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#214 Is the Old Testament history or metaphor? (Replay)

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers listener questions about the Old Testament. Can the truly trust the Old Testament? When was it all written? Is the Old Testament more spiritual metaphor or natural history? How do we make sense of the Old Testament teachings in light of the 'new law' of the New Testament - don't they contradict each other? Originally Aired: 18 Dec 2019 Please remember to rate and review this podcast if your enjoyed it! __ •
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Transcript

Before we get into today's episode, I want to let you know about a free ebook for you to download today that you won't want to miss. It's called, In Conversation with Jordan Peterson, Atheism, Christianity, and the Psychology of Belief. This special ebook was created from an unbelievable podcast with famed Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson.

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This is a limited time offer, so make sure to do it today. That's premierinsight.org forward slash resources. And now it's time for today's podcast.

Welcome to this replay of Ask NT Wright Anything, where we go back into the archives to bring you the best of the thought and theology of Tom Wright. Answering questions submitted by you, the listener. You can find more episodes as well as many more resources for exploring faith at premierunbelievable.com, and registering there will unlock access through the newsletter to updates, free bonus videos, and e-books.

That's premierunbelievable.com. And now for today's replay of Ask NT Wright Anything.

The programme, and we're going to be talking about the Old Testament today, and Tom, now obviously your speciality is the new, not the old necessarily, but I think you've got a few things to say about the Old Testament as well. Lots of these questions are actually, and the ones that most commonly seem to come up regarding the Old Testament, are either to do with the way God is portrayed in the Old Testament, and we've done a podcast on that.

If people have questions on that, I do recommend going back in the archive to look that one up. But also a common theme is the historicity of the Old Testament. People who say it feels like we've got this quite historical grounding for the New Testament, and you've done a lot of work in that yourself, but the Old Testament, well that's just that much further away and just much harder to get behind and so on.

So I'm going to bring a variety here. Firstly, questions on one specific book of Daniel, and I had about three people actually send questions in on this. So I'll read all three.

Alex in Kent says Bart Ehrman said that modern biblical scholars say the book of Daniel was not written in the sixth century BCE by a Hebrew prophet named Daniel, but much later. Chapter 7 to 12, around the time of the Maccabean revolt in the 160s CE, how would you respond to this? Spencer in Mead Buffalo, New York says, what do you make of Porphyry's attack on the historicity of the book of Daniel? Again, mentions Bart Ehrman asserts that his view is widely accepted by contemporary historians, to what extent is Porphyry's argument credible, and if it's true, what would be the implications for Christianity? And finally, Kevin in Donegal was Daniel a prophet in the sixth century, or a historian in the second. So that's a nice, summarized way of asking the previous two questions.

So yes, I think anyone who starts to look into the history of the Old Testament and specifically books like Daniel will soon run up against commentaries and historians who say, no, this was written a lot later than it's presented as in the book of Daniel. So yeah, general responses to this and perhaps to some of the specifics of these questions. Okay, yeah, I mean, this is obviously a very well-known area.

I am not myself, a little testament scholar, primarily. I am not a Daniel specialist, primarily, though I've done a lot with Daniel because obviously from all we know about Jesus, Jesus was certainly retrieving the book of Daniel, especially I think chapter seven and nine, and chapter two as well, that's another story. So inevitably, one bumps one's nose up against it and Daniel is rigidly odd because it's in two languages.

It switches from Hebrew into Aramaic in chapter two and then it switches back again after chapter seven. And that's odd because that doesn't usually happen in the Old Testament, but it's also especially odd because that is not the natural division of the book. You might have thought if there was to be a division at the end of chapter six where we finish these great stories about Daniel and his friends in the pagan court and

we start in these extraordinary visions.

So there's all sorts of things going on there. And I do want to say, as we've said in a previous podcast, what I believe about inspiration is that we have the Bible God wanted us to have. And that doesn't mean that there were no editors involved.

It means that any editorial process, any bringing together of texts, any putting stuff together later is likewise under the guiding control of God's spirit. I have no problem about that at all. And I think part of the difficulty that people have had is because they have a theory of inspiration that demands that there was this person who got zapped by God, wrote the whole thing.

And that's the end of the story. And we've had it perfectly preserved from the title. Exactly.

And I mean, there is, there is a sort of a secondary or tertiary doctrine of the preservation of scripture that God wanted us to have this book and say, made sure we did get it. But that too seems to be puzzling because the discovery of manuscripts, particularly in the 19th century brought all sorts of things to light, which have been, I think, a real help and a blessing, which then implies, well, the people before the 19th century didn't have that. And well, okay, if that's how it was, that's how it was.

And it's not my business to question God's providence in that. Having said that, it's very interesting that there's a passage in Ezekiel, which talks about Noah, Daniel, and Job as being the righteous men. When did Ezekiel say that? And clearly he knew about Daniel.

Did he think that Job was a real character? Did you think that Daniel was already the writer of all of this? We just don't know. But clearly there seems to be historical evidence for Daniel figure in Babylon in the time of the exile. And this Daniel figure, rather like Joseph in the book of Genesis, was kind of good at dreams, good at visions.

Reminded of Joseph and his technical dreamcoat when somebody says, I know of a bloke in jail who is hot on dreams. So that's the vision of Daniel. But then as you read on in the book of Daniel, there are these extraordinary passages from chapter seven onwards, though already there in chapter two, the king's dream about the statue with the different metals and so on, which are seemingly about the rise and fall of great global empires.

And then God is going to do something quite different and quite new. And the way that plays out in Daniel eight, and then in Daniel 10 and 11, particularly looks as though it's being written, interpreted by somebody, yes, in what we would call the early second century BC, some bits of it seem to relate very directly to the movement of kings and armies and so on at the time of what we call the Maccabean crisis. And do you know, I have no problem with that at all, just like I don't really have any problem with somebody saying that somebody has edited the book of Jeremiah, taken these disparate oracles

and put them together, so that the septuagint into the book of Jeremiah may actually reflect an earlier version to what we find in the Hebrew, which is puzzling.

But again, it really doesn't bother me. We are to wrestle with these books as the holes that we now have. And I think particularly, it is as though with Jesus at the middle of the Christian story, we look forwards and we look backwards from that point.

And we say that the person that Jesus was and the vocation to which he was called was shaped by this great stream of writing and praying and visions, which have come together in all sorts of ways. And the idea in a rather abstract fashion that we should say, this is either inspired or not. And if it was inspired, it must mean that somebody called Daniel in the sixth century wrote it all down exactly as we've got it.

Well, sorry, I just looked at the book of Daniel extremely well and was plugged into it. In a sense, that's good enough for me. In a sense, it's also a way of saying, Jesus lived in the world, which was shaped by the exile and Babylon and memories of that, and in a world for whom that axilic shaping had come into sharp focus at the time of the Maccabean crisis.

Those are really, really important in order to understand how a first century Jew like Jesus and Azeroth would be responding privately and wisely and to his calling from God. So I'm not bothered by what Bartraman or Porphyry or anyone else has. Well, we'll come back to the more general issues of the historicist, because I've got another one coming up, which is someone who really feels like they're going through a crisis of faith, really, because of it.

But here's another one. And you mentioned him already, the book of Job. And the question from Steven in Beaverton is simply, do you believe the book of Job is a true story? Now, I suppose you could interpret that in different ways.

But I think what Steven's getting at is, is it historically what happened? Because obviously, it's supported, I believe, to be one of the oldest pieces of writing in the Old Testament. I don't know that, but it might well be. Yes.

And obviously, some people take it as essentially detailing something that really happened to a person called Job. And others take it as more a sort of wisdom literature that it is a parable of its time of a man called Job coming to terms with the problem of suffering in the face of God. For you, does it matter at this point whether this really did happen to someone called Job, or whether it's a story that was written down for the wisdom it gives us? I'm inclined to say that it does matter that it wasn't, because it is so stylized with the three comforters making their speeches and Job responding and all that.

And then at the end Job gets stuff back again, etc. It looks like, whether you call it a

piece of wisdom literature, I suppose it is, but it looks like a perfectly good comprehensible narrative framework for expressing the quintessence of the ongoing so-called problem of evil. As to whether it's a true story, I want to say, is the parable of the prodigal son a true story? And I want to say, absolutely yes it is, did it happen? No.

And so the different levels of true story, because I know that that can then be slippery. People then say, oh well, Jesus was just another story. Exactly.

Exactly. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus, that is rather like the parable of the prodigal. And I want to say no, actually that actually happened.

And I think Luke intends us to think, and so it's then about this complicated thing of authorial intent. But I don't think it matters at all that Job should be historical. And I think that anxiety as to whether it was, and I would say something similar about the book of Jonah, though I think Jonah probably does have a strong historical call, that I think the anxiety as to whether it's historical or not comes from a period, particularly in the 18th century, which is sort of, we in the Western biblical Christianity, was very much, you know, it's either historical or it's all rubbish.

And so we will attack the history and will undermine your faith. And I want to say, the Old Testament is full of many different literary genres, classically when the Psalms say that God has smoke coming out of his nostrils. I don't think it actually means he has neutral smoke coming out of it, etc, etc.

And so we need to lighten up about that. Job is one of the most extraordinary books. I don't claim to understand it all, but every time I read it, I am in awe of this amazing vision of human tragedy and the still puzzling power and love of God, because the fact that there's a sort of happy ending doesn't actually mean that it's a happy book.

If I may press you on this, though, and still take us to I think to partly to Matthew's question, I suppose it's a question of how far you take that in the Old Testament. And if someone starts to tell you well, we can assume that all of the Exodus accounts are really just later inventions by people trying to make sense of their history, or the patriarchs, you know, in Genesis and so on. All of that's really, you can't, there's really no history to it.

I mean, at that point, it feels like you're taking away some fairly foundational parts of the story. Yeah. And of course, the thing that records from Egypt, from Canaan, et cetera, at the time that we could compare things with, then we would be on more secure ground.

We don't. And again, it's not my professional field, but my understanding is that a vast amount of what we read in the Old Testament as history, let's say starting with Abraham, just to make life a little less complicated. We do not have other sources that can tell us about this.

Whereas in the New Testament, we have a lot of comparative material. We've got Josephus who got Roman historians, et cetera, et cetera. And even though they don't tell us about the specifics concerning Jesus, what we find in the gospels about Jesus makes sense within the world of first century Judaism.

Whereas we don't have a world we can construct of, say, 2nd millennium BC, Middle East, within which we can say that either Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob fit or they don't fit. In so far as we do, the world of ancient Hittite treaties or whatever it is, then, yeah, there's a lot of stuff which, yes, this makes considerable sense. I suppose for a lot of people, it's having to contempt themselves with the fact that we can't literally get back there.

And so to some extent you have to satisfy yourself with the fact that this is the story as received and as you would say, the story God wants us to know. Yes, and I think it's interesting that this was a big worry in the 18th century and that up until the 18th century, Western culture had looked back at the Greek and Roman classics and thought, we belong in that world. It is our world, etc, etc.

And suddenly the rise of what called itself historical consciousness with people like David Hume and Edward Gibbon in the middle of the 18th century made people think, oh dear, we thought that was our world and we were in touch with them and now they're gone and it's all rather remote. And it was to solve that 18th century problem that people like David Friedrich Strauss talked about, myth, that actually those stories are about timeless myth and we can plug into the myth and then it doesn't matter whether this stuff happened or not. That was a way of solving an 18th century problem and I just think, and my new book is about this partly, we've got two stuck in the 18th century and we need again to lighten up.

And of course, it looks as though somebody probably at the time of the Babylonian exile has done a lot of editing. You're away from the temple, you're away from the land, you're stuck there, but you've got trained scribes who are studying the scriptures and they've got these different scrolls. It looks as though quite a lot was edited then.

Does that mean it was made up from scratch then? Of course not. You know, ultimately if you go that route, you would have Martin Luther be the author of the letter to the Galatians because it was so important for him in the 16th century but no actually, he's retrieving something much older. This podcast is an outreach of Premier Insight and can only come to you each week through the support of listeners like you.

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Thank you for your support. Today's show is brought to you in partnership with SBCK, the UK publisher of Tom's Miriel and two new books you may be interested in, The New Testament in its world, an introduction to the history literature and theology of the first Christians in which nt right and Mike Berg provide a thorough overview of the New Testament for students, church leaders and indeed everyday Christians. And another book from Tom, History and Eschatology, Jesus and the promise of natural theology.

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Well, let's come to Matthew in Louisiana's question. It's rather long because he tells us something of his own background as someone who is sort of very into apologetics and finds that very helpful to him when trying to, you know, think through his faith. But he started to really go through the Old Testament and he says he's run into a big problem because so many of the sources he's coming across online and so on are very skeptical of the historical background of lots of parts of the Old Testament.

And so just to read some parts of his question here, he asked where Genesis, Exodus, etc. a collection of Hebrew myths stitched together from different sources during the time of the Babylonian captivity or later. What about archaeological finds showing that a certain sect of Hebrews believed Jehovah had a wife and worship her as his equal.

And he goes on to say, I couldn't turn the skeptical part of my brain often as I ventured online for answers. I kept encountering these questions and more, all casting out on the validity of the Old Testament narratives. But there's such a dearth of apologetics in this area that I couldn't calm my skepticism.

Everyone knows the reasons to believe Jesus existed, died in rose again. But if Moses was a myth, if Abraham and Isaac were myths, doesn't it all fall apart? And yet thanks me to God, I haven't entirely lost my faith. I've witnessed the supernatural too many times to not believe in anything.

But this stumbling block has hindered me from reading the Bible from having a prayer life and from worship for nearly a year. I miss God in my life. I look at my Bible.

I want to read it, but I'm afraid of losing my belief. Wow, wow, wow, wow. I would love to sit down with this dear person and actually work through some of this stuff.

And I would say, for goodness sake, don't trust Wikipedia. You know, I appreciate that the internet does give us instant access to all kinds of things, which before you wouldn't have had access to including this podcast. It's a great gift.

But there's a lot of rubbish out there. And particularly, a lot of skeptics have muddled in and said and put stuff up there. So you can't believe this, you shouldn't believe that.

And I want to say, actually, there's a lot of good stuff on this. It's not my field, but I would just instance the work of somebody like Trempe Longman in California or John Walton at Wheaton College. There are many other contemporary Old Testament Hebrew Bible scholars, John Goldingay, who is my collaborator on this Bible for everyone project.

And if you look around among the serious believing scholars in North America and in Britain, then you'll find lots of people who have faced these questions for years and are not phased by them and are quite happy to say, yes, there's this, yes, there's that. And it doesn't matter if things were edited later. Many things were edited later.

When that book of mine finally came out a week or two ago, that both is and isn't the lectures that I gave 18 months before, because I had to work on editing it and people said to me, oh, if you're going to say that, you need to deal with this and so on. So that is much longer than the original lectures. And I hope not the worst of that.

I hope the better for that. And I think the vision that we have, say of the Pentateuch of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, I see that as a very, very ancient set of documents which have been edited into this amazing artistic form where Leviticus, which seems so strange for us moderns, sits right in the middle with the day of atonement right in the middle of that. This is an astonishing work of art as a whole and is all to do with the desire of the Creator God to live in the midst of his people and what has to happen if that's going to be a reality.

And I really don't mind if that was already an artistic idea in the mind of Moses or if that was something which somebody later has put together prayerfully, wisely, humbly out of the traditions that they had received or take the court history of David and Solomon. A lot of that stuff, many historians will say quite honestly, this is so sharp and so vivid that either somebody has invented the modern novel 3000 years early or this really does take us back to some fairly rough stuff that was going on back then and so on and so on and so on, so that I would encourage this good friend to look at the good Christian scholars from various traditions who have worked over this and don't trust what you find online. Right and I suppose in that sense as well the problem sometimes is if people have been given a picture of what scripture is and this applies to the New Testament of most of the old and it has to fit some kind of very narrow modern version of what counts

as historical biography and then they're given some evidence that the people who wrote it down had different categories that they were interested in writing in and sometimes it's just simply about adjusting our expectations sometimes.

Absolutely and our expectations again, sorry to sound like the fact that our expectations come to us largely from the 18th century from this either or that either it's all sort of true in fact you see even when you say what counts for a modern biography but actually having written a biography before but having read a lot of biographies, a biographer like everybody else has to select and arrange, a biography is not the same as a total transcript of everything this person said as a video camera that was accompanying them you know like a drone throughout their lives that's not what makes a biography. Absolutely, let's move on to one or two other questions that are related to the Old Testament. A few people have asked this, Dr. Michael Heiser, his book is called The Unseen Realm and people asking what's your take on it for instance Scott in St. Louis asks is it St. Louis or St. Louis, I never compare that to.

Louis says what is Dr. Wright's take on the work around the divine council and the spiritual realm as set out by Michael Heiser. Now I think you haven't actually had a chance to properly read. I haven't read Heiser's book but I've met people who have been very enthusiastic about it and have talked to me about it and I've just scanned and skimmed it to see and Heiser takes off from this passage in Psalm 82 which he says was his moment of great revelation which says God stands in the council of the gods, that's Elohim standing in the council of the Elohim who are these gods and then he gives judgment and he says you're supposed to be gods but actually I want you to do justice and defend the poor on the widow etc etc and it is as though in that particular psalm at least but also in other passages in the Old Testament like in the beginning of Job or like in the vision of Mike Imlach and Imlach in the end of First Kings.

It's as though those who in the ancient world are seeing into the very council chamber of God see different characters there and are they what we would call spiritual or are they what we would call socio-political are these leaders of nations or whatever and I think as with Paul's notion of principalities and powers they seem to be rather shadowy and possibly both of those things and again we come with our modern categories it must either be quote spiritual supernatural or it must be natural let's get rid of this either or God's world is rich dense complex multi-layered the more I live as a pastor and hear people's stories of what's happened in their lives the more I'm aware of the multi-dimensionality of life and it's funny most people in the modern world can go for a long time without talking about weird uncanny strange things that happen but if you get in on the edge of a conversation like that in a pub or a football changing in order suddenly you'll find people say oh that's interesting my aunt said that a couple of years ago she hadn't and all sorts of things come out which because we don't have categories for we hear the story and then I can't cope with that so put it in a box in the Bible it's not in a box it's out there in the open Colossians 1 in him God created all things in heaven and

earth thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities all things they're all created in it's you know Paul assumes that they're hierarchism levels and that these overlap with what we think of as human hierarchies that when you give somebody authority when you elect somebody at a parliament or when you make them leader of an army or something you're actually giving them a responsibility which puts them in touch with created but non-human intelligences which God wants to be acting wisely and God will hold them accountable to whether they act wisely or not so I haven't read Heiser I don't know what he does with this what I would say is this the category of the supernatural is rigidly unhelpful because as I've said before we tend to think in terms of supernatural up there natural down here and occasionally supernatural does stuff that is simply not a biblical way of looking at how stuff happens in the real world great well what maybe one day we'll be able to bring you together and have a proper conversation on it and maybe by then I've read the book that's right um final question for this one um Alex in Dallas Texas says Jesus seems to clearly contradict the Old Testament law what does he mean when he says not one jot will pass away and he didn't come to abolish it but to fulfill the law okay again we tend to think in terms of it's either all true and all still relevant or it's none of it true and I I've heard that there are some people in America these days who are saying that in order to be a good Christian we must just abolish the Old Testament and forget it I mean how on earth one could say that I'm honestly not sure but um I'm going to be doing a conversation fairly soon in a big American church and apparently this is one of the questions this can come up um and again this comes very clear when you think of the story actually I would prefer to approach this question via Paul via Galatians 3 where Paul talks about the law and he says that the law is not against the promises of God but the law was a good gift for a good but time limited purpose and that when that time limited purpose is done the law is set aside not because it was a bad thing or a stupid thing many Christians have said oh the law you know that's all judgmental got to get rid of that no that's not what it is at all think of how the story from Abraham through to the ultimate new creation really works the law is given Paul says from Moses to the Messiah to keep the chosen people from as it were going bad until the coming of the Messiah the Messiah is Israel in person as well as being the living God in person and now all of that keeping Israel sorted out ahead of time business has been done so I use the illustration which works just above the gospels of a booster rocket on a space flight the booster rocket gets the spacecraft out of earth's atmosphere when it gets up into deep space somebody presses a button somewhere and the booster falls away not because it was a stupid thing and we wish we could have done without it but because it was a necessary thing whose job is now done now when you come then to Jesus and the gospels take the Sabbath Sabbath is made for man not man with the Sabbath so guess what I'm as many many Jewish teachers have been telling us for years the point of the Sabbaths is that they are the weekly anticipation of the age to come the coming age that when the Shabbat comes we are living in advance in the age to come Jesus says the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand we are now in perpetual Sabbath that's why in Luke 4 he says this scripture is fulfilled it's the belief the Sabbath of

Sabbaths because he's here and you don't put up signs saying this way to London in the middle of Whitehall you know because you're there already and so for Jesus to abolish the Sabbath and notice that in the rest of the New Testament every time somebody summarizes the Ten Commandments they miss out the Sabbath Paul never mentions it and never mentions it as part of the Commandment because it's fulfilled and so if we elevate oh here are the Ten Commandments and they were given by Moses so they're either all valid for all time or they're not all valid for all time no sorry the Sabbaths were this constant week by week promise of the age to come and Jesus says it's here and likewise the incoming of the Gentiles that's something which in the Old Testament you're not allowed to fraternize with Gentiles in the way that Jesus does and then Paul does but Jesus sees the time coming when in fact the nations will come many will come from Eastern Western there's going to be a great change and so certain aspects of Torah of the Jewish law will be fulfilled in Jesus and therefore will no longer be relevant for the church while other aspects of course because they're about what it means to be genuinely human will be fulfilled and therefore will be relevant so that's not a problem dare I say you've been listening to the Ask, Enty, Write anything podcast let other people know about this show by rating and reviewing it in your podcast provider