

# Chapter 5

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## **Extra-Biblical Truths about God**

There seems to be a genuine paranoia among many Christian conservatives about investigating extra-Biblical sources of spiritual truth. These information sources include the discoveries of science, psychology, sociology, history, archaeology, metaphysics, and the scriptures of non-Christian religions. If the Bible contains accurate information about God, why on earth would you expect this to be contradicted by extra-Biblical sources of truth? Many churches sometimes attempt to control their flocks in a very “cultish” manner by exercising a form of “mind control.” Church members are encouraged to submit to the spiritual “authority” of their leaders and avoid exposure to sources of truth outside of the Scriptures. They are especially warned to avoid those sources which seem to contradict their particular interpretation of the Scriptures.

In my view, they have got it just backwards. We shouldn’t rely exclusively on the Scriptures to “authenticate” or “evaluate” the truths found outside of the Scriptures. Instead, we should be exploring those extra-Biblical sources of information in order to authenticate the truths found in the Bible. If you don’t agree with this, ask yourself why you believe that the Bible is true in the first place. No religious text may be accepted as truth solely on the basis of its internal claims. In a court of law, the defendant is not declared innocent solely on the basis of his or her own testimony. That would be ludicrous. A proper defense can only be made by carefully examining many forms of evidence which are external to the statements of the defendant. This evidence would be historical and scientific in nature, but would also include the experiences and testimony of impartial observers.

At one point in my life, it was difficult for me to affirm the truths in Scripture while at the same time discarding the doctrine of inerrancy. This is no longer a problem for me for two reasons.

First, my investigation of extra-Biblical sources of information has provided strong evidence for the truths contained in the Scriptures.

Second, and equally important, this investigation has helped me to more correctly interpret and apply the truths of Scripture.

Truth is truth, no matter where you find it. All truth is God’s truth. Many extra-Biblical truths are in my view reasonable, logical, and incontrovertible. Here are a few specific examples of how these extra-Biblical truths have influenced my theology and my interpretation of the Scriptures.

### **Extra-Biblical Truth Case Study No. 1: The Stories in Genesis**

When I was a young man, struggling with my faith, I desperately wanted to believe the Gospel of Christ and find assurance of my salvation. A huge obstacle for me was the difficulty I had accepting the literal truth of many Old Testament passages of Scripture, especially the creation account in Genesis and the events relating to human origins, the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, the flood story, the story of the Tower of Babel and the confusion of languages, and so on. I was completely unable to believe that they are literally true. As I read the narratives, they seemed rather absurd in many ways. Although I believed that God is completely able to circumvent and violate the laws of science, I couldn't believe that there would be any logical reason for Him to do so in the manner described in Genesis. Why would God choose to accomplish supernaturally what He could just as easily do through the natural processes which He had already set in motion? A bigger question for me was this. Why would God create the world in seven literal 24-hour days and then create a false geological, linguistic, cosmological, and archaeological history that would make it appear that the process occurred over billions of years? Why would God attempt to fool us in this way and in so doing make it nearly impossible for reputable scientists and rational thinkers to believe the Bible?

To make matters even worse, these stories lacked plausibility. Why would God need to rest on the seventh day? Why would God need to scoop up a handful of clay, or a rib from the side of Eve, to create the first male and female? Why would God, who is supposedly omniscient, be walking around in the garden calling out to Adam in order to find out where he was hiding? And a talking snake? Give me a break. If God wanted to destroy all mankind and start over, why would there be any need at all for the worldwide flood and the ark? Why not just snuff out all the bad guys instantaneously? This would eliminate the need to put millions of species of animals onto an ark that was not nearly big enough to accommodate them. Why would a man-made tower that reaches at most a few hundred feet into the air be such a threat to God? The confusion of languages at Babel seems not only unlikely but makes no sense at all. A confusion of languages would not at all be necessary in order to encourage mankind to spread out and explore their world. I could go on and on. These ancient stories bear all the earmarks of legend and myth, and they are contradicted by the findings of science, especially geology, cosmology, and paleontology.

If the stories in Genesis are not historically true and accurate, in what sense may they be relied upon for discovering truths about God and for guidance in making important life decisions? According to 2 Timothy 3:16, "*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...*" This passage says nothing about the Hebrew Bible (ie. the Old Testament) being historically accurate or literally true. In the Bible we find many different genres of literature, including historical narratives, legends, myths, poetry, songs, sermons and homilies, symbolism, imagery, parables, similes, and proverbs, none of which need to be scientifically or historically accurate in order to convey spiritual and moral truths. The Bible was derived from many oral and written sources, none of which originated with the intent of being incorporated into an infallible, inerrant book which would be identified by many as the authoritative word or words of God Himself. Their original intent and purpose was to communicate information that would motivate people to conduct their lives in a manner pleasing to God and beneficial to mankind.

So, with this in mind, what can we learn from extra-Biblical sources that will help us better understand, interpret and benefit from the stories and legends in the Book of Genesis? First of all, we learn from science, geology, linguistics, cosmology, and paleontology that the stories are not literally and historically true. Because of this, I personally would be reluctant to base any critical theological teaching on a literalistic interpretation of these stories. In order to believe Christian doctrines relating to observance of the Sabbath, capital punishment, the existence of Satan, original sin, human depravity, and so on, I personally would need to find support for those doctrines elsewhere in Scripture.

What we learn from archaeology is that these stories are a huge improvement over the creation myths and legends of the surrounding Babylonian and Sumerian cultures, from which they are partially derived. We see evidence of an evolution in thought. God is still described in largely anthropomorphic terms, but is now viewed as the creator of the universe, and He is a righteous God who enforces a moral code that will develop into something quite sophisticated over time.

## **Extra-Biblical Truth Case Study No. 2: God-Approved Genocide**

Second only to the doctrine of eternal conscious torment (ECT) in Hell, God-approved genocide in the Bible has been the most troubling to me. If one believes in the inerrancy of the Bible, then one must also accept that genocide is an approved method of achieving God's purposes. Examples include the Genesis flood, the killing of all the first-born of Egypt prior to the Exodus, the subsequent conquest of Canaan, and God's continuing support of Israel in various wars against her enemies. The idea that God destroys His enemies in the form of mass genocide has, by extension, also found its way into the New Testament, especially in the Book of Revelation.

It's one matter to defend yourself against enemies who are seeking to kill you or your loved ones. It is quite another matter to employ the use of violence to advance a religious or territorial objective, especially when other options are equally available to you. Most Christian conservatives, who are strongly opposed to fundamentalist Islamic jihad on moral and ethical grounds, are perfectly comfortable with exactly the same methods being used by the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, and by God Himself in the Book of Revelation.

In the Bible, God is depicted as loving, yet at times very harsh in His judgments. God-approved Genocide has been rationalized as having a loving and redemptive purpose. The question then arises, does the end justify the means? When tempted to return evil for evil and employ violence to resolve problems or achieve righteous goals, are we able to do this in the spirit of what Christ taught us about loving our enemies and returning good for evil? Is there a conflict between what Christ taught and what was previously taught in the Old Testament? Was God really approving, even commanding, the use of genocide, or was man incorrectly ascribing this to God?

In order to successfully resolve this issue, we need to discard the doctrine of Scriptural inerrancy, and employ a different basis for the interpretation of Scripture. Separating truth from error in the Scriptures is not as difficult as you might expect. Those teachings which are consistent with what we know to be the true character of God, as described by Christ himself, may be accepted. Those

teachings which are inconsistent with the true character of God must either be rejected or reinterpreted in ways that would resolve the discrepancies.

For the answer I seek, the primary extra-Biblical information source I would draw on is the use of common sense, logic, and the lessons of history. The answer that satisfies me most has to do with the concept of progressive revelation. I view the Bible as a man-made, yet God-inspired, record of an evolution of thought, a learning process. Through a process of trial and error we learn and grow in our personal lives. Even Jesus, Himself, started out with a blank slate and grew in wisdom and stature with both God and man. The same is true for humanity as a whole. Just as various plant and animal species develop and adapt through a process of God-directed macro and micro evolution, so it is with societies. God directs from behind the scenes. He works in and through us, not outside of us. Supernatural intervention is the exception, not the norm. He has chosen to accomplish His goals for mankind through us, not for us. He doesn't just hand us wisdom and all the answers to life in completed form, on a silver platter, as it were. Instead, He helps us to learn and grow in a better way, through actual human interactions. Spiritual, moral and ethical lessons are best learned first-hand, not second-hand, in the crucible of both positive and negative life experiences. In the Bible we find a record of this painful process on the societal level, and especially in the experience of one particular society which God has chosen to be an example for all the others, the nation of Israel. The Bible records their successes and their failures. It records their wisdom and also their misconceptions and misunderstandings.

This process reaches an apex of sorts in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. All that has gone before should be evaluated on the basis of what Christ taught. Since the time of Christ, society has continued to evolve and change, and progress has not been easy or smooth. Many of Christ's followers have not been able to fully assimilate much of what He taught. Many of them remain stuck in the past and have not been able to discard many of the mistaken religious beliefs and ethical mores of the ancient Hebrews.

### **Extra-Biblical Truth Case Study No. 3: Soul Sleep**

There are two main schools of thought regarding what happens to us immediately after death.

Some believe that the soul and body are so closely connected that when the body dies, so does the soul. When Christ comes again to earth, those who are dead in Christ (or "asleep," in the words of Paul) will be made alive again and their physical bodies will be resurrected and made immortal. Proponents of this view believe that non-Christians will also be resurrected, but at a much later date, at which time they will be either annihilated in the Lake of Fire or punished there for all eternity. Some, who subscribe to this view of the body-soul connection, believe that the Lake of Fire is symbolic of a purification and refinement process, after which all will eventually be saved and granted admission into the Kingdom of Heaven.

The second major school of thought is that the body and soul are separate and distinct, and the soul lives on in spiritual realms after the body dies. Some, who subscribe to this view, believe that punishments in Hell begin immediately after death. Some also believe that the purpose of

those punishments is to bring sinners to repentance. Some believe that the “hellish” experiences after death are only temporary mental constructs and are not imposed by God.

A pretty good case from Scripture can be made for of the above views. I myself, subscribe to the latter view, and can make a strong case for it solely from Scripture. However, various extra-biblical sources of information also support my view.

According to virtually all NDE’s (Near Death Experiences), the soul immediately leaves the body upon death and enters the spirit world (ie. heaven or heavens). If you believe that soul dies when the body dies, then you cannot at the same time believe that NDE’s are valid out-of-body or after-death experiences. In my view, the evidence for the validity of NDE’s is much stronger than the arguments against it. If you have not read up on this, I would encourage you read a few good books on the subject or research it on the internet. Most NDE experiencers testify that they were welcomed into the spirit world (ie. heaven) with open arms and experienced nothing but an overwhelming feeling of being loved unconditionally. This was true of both Christians and non-Christians, even atheists. Of the very small minority, who had “hellish” experiences, virtually all of them were eventually rescued as they called out for help.

Additional support for the immortality of the soul can be found in the findings of quantum physics. These findings support the view that the physical body is not actually physical at all, but is made up of particles which start out as waves and continually blink into and out of existence. Human consciousness is not an artifact of the physical body, but exactly the opposite. It exists independently from the quasi-physical body and actually creates all physical realities, solely through the power of observation. Some very excellent books have been written on this subject, in terms that the layman can understand. Many excellent YouTube videos have also been produced on the subject.

#### **Extra-Biblical Truth Case Study No. 4: Paul’s Sermon on Mars Hill and Progressive Revelation**

*Acts 17:22-31* “So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, ‘Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’ Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge

*the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”*

From this passage it appears that Paul believed that all mankind originated with one man, although the word “man” is not in the original Greek. He was presumably speaking about Adam. Paul was a product of his age and was probably a Biblical literalist. At the time he preached the above sermon in Athens, he also probably believed in a future judgment of all mankind on a single, fixed day in the future. I believe all human beings on Earth are descended from a single man and woman, but I don’t believe this because of the Genesis myth. Instead, I believe it because it has been discovered scientifically through mitochondrial DNA analysis. It has also been established by science that other human beings existed prior to the “mitochondrial Eve,” from whom all present day humans are descended. It has been estimated that our current lineage branched off from the rest of humanity between 100,000 and 200,000 years ago. So, it appears that Paul didn’t know everything there was to know about human origins.

Paul’s sermon also raises another difficulty. His teaching that God will judge all mankind in a single “*appointed day*” in the future is contradicted by the NDE (Near Death Experience) during which, at least for many of us, a “life review” or “self-judgment” occurs almost immediately after death, and it appears that we for the most part judge ourselves and are not judged by God at all. This reminds me of the saying in John 3:17 that “*God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*” Paul also seems to contradict his teaching of a universal judgment in the future when He says in 1 Cor. 5:8 that “*to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord.*” Early on in his ministry, I’m sure that Paul believed in the imminent return of Jesus to Earth to judge all mankind and set up an earthly kingdom. As time went by, this hope faded and was replaced by another concept, that of a spiritual kingdom, not of this Earth. The seeds of this belief may also be found in the Paul’s above sermon on Mars Hill, where he states that God is not a physical being who dwells in physical places. Instead, God exists everywhere including inside all of us. “*In Him we live and move and exist*” and “*we also are all His children.*” This obviously refers to non-Christians, as well as Christians, as Paul was speaking to non-Christian Athenians.

Eventually, the focus of the early Christian community shifted from an emphasis on a physical Kingdom to that of a spiritual Kingdom which exists everywhere. This transition did not occur at the same time for all the writers of the New Testament. The idea that Jesus’ kingdom is “*not of this world*” was introduced later on, and may only be found in the Gospel of John, the last of the Gospels to be written (See John 18:36). Even Jesus, Himself, in my view, probably did not come to this realization until late in His ministry, perhaps not until after His resurrection. According to Paul’s sermon above, God’s revelations to mankind are progressive in nature. In the past, mankind has been kept pretty much in the dark about many spiritual matters and it was determined by God that “*they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.*” Because of this, God “*overlooks our ignorance.*” God apparently judges us only on the basis of what He has revealed to us.

In the following passage in 2 Corinthians, Paul suggests that the “*judgment seat of Christ*” occurs for each of us immediately upon death, rather than as a single mass judgment day in the distant future.

*2 Cor. 5:1-10 "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. <sup>2</sup> Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, <sup>3</sup> because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. <sup>4</sup> For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. <sup>5</sup> Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. <sup>6</sup> Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. <sup>7</sup> For we live by faith, not by sight. <sup>8</sup> We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. <sup>9</sup> So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. <sup>10</sup> For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."*

So, what do we learn from all of this?

My first take-a-way is that the progressive nature of God's revelation to us did not stop with the life of Christ, but continued afterwards. I believe this process continues today, and I would expect that with further advances in science, parapsychology and various forms of critical analysis of the Scriptures themselves we can gain additional insights that will help us better understand the true nature of God and the purpose for our existence here on Earth.

My second take-a-way is that the Christian Scriptures, though not inerrant, are still useful for *"teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."* They do not provide us with definitive and incontrovertible answers to the exact nature of the afterlife and what happens after death. A great deal of mystery still remains. According to Paul's sermon above, up until the time of Christ, God was OK with our not having all the answers. Our understanding has grown since then, but we still have a long ways to go. I'm sure God is OK with that. Is there value in not knowing all the answers, or having to dig for them, at the very least? I would assume so.

### **Extra-Biblical Truth Case Study No. 5: The Holy Spirit**

You might never have thought of it this way, but the Holy Spirit of God is actually an extra-Biblical source of information. According to John 16:13, the Holy Spirit "will guide you into all truth." In John 14:26, Jesus said, *"the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."*

The question I have for you is this. If the Scriptures are self-explanatory and easy to interpret, why do we need the Holy Spirit? The truth is that the Scriptures are in many places self-contradictory and contain a mixture of truth and error. I'm not at all sure that Christ ever intended His teachings to be written down by fallible men and then passed on to others as the actual words of God Himself. If we are going to make sense of the Scriptures and benefit from them, we need to seek guidance from the original source on which the Scriptures themselves are

based. The Scriptures are first, second and third-hand accounts of the working of the Holy Spirit in the lives of fallible men. I realize that this sounds like a rather negative and cynical view of Scripture. But we must remember that we don't worship a book. We worship a living God who is more than able to directly interact with us truthfully and intimately. He will not lead us astray if we seek Him with an open heart and good intentions.

Rather than trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit when interpreting Scripture, most Christians have ceded this God-given right to their religious authorities. Instead of trusting in their own intellect and intuition under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they have decided to let their pastors and teachers do all their thinking for them. The problem is that most of those pastors and teachers have done the same thing. So we basically have the blind leading the blind, resulting in many contradictory Christian belief systems and denominations, with many factions accusing others of blasphemy and heresy.

So, the question is this. Would the situation be better if every individual Christian decided to take back their God-given right to access spiritual knowledge directly from the original source, the Holy Spirit? At first glance, one might conclude that this would result in even more disunity and an even greater variety of competing beliefs. I believe exactly the opposite would happen, and here's why.

Let me begin by using a secular example. Totalitarian ideologies are only able to deceive their subjects in the absence the free flow of information. They implement massive propaganda campaigns, and don't allow their subjects access to a free press, or travel outside their borders. The idea is that the masses are too ignorant to make good decisions. They aren't capable of thinking for themselves. They will all be better off if they allow their leaders to do their thinking for them. Due in no small part to the free flow of information across national borders, totalitarianism has gradually been giving way to democracy in many parts of the world. The most successful nations in the world today are the democracies. They are imperfect, but not nearly as bad as the totalitarian systems.

The same is true with respect to the Christian religion. Various denominational leaders strive to maintain a rigid orthodoxy in their respective groupings. They do this primarily by restricting the free flow of information and threatening dissidents within their ranks with excommunication and damnation in Hell. As long as these leaders are successful in maintaining their ecclesiastical authority and their status as gatekeepers of spiritual truth, the Christian church will remain divided and will become increasingly isolated from the popular culture. They will continue to lose ground to advances in spiritual growth and evolution that are currently taking place in the popular culture.

Here's what I believe. As more and more people begin to question their religious authorities and seek to guidance of the Holy Spirit instead, two things will begin to happen.

First, it will become apparent that no one knows all the truth. People will have to humbly admit that there is more that they don't know than what they do know. They will be less dogmatic in their thinking and far less judgmental of those who disagree with them.

Secondly, common threads of truth will begin to emerge as people begin to realize that the most important truths are those which the Holy Spirit reveals to all of them, truths relating to the loving, forgiving and just nature of God and the importance of developing and expressing in our lives qualities of character like love, kindness, justice, mercy and forgiveness.

Christian scholars and leaders will still play an important role, but they will exercise their roles with more tolerance and humility. The Christian church will become more inclusive and far more effective in leading back to Christ those who have lost their way.