

2.22.20

GREAT QUESTION! “How can I keep from having doubt with such ambiguity in the Bible?”

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Over the last several weeks we’ve been trying to answer questions submitted by people in our community. Today, we’re trying to answer the question, “how can I keep from having doubt with such ambiguity in the Bible?” You see, sometimes, people come to the scriptures and they’re confused or uncertain about what it says. So what do you do when the Bible’s ambiguous?

At this point, camps are starting to assemble, sides are being taken, alliances are forming. On one side you have people that are like, “yea, the Bible is confusing sometimes.” The other are those who say, “no, the Bible is not ambiguous. We have so many clear “thus saith the Lord’s” that if the Bible doesn’t make sense you’re not studying it right or there’s something wrong with you.”

I know there are people in both camps because I’ve had conversations with both groups. Who’s correct? Is it one? Is it both? Is there middle ground? I don’t know but I am going to attempt to answer the question. But ultimately I’m not really interested in trying to prove one group right or wrong, I’m interested in trying to help people better understand the Bible. So, to that end, let’s dig in with prayer.

The series we’ve been doing, where a question is asked and then an attempt is made at an answer dates back thousands of years to ancient Greece. In our current culture we call it apologetics. Someone comes with a charge, a kategoria, and someone has an opportunity to respond, an apologia. It sounds/looks very similar to apology, but the two are very different. An apology admits wrong-doing but a apologia defends one’s words or actions. Parents, these are not synonymous.

Apology—I’m sorry I called you a stinky head

Apologia—I called you stinky head because you’re stinky.

There’s not a lot of understanding the other in apologia. There is no middle ground because you’re either right or you’re wrong. In apologia I’m trying to defend something that I said or did, or defend a position that I hold.

Here’s the deal though, in apologetics, the question is treated as a charge or an accusation and immediately, that puts people on the defensive, so much so that the reply, the apologia, is actually known as a defense.

Some might hear the question and make up their mind about what is being asked. Assumptions could be made that the person is trying to get out of doing something the Bible says, or to ease their conscience. And then when it comes to the defense it gets ugly. “The Bible is super clear. What’s so hard to understand about a quote taken straight from the Bible?” The Adventist fundamental belief on the scriptures states: “The Holy Scriptures are the supreme, authoritative, and the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the definitive revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God’s acts in history.”

2 Timothy 3:16--All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness

Isaiah 40:8--The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Hebrews 13:8--Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

“So no, the Bible isn’t ambiguous, it’s the word of a God who never changes and we all just need to fall in line and understand it!” Apologia delivered. And yet, for any who were still questioning, the doubt, the uncertainty, the tension still exists. When we approach our interactions with people as engagements and take an aggressive posture, we’re probably not winning many people over. Instead we’re alienating them.

The question that we’re dealing with today isn’t asked by someone looking for a way out, they’re looking for a way in. The question was “how can I keep from having doubt” not “why shouldn’t I have doubt.” This person, like myself, like many of us, is trying to figure out how to understand the Bible more deeply, not to toss it aside. They wrestle with the ambiguity. Let me give you a few examples of what I’m talking about.

Matt 27:28—They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him.

Mark 15:17—They put a purple robe on him.

Ambiguity.

Exodus 20:12—Honor your father and mother

Luke 14:26—If anyone comes to me and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers, and sisters, yes, even his own life, they cannot be my disciple.

Ambiguity.

The creation account in Genesis 1 is very different from the account in Genesis 2.

Ambiguity.

Do you believe in the Bible? Do you believe we should follow what it says?

Leviticus 19:27--Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.

Show of hands, how many of you would say that prohibition no longer applies, that perhaps it was cultural, or applied to a ceremonial element, and now no longer has a place?

Now things get awkward.

Leviticus 19:28--Do not...put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the Lord.

I'm not gonna ask for a show of hands, but there are many people in the world who feel that tattoos have no place on a Christian. Two prohibitions, in sequential verses, one applies, the other doesn't.

Ambiguity.

So what do we do? Do we pick and choose what we follow? Do we follow every command given in the Bible and start keeping feast days, build some altars, and pick a high priest? What do you do with differences? How do we have the bible function as our guide when we struggle to understand it's application in our life?

I want to give you two questions to ponder in an effort to help deal with the doubt and ambiguity you may come across while reading scripture.

The first: What am I reading?

The Bible is a collection of 66 books, written over a period of thousands of years by at least 35 people to myriad of different people in 3 primary languages. Portions of the Bible are first-hand accounts of what they witnessed. I used an example earlier about the color of Jesus' robe in the events leading up to his crucifixion.

I want to ask a question, what color shirt is the drummer wearing? If someone gets it wrong, does that mean they're not trustworthy? In the same way the authors of Matthew and Mark were trying to tell the story of one of the craziest and emotional nights that had happened in their culture in quite some time. The Bible was not written to recount history, but to recount the incredible things God did. If we get focused on the color of the robe we miss the resurrection!

The Bible is a collection of different types of literature as well. The Bible has prose, poetry, prophecy, parables and proverbs. It has epistles, treaties, laws, and songs. 40% of the OT and 60% of the NT is narrative. The Bible uses things like hyperbole and idioms

Idiom-- a group of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words

Any fluent Spanish speakers in here that would be willing to translate something for me?

Idiom for First and Idiom for Second

I used another example earlier about honoring your parents but then also hating them. In Hebrew culture, it was understood what this meant. Jesus wasn't asking people to hate their parents, he was asking them to love God more than anything else. In their culture they understood that, in our culture, we get to that section of scripture, and give the ol' shrug emoji.

Judges chapter 4 and 5 tell the same story, but one is prose and one is poetry. The story in Judges 5 didn't happen as written because its intent was not to be considered an accurate retelling of the battle. It's a song, a poem, about what happened.

The Psalms are poetry and if we tried to literally interpret the following passage, we'd have a problem

Psalm 22:14--I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me.

The two different creation accounts in Genesis are not actually two creation accounts. Genesis consists of 10, or 11, depending on which set of scholars you listen to, family stories, each section identified by the Hebrew word, toldot. Genesis 1:1-2:3 is the prologue and Genesis 2:4 begins the first toldot, and tells the story of earth's family, before it digs into the specifics of Adam's family in Genesis 5:1.

The Bible was never intended to be a text book, almanac, chronology, or logbook of science, math, history or any other academic subject.

It will not answer all your questions in life. Some might recoil to hear me say that. But look, the Bible cannot answer which person you should take to prom. There is no verse that says "you should go with Tiffany!" or "you should go with Roger!" If you are considering two different jobs that look basically identical on paper, you will not find a verse that says, "take the one at WholeLife church!" (In fact, I would be hesitant to take any job that says "WholeLife Church because it doesn't exist for another week).

The intent of the Bible to show the interaction of God in this world. Its purpose was to reveal a Creator so passionate about relationship that he gave everything he could to restore that relationship with us. It was a way to give us guidance as we seek to follow him.

We must seek to understand the scope and magnitude of the Bible and all the different things at play so that we don't get a warped view of scripture. Ask the question, "what type of

scripture am I reading?” And if you’re interested in learning more, Robert Stein wrote a book called *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*.

Two questions—1—What am I reading?; 2—Why am I reading?. I have lost track of how many times I have listened to someone give an interpretation of a passage that is not based on the text. They have created an interpretation based on their own culture, tradition, practice, or preference, and weaponized it to make the Bible say something it doesn’t say. And when we make the bible say something it doesn’t say it causes some serious problems.

Let’s go back to my tattoo example. If you use Leviticus 19:28 as justification and a clear “thus saith the lord” for why Christians shouldn’t have tattoos then I better see some haircuts where the sides of heads aren’t shaved and your beards have their corners. But the truth is, I don’t see those hairstyles advocated by the same people saying tattoos are evil. So we wrestle with the ambiguity and we wrestle with the question, “why does God care about tattoos but not haircuts?”

What’s up with these passages? The tattoos, and really, the word tattoo is not used, the word is actually marks, they were specific, identifiable marks, along with the haircuts and facial hair were all part of pagan worship. God was commanding them not to do those things because they represented something that was so abhorrent to God in what they stood for: child sacrifice, prostitution, rape, mutilation, and a slew of other terrible things. God wanted his people to distance themselves from that as much as possible. Those prohibitions, for those reasons, don’t exist today.

I’m not saying everyone should go get a tattoo. I don’t have one. I am saying that instead of telling your child, “no, you can’t get a tattoo because Leviticus 19:28 says not to” talk with them about the permanence of tattoos, the implications it can have for life and careers, or how, as a Christian, the message they choose will have a profound impact on anyone that ever sees it. Those are holy conversations.

Look, I’ve harped on one example, and there are so many others, there’s prophecy we don’t understand but we force it, there’s hyperbole we don’t understand and we force it. We don’t know what animal a leviathan is so we guess and make it truth. Don’t be afraid to not understand! Be afraid to make the Bible say something it doesn’t say. Why are you reading? If it’s to try and find ammunition for your viewpoint—you’re doing it wrong. If it’s to try and get out of doing something—you’re doing it wrong. If it’s to degrade someone—you’re doing it wrong. So what does it look like to do it right?

Psalm 119:105--Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path. What’s the path it’s lighting? Our journey towards God. What does it look like to do Bible-reading right? When we treat His word as the wonderful story of all the great things he has done to be with us! When we allow God’s word to function as our guide to help us have lives of purpose and meaning. How can I keep from having doubt with such ambiguity in the Bible? Know what you’re reading, and know why you’re reading. Glory in the great things that God has done.



2.22.20

What's the most confusing/troubling/challenging passage or story from the Bible that you've encountered?

Is it good, bad, or neutral that our current culture could interpret our view of Scripture?

Where do you turn when you're trying to interpret or find answers about a difficult-to-understand passage?

Does the fact that the Bible contains poetry, idioms, hyperbole, etc. diminish its authority? How would you answer that question for someone who's wrestling with the validity of Scripture?

For more information on how to interpret the Bible, check out *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible* by Robert H. Stein.



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