

OpenTheo

Do Atheists Read the Bible More Literally Than Christians?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether atheists read the Bible more literally than Christians because they don't have to make up excuses for what it says and how to make a case for the attributes of God by arguing from cosmology rather than the Bible.

* How would you respond to an atheist who says nobody reads the Bible more literally than atheists because they don't have to make up baloney excuses when it says something they can't allow it to mean?

* When arguing from cosmology, how do you show what attributes God has without using the Bible?

Transcript

You're listening to Stand to Reason's hashtag, S-T-R-S-C-Podcast. I'm Amy Hall and Greg Koukl is with me. I am.

We are here to respond to your questions. Hey, go Amy. That would be great for I am.

Greg, the lightning's gonna strike you. I'm gonna get out of the way. Jesus claimed the deity.

Okay. Alright, let's get on to the question. Weird mood today.

Okay. Alright, this question comes from Heidi. I am seeing a quote by a man named R.I.M. Ron Ra circulated a lot lately on Facebook and I'm wondering if either of you have thoughts on it.

And Ron Ra is an Internet atheist just in case you don't know that, Greg. Here's what he says. Nobody reads the Bible more literally than atheists because we don't have to make up BS excuses for when it says something we can't allow it to mean.

Okay. Well, the difficulty here is just the devils and the details, right? So, and also this question of literally. And so, I address this in Street Smart because it comes up a lot, you

know, and that is all we, I say, always do this and never do this.

So, with regards to the Bible and the chapter of the Bible, never read a Bible verse. We talk about that. But always do this.

Always read the Bible in a certain sense, the regular way. When people say, do you take the Bible literally? Of course, the answer is simply, I take it in the sense that the, I think the author intended. Do you take the sports page literally? Do you take? I mean, there you got all these people stopping and destroying and, you know, mutilating and crushing other things.

Yeah, crushing. So, no, these are all figures of speech. And of course, it's not just the sports page that uses hyperbole like that for the sake of effect, but you also have the rest of the newspaper.

It has those kinds of things. They have figures of speech. And so, we take these, we try to take the text in the sense that is intended.

Okay. So, but I know, I know, maybe part of what this atheist is referring to. Okay, let's just say, uh, slavery in the Bible.

Look at all the slavery in the Bible. So, I read that literally, really, if you read it, literally, you'd know that the word translated slave is a bad. An about means servant.

It's the exact same word in both cases. And up until about the 20th century, the beginning of the 20th century, it was always translated servant. And then it started being translated slave.

And now you have slave translated at the, the word about translated slave. Okay. So, is he, are you taking that into consideration? When you think slavery, use, when you read slavery, you take it as a literal characterization of the kind of thing that happened in America.

But that is not what the writers intended. And when you read the text and all the things that are involved with it, you realize it was quite different than that situation. All right.

So, part of the difficulty is his point reading literally. Okay. Now, what about the accent that floated? Do you take that literally? Yeah, because that's the way it was written.

This is something miraculous that happened. And so what's interesting is a lot of times when people say, do you take that literally? What they mean is, do you take the parts of the Bible that I don't like at face value? Like, you know, the flood destroying all humankind at that time, the world that then was as Peter puts it in second Peter, or Jesus being the only way of salvation, Jesus being the God, man, Jesus, raising somebody from the dead, healing lepers, rising from the dead himself. You don't take all that literally.

That's not rational. What do you mean? That's not rational. Well, what they mean is it doesn't comport with a rationalistic materialistic philosophy there.

They're bringing to the text. There's nothing died if there is a God who is the author of life and then can accomplish miracles. One person put it this way.

I think it was Frank Turk that everybody believes that the universe had a beginning. Secularists and Christians, they all believe that. Christians think God did it.

Oh, that's a miracle. What do you believe? The whole universe came out of nothing spontaneously for no reason and no purpose. That's not a miracle.

That's just a miracle without God. So both sides is committed to a miracle of some sort. All right.

So the irony to me is that that when other miracles show up in the Bible, these are dismissed out of hand as not being literal. When it appears in the context that these things are describing events that the writers were fully convinced took place. Now, it doesn't mean you don't have to assess these.

I'm just making the observation that when the atheist says I read it carefully and more literally than others, that needs to be cashed out. What exactly does he mean by that? Okay, our classical question. And also he mentioned about BS excuses.

Well, I think there may be excuses that are baloney like that. And that, okay, that happens. That doesn't mean that there isn't a legitimate explanation for that from somebody who's not talking baloney.

All right. And like my comment about slavery. Well, wait a minute, this is servitude in many cases, not most cases.

And even when it's the kind of slavery and not just servitude, indentured servitude, it wasn't the kind of slavery you have in mind anyway, because the Mosaic law was like union representation to those who were in servitude. So it all comes down to the details. I would want to hear more of what he says.

What I just offered wasn't a BS excuse. What I just offered was an explanation of the historical context of the ancient Near East and that it was the law of Moses that dignified servants and slaves, if you will, far beyond anything else in the ancient Near East. That helped them.

So that's the kind of thing that has to be taken into consideration when you when you hear statements like this. It's also in the context of the entire, the main thing that happens in the Old Testament is the rescue from slavery. Clearly, God does not want people to be in slavery.

That's not his ideal. That's not what he wants. And this brings me to the topic of context.

And here is where I think things go wrong quickly with a lot of internet atheists. There's a whole context to these versus these passages. And so sometimes what they will do is read one verse and say, this means whatever.

One example that I've run into before is the, they think God commanded Christ or the Christian God commanded the Israelites to do child sacrifice. Now, if you look at the context, this is clearly not the case. And I've made the case on our website.

If you look up child sacrifice at str.org. But a lot of times what, what happens when I point out the context is they will say, no, this is what this verse says. And you're, you're denying what this verse says. And here's where I think maybe you could illustrate with another book because we all know how to read books.

So if there's some sort of a novel that everybody knows, maybe, maybe something from Harry Potter, just have it ready and say, okay, what does this sentence mean? Take something that out of context means something crazy and horrible. And then say, what does this mean? Is, is, is this promoting, you know, lying or whatever? But then if they know the story, they know that's not the case. So you can point out, look, when you just read this one passage, then it sounds like this, but that's not reading it literally as you were pointing out, Greg, you have to read everything in context.

And it's the context that makes sense of that sentence. And it's not illegitimate to bring the context into the situation. And so a lot of times there, there are a lot of atheists who will get these, you know, verses here and there on the internet.

And then they think they've got a slam dunk, but they really don't know what the context is for that verse. I heard a great example of this from David Wood, who was talking about Abraham being sacrificed. And, and this is, this is, I'm sorry, Abraham sacrificing his son or being asked to sacrifice his son.

And so he gave a whole bunch of the historical background to it. And, and then showed that all things considered, when you look at the entire account and understand the ancient Near Eastern practices that were child sacrifice was prevalent as an example of showing the most fealty to the God you worshiped, which is why these other pagan religions would do that. It was their way of showing fealty to God.

They sacrificed what they loved most. Abraham was being asked to do that to show his great love for his God in a way that made sense within the context of the culture. Then God stayed his hand to show that child sacrifice is not appropriate.

Okay. And so it, it, what happens is the exact opposite message is communicated when you understand the full context, then what atheists or critics take from the passage when they read just this narrow thing. There are also other indications that Isaac is not

going to be sacrificed because Abraham says to his servant, we're going to go up the mountain and we will return.

Okay. And then when the, when Isaac asks about where, where's the sacrifice, Abraham says God will provide the sacrifice. And even in the book of Romans, Paul says that Abraham understood this was the child of promise.

So if it turned out that he was sacrificed, God would raise him from the dead because the promise was in the seed of this son of his who had to survive in order for that to happen. When you see all of that particular, all those particulars there, it sheds an entirely different light on the sacrifice. And one last thing I'll mention though, and it's something that happened on the show many years ago when I was working at KBRT and somebody called in on an issue like this.

Then he was an atheist and he disagreed with me and he said, this is blah, blah, blah. And this is his view as he read it. And I said, well, I don't think that's what's happening.

Here's, I think what's happening. He said, well, that's just your interpretation. That's not my interpretation.

I said, okay, within the problem is with your interpretation. It's not with me. You have an objection against your own interpretation.

So you have to solve that problem. Mine doesn't have that problem. And you have to deal with me if you're in my views, if you're going to bring objections against Christianity.

Well, that's the thing. We all know how to read books. There are certain rules of interpretation that we all understand, even if we've never studied it.

And you can study it when it comes to the Bible. It's called hermeneutics. And you learn about the context, the history, the genre, how to make sense of things.

But the fact is, we can use our minds to show what is happening in a passage. So if they're willing to look at it, you could just say, look, let me make my case and you tell me where I've gone wrong. And then you can tell me if this is just an excuse.

Now it may be that they'll reject whatever you say, but then you can say, okay, I think I've made a reasonable explanation of this. And we just disagree on that. There's an alternate explanation that's legitimate that doesn't fall prey to your objection.

That's basically what you're saying, you know, and that's not BS, baloney stuff. Although I'm sure people could do that. I'm sure it happens.

All right. Let's take a question from Mitchell Hanson. When arguing from cosmology, how do you show what attributes God has without using the Bible? Well, the way Paul puts it

in Romans 1 is that his divine, his, his, I'll get it.

I think he says something about his power and attributes are clearly seen being, here it is. That which is known about God, verse 19, Romans 1, that which is known about God is evident within them. Well, that's interesting because now he's talking about an internal witness in that phrase.

For God made it evident to them. He's talking about the, that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven and against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. For since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen being understood through what has been made.

So they're without excuse. Okay. So eternal power and divine nature.

All right. Eternal power that relates to his eternity and his power. Okay.

If you think about the origin of the universe, it has to be from an unmoved mover to use the Aristotelian characterization. One that himself was not created or else you fall into an infinite regress who created him, who created him, who created him sooner or later you have to have a starting point of a being with aceticity. That is, that is, that is, self-existed is eternal by nature.

So that's the only place you can go when you think about it. So when you reflect upon the nature of the universe, there has to be some, the universe is contingent. There has to be some non-contention being who is the best explanation for, for the universe.

That's fear. That's another form of the cosmological argument. I'm trying to remember the contingency.

Yeah, the liebnets. Thank you. Yeah, liebnets.

So, so when you look at the nature of the universe and you could be an ancient and still reason that way, it would, an eternal being that is really powerful has to be responsible for the universe that we see. Okay, that's one thing. Not just powerful, but smart.

Look at the nature of the universe. Look at the intricacy. Look at the design features that, and creative.

And I don't mean creative just in the sense of causing something to come from nothing. That would be the classic sense of creating something. But creative in the aesthetic sense.

Holy smokes. Think of all the, just look at any critters. Stand in your front yard and look around.

We are sitting there the other evening at the bench in our front yard. My wife and I, and

there were little brown bats flying around in front of an eye yard. Wow, they're great.

These are mammals that fly, not birds that fly, mammals that fly. Okay, catching insects that fly. Flight is not easy to accomplish, right? And all of these fly to different means.

Basic aerodynamics are in place, but they have different ways of mechanized being mechanized to accomplish that. And what are the bats doing? They're eating these flying insects. Like what? Like mosquitoes? Huh? Do you ever try to catch a mosquito? That's not easy to catch a mosquito.

They're flying around midair, catching them in their mouth, and zooming here and there. How do they do that? Echo location. Amazing.

Unbelievable. Okay. So, I mean, that's creative.

You look at any critter. You look at any creature. You look at, I was looking at a milkweed pants in our front yard and there's the monarch butterfly caterpillars eating, eating, eating.

They can't see anything. They don't have eyes, but they eat the plant that they were laid on because they know this when the stalk is all gone, they go find another. They go down the stalk and then how do they do that? Then they find a bush or a tree to pupate in.

How do they do that? They know how to do it without eyes. And then they pupate, which means they turn to mush and then come out a flying thing. Go figure.

That is pretty cool. Okay. So, these are design qualities that we can observe in nature.

And from that, we properly infer the intelligence and creativity, now in the aesthetic sense, of a creative and power. And so, there are lots of things that one can infer in what might be called natural theology about the character of God. And by the way, Paul in Romans 1 says, people are held responsible for that.

What about those who have never heard about Jesus? Well, maybe they've never heard about Jesus, but they've all heard about the Father. That's his point. And if they hear about the Father and reject the Father by suppressing the truth and unrighteousness, why does the Father have any obligation to give them more information about his Son? Because as Jesus said, if you reject the Son, you reject the Father who sent me.

If they're already rejecting the Father, they're not going to accept the Son whom he sent. I can, I just to add a couple more things to your list there, Greg. We know he cares about beauty.

We know that he's rational because everything is orderly. So, even beyond being creative, you know, he's beautiful, he's rational. And also, tell me what you think about

this one.

I think it also indicates that he is a person, that he's an agent. Oh, yes, definitely for that. Because you don't, if he were just a force of some kind, there would be no explanation for a beginning of creation.

That's right. He has to initiate the beginning of creation. That's right.

That's a real important point. There are two types of causes, something that get a little philosophical here, but it's not difficult. They're called agent causation and event causation.

Now, event causation, we know about, it's like dominoes falling. And that's why science works. Because if you set the dominoes up the same way every time, they will always fall the same way according to natural law.

That's called the, it's entailed in the concept of experimental repeatability and the scientific method. Okay. That's event causation.

Okay. But notice somebody has to set the dominoes up and has to flick the first domino so that they all fall in this orderly succession. Well, the one that flicks the first domino and initiates the causal, causal chain is called an agent.

It's a someone who is a person who is capable of starting something happening. Okay. And if there is no starter and things are happening, that means the happenings fade back into eternity, which turn out to be impossible.

Because you can't, you know, accomplish an actual infinity of events by adding one to another, two, three, four, five, six, only a thousand, one, a thousand, you keep counting, you're always going to have a number. Okay. So therefore there had to be initiation and only, and our uniform experience is that agents are initiators.

Okay. Not events. They're prime movers.

Okay. You could have a couple of events being influenced. Say, for example, an earthquake happened and then that shook the first domino and then the domino started falling if you're using that as an illustration.

Well, that is a physical event, an event that caused the next physical event. But eventually you're going to have to go back to some event that caused motion to begin with. This is one of Aquinas's arguments for God is the is motion, who starts the motion kind of thing.

So the original agent is obvious from the nature of cause and effect in the universe. Well, thank you, Mitchell and Heidi. We appreciate hearing from you.

Send us your question on Twitter with the hashtag SDR. Ask or go through our website on our podcast page for hashtag SDR.org. We look forward to hearing from you. This is Amy Hall and Greg Kolkal for Stand to Reason.