacob] lord over you and have made all his relatives his servants, and I have sustained him with grain and new wine. So what can I possibly do for you, my son?" (Gen. 27:37) That is one pretty valuable blessing: it used up all Isaac had to give. (I should note that Jacob had also, years earlier, bought Esau's birthright from him by a sales technique that today is called "gouging.")

It should also be mentioned that Jacob's deception was not a matter of greed alone (though it certainly was that), nor was he the only family member involved in it. His mother Rebekah helped him with the impersonation -- in fact, it was her idea to begin with -- and her own reason for choosing one son over another was that she was angry that Esau had married two Hittite women. Not because there were two of them -- men taking multiple wives is pretty commonplace in the Bible -- but because they were Hittite.

Given that God not only knows everything, but that he also had that special (never explained) affinity for this family and kept an even closer eye on its doings, God couldn't have missed what had happened. Did He punish Jacob for taking advantage of his father's blindness to cheat Esau out of his inheritance and taking the riches that were rightfully Esau's? Did God take exception to Rebekah's cultural bigotry (Rebekah: "I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women"), or her attempt to wreck her own son's life because she didn't approve of the tribe of people from whom he had chosen wives, enlisting Jacob as her willing weapon against him? Not at all. (And if you think God was in favor of cultural bigotry, and that any objection we might have to it is just modern-day sensibilities, look at Leviticus 19:33-34: "When foreigners reside among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigners residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God." God does *not* like bigotry in His followers -- unless the bigot is Abraham's daughter-in-law Rebekah.) After Jacob had fled, because Rebekah told him Esau had (understandably) threatened to kill him, God appeared to Jacob in a vivid dream and told him (Gen. 28), "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and God of Isaac. I will give you and

your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the Earth [that is, unimaginably numerous], and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on Earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. [Jacob had only been passing through.] I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised.” And some time later (Gen. 32, in a scene in which God shows a curious lack of omnipotence), God changed Jacob’s name to... Israel. Jacob’s twelve sons (by multiple wives, I should add) became the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Jacob’s crimes -- taking advantage of his father’s old-age infirmities to do a con job on him, cheating his brother out of his rightful inheritance, and accepting the blind hate of cultural prejudice by which his mother had justified it all -- are rewarded by God with promises of riches beyond measure, right in the middle of Jacob’s retreat from his brother’s wholly justified wrath, without even so much as a light “You really shouldn’t do those kinds of things, Jacob” from God.

And if we accept the premise that the Bible is the word of God, then the presence of this story in the Bible is evidence that God wanted it told, a story of the vast rewards of cheating. “Training in righteousness,” indeed.

THE EXODUS -- DID IT HAPPEN?

There are any number of stories in the Bible sufficiently farfetched that only someone thoroughly determined to believe every word of the Bible could give them any credence -- stories of the faithful being thrown into a fire or the den of hungry lions without ill effect, or being swallowed whole by a fish and surviving by the power of prayer. Stories such as these are easy targets for skepticism, to the point that many firm believers in the Bible have defensively taken to regarding the stories as being more in the nature of fables meant to illustrate the power of God and the value of faith, rather than being intended to be taken literally as events that really happened.

It’s hard to accept applying that description to some of the stories: when the stories become too long, too detailed and bear all the hallmarks of historical/biographical accounts, it’s not fair to defend them as “fables not intended to be taken as true.” As histories, they are either true or they aren’t, and in these cases the details sometimes go far enough to allow for the truth to be judged. The story of Noah and his Ark, in which Noah saves breeding pairs of every living thing from a monster flood, is such an account. It has been thoroughly researched by scientists (which I take as a sign that the subject of its truth or falsity is fair game), who have pointed to the complete absence of evidence that such a worldwide flood could ever have occurred, but Bible supporters tend to dismiss the scientific approach because it’s usually based on principles they don’t understand. So my choice is to debunk it in the most understandable way possible.

Consider the number of different species of living things existing in the present day:

<http://www.currentresults.com/Environment-Facts/Plants-Animals/number-species.php>

Note that this isn't a list of the number of species *believed* to exist today. It's a count of the numbers of species of various types that have been seen, catalogued, and given names. Any believer in the literal word-for-word truth of the Bible discounts the theory of evolution (since it contradicts the Bible), and such a person is then forced to admit that, if these species exist now, then they must have existed in Noah's time, and must have been saved by Noah -- otherwise how are they here today? Believing that Noah saved more than 25,000 species of mammals, reptiles, and birds, more than 100,000 different species of spiders and scorpions, and over a million different kinds of insects, many of which could not have lived in the hot arid climate of the Middle East so Noah would have had to travel to all the places those species live (Northern Canada? The Brazilian rain forest? Antarctica?), is exactly equivalent to believing Santa Claus visits the homes of all of the hundreds of millions of children on Earth in the space of a single night.

But I want to devote most of my Old-Testament-believability attention to the Exodus. Can the Exodus be classified as "only intended as a fable"? This Biblical account is even harder than the Noah's Ark story to defend that way. There are too many characters, many of whom are given detailed biographies and ancestries, and too elaborate a series of events, to claim that the story was just invented as some sort of teaching tool. The Exodus story presents, to readers of the Bible, a very significant turning point in the history of an entire people, the Hebrews -- that is, Jacob's (Israel's) twelve sons and their descendants. It has been the subject of a *considerable* amount of time and effort spent trying to decide whether it happened as stated in the Bible, by scholars who clearly took it to be intended as a true story. So let me examine the Exodus to see whether it can pass a test of historical accuracy.

The Hebrews having settled in Egypt, the stage is set. After a new Pharaoh came to power, causing the growing population of descendants of Israel to lose their inside man at the Pharaoh's court (Jacob's son Joseph), things went downhill for the Hebrews. The Egyptians despised the Hebrews and treated them as slaves.

Moses, of the tribe of Levi (one of the twelve sons) finds himself chosen by The Lord, who introduces Himself as the same God of whom Genesis spoke: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God wants Moses to lead the entire population of Hebrews out of the oppression of Egypt to a better place, which would turn out to be Canaan.

Why would God choose Moses, of all people, given that Moses, by his own admission, tended to stumble over his words and had absolutely no leadership skills? Well, Moses was, at least, very committed to promoting a group identity among the Hebrews and standing up to outsiders, to the point where he killed an Egyptian who was mistreating a Hebrew... Okay, there we go: Moses was a murderer. I knew there had to be *something* that attracted God to

him. (One wonders how personally Moses took it when God handed him the tablet reading “Thou shalt not kill” among the other Commandments.)

So Moses, along with his less tongue-tied brother Aaron, organized the mass movement of the Hebrew tribes out of Egypt, across the Sinai, seeking out the land of milk and honey promised to them (which none of them ever reached in their lifetimes). Moses, channeling the power of the God of Abraham, visited plagues on the Egyptians, and led the escape, facilitated by his parting the waters of the Red Sea, which then closed behind him and destroyed the pursuing Egyptians.

There are obviously some important details in the story that are hard to swallow whole. Before I started looking into some of the relevant history, I did know that some time went by (centuries? I wasn't completely sure) between the time of the Hebrews leaving Egypt and the time when all of this was written down in its more-or-less current, definitive form. Enough time for the story, passed along down the years by word of mouth, to undergo a considerable number of... improvements.

My facts here are from the Wikipedia article on The Exodus:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Exodus

I was right about the length of time. The Bible itself gives a date (in 1 Kings 6:1) that implies that the Exodus occurred around the 15th century BCE [Before Christian Era]: that verse “says that the Exodus occurred 480 years before the construction of Solomon’s Temple; this would imply an Exodus c. 1446 BCE, during Egypt’s Eighteenth Dynasty.” In support of a date that far back, there is archaeological evidence that there were a people called “Israel” in Canaan by 1200 BCE, and they could only have been there, by that name, after the Exodus, so that 1200 BCE seems the *latest* possible date for the great movement from Egypt to Canaan. As for the writing of the book of Exodus, Bible scholars have settled on an authorship of the Torah (which includes Exodus) somewhere in the neighborhood of 500 to 600 years BCE, though there are writings with some of the details of the story dating about 200 years earlier. So there is a gap between the Bible’s dating of the events and the writing of the current official “book” about them of at least 600 years, more than sufficient time for details to wander a bit.

But it turns out that it is not the specific details that are a problem in the story: there is considerable doubt, among Bible scholars, that the Exodus ever happened at all, and the *entire* story seems likely to be purely a “creation myth” for the beginnings of Israel. From the Wikipedia article: “A century of research by archaeologists and Egyptologists has found no evidence which can be directly related to the Exodus captivity and the escape and travels through the wilderness, and most archaeologists have abandoned the archaeological investigation of Moses and the Exodus as ‘a fruitless pursuit’.”

And the problems go beyond a mere absence of evidence that it happened: there is a lot of evidence *against* it happening. For example, a number of the places the Hebrews are said to have passed through during their escape from Egypt existed when the story was written down -- but not when the Bible says the escape took place, six to eight centuries earlier. Also, again from Wikipedia: "Pharaoh's fear [as described in the book of Exodus] that the Israelites might ally themselves with foreign invaders seems unlikely in the context of the late 2nd millennium [BCE], when Canaan was part of an Egyptian empire [that is, going to Canaan was not an escape from Egypt] and Egypt faced no enemies in that direction, but does make sense in a 1st millennium [BCE] context, when Egypt was considerably weaker and faced invasion first from the Persians and later from Seleucid Syria." (Keep in mind: the mid-second millennium BCE is the Biblically-validated date -- if we are to believe the Bible, then that is when this all happened.) The narrative in the Bible says the Hebrew masses participating in the Exodus numbered "about 600,000 men on foot, besides women and children" (Exo. 12:37-38), which suggests a huge movement of around two million people (plus livestock), while the entire population of Egypt at that time has been estimated at 3.5 million, and "No evidence has been found that indicates Egypt ever suffered such a demographic and economic catastrophe or that the Sinai desert ever hosted (or could have hosted) these millions of people and their herds." Some authorities have said that "600,000 men" could well be a mistranslation of "600 families", but then it becomes hard to fathom why Pharaoh and his millions of citizens would have felt threatened by a few hundred essentially unarmed men, and why the Egyptians would have gone to such great lengths to stop them from leaving and to get them back.

No one, in fact, has ever uncovered historically reliable evidence that the Hebrew people, as a whole, ever actually lived in Egypt proper. All historical evidence suggests origins in Canaan, the land that the Bible has them eventually arriving in after escaping Egypt. The article summarizes the findings of historians and Bible scholars by saying: "It is therefore best to treat the Exodus story not as the record of a single historical event but as a 'powerful collective memory of the Egyptian occupation of Canaan and the enslavement of its population' [quoting historian Ann Killebrew] during the 13th and 12th centuries [BCE]." That is, it does seem likely that the Hebrew people were oppressed by Egyptians, and passed down stories of it, but the oppression was in Canaan, the original home of the Hebrews, and the Hebrews, without going anywhere, were saved by the slow, centuries-long dissolution of the Egyptian empire, without themselves having done anything to bring that about.

My own original suspicion, before going into this research, had been that stories of a lot of heroic (human) action during the flight from Egypt had evolved, over the years, into stories of divine miracles from a God who was looking out for Israel. As it turns out, that doesn't seem to have been quite correct. According to all evidence collected, the entire account of the Exodus records a mythical "escape" that, in truth, never occurred.

It's not easy to downplay the significance of a consensus forming around the idea that a major event in the history of the Jewish people, recorded in the Bible, the official source of the Word of God, never happened -- a consensus among people who have spent their entire careers studying the Bible and all other writings ever found to be associated with it. If any part of the Bible is pure myth, what does that imply about the rest of it?

DID JESUS RISE FROM THE DEAD? AND WHY?

Shifting attention to the New Testament, it is natural to wonder about a collection of writings from thousands of years ago that focus on the life, death, and return to life, of a single man. If we take the New Testament to be true, then we'd have to accept that Jesus came back to life after being, according to witnesses, indisputably dead.

Why did that dance with death occur? The Gospel of John (chapter 3, verse 16) makes the most clear statement of it: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." The words about God "giving his Son" are widely interpreted to mean that the Son had to die, which does seem a reasonable way to read it. And Christian doctrine holds that the ensuing resurrection was necessary, as a sign of Death itself being conquered, so that afterward we could all hold onto Jesus' shirttails, as it were, and follow him into the Heaven to which he ascended after his resurrection.

Christianity is the only major religion on the planet that offers *this* means of attaining immortality: simply having a particular belief. See "How To Get To Heaven," on [gotquestions.org](http://www.gotquestions.org)

<http://www.gotquestions.org/how-to-get-to-heaven.html>

for a summary of what various religions believe relative to getting into Paradise, and note the comment in the second paragraph: "Only Christianity teaches that salvation is a free gift of God through faith in Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9), and no amount of work or effort is necessary or possible to get to heaven." That's the Christian belief about everlasting life, very well summarized: that we can't possibly be good enough to *earn* entry into Heaven, so instead we must just trust in Jesus to get us there. I can understand the premise that eternal life in Paradise is such a *huge* gift that none of us is capable of deserving it, but my point is that Christianity is the only religion to posit that some sort of roadblock prevented an omnipotent God from simply saving us directly, and that He had to come up with this workaround to make it possible to give us eternal life.

I will spend more time addressing the question of "Why would God need to have a son die and then resurrect him to make salvation happen?" in a later chapter. For now I want to move beyond *why* it happened to the question of *whether* it happened.

There are many accounts of Jesus' activities during the forty days he remained on Earth after rising from the dead, which tell of him appearing before large (and growing) crowds of followers. Most of those records were written by people who had an interest in making the importance and divinity of Jesus very clear to any potential new convert, so their accounts can hardly be termed "objective." It would be nice to have a written document by a neutral observer. Rick Marshall, in an essay "What Did Jesus Do Those 40 Days?" points out that the "contemporary Jewish historian Josephus referred to [resurrected Jesus being seen by multitudes]". Ah, I thought, contemporary Jewish historian. Will he be the objective observer, the dispassionate eyewitness, I was looking for? It turns out that Marshall was seriously stretching the meaning of the word "contemporary," since at the time of Jesus' forty-day post-resurrection ministry, Flavius Josephus hadn't even been born yet. The references to Jesus in Josephus' writings come in his books "Antiquities of the Jews," written in the years 94-95 CE [Christian Era, called "A.D." by some], an estimated 60 years after the events in question -- and of the account by Josephus of Jesus' ministry and crucifixion, called the *Testimonium Flavianum*, "The general scholarly view is that while the Testimonium Flavianum is most likely not authentic in its entirety, it is broadly agreed upon that it originally consisted of an authentic nucleus, which was then subject to Christian expansion/alteration." (See "Josephus on Jesus" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josephus_on_Jesus in Wikipedia.) That is, scholars have generally arrived at a consensus that what Josephus had written about Jesus changed a lot after early Christians got hold of it and edited it more to their liking. So much for Marshall's citation of a reliable objective witness.

Jesus' disciples really, *really* wanted him alive. It would be perfectly natural for them to "wish" him into existence, to the point where they sincerely believed they had seen him walking and talking. That is, the disciples didn't necessarily consciously concoct a lie about having seen him after he died, but instead it may have been more a case of wanting so much to have seen him return from the dead that they gradually went from "I saw him in a dream last night" to "We all were with him when he spoke and performed miracles before hundreds of people," building on each other's versions of the story until it became firmly fixed in their minds as something that had really happened.

It should be noted that *none* of the accounts of Jesus' post-resurrection ministry (or the rest of his life and deeds) are believed to have been written by eyewitnesses. The four Gospel accounts, attributed in authorship to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are all believed, by New Testament scholars, to have been assembled in their more-or-less current form between about the years 70 and 100 CE, with Mark probably written first, Matthew and Luke likely copied from Mark and another (unknown) source, and John composed by a "Johannine community" consisting of followers of John the Apostle (one of Jesus' disciples), but written decades after the events described in it, and not by John himself. See Wikipedia, "Gospel of John": http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_John

(There are many references in the Gospel of John to a particular disciple as “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” which would certainly fit with authorship by a group of devoted followers of that disciple, presumed to be John, and that is surely more likely than that one of the disciples would describe himself, or a colleague, that way.) The four to seven decades that passed by after Jesus’ death before any of these accounts was assembled, in all cases by people who didn’t actually witness them, gives the story plenty of time for truth-stretching.

While the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John all give basically similar accounts of what we now call Easter Sunday morning, describing the initial discovery by Mary Magdalene and other women that the stone sealing the tomb of Jesus had been rolled away and the body was missing, as one or two men in white tell them Jesus has risen from the dead and left the tomb -- in one case it’s Jesus himself -- Matthew offers a curious variation from the others: rather than simply finding, after the fact, that the stone had been rolled away, Matthew says Mary Magdalene and her companions experienced an earthquake during which an angel of the Lord appeared and rolled away the stone as they watched, and the guards of the tomb were “so afraid of [the angel] that they shook and became as dead men.” And after that, Matthew (28:11-15) records another detail not mentioned by the other gospels: “While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, ‘You are to say, “His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.” If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.’ So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.”

You have to wonder about an account of the events of that morning so divergent from any of the others. Surely if Mary Magdalene, or any of the women with her, had claimed to have had such a literally earth-shaking experience and seen the guards struck down in their fright, that would have made such an impression on all who were told about it that it’s hard to believe the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John would have left that part out. But more significantly, Matthew gives us this account of a conspiracy among the Jewish priests, elders, and the guards to concoct a phony story about what had happened, so that we have, within the Gospel of Matthew, two competing versions of what occurred on Easter: (1) An angel came with the fanfare of an earthquake, rolled the stone away, frightened the guards to unconsciousness, and told the women Jesus had risen from the dead and left, or (2) the guards fell asleep and someone stole the body. Given that version (2) had, according to Matthew, been circulating for years at the time of the writing of the Gospel of Matthew, it is not surprising that the author of the Gospel felt it necessary to address the issue and say that something else had happened, and to explain that the story of the guards simply falling asleep and missing the theft was the result of a high-level conspiracy. It is obvious that *someone* came up with an account of Easter morning that diverges from the truth. The question is, was it the high priests, or was it Matthew? Which one of those stories, (1) or (2), sounds more believable? Before answering

that, ask yourself: When, in all of history, have the members of a troop of military guards been persuaded to say, "We just fell asleep on duty" -- historically a capital offense in many armies -- and expected their commander to be satisfied with that, when the truth was far more complicated and interesting? That's what Matthew wants you to believe.

In my own case, I believe that the guards did fall asleep and the body was stolen, by a small group (or all) of the disciples *or* by someone else (and those who stole the body did know Jesus hadn't come back to life, but possibly took it with the intention of spreading such a story), and that all of Jesus' followers not involved in the theft came to believe, as I said earlier, that they had really seen Jesus alive, because they wanted so badly to believe that. As for Matthew's assertion that the general knowledge of the guards' dereliction and the theft of the body was the result of a misinformation conspiracy, I don't see any possibility that the description of that "conspiracy" is anything but a fabrication by Matthew -- no matter what you think about whether the author of the Gospel of Matthew might have been an eyewitness to other events, he couldn't *possibly* have been present to hear the Jewish elders and priests conferring secretly or paying off the guards. And if there is any fabrication anywhere in the Gospels, what does that say about the reliability of the rest of their contents?

I anticipate an objection to my interpretation of this passage in Matthew. Matthew didn't need to be an eyewitness to know about the conspiracy, someone will tell me. God told him it happened.

I might grant that point, except for one thing. I had a reason for citing that other discrepancy in Matthew's reporting of the Easter Morning story. If God told Matthew about the conspiracy, did He also tell Matthew that Mary Magdalene, on arriving at the tomb of Jesus, experienced a big earthquake, and that an angel rolled away the stone while she was watching? That version of events would apparently be news to Mary. As I said, the other three gospels offer descriptions of what Mary Magdalene saw that are *very* different from that, are far more boring, and are identical to each other except for minor details. How did everybody but Matthew miss hearing about the earthquake and the angel's visible feat of superhuman strength?

What I believe we are seeing is that Matthew was not at all above punching up his stories to make them more gripping, but the embellishment here very likely serves another purpose: Matthew was trying to reset the timeline of when the guards fell asleep. He invented the priests/elders/guards conspiracy to combat the (probably true) story of the body being stolen while the guards were slumbering, and his earthquake/feat-of-angelic-strength version of Mary's discovery of the empty tomb was a further attempt along those lines: it seems that here Matthew is trying to convince us that the guards, rather than being asleep *before* the body was stolen (facilitating the theft), were instead struck unconscious in fright after the body was

already gone. (It sounds like too many people saw the guards lying there in dreamland for Matthew to be able to get away with saying they were never asleep at all.)

I have found discussions, by Bible supporters and by skeptics, of the discrepancies in the various Gospel accounts of Easter morning. Among the supporters, all that I have found examine only the small nitpicky details (How many angels? How many women, and which ones? What exactly did the angel say?), which I have already dismissed above as being too minor to bother exploring, and they ignore the larger question of whether (as in Matthew) there was an earthquake and a dramatic unveiling of the tomb, which, as I said, doesn't seem like something the other writers could have missed. One of the skeptical discussions I found did mention that curious inconsistency.

Matthew's account contradicts Mark, Luke, and John in much more serious ways than Bible supporters seem to want to admit. Are we nevertheless supposed to believe him anyway?

HOW CAN DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN GROUPS HAVE SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF THE BIBLE?

The Bible is considered to have been written by humans under the direction of God. It is His word; it is what He wants us to know.

And yet, there are arguments over the accuracy of translations, with experts often looking at a Bible passage in one language and saying, "No, that's incorrectly translated from the earlier language this edition is based on." See, for example, the website for *And God Said*, <http://www.andgodsaid.com/> an *entire book* about mistranslations in the Bible. If God is "guiding the hands" of the people who are producing Bibles, how could any mistranslation possibly occur?

One example of iffy translation (I don't know whether this one is in the book cited above) has to do with Paul's conversion to Christianity, which, as I mentioned in chapter 5, occurred when the late Jesus spoke to him from within a blinding light as Paul was traveling to Damascus to persecute Christians. Paul wasn't traveling alone. What did his traveling companions hear? The Book of Acts (authorship attributed to Luke) answers that -- in different ways. In the King James Version of the Bible, Acts 9:7 says, "And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man." Meanwhile, later in the same book, in that same King James Version, Acts 22:9, now quoting Paul himself, says, "And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me." The contradiction has been rectified in more recent translations of the Bible, and has been explained as a mistranslation of a Greek word whose meaning in English is ambiguous. If that is the case, I'll repeat my question above: If God was guiding the translators producing the King James Version, how did a mistranslation, resulting in a contradiction, slip past Him?

But there is a much bigger problem than mistranslations: Why isn't The Bible one particular book? There are different Bibles, with different content, for different Christian denominations. How could that possibly happen? Did God somehow let the editing process get away from Him altogether?

Jews, of course, don't recognize any of the New Testament as holy, inspired, or indeed accurate in describing the role of Jesus Christ in human history. Christians, of course, do: the common view is that Christians accept both the Old Testament and New as the word of God. But among different Christian denominations, there are major disagreements on just what those Testaments consist of.

Consider the article, "Books of the Bible," in Wikipedia:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Books_of_the_Bible

One sees that "Different religious groups include different books in their Biblical canons, in varying orders, and sometimes divide or combine books, or incorporate additional material into canonical books. Christian Bibles range from the sixty-six books of the Protestant canon to the eighty-one books of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church canon."

As an important example of the differences, consider the Intertestamental books (the following quote is from the article cited above): "The intertestamental books, largely written during the intertestamental period, are called the Biblical apocrypha ('hidden things') by Protestants, the deuterocanon ('second canon') by Catholics, and the deuterocanon or anagignoskomena ('worthy of reading') by Orthodox. These are works recognized by the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Oriental Orthodox Churches as being part of scripture (and thus deuterocanonical rather than apocryphal), but Protestants do not recognize them as divinely inspired." Think about those last eight words. Protestants don't include these books in their Bible because they are convinced God didn't write them and doesn't want them there. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians think God *did* write them. The question of whether God inspired these parts of the Bible is a matter of belief, opinion, and dispute. How does that fit with the idea that God can, and did, use His power to direct the writing of the Bible? How can He have *that* power, yet not have the ability to make it clear to His followers what He wrote and what He didn't? And if there is disagreement, not settled by God, over whether certain parts of the Bible were inspired by God, how is it possible to be sure *any* of it was?

IS GOD'S WORD SUBJECT TO POLITICAL BIAS?

Andrew Schlafly, creator of the ultra-conservative website "Conservapedia," has included on the site a "Conservative Bible Project," aimed at rewriting the English Bible to strip it of liberal bias, a task that even includes deleting several Gospel quotes of things Jesus Christ said on the grounds that Schlafly, who wasn't there two thousand years ago, doesn't think Jesus would

have said them. (They make Jesus seem suspiciously liberal.) See the Wikipedia article on “Conservapedia”:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservapedia>

Schlafly, in committing his efforts to the project, doesn’t seem to realize he has given the entire game away: If humans can arbitrarily edit the Bible so that it conforms with their pre-existing political beliefs, as Schlafly is doing because he believes other people already did so, without being struck dead or visited with plagues and pestilence for doing it, if there can be human political bias in the Bible, either put there by Schlafly or removed by him, then how can *any* version of the Bible be reliably identified as being composed by God rather than simply written by men acting on their own personal agendas without any direction or correction from God?

* * * * *

SUMMING UP

To believe in the Bible as the Word of God, it is necessary for you to accept that the God of Abraham has the power to guide the hand of the people who wrote it. Yet surely that God would then have the power to make sure different parts didn’t contradict each other; to make clear what lessons He wanted his followers to take from it; and to clarify which writings He wants included so that His followers are all, so to say, on the same page. If God guided the construction of the Bible, His followers would not disagree on what belongs in the Bible and what doesn’t, argue about whether events chronicled in great detail in the Bible ever happened at all, and split into different churches that differ in their beliefs about what God’s rules and desires are -- in particular, disagreeing on what He promised in the way of salvation for the people who have remained true to Him and on whether those promises have been carried out already (leaving us with Christianity vs. Judaism).

If you want an extreme example of the disagreement: the God of Abraham, the god whose dealings with Abraham is one of the main subjects of the book of Genesis, is the god worshipped in Islam under the name Allah. Yes, I am talking about the Abraham who had sons named Isaac and Ishmael, and a nephew named Lot -- *that* Abraham. That’s why Abraham -- pronounced as Ibrahim in the Arabic language -- is a common name in the Muslim world. Mohammad himself named his own son Ibrahim! And yes, it was for *that* Ibrahim, or Abraham. But Muslims believe that the God of Abraham inspired an entirely different book, the Quran, which includes many of the same characters, and many of the same stories about them, that the Bible does (sometimes with different details), but in other ways has a completely different message for God’s followers.

More than half of the world’s population are either Christians or Muslims, and these two religions have nearly the same number of adherents. Yet although followers of both of these

faiths worship the God of Abraham, they have absolutely contradictory beliefs about how eternal life with that God is to be attained (see link above to article on how to get to Heaven, and the Wikipedia article on “Jesus In Islam”):

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_in_Islam

- Islam teaches that immortality comes from obeying the teachings of Allah sufficiently well that your good deeds outweigh the bad, in Allah’s judgment. Jesus is regarded in Islam as a major prophet, but if you worship Jesus as the son of God, or in any other way consider him divine and worthy of worship as a god, you’re guilty of blasphemy. (From the “Jesus in Islam” article: “The Quran says that Jesus himself never claimed to be the Son of God... Islamic texts forbid the association of partners with God, emphasizing a strict notion of monotheism.”)
- Christianity, on the contrary, says you cannot possibly be good enough to earn immortality, and that you can only be saved by trusting your fate to your faith in Jesus as the son of God.

There is no safe road to follow between these two beliefs, no possible compromise allowing you somehow to be saved in both religions.

The God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, the God who, according to the Book of John, sent His only son into the world to be sacrificed on behalf of His people because He loved them so much, wouldn’t play cruel practical jokes on those same people, leaving billions of them to live their entire lives and die with incorrect information on how they could have been saved.

The followers of the God of Abraham -- the so-called “Abrahamic Religions,” including Jews, Christians, Muslims, and some smaller religions, have been left in disagreement and confusion, not to mention murderous mutual hatred, which adherents to all those religions believe God obviously must have the power to straighten out, yet He never has.

Some people reading what I am writing are going to say “God is testing His people, wanting to make sure they come to a true understanding of Him and of His plans for them.” That’s always been a cop out, something you can always say to shrug off things God is doing when you don’t understand them. But there is no merit to the argument. Yes, there are stories in the Bible of God testing various people, such as Job and, in fact, Abraham himself, to make sure of their faith. But none of those tests involved God leaving those being tested in the dark as to what He wanted them to do; what He wants done is clear, and the tests involved seeing whether the people being tested would do those things. The massive confusion among followers of the God of Abraham is not some sort of “test” -- if it were a test, then when you consider its fifty percent (at least) failure rate, since either every Christian or every Muslim fails it, at a

minimum, despite all of them sincerely believing they were doing the right thing in God's eyes, you know this is something no loving god would allow to happen.

So if the God of Abraham is not straightening out the confusion about His Word, it's because He isn't capable of it (perhaps because He isn't there), which leaves no foundation for believing He could guide men to write His Word down to begin with.

What about taking The Bible as a book that tells you how to be good? "...for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness"? On being confronted with the many problems in taking the Bible literally as a book of history (the thousand year lifespans, the evidence that the most important event in the history of the Jewish people never happened, and so on), many Christians respond that to be a historical document was never the Bible's purpose, and that it was really intended as a resource for moral instruction, exactly as it proclaims itself to be. So let's consider that. Is the Bible a moral resource?

How do parents teach good, moral behavior to their children? By establishing rules and setting examples.

Does the Bible establish rules? Absolutely. There are rules all over the place in the Bible. Rules such as the ones I cited in the chapter 5, on Morality: rules to follow in buying and owning slaves (don't use your own people as slaves, feel free to pass ownership to your kids when you die, and so on), rules for the behavior of women (keep them quiet, don't let them lead or teach), rules about rapists and their victims (they have to marry and never divorce), and these are just a few of my favorites among the *many* Biblically-established laws that have long been discarded by present-day society -- laws that I have never heard *any* of our most prominent self-appointed Guardians of Morality, in their megachurches and television shows, propose returning to.

Does the Bible set examples? Indeed, there are plenty of examples, provided by the First Family of the Old Testament, including Abraham (preemptively lying to save his own skin), Isaac (same lie as Dad), Jacob (cheating his brother out of a fortune by conning his father), Rebekah (instigating the robbery of her own son Esau out of cultural hatred of his wives), Moses (murdering a man for doing something Moses didn't like -- no self-defense involved), with none of these people punished or even criticized by God for doing any of these things, but instead richly rewarded. What a fine job of showing us how God wants us to behave.

It would take the world's biggest broom and most spacious carpet to sweep all of the Bible's lapses in moral instruction under the rug, yet that is exactly what proponents of the Good Book all manage to do. I wish they'd come over and clean my house.

To capture, in more abbreviated form, my answers to the three main questions I posed at the start of this chapter:

1. Was the writing of the Bible inspired and guided by God? No. A God who controlled the content of the Bible would not have

- let it be full of inconsistencies and contradictions;
- let it be mistranslated;
- let humans use it to further their political agendas; and
- allowed disagreements among religious authorities over what belongs in it and what it means.

2. Is the Bible believable? No. Just to list a *few* of the reasons:

- Again let me mention those inconsistencies and contradictions;
- The writers of the Old Testament's most important story, the Exodus story, made the mistake of including too many specific details to pass archaeological scrutiny;
- The author of one of the gospels got carried away trying to establish his own version of events in the New Testament's most important story (Jesus' resurrection), attempting to disprove what was probably the true story of what had really happened by claiming that story was the result of a conspiracy he couldn't possibly have been privy to, and trying to support that claim by providing details of events at the tomb that contradict all the other accepted authorities (the other gospels).

3. Is the Bible useful as a tool for teaching goodness? No. The Bible is woefully unreliable as a guide to upright behavior:

- There are so many examples (some cited above) of terrible behavior rewarded by God Himself;
- There are so many horrifying rules (a few cited above) that society has sensibly rejected.

That's my belief. What's yours?

7. MIRACLES AND GOD'S BLUNDERBUSS

*If, as some say, God spanked the town
For being over-frisky
Why did He burn his churches down
And spare Hotaling's whiskey?*

Charles Kellogg Field, on observing the Hotaling Whiskey warehouse standing undamaged amid the rubble of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire.

* * * * *

MIRACLES

The word “miracle” is used in a variety of ways. Though it *can* simply mean “an occurrence that is statistically unlikely,” it is used by many people to signify “an event caused directly by the hand of God.” In the latter case, the use of the word usually means that the event defies the laws of the natural world.

It is overused, as so many words are. I recall its use by a local sheriff in connection with the escape of a kidnapped boy, who worked loose from the ropes with which his captor had bound him and ran to freedom. In this case, either attributing the escape to God’s intervention or claiming it simply was an occurrence of extremely low likelihood are equally inappropriate -- all the escape really signified is that the kidnapper didn’t know how to tie effective knots, an ignorance he probably shared with a majority of the population.

The biggest problem I have with the word “miracle” is that there are so many people who make no distinction between the two above meanings: If it defies the odds, then God must have done it. No other explanation is considered.

One thing that really sets my teeth on edge is when people say they see the hand of God in an event in which they were far more lucky than other people were -- the man who “miraculously” survives a train wreck, for example, in which everyone else riding in the same train car he was in died. When the survivor tells news reporters that “God was watching over me and saved me,” I really wish he could see how incredibly arrogant and shockingly insensitive he is being. He is saying that God considered him more important, his survival more essential, than all of those people who died. It is a slap in the face to all family members of the people who died, as

if they needed insult to their loved ones added to their tragedy. The same is true if none were killed but some were hurt, when an uninjured passenger credits God for the “miracle” of her personal safety -- she is thoughtlessly insulting all of those who *did* get hurt. She is saying God didn’t find them worth protecting.

What about the train crash in which *everyone* survives without serious injury, in defiance of the odds? Can they say, or can we say, that God saved them? Is it one of God’s “miracles”? The trouble is that if no one was killed or even badly hurt, that opens up the question: if God didn’t want any of those people hurt and worked to prevent it, then why did He allow the crash to happen at all? If we grant that God has the power to save all those people from death and injury, then He clearly must have the power to prevent the accident from occurring to begin with. Wouldn’t that have been much simpler?

Citing Satan as the instigator of the accident doesn’t help explain it -- it only opens up, once more, the subject of that inexplicable competition between God and Satan (see chapter on “Good and Evil”) that runs counter to every notion of God being omnipotent.

The next time you hear of an unlikely event being awarded the status of a “miracle,” here is something to keep in mind: we live in a very big world, and *every day*, around the world, one-chance-in-a-million events are given millions of opportunities to happen. That being the case, the laws of mathematics, and even of common sense, say that some of them are going to happen. God isn’t required for that.

* * * * *

THE BLUNDERBUSS

During the 2014 Congressional campaign, candidate Susanne Atanus was quoted saying that “Everybody knows that God controls the weather,” a “fact” she offered as proof of her contention that tornadoes (along with autism and dementia) were God’s punishment for gay marriage and access to abortions. (For the record, she won the Republican primary, but lost the general election by a 2-1 margin.)

The purposeful tornadoes cited by Ms. Atanus are a perfect example of what I call “God’s Blunderbuss,” the weapon employed by God for exercising His wrath on wrongdoers that ends up destroying completely innocent victims, while often missing the actual target.

The blunderbuss was a muzzle-loaded shotgun popular two to three centuries ago, with a short, flared barrel capable of scattering shot over a wide area, most of it (if not all of it) missing the intended target. To many devoted believers in God, in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic-and-almost-any-other-religion world, it seems to be God’s weapon of choice.

Hurricane Katrina, for example, was God's Blunderbuss. It was widely said, among conservative Christians, that God threw Katrina at New Orleans in response to the wild, hedonistic lifestyle of the denizens of Bourbon Street, where women parade topless at Mardi Gras and you can purchase mixed alcoholic drinks without departing from the sidewalk on any night of the year. It seems like a reasonable tantrum for a fed-up God to have, if you overlook one important detail: the hurricane largely spared the sinful tourist trap of Bourbon Street of all but minor flood damage while focusing all of its significant destruction in New Orleans on an inner-city neighborhood of desperately poor African-Americans who attended church every Sunday, prayed to God every night and at every meal, and had absolutely no connection with any of the activities on Bourbon Street that God might have been angry at. (Not to mention all the destruction visited on the people of the Bayou whose misfortune it was to be living in the area the hurricane had to pass through to get to New Orleans.) Meanwhile, in contrast to the utter demolition of New Orleans' 9th Ward: Harrah's Casino, a den of gambling near the foot of Canal Street just across from the entrance to Bourbon Street, was so untouched that the police used it to set up a command post! Is God really that clumsy that He completely misses all of the people He wants to punish and ends up striking only bystanders who just got in the way? Think of all the power God is supposed to have. Shouldn't He be capable of using it more effectively than that?

God's Blunderbuss is one side of a coin, of which miracles are the other side. God rewards the good people, He punishes the bad ones. That fits well with what most people think God's job is, and anyone who chooses to ignore all of the obvious inconsistencies in the real-world application of that process, all of the questions about who deserved what, all of the collateral damage, and all of the failures to hit the intended target, is welcome to hold onto that belief. But I can't. Just read the poem at the start of this chapter for another example of one of the reasons I can't.

8. IS GOD OKAY?

OK God, Now What?

Title of a book by Donald C. Mann

* * * * *

The title for this chapter doesn't mean what you probably assume it means. I will clarify at the end.

Followers of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or any of the smaller religions centered around the God of Abraham, might reasonably ask a non-believer, "If our God is a myth, how did He come to have literally billions of worshippers, more than half the population of all of Earth?"

That is indeed a fair question. Through human history and across all cultures, there have been many different gods. Among those remembered by history, the ancient Greeks had quite a lot of gods living out eventful and colorful existences, as did the people of Scandinavia. All of those gods are now regarded as pure myth, none of them with any significant number of true followers today. (You can find out about the gods of many cultures at *Wikipedia*: Pantheon (religion)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pantheon_\(religion\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pantheon_(religion))

and this, of course, doesn't include the innumerable gods that no one at all remembers today.) So how, if He doesn't really exist, could the God of Abraham manage to swamp all other gods and take over as, in a sense, the God of All Mankind?

Well, there's an interesting analogy that may shed some light.

Many stories have been told about where the English-language word "okay" came from. None of the most widely-noted origin stories are actually true as to the first use of the word, though some of them contain important shards of truth.

In the book *OK: The Improbable Story of America's Greatest Word*, author Allan Metcalf explores the bizarre history of a word that (I'm using the following phrasing intentionally) has come to swamp all synonyms and take over as, in a sense, the Word of All Mankind.

Dr. Metcalf, I should note, knows what he is talking about relative to the history and usage of English words. He is a professor of English at MacMurray College, has served as chair of the

English department at the college, and since 1981 has been (still is, as of this writing in 2015) the executive director of the American Dialect Society. In the book, Dr. Metcalf has assembled exhaustive research by language experts, including that of Dr. Allen Walker Read, who found the original citation described below.

In the 1830s and 1840s, there was a widespread fad, among editors of newspapers (and this was an era in which pretty much *everyone* read newspapers) for abbreviations taken to an absurd level as a form of humor. The fad centered around the Boston Morning Post, the leading (and thus much quoted) newspaper of that city, and its editor Charles Gordon Greene. Greene peppered his articles in the Post with abbreviations so obscure they usually had to be explained on the spot (defeating the purpose, but that was part of the joke), such as R.T.B.S. (“remains to be seen”), S.P. (“small potatoes”, as in “no big deal”), and even W.O.O.O.F.C. (“with one of our first citizens”). (Dr. Metcalf points out that the fad has been resurrected today in online communications, so that abbreviations such as BTW [“by the way”], LOL [“laughing out loud”], and IMHO [“in my humble opinion”] are widely recognized and understood, along with others which, like Greene’s in the 19th century, need to be explained when used.)

Greene sometimes took the joke a step farther, basing an abbreviation on a ludicrous misspelling of the phrase being abbreviated. In 1838, for example, Greene used the abbreviation “o.w.” to stand for “all right,” based on pretending the phrase was spelled “oll write.”

A year later, on March 23, 1839, Greene was similarly moved to use “o.k.” to abbreviate “all correct,” pretending that it was spelled “oll korrekt.” (We know that is what he meant by o.k., because he followed his use of o.k. with an explication “all correct.”) Despite exhaustive searching, no one has ever found an earlier use of the abbreviation o.k. with that meaning, or any other meaning equivalent to the way o.k. is used today -- it appears Greene spontaneously invented it that day, in keeping with his habit of doing exactly the same sort of thing with other phrases.

Other newspapers, for reasons not at all obvious, seem to have been rather taken with that handy abbreviation, and “o.k.” (again explained immediately to mean “all correct”) started showing up with increasing frequency in other papers, in other cities, through 1839 and 1840.

If you have heard previous histories of “o.k.”, you may have been told it originated with Martin Van Buren’s 1840 presidential campaign. That is *not* its original source, but that campaign did help spread o.k. more widely. For that 1840 campaign, fans of the president played on the growing popularity of the abbreviation o.k.: they took to referring to Van Buren as “Old Kinderhook” (for his hometown, Kinderhook, New York), and formed organizations for his support that they called “O.K. Clubs.” The first meeting of an O.K. Club was announced by the

Tammany Society, a major center of power in the Democratic Party in New York, on March 23, 1840, coincidentally the first anniversary of the invention of o.k. It should be noted that, though Van Buren was first elected in 1836, there is no reference to him as “Old Kinderhook” nor to any “O.K. Club” in any literature (political handbills, newspaper articles) from that earlier campaign. But such clubs flourished in 1840, on the strength of spreading use of the term “o.k.” for “all correct.” Mentions of O.K. Clubs in 1840 campaign literature often made use of both the fact of Van Buren being “Old Kinderhook” and o.k. standing for “all correct,” with the intention of implying that everyone found Van Buren’s policies agreeable and acceptable. (They weren’t. He lost.)

If you have heard that Andrew Jackson, when *he* was president in the early 1830s, used to approve papers presented to him with the letters “o.k.” because he thought “all correct” was spelled “oll kurrek,” that was a hoax, and the hoax was perpetrated in 1840 as a slap at the man who had been Jackson’s vice-president and chosen successor: Martin Van Buren. The date tells us that this hoax is not the original source of o.k., but the hoax was crucially important: it gave rise to the idea that one might authorize an action by giving it the o.k. Of all the different ways today in which “o.k.” is used, this might be said to be the primary modern meaning.

So an abbreviation invented on March 23, 1839 -- who would have thought o.k. would be known to have such a specific date of birth? -- spread quickly, helped along by its coincidental usefulness in a presidential campaign (on both sides), and over the years it acquired a spelling (“okay”) as a word in its own right. Where does it stand today?

Dr. Metcalf lists Dutch, German, Swedish, Polish, Finnish, Italian, Spanish, Welsh, Hebrew, Korean, and Japanese as languages whose speakers make use of “okay” sufficiently often that the word can be considered part of those languages -- and he points out that is only a *partial* list. This despite the fact that most of those languages already had a word that meant essentially the same thing. In Hebrew, as one example, there is a word, “b’seder,” which means “in order,” as in “everything is the way it should be, it’s all in order.” It is used in pretty much any context in which “okay” could be used -- but today, speakers of Hebrew use “okay” more often than “b’seder.” “Okay” is driving “b’seder” out of the Hebrew language and replacing it.

I can even add two more languages to that list. Sometimes I watch foreign films. I watch them with subtitles, as I only know a small bit of French, German, and Spanish, and almost nothing in any other language. But I can hear the foreign language dialogue, of course. I have heard the word “okay” used in a French-language movie (made in France, written by a French screenwriter, with French actors playing French characters speaking French), and I have heard it in a Norwegian movie (made in Norway, written by a Norwegian, spoken by Norwegians playing Norwegians speaking Norwegian). In both cases the word, spoken out loud in the dialogue of the film, was also rendered as “okay” in the subtitles. To hear it used in French dialogue leaves

me as surprised as it is possible to be. The French are extremely touchy about foreign incursions into their language (especially from English) -- and French, like Hebrew, already has a word that can be used in most situations where "okay" would be appropriate; in French it is "d'accord." Yet the French now casually drop "okay" into conversation.

So in the span of less than two centuries, a joke abbreviation invented by an idiosyncratic newspaper editor in Boston has emerged from obscurity, in which its meaning had to be explained, to become an indispensable word used daily by billions of people in nearly all of the world's major languages, replacing existing words (sometimes more than one) in those languages. This, despite an exactly equivalent invention, "o.w." for "all right," having dropped out of sight immediately without leaving a trace.

Looking back at the title of this chapter, I can now explain what I meant: in saying "Is God Okay?" I was asking "Is the God of Abraham analogous to the word 'okay,' in the sense of being an idea whose worldwide spread owes to a set of circumstances that could never have been predicted, all by blind happenstance, while other similar ideas (other gods, other words) have dropped by the wayside?"

I believe so. The analogy runs deep. In the same way that the fortuitous adoption of "o.k." by a presidential campaign was an invaluable aid to its spread, the fortuitous conversion to Christianity of a single particular man -- Constantine, emperor of the Roman Empire -- gave a phenomenal boost to the spread of the God of Abraham. My position is that, if a word that couldn't possibly be taken as an abbreviation for "all correct," except for someone claiming it was, can spread, with that meaning, to everyday use in dozens of languages spoken by billions of people around the world, replacing words previously used, then in just that same way the belief in a particular god can spread around the world, because of an accidental confluence of circumstances, without the god actually existing any more than all of the replaced and forgotten gods do.

9. SO WHERE DID IT ALL COME FROM THEN?

[T]he Jatravartid people of [the planet] Viltvodle VI believe that the entire universe was in fact sneezed out of the nose of a being called the Great Green Arkleseizure.

Douglas Adams, in *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*

* * * * *

We are a very inquisitive species, in our search for causes and reasons, each of us using them to flesh out the narrative of the Story of Me. The biggest question of all is: How did the universe (that is, my environment, in its broadest possible sense) come to be?

I should point out first that the question doesn't *require* an answer. The universe is here, it sustains us, and it won't go away if we don't figure out what caused it. But it's nearly impossible for us to turn off the questioning mechanism inside us.

The question itself leads to the broadest possible use of the concept of God: even people who don't believe a Supreme Being exists (and takes an interest) in the present-day universe believe that some thinking power must have created all this: an "Intelligent Designer" of all we see around us. And even people who don't ordinarily hesitate to accept "it just happened" as an explanation for everyday events such as the weather or train wrecks find it hard to attribute the existence of the universe to happenstance.

Science, in this case, is only semi-helpful, because scientists haven't finished working it out yet. That Science has been unable to finish answering the cause-of-the-universe question (to date) is seen by the devoutly religious as proof that God must have done it. Such people often declare Science to be a failure, but in many cases that is because they only have a rudimentary, and often wildly inaccurate, notion of what Science is. So I want to put in a word on behalf of Science here. It is often pointed out, by those extremely religious people, that scientists often aren't sure; they make errors; the consensus of scientists often shifts from one explanation for a phenomenon to an entirely different one. All of that is true. But that is not because there is anything "broken" about Science -- all of that is a key part of what Science is *intended* to be, as an exploration of the world around us. Scientists don't know everything. They don't *claim* to know everything, because knowing everything would actually end the subject. Science is about *finding out*, and if everything were known, there would be nothing to find out. If all mysteries

of the world around us had been solved, then the people in charge of keeping track of that knowledge wouldn't be scientists. They would be librarians.

Yet all through history, despite mistakes and false starts, more *has* become known. Scientists can now offer explanations for uncounted phenomena that previously had been attributed to the Will of God. You can choose to reject scientific explanations and stick with the Will of God for everything if you want, but what is different today from yesterday is that today, and every day, the Will of God has more alternative explanations competing against it than ever before. God continually becomes less indispensable as time goes by; where once you could only believe God must have caused something, more and more often you have another explanation now that you can use instead. And that doesn't require that all scientists agree. It only requires that the explanation be plausible. Many of the explanations offered by scientific theories become steadily more plausible as time goes by.

The word "theory," now that I've used it, is often abused by people who wish to disparage science: "Evolution is only a theory." This is the sort of thing usually said by people who don't actually understand what the word "theory" means. Most often they are confusing it with the word "conjecture" -- often they don't know what *that* word means either, or in some cases haven't even heard of it, but what "conjecture" means is what people usually (incorrectly) assume "theory" means. A conjecture is simply an untested statement; basically, conjecture means "guess." Sometimes an educated guess, when you have some reasons to think your guess is true; sometimes a guess out of nowhere with nothing to support it -- yet. A "theory" is something else.

A theory is a framework, a structure. You can think of a theory as a desktop organizer -- your pens go here, your paper goes there, everything on your desk has a place to go so that you know where everything is without fumbling for it, and it all fits neatly and efficiently. A theory is like that, with observations, rather than desktop implements, as its contents. You perform an experiment, you observe and record what happens, and the result of all that should have a place to go in the theory. At the beginning the theory holds only a few observations together, and it was designed by a scientist to hold those things. But if the theory is any good, gradually more and more observations related to the phenomenon being studied have a place to fit in the theory -- the theory is helping to "explain" the observations. Sometimes an observation has *no* place to fit in the theory. The theory, in that case, might be adjusted in small ways, and afterward perhaps the observation fits; on the other hand, sometimes the observation can't possibly be fit into the theory, and the theory breaks down. Perhaps then a new theory can be designed, and a lot of scientists jump in trying to do exactly that.

But the best theories, the strongest theories, are the ones that have stood the test of time, sometimes for centuries, accepting and fitting into their framework every observation that has

come along. The number of scientists who accept the theory grows, until in many cases overwhelming consensus is reached. Evolution is such a theory.

Now, back to the subject of the universe, and how it got here.

Early in the 20th century, astronomers observed that all of the stars in the observable universe outside of our immediate neighborhood in space, *all* of them, were moving away from us. (If you wonder how it is possible to know that, look up things like “cosmic expansion,” “Doppler Effect” as it applies to light, “red shift,” and “Edwin Hubble.”) The only explanation anyone could come up with, or has come up with to this day, is that the universe itself is expanding. That is, as time goes by, the universe is continually getting bigger and bigger: tomorrow it will be bigger than it is today; yesterday it was smaller than it is today. Looking farther into the past, there is an obvious limit to how far that can be taken: the amount of space occupied by the universe could never have been less than zero. It was the Belgian astronomer Georges Lemaître (of all things, a Jesuit priest!) who first proposed, in 1927, that all of the observable universe began from a tiny point, the “primeval atom,” its expansion beginning with an explosion that came to be called the “Big Bang.” Current measurements of how fast the expansion is going imply that the universe was a single point about 14 billion years ago (as you may have heard in the theme song for the U.S. television series “The Big Bang Theory”).

The idea of the expansion of the universe, and the resulting Big Bang Theory, have stood up to a *lot* of tests over the past century: time after time observations have fit into the theory. Few cosmologists (those scientists who study the origins of the universe) have any doubts about it anymore. At most the cosmologists differ about details.

The big question, for my own purposes here, is: with the consensus of scientific thought having come to accept a creation date for the universe about 14 billion years in the past, what does that imply one way or another about the universe being “created by God”?

It certainly doesn’t disprove God’s existence, at least not all by itself. If the universe had a beginning, in an unimaginably huge explosion, the question remains: “So what made *that* happen?” There is room for God there. But there is also room for the absence of God, for an explosion that simply happened on its own.

As I’ve said, many people refuse to believe *anything* ever “just happens.” And such resistance to happenstance seems reasonable here. Our experience with explosions is that they always have a cause, and for the Big Bang, it is not at all obvious what the cause might be, since our universe itself presumably didn’t exist before the explosion.

That does seem to leave one feeling that a more mystical force must have caused it, but the claim that the God of Abraham made the Big Bang happen does turn out to have some

problems. One of them is that scientific evidence shows that our own small piece of the universe, our own sun and its system of planets, Earth being one of them, is only about 4.6 billion years old. That is, two-thirds of the entire history of the universe went by before our sun and our planet ever put in an appearance.

(That 4.6 billion year figure is, like the 14 billion year measurement, something that I don't want to take time to explain here, because that would not only make this a much, much longer book, it would make it a different *kind* of book. But I do want to say this much about scientific measurements in general: scientists have very specific reasons for stating particular numbers. In many cases it takes years of study to reach a point of understanding the principles and techniques used in making those measurements, and anyone who really *wants* to understand them fully is going to have to put those years in -- you can't just learn it all spending an afternoon with Google. That is a further reason why science is often belittled by non-scientists -- non-scientists think scientists are just making this stuff up and *pretending* there is a reason behind these numbers. Scientists aren't making it up and they aren't pretending, but they can't explain the source of the numbers to people without enough knowledge to understand them. If you truly, seriously are curious and want to know, you can get started trying to learn the details whenever you want to. As a hint of a way to get started on understanding how the age of the solar system is estimated: it has a lot to do with the relative amounts of different isotopes of chemical elements and the rates at which the isotopes decay. If you don't know what any of that means, that would be one place you'd need to start: learning what chemical elements are, what isotopes are, how different isotopes are detected and the amounts of them measured, what "isotopic decay" is and what its rate tells you... Stop there if you're not interested, but look into it if you are.)

If our world, Earth, is indeed only a third as old as the universe but still several billions of years old, then the idea that the God of the Bible created the universe runs into two problems:

1. The Bible says God made "the heavens" and the Earth together. Science says He did not -- not even close;
2. Bible scholars estimate that, according to the Biblical account, based on family genealogies of the leading participants in the Biblical narrative starting from the Book of Genesis, the Creation occurred about 6000 years ago. So scientific measurement holds that the Earth is literally almost a million times older than the Bible says it is.

So on the subject of Creation, you can accept Science or you can accept the Bible, but not both.

I've already addressed the questionability of the Bible at great length, so between Science and the Bible, I don't have a problem choosing a side. But what about God, separately from the Bible? There is still that question of an "Intelligent Creator."

I can't disprove the existence of a "Creator" -- it's just not subject to scientific disproof because it's an idea outside science -- but I don't need to. I have already brought the general idea of "God" into question earlier, in so many ways, that all I need to do here, as I said above, is offer an alternative that is plausible.

Let's go back, then, to that Big Bang -- the description of the beginning of the universe which, as I said above, originally came from a Catholic priest who also was a scientist. If God didn't make the universe start, then what did?

Consider the following:

A growing number of cosmologists (including, if you want some famous names, Stephen Hawking and Neil deGrasse Tyson) believe in the possible existence of something bigger than the observable universe, something which contains the observable universe as part of itself, and that "something" is usually called the "multiverse." The nature of the multiverse is... well, there are almost as many different versions of the idea as there are scientists.

There is one popular version of the notion of the multiverse that I have taken a liking to. It states that the multiverse is an unimaginably huge space that occasionally gives birth to "bubbles," each bubble being a universe. One of these bubbles is our own universe, just a tiny piece of the multiverse, though of course very large to us. Each of these bubbles originates in a huge explosion and expands from there, just as we perceive that our own universe has done.

There it is, a description of where our universe came from: an explosion that happened, as such explosions sometimes do, within the larger multiverse. The multiverse may extend forever into the past -- the fact that we aren't able to *imagine* extending the existence of the multiverse forever into the past is just a limitation of our imagination. The multiverse, in this version of the idea, simply exists, has always existed, will always exist -- it is simply what *is*. It requires no explanation for its beginning, no "Creator," because it has no beginning. As for the explosion within it that resulted in our own universe, that *could* be the result of an action by an intelligent being -- but there is no reason it *has* to be. It can, like so many other explosions in our experience, simply be the result of an accidental set of conditions in the multiverse that no one intentionally caused.

I'm comfortable with that. I've already accommodated my beliefs to the absence of God in all other situations. On this one question, the creation of the universe, the question where most people believe a God must have done it, I find that I don't feel a need for God there either.

10. SOME QUESTIONS

God: "Any questions?"

Daniel raises his hand.

* * * * *

There are questions I have, relative to God, that I've never seen acceptably answered and, in most cases, haven't even seen asked. I'd be interested in someone giving me *convincing* answers to any of these. By "convincing," I mean from my point of view. I am the person looking to be convinced here. It will do no one any good to give me an answer that satisfies the person giving it but not me -- no one's mind will be changed by that.

Here they are. I could think up more, given time, but I have to call an end to this at some point.

1. In the human body, and in the bodies of many other animals, the digestive system and the respiratory system share the same entrance into the body, at the back of the throat. That is where the trouble begins. All of us have experienced the distress caused by food missing its target, taking the wrong path and starting on its way to the lungs. Our body reacts in panic, we start choking, coughing, trying to expel the food. Often we correct the problem, but sometimes we don't. Many people through history have died as a result of food taking the wrong branch at the fork in the road, blocking their airway and irreversibly preventing them from having the air they needed to live. All of that could be avoided if we had bodies where food entered in one place and air in a different one. Whenever I hear someone say that the world and everything in it is the result of "Intelligent Design," I think of the airway and wonder: how intelligent is *that* design? Forcing the digestive and respiratory systems to use the same input entry, causing frequent permanent breakdowns, would be classified as a design defect in a mechanism built by humans. No intelligent designer would choose to make it that way, given the *obvious* problem that the design causes. So my question is: Why would God make it that way? Could the whole thing instead be an accident? A result of a set of evolutionary steps of which *no one* was in charge? That seems a lot more likely to me.

Anyone trying to answer that for me: Don't bother with anything like "It gives God a way to end our lives when He decides He wants to." That makes no sense whatever to me. God is "all

powerful.” He doesn’t need to pre-install an internal mechanism for the purpose of killing us. If He wants someone dead, He can just point a finger and say, “You’re dead.”

2. The basic, central belief of the Christian faith (at least in most branches of it) is that God sent His son, Jesus, into the world to die on our behalf, so that we could have life everlasting (after we depart this world), and that as long as we believe, sincerely, that Jesus was the son of God and lived and died for that purpose, we will be saved. (John 3:16.) The problem, from my point of view, is that that sounds so much more like grand opera than sensible strategy. My question is: If God wants us to live forever, why did He need to go through all that elaborate and rather dramatic complication to make it happen? Regardless of how Satan might figure into it (I’m sure some people will use Satan, or more specifically the version of Satan believed in by many Christians, as an explanation), it’s hard to say why a being with the sort of powers God is supposed to have would be hamstrung by arbitrary rules to the point that he finally thinks, “Wait, what if I have a son by an Earthly mother -- never mind what it is about him that somehow makes him genetically *my* son -- and have my own Chosen People kill him, then I’ll bring him back to life, and then I’ll give everyone a free pass if they believe my son died to save them? Yeah, that should work! Oh, and I apologize to all those people who lived and died before my son arrived. I thought of all this too late for them. Nothing I can do.”

As I point out in the chapter on the Bible, no other significant world religion bases entry into the afterlife on a gimmick like that. I can make no sense of it. If we can’t possibly earn our way into Heaven, I can understand the idea that there should still be some sign of our sincerity God would want us to show, but that could easily be taken care of by God demanding that we believe in *Him* and that we say something like, “I know you will save me by your grace, God, thank you so much!” And that grace from God could have been in place from the very start, so that untold generations wouldn’t have missed out on it. For me, it’s the idea of God waiting for thousands of years, and then suddenly sending a son to open a path to salvation because for some reason, despite His omnipotence, He couldn’t do it any other more straightforward way, that I find completely inexplicable.

3. Proponents of “Intelligent Design” as a replacement for the Theory of Evolution claim that it is clearly impossible for a life form as complex as Humanity simply to “just happen”; that some intelligent being must have designed it. My own objections to describing the design itself as “intelligent” aside (see question 1, above), my question here is: Isn’t God more complex than a human? Why is it impossible that the human race can “just happen,” but perfectly okay that God “just happened”? I have never heard anyone address that.

Explanations involving description of God as a “timeless” being, saying that He is unaffected by Time and doesn’t require a “beginning,” introduce a wide range of new problems, including taking us back to question 2 again: why, in that case, would He would insert His son into history after many, many centuries without a Savior had gone by, denying salvation to all those who

lived before? If He is outside Time, He can see all of His creation as a finished product at once. If He wanted His creation to include eternal life for its occupants, why arrange for it several millennia after the starting point?

4. If we are to experience life-after-death, in Heaven or Hell, as people universally visualize it, it is absolutely required that our self-awareness and memories be able to exist independently of our physical bodies. We know that our physical bodies will die, but we expect our self-awareness and memories to go on. While we're alive, we picture our departed loved ones looking down on us from above, and being proud of (or horrified by) the things we are doing with our lives; and then after we die, we imagine it will be our turn to do the same thing.

It is easy to see why people thousands of years ago might have believed that that is possible, when no one had any idea what the brain is or what its functions are, but to maintain that belief today requires ignoring a thousand known and demonstrated facts. Sudden physical trauma to the brain, or the slow build-up of damage from Alzheimer's Disease, can rob us of all of those memories we believe we're all going to take with us into the afterlife. The fact that our memories have physical existence in the brain and are vulnerable to physical damage shows that they are part of our body, and not something that can have an existence separate from our body. Imagining that we can take our memories, a part of the physical world, with us after we die is very much like imagining we can ride to Heaven on a city bus.

You may be thinking: wait, I accept that memories can be lost through damage in the brain -- in fact, memories are lost all the time even without damage. We often forget things. Admittedly the loss is profound in Alzheimer's. But even when I forget things, I am still me and I *know* I'm me. That's not something I will lose. And after I die, it will define me in the afterlife.

Think again. Let me offer some excerpts from the book *The Curse of the Self: Self-Awareness, Egotism, and the Quality of Human Life*, by Mark R. Leary. As for Dr. Leary's qualifications to write authoritatively about the mind and the self, he is a professor of psychology and neuroscience (the science of the brain) at Duke University, and "self and identity" is his research specialty. The following passages are from the book:

If you are like most people, you may have the vague sense that there is, inside your head, a small, experiencing "thing" that registers your experiences, thinks your thoughts, and feels your feelings -- some sort of conscious entity "in there" that is the center of your awareness, thought, and conscious experience. Many people report that this mental presence is at the core of whom they really or most essentially are, and some people have the sense that their body is just a vehicle for carrying around this important mental entity....

We know relatively little about the brain structures that are associated with self-

awareness, but neuroscientists are beginning to investigate where and how the brain creates self-awareness and our sense of self.

Dr. Leary then describes the frontal lobes of the brain, which are immediately behind the forehead, and says:

Case studies and experiments over the past 150 years have shown that damage to the frontal lobes produces disturbances of self and awareness. For example, people with damage to their frontal lobes are typically completely unconcerned about their injuries. Despite the fact that they understand fully that their injury is quite serious, they simply do not seem interested in it -- much as if the problem were someone else's rather than their own! As one researcher observed, frontal lobe patients "seem to be entirely uninterested in themselves as persons." Clearly, something about their sense of self has gone awry.

Dr. Leary then goes on to describe further symptoms, all of them suggesting that people with frontal lobe injuries no longer have that "me" inside them that functions as the observer of their lives.

There is a serious problem here, relative to the afterlife. If our self-awareness is independent of the body, then nothing that happens to the body could affect it in any way (because that's exactly what "independent" means). But we see that's not the case. It is dependent on the body, and that means it can't survive the body's death.

My point is: along with our memories (certainly at least *some* of them), this self-awareness, the me inside me that thinks about me-being-me, would have to persist in the afterlife for the whole idea of "afterlife" to make any sense -- in the afterlife, without any of my memories of me or awareness of being me, what's left? How is it "me" in any sense? Read that first paragraph again, from Dr. Leary's book. If you believe in the afterlife, isn't that paragraph describing *exactly* the part of yourself that you believe is going to experience the afterlife? It is that perception of me-inside-me, that sense that "[our] body is just a vehicle for carrying around this important mental entity," that gave rise to the concept of the "soul." Yet in reality our self-awareness physically occupies a specific part of the brain, and can be obliterated by physical damage to that part. How does that fit with the idea of it being something separate from your body that can drift away after you die?

Someone who is reading this (or who would only read it if forced to) might say at this point: Okay, perhaps my experience in Heaven won't be quite how I had visualized it. I won't have my memories, and I won't have my self-awareness. But perhaps that was never the point of Heaven. Maybe I should think of Heaven as a place where I would simply feel the joy of being in the presence of God. I wouldn't need the awareness of myself; in fact, perhaps it is all about

losing my individuality in becoming unified with God's Creation. That is what Heaven could be: not thoughts, not memories, not myself, just that pure joy.

That certainly would be a philosophically interesting way of looking at it. But that doesn't work either. Emotions, such as joy, don't overlay your existence and react to it from outside it. Exactly like memories and self-awareness, emotions are a function of the brain, and are physically located in a particular part in the brain, in this case the limbic system. The following is from *Breaking the Emotional Health Barriers*, by Dr. Reuben Phiri, Principal Doctor at Merrindale Medical Centre in Melbourne, Australia:

The limbic system is the seat of all emotion. People who have head injuries that damage the limbic connections between the neocortex and the limbic system are emotionless. Such people can function normally in all aspects but are very poor at social interaction.

Passion depends on the limbic system. It is a known fact that people work most efficiently when driven by passion for what they do. People with damage to the limbic system lack passion for anything. As a result they may perform poorly at work, have no hobbies and are not fun to be with.

So for anyone who is thinking that your emotions are something mystical and spiritual rather than a physical process taking place in your brain... they aren't. Like the other parts of your selfhood I have been talking about, emotions are created by electrical activities in the neurons of our brains, and are subject to damage and loss.

Anyone who responds to me by saying "The Lord will make the spirits of people with brain damage whole again in Heaven" is missing the point. (So don't bother.) To repeat the above points in more unified form: our memories of ourselves, our awareness of being ourselves, and our emotions in reaction to our experiences, these things are the very core of anything that could be called an afterlife. It is simply not an afterlife without at least some of those things. But the entire idea of *any* of those things surviving our death is based on the belief that they have an existence that is independent of the body. They don't. They are a physical part of the brain, with physical locations in it. They are not "spirits" with a separate existence of their own that can depart from the body at death: if that were the case, they could not be crippled when the brain is damaged. And we aren't taking any parts of our brain with us when we go, any more than we can take parts of our kidneys with us.

So this, then, is my question here, and I put it last, in this chapter, because it is so central to nearly everyone's religious beliefs: How can there be an afterlife?

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All of the above questions are important. Important to me, anyway. But if you read any of them and are struggling to come up with answers that make sense to you, then they are important to you too.

Keep thinking about it. Come up with some new questions of your own. If you are a devout Christian, or a devoted follower of any religion, and you have stayed with me this far (unlikely, but who knows?), and if you feel any discomfort about asking questions about your religion, then make that your first question: Why can't it be questioned?