

ZONDERVAN

The Reason for God Discussion Guide

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

ISBN 978-0-310-33047-9

Based on the *New York Times* bestselling book *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*.

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Interior design: Ben Fetterley

Printed in the United States of America

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DISCUSSION 1

Isn't the Bible a Myth? Hasn't Science Disproved Christianity?

OPENING THOUGHT

Read this thought aloud and then pray as you begin.

In 1993, archaeologists dug up the first outside-of-the-Bible reference to King David. Up until then, only the Bible talked about King David—there were no inscriptions, no archaeological digs, no other documents, nothing, that ever mentioned David. Does that mean that Christians could not believe there was a David before 1993? It does not work that way. Christians believe there was a King David because the Bible is the Word of God.

THE OBJECTION

People say that there are many good things in the Bible, but you should not take it literally; you must not insist that it is entirely trustworthy and completely authoritative because some parts of the Bible are wrong, historically unreliable, and culturally regressive.

BIBLE VERSES

These verses are referred to at some point in the DVD.

Mark 15:20–21

And when they had mocked him [Jesus], they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.

Romans 3:21–25

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.

DVD NOTES

Watch the DVD of Discussion 1. Use the space below if you would like to take notes.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

The notes in the gray boxes following the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help guide and direct the discussion.

1. Are people you know more troubled by the ethical aspects of the Bible or the historical? Why?

2. One of the participants on the DVD said,

“The Bible is a wonderful text, it’s complex, a lot of things going on, some people believe it to be the truth, I myself do not.”

Another said,

“Jesus sacrificed himself—I’m not sure if there is evidence for that.”

Many people say the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life—his claims to be divine, the miracles he performed, his death on a cross, his rising from the dead—were written much later by church leaders who were trying to consolidate their power and build their movements, so they suppressed the evidence that the real Jesus was just a human teacher. How would you respond?

Following are three reasons why people can trust that what the Bible says about Jesus is historically reliable.

The New Testament accounts of Jesus were written too early to be legends.

Luke wrote his account of Jesus' life 30–40 years after the events, and he records the fact that many people who saw Jesus were still alive, and that his readers could therefore check his account with these eyewitnesses. In fact, Luke (in Luke 1:1–4) claims to be painstakingly preserving historical facts, “I myself have carefully investigated everything . . . so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” Luke’s statement to Theophilus, the recipient of the text, shows that ancient authors knew the difference between an “*orderly account*” and spinning a tale.

This attitude toward history is not Luke’s alone. In John 19:35 and 1 John 1:1–4, the writer claims to have been an eyewitness of the events of Jesus’ life.

Paul, who wrote 15–20 years after the events of Jesus’ life records, “He [the resurrected Jesus] appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living” (1 Corinthians 15:6). Paul could not have written that in a public document unless there actually were hundreds of living eyewitnesses who claimed to have seen Jesus. Paul could also confidently assert to government officials that the events of Jesus’ life were public knowledge: “[These things were] not done in a corner,” he said to King Agrippa (Acts 26:26). The people of Jerusalem had been there—they had been in the crowds that heard and watched Jesus. The New Testament documents could not say Jesus was crucified when thousands of people were still alive who knew whether he was or not. If there had not been a burial, if there had not been an empty tomb, if there had not been appearances after his death, and these public documents claimed there had been, Christianity would never have gotten off the ground. It would have been impossible for Christianity to have gained widespread support if its critical historical claims were bluntly contradicted by numerous witnesses who were still alive.

Moreover, there are references within the Gospel texts that demonstrate that the Gospel writers and readers had access to firsthand accounts of the events of Jesus’ life. In Mark 15:21 the author can refer to “Alexander and Rufus” (the sons of the man who carried the cross for Jesus) in a way that shows they were well known to his readers. This was mentioned in the DVD where Dr. Keller said, “It is like footnotes today.”

(cont.)

This shows that the Gospels were written by people in a position to get and report accurate historical information, and were written at a time when eyewitness memory about Jesus was still widely available as a “check” on any fantastic or fabricated claims.

The documents are too detailed in their form to be legends.

In Mark 4 there is a detail recorded which says that Jesus was asleep on a cushion in the stern of a boat. In John 21 it says that Peter was a hundred yards out in the water when he saw Jesus on the beach. He then jumped out of the boat and together they caught 153 fish. In John 8, as Jesus listened to the men who caught a woman in adultery, it says he doodled with his finger in the dust. The best explanation for why an ancient writer would mention the cushion, the 153 fish, and the doodling in the dust, when they are irrelevant to the narrative, is because the details had been retained in the eyewitnesses’ memory.

The documents are too counterproductive in their content to be legends.

The argument goes that the Bible does not give an account of what actually happened; instead, it is what the church leaders wanted people to believe in order to consolidate their power and build their movement. However, if someone wanted to build a movement, would they have included in the account that their founder, Jesus, asked the Father for a way out: “If it is possible, may this cup be taken from me” (Matthew 26:39)? Would they attest that the original resurrection witnesses were women at a time when women’s testimony was not admissible evidence in court? The leaders of the early church were the successors to the apostles, and yet on every page of the New Testament, the apostles look like fools or cowards. Why would a leader of the early church make up those accounts? The only possible explanation for their inclusion is that they actually happened. Otherwise, they are totally counterproductive.

3. Read the following objections aloud:

A: “The Gospels are full of contradictions.”

B: “The Gospels can’t be reliable accounts because they describe miracles.”

C: “Why should a person believe the Old Testament is true?”

Divide into three groups and assign one of the objections above to each group. After five minutes regroup and share your thoughts on how you would respond to the objection.

After coming up with your own thoughts and ideas, use the notes below to help you formulate a response to share with the group.

A: “The Gospels are full of contradictions.”

Comparing the Gospel accounts reveals some apparent tensions and contradictions. But a long tradition of scholarly study has shown that most of these can be explained with reference to two principles.

First, remember the Gospel writers were not simply reporters but also teachers. John says (in John 21:25) that it would be impossible to put together a complete account of all Jesus’ teaching and acts. Each writer selected in accordance with his didactic, or teaching, goals.

For example, many have said that John contradicts the other Gospels because he depicts Mary coming to the tomb alone on Easter Sunday. And yet, when Mary runs to the disciples, John reports her as saying, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” (John 20:2). Mary’s use of the plural “we” shows that John knew full well that Mary had not gone to the tomb alone, and yet in the first part of his account he chooses to focus on her exclusively. Why? He wanted the interview of Jesus and Mary to be highlighted.

(cont.)

Second, remember the selectivity of eyewitness memory. If, as they claim, the Gospel writers were drawing on eyewitness accounts (e.g., from the memory of Peter, John, Mark, or any of the women), each witness would have seen only part of the events.

Also, in some cases, a fact could be described different ways by eyewitnesses without being a contradiction. For example, John says Mary arrived at the tomb “while it was still dark” (John 20:1), but Matthew says it was “at dawn” (Matthew 28:1) and Mark says “just after sunrise” (Mark 16:2). At dawn, the degree of darkness or light is a matter of opinion, and so three different people, there at the same moment, might later describe that moment in all three ways.

B: “The Gospels can’t be reliable accounts because they describe miracles.”

Matthew Arnold, the 19th-century thinker, was candid about how he knew that miracles were impossible. He said effectively: “Miracles cannot happen. Therefore miracles have not happened.”¹

There is an intellectual inconsistency involved in objecting to the historicity of the Gospels because they contain miracles. To say “miracles cannot happen” is a philosophical assumption, not an empirical conclusion. If there is a God, miracles would have to be possible, even if you have never seen one. If a God exists who is capable of making the world, why should he be incapable of altering it? So to say miracles are impossible is to assume that there cannot possibly be a God, a thesis that is impossible to prove empirically, and therefore a philosophical assumption. This is arguing in a circle—“miracles cannot happen, *therefore* miracles have not happened.”

C. S. Lewis wrote, “When the Old Testament says that Sennacherib’s invasion was stopped by angels (2 Kings 19:35), and Herodotus says it was stopped by a lot of mice who came and ate up all the bowstrings of his army (Herodotus, Bk.II, Sect.141), an open-minded person will be on the side of the angels. Unless you start by begging the question [assuming miracles cannot happen], there is nothing intrinsically unlikely in the existence of angels or in the action ascribed to them. But mice just don’t do these things.”²

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1. Paraphrase of the conclusion of Matthew Arnold in *God and The Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1901).
 2. C. S. Lewis, “Miracles,” *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 27–28.

C: “Why should a person believe the Old Testament is true?”

There is a great deal of archaeological and historical support that validates much of the Old Testament. But that alone could not establish the divine inspiration of the Bible. Christians believe the divine inspiration of the Old Testament because Jesus taught and believed in its entire inspiration and trustworthiness (John 5:37–39, 46–47; 10:34–35; Matthew 5:17–19). Almost no one can doubt that Jesus, as a first-century Jew, believed in the authority of the Old Testament. If Jesus was who he said he was, then we must accept the entire Bible as God’s Word.

In Matthew 5:18 Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law [the Old Testament] until everything is accomplished.” In John 10:35 he says, “Scripture cannot be broken.” According to Jesus, even the smallest punctuation mark in the Old Testament is important—“the least stroke of a pen.” That is the strongest statement about the Bible that can be made. On one occasion Jesus says to someone: “Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?” (Mark 12:24). Far from being full of errors, Jesus insists that the Bible is the way to keep from error.

And Jesus does not just say that every part of a letter of the Bible is true. He goes even further to say every part of the Bible *will* come true—he says it will all be accomplished. It is one thing to say the Bible is true. A phone book could be true. But Jesus goes beyond that—it will be accomplished. That means every prophecy will come true, every promise will be fulfilled. Every warning and every threat will be followed through on, and every single command will someday be obeyed because someday every nation will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Scripture cannot be broken, it cannot be written off, not one part of it, because every part of it is the Word of God.

Interestingly in John 7:17 Jesus lays down this challenge to people who doubted his words: “If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.” Jesus is saying that if you want to know in your own experience whether or not the Bible really is true, then put its teachings into practice.

4. Read Matthew 28:16–17. One of the participants on the DVD said,

“There are a lot of miracles that happen in the Bible, but . . . I’ve never seen a miracle along [the lines of] what happens in the New Testament.”

How do people you know react to the idea of the miraculous? What does this passage teach about miracles?

Miracles are hard to believe in, and they should be. In Matthew 28 it says that when the apostles met the risen Jesus on a mountainside in Galilee, “they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.” That is a remarkable admission. Here is the author of an early Christian document saying that some of the founders of Christianity could not believe the miracle of the resurrection, even when they were looking straight at Jesus with their own eyes.

This passage shows several things. It is a warning not to think that only modern, scientific people struggle with the idea of the miraculous, while ancient, more primitive people did not. The apostles responded like any group of modern people would—some believed and some did not. It is also an encouragement to patience. All the apostles ended up as leaders in the church, but some had more trouble believing than others.

The most instructive thing about this text, however, is what it says about the purpose of biblical miracles. They lead not simply to cognitive belief, but to worship, awe, and wonder. Jesus’ miracles in particular were never magic tricks, designed to impress and coerce. Instead, he used miraculous power to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and raise the dead. People tend to think of miracles as the suspension of the natural order, but Jesus meant them to be the restoration of the natural order. The Bible says that God did not originally make the world to be filled with disease, hunger, and death. Jesus’ miracles are not just proofs that he has power, but wonderful foretastes of what he is going to do with that power. Jesus came and is coming again to redeem the world where it is wrong and heal the world where it is broken.

5. One of the participants said on the DVD,

“Evolution is very crucial for me—it being able to mesh into the Bible properly. Because I definitely believe in evolution. So, if the Bible says evolution does not exist, then I feel it loses credibility.”

How would you respond to someone who felt that evolution makes biblical faith unacceptable?

A frequent objection to the credibility of Christianity is the seeming incompatibility between the “ancient” belief in a God who created the world and who, for example, performed miracles like the parting of the Red Sea, and the “modern” world of genomes, Darwin, and the scientific method. One area where this tension is strong is in the area of evolution—such that most people now think that if you believe in God you can’t believe in evolution, and that if you believe in evolution you can’t believe in God.

First, many believe that the account in the Bible of how the world was created completely contradicts the generally accepted idea that human origin is a function of evolutionary forces that can be explained in the natural world. It is important when discussing the Bible to ask that people take the time to honor the writers of the Bible by taking them seriously—which means, for example, asking the question “How does this author want to be understood?” One way to discern how an author wants to be read is to distinguish what genre the writer is using. Many people believe that the book of Genesis falls in the genre of “exalted prose narrative”—this means that the author was making truth claims about the world in which we live, but that he wrote it in such a way that it was not meant to be taken literally. For example, in Genesis 1 natural order means nothing (light appears before the sun is created), where in Genesis 2 natural order is followed (Genesis 2:5). So it seems clear that the author’s primary intent was to show that “In the beginning *God created*.” How he did it (i.e., in seven 24-hour days or over millions of years representing seven epochs) is not the point. Once this is understood, evolution, or any other scientific theory, is no longer contradictory to the Bible because the point of Genesis is that the omnipotent, personal God created and sustains all things.

(cont.)

Second, it is important to carefully define the terms when engaged in a discussion on this topic. So for example, if someone says something like, “I don’t believe in God because I believe in evolution,” one response might be, “What do you mean by evolution?” For most people today that word has come to mean an overarching way to describe who we are, how we got here, and where we are going. That is, everything from our morality to our aesthetics to our shared logic have been shaped by nondirected genetic mutation that helped our ancestors survive. This is a significant departure from understanding evolution as a biological process that explains how species have changed and adapted over the years. One is a worldview that is no less a faith position than Christianity; the other, a scientific hypothesis. One scholar summarizes it this way—“If ‘evolution’ is . . . elevated to the status of a worldview of the way things are, then there is direct conflict with biblical faith. But if ‘evolution’ remains at the level of scientific biological hypothesis, it would seem that there is little reason for conflict between the implications of Christian belief in the Creator and the scientific explorations of the way which—at the level of biology—God has gone about his creating processes.”³

6. Was there anything in the way the DVD discussion was conducted in terms of tone, atmosphere, attitude, mannerisms, expressions, and so on, that you might find helpful to adopt, or not, when you run your own discussion about this objection?

Notice, for example, how much Dr. Keller speaks in the first 10 minutes of the discussion as opposed to the last 10 minutes. Is listening to people an important part of a group discussion?

3. David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1–11*, The Bible Speaks Today Series, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 31.

7. If you had to summarize the Bible from Genesis to Revelation in three minutes what would you say? Try it. You may want to divide the group into pairs to do this exercise.

Here, for example, is one way of doing this. You may want to choose someone to read this aloud to the group:

God's kingdom was present in the Garden of Eden. God lived there with his people and there was nothing but unclouded joy and fullness of life. But when his people decided to be their own masters, and reject God's authority, God's light and glory withdrew. And the big issue, the question of the ages, and the question on which the plot of the Bible hinges is—will he ever be back? Will his light and glory ever be on the earth again?

And then hundreds of years later, a man named Moses met God, and God said, "Build me a tabernacle and in the middle of the tabernacle, build a sanctuary, the holy of holies, and in there, my Shekinah glory, my kingdom presence will dwell." And when Moses built that tabernacle, God's glory came down and dwelled in the midst of the tabernacle, in the midst of the people. Yet, people could still not see God because his presence was dangerous to sinful human beings. And the people who lived around the tabernacle were constantly being rebellious, trying to be their own masters. So eventually, God removes his presence, and his glory and light are gone once again.

Then hundreds of years later, another man comes and wherever he went, glory and light went—diseases were healed, people were given new life. And on the night that he was killed, the veil that divided the people from the holy of holies was ripped in half. That means that because of Jesus' death, not only did he take the punishment for all sin, but people can go back into the presence of God—that his glory is present, his kingdom of power is now back. This power is in the people of God who know him, and that's why Jesus says, "I have given you the kingdom." And that kingdom power that was in the Garden of Eden, and then in the tabernacle, is now here. Eventually this kingdom will cover the entire earth, God's glory and light will take over the universe again, and the entire world will be a gigantic holy of holies—the New Jerusalem.

FINAL THOUGHT

Read this thought aloud.

Notice how 30 to 50 percent of each Gospel is given to the last week of Jesus' life. If you were telling the story of someone's life, why would you do that? The Gospel writers believed it was not the example and teaching of Jesus, but his saving work in history, his death and resurrection, that was the important and significant part. One of the participants said on the DVD, "Did Jesus come, die on a cross, or did he not? For me that is very important, that is the most important, because it holds all these ramifications with it. If he did do that, then that changes everything, as opposed to, if he didn't do that."

PRAYER

Spend time praying about the things you have learned in this study and how you might help people you know with this objection.

ADDITIONAL READING

The Reason for God, Timothy Keller (ch. 6, "Science Has Disproved Christianity," and ch. 7, "You Can't Take the Bible Literally")

Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?, Denis Alexander

Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, Richard Bauckham

The Historical Reliability of the Gospels, Craig Blomberg

The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?, F. F. Bruce

Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?, C. John Collins

Nothing But the Truth, Brian Edwards

Darwin on Trial, Phillip E. Johnson

Redeeming Science, Vern Poythress