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## How Should a Christian Approach the Arguments in Richard Dawkins's Book?

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### #STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how Christians should approach the arguments in Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion* and how to respond to the claims that the New Testament Gospels are flawed and unreliable and that Christianity isn't based in science.

- \* How should Christians approach the arguments in Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*?
- \* How should I respond to the claim that the New Testament Gospels are flawed and unreliable?
- \* How should I respond to the objection that Christianity isn't based in science?

### Transcript

I'm Amy Holland, you're listening to Stand To Reasons #STRAskPodcast. Greg Cokles here with me to answer your questions. And we've got a good one today, Greg.

We always have good questions. You guys give the best questions. We do.

Absolutely, I agree. And sometimes you ask a question. There's a long silence here on my end.

I'm going, "Okay, let's see. I've never heard that one before, and it's a good one. And how do I want to respond? Go ahead.

Let's keep going." So this question comes from Kay, just the letter K. And I think there are a few different elements to this. So this might even take us the whole time. We'll see how it goes.

But here's the question. How should Christians approach some of the arguments in Richard Dawkins, *The God delusion*? So there's the first one. How should you approach

the arguments? And then Kay gives some examples.

For example, the argument that the New Testament Gospels are flawed and unreliable and that Christianity isn't based in science. Pardon me for laughing. But I'm just thinking about the challenges.

The challenges, Richard Dawkins' challenges are so shallow. And I will explain that. I'm not just putting him down.

They're shallow. All right. So I think he says here, "Go ahead." Oh, I was just going to say, "Let's start with the idea that you come across a challenge that you don't know.

You're kind of thrown off. How do you approach that?" Yeah, the general with any writer, whether it's Dawkins or Hitchens or Sam Harris or Daniel Dennett, those are the more well-known, new atheist, so to speak, or any others. Speaking and in their writing, there's going to be flourish.

There are going to be ideas written with a flourish because they're good writers. They're also good logicians. Wait, there were good rhetoricians.

This is what I mean, not logicians. In other words, they'd always think well, but they sound persuasive. So how do you deal with all of that when it comes down? I've said this a number of times in different ways and different things I've written, but it comes down to taking each piece by itself.

So any particular challenge, take the challenge by itself. All right. And then, as you got, because there may be, I remember who's the football player, the quarterback for the Green Bay Packers.

I don't know why I'm asking you this question, but... Rogers, I can't remember the first, is it Adrian Rogers? Adrian Rogers, or anyway. I can't remember. Okay, yeah, but that guy, but he went on a, did a rant against Christianity.

And it was really powerful when you look, when you hear it, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. So then I said, "Okay, let's just break it down. Just break it down." He makes this claim and this claim and this claim and this claim.

So you want to remove the rhetoric, or the flourish that's around it and get down to the basic claim. Then you deal with that particular claim. And there's a number of questions you're going to ask yourself.

If it's a factual claim, is it factually accurate? This is just the facts, ma'am tactic. If it's a logical claim that is something is, if they're making some claim that is, it might be just, I call it a trash talk, it might just be nonsense. When you look at it, there's no logic to this.

Maybe he's misrepresenting Christianity at this point with this claim. That's a straw man

fallacy. These are informal fallacies.

Maybe he's just putting Christians down. Christians are stupid. They're dumb.

They have a crutch. They believe in God. Jesus, because they were born in America.

Well, all of these are genetic fallacies. They're irrelevant to the question of whether or not Jesus was the person he claimed to be or whether God exists or anything like that. It's just all destructive trash talk.

And if you don't recognize when that shows up, you don't know how to get rid of it. So you want to get rid of all that and then see what the argument is. It's very interesting with Richard Dawkins in the God delusion because there is a place about a third of the way into the book where he actually gives his argument.

And it's like eight points. And I assess that argument in, I think in the book, the little book led on new atheists. But I assess that.

I say, here's what he says. And I said, here's premise one, premise two, premise three. And I go through the whole thing.

I said, there's no argument here. Some of these premises are irrelevant. Like one premise says, we haven't solved this problem about the fine tuning of the universe yet, but we probably will.

What's that? That's not a premise in an argument. And anyway, so I've gone through the whole thing and it turns out there's only two lines that are even meaningful out of the seven or eight. He's got him numbered.

He says, in case you're confused about what my argument is, here it is. Now this guy's got a PhD, right? And then he gives his argument and it's an absolute mess as an argument. And then the two things that are left, you can't come to any conclusion at all based on the two things that remain as quasi premises.

So anyway, lots of times it's just a lot of noise and no solid thinking. Okay. So that would be the general approach.

Take the challenge, break it down, get rid of the nonsense that you recognize as nonsense. Let's see if there's substance, if there's substance, then you look at it. Now it's much easier to do that.

Okay. So now let's go to the particulars here. The New Testament is flawed.

What does that mean? Okay. Well, it means that is there some characterization that's given there, right? Could you read that for me, Amy? That the New Testament gospels are flawed and unreliable. Okay.

They're flawed and unreliable. I want to know what they mean by flawed and in what sense of the unreliable. It turns out that every historian of that period, every single credentialed historian of that period takes the New Testament gospel seriously as reliable historical information coming from primary source documents.

How do I know that? Because that's what Bart Ehrman says. And Bart Ehrman is one of the most vigorous critics of the New Testament and the gospels. But he makes that statement, historians, because somebody said, I don't believe there's a Jesus that ever existed in a Q&A.

And Bart Ehrman says, he said, well, I do. I wrote a book on it. And these are reliable documents as history.

They are multiply attested. This is everything Bart Ehrman, the former Christian who is now a famous, not only critic, but scholar in this field. They're multiple testimonies.

They're famous. We have one testimony. This guy knew Jesus brother.

He's probably talking about Josephus writing about James, but in any event. So this is just false, straight up across the board false, that the gospels are not reliable in some significant academic sense. Now, when he says it's flawed, it's hard to know what he means.

Are there variations? Sure. Sure. There's like 400,000 variations.

There's only 300,000 words in the New Testament. Wow. How could you have so many variations with that's a mess? No, it isn't.

Well, how could it not be a mess? Because most of them are spelling variations. That's why it doesn't matter. The vast majority of them have no bearing at all on recapturing the original.

And you can go through the process and I wrote a piece on this that's on our website. But it turns out that it's one thing to just wave a hand like that like Dawkins does a lot and make this particular claim and verifying the claim. Well, let's the devils in the details here.

And Bart Erman, even with his respect for the historical reliability of the gospel, still is concerned about changes. Okay. And when he wrote his first book, misquoting Jesus, he talked about these kinds of variations and there are variations.

But what's interesting is at the end of that book, he's got, here are like the 10 verses that you thought were in your Bible, but are not in your Bible. Okay. And it's got the long ending of Mark.

Well, everybody knows that's not reliable. And it doesn't have any theological

significance at all. Well, what about the woman caught in adultery that's in our Bibles in the end of John seven, beginning of eight, I think? Well, everybody knows who knows anything.

I don't know if that's not a that's probably not authentic. It shows up in different places and different manuscripts. So what? There's no theology in that anyway.

We know that there are. But most Bibles will say that. It might have a footnote.

Exactly. It's a marginal rendering and not an earliest manuscripts. So what's really interesting about this, and this kind of makes the point on the Bible being flawed, if you're talking about textually flawed, is at the end of his book, he's got here this appendix that has the verses you thought weren't in the Bible.

The first as you thought were in the Bible that weren't in the Bible. And almost every single one of my recognized, first of all, so I never thought those were in the Bible. Okay.

Secondly, how does he know they weren't in the Bible? Because he has a science in a sense, a textual critical method and tool that allows him to discern the mistakes. Well, he's not the only guy with that tool. We all have that tool.

All the academics have the tools called textual criticism. And in fact, his mentor, Bruce Metzger, whose book he co-authored the same year he published, that was published the same year he published the misquoting Jesus, came to a different conclusion. But Bruce Metzger died that year.

Okay. And so he authors one book with Bruce Metzger that comes to one conclusion. He authors a popular book to the masses because Metzger's book was for academics.

And he comes to another conclusion. But in that first book, they talk about the textual apparatus, the critical apparatus allows them to determine which texts are sound and which aren't. And so at the end of his book about misquoting Jesus, he shows you we can do this.

We can know what verses probably are not reliable. And so it allows us to remove those things or at least understand them in that way. But there's still a massive body of text that's completely reliable.

It's just it's it's a non issue. It was actually a non issue for a long time until Bart Ehrman made a name for himself by writing misquoting Jesus. And anyway, so Dawkins is just it's flawed in what sense.

Okay, in that sense, yeah, and that's all fixable. The key is can we recap, can we recapture the original, any meaningful way in the answers? Absolutely. Okay, what you do with the original is your business.

That's another issue. But can we recapture it? Yeah. All you have to do is look at the details.

Anyway, so that's a response. So this is just the facts, ma'am tactic use of Dawkins is misrepresenting the actual facts of the matter. It actually so does Bart Ehrman.

Okay. In certain circumstances, in more academic circles, he's much more careful. But when he's in popular writing and everything, he just goes, he goes goofy, but he got caught once answering the question, affirming the historical reliability of the gospels and given all the standard reasons why you can rely on the history of the gospels.

Now, he doesn't think believe in the miracles. Obviously, he's an atheist or some kind of agnostic, but so he doesn't think everything can be trusted. But on the main, you can trust the gospels.

Okay. Well, then the question is, why don't you trust the miraculous stuff if you trust the other stuff? And that's another issue. Okay.

The last one, Christianity is not based in science. Well, I'm not sure if this was our case characterization of Dawkins or not, but taken at face value, that's true. So what? Christianity is a religious view.

It is not an examination of some detail of the physical world to find out its empirical qualities. This is, you know, I talk about this in a, I asked the question, can you weigh a chicken with a yardstick? No, you can't weigh a chicken with it. But that doesn't mean the chicken doesn't have weight.

It just means you're using the wrong tool, use a scale to weigh a chicken, use a yardstick to measure it. Well, science is a yardstick. Okay.

And it is trying to, and the claim here is, I can't weigh the chicken with my scientific yardstick so that chicken doesn't exist. Well, this is nonsense. The details of Christianity are historical details and philosophical details, spiritual details.

They are not scientific details. They are two different categories of things. All right.

So I'm not saying that there's no relationship between science and the Christian worldview. There's a close relationship. And as a matter of fact, and the best source for information on this right now is Stephen Myers new book, The Return of the God hypothesis, because in the first section of the book, he talks about the history of science.

And that's worth the price of the book itself. And in the history of science, you see, virtually every single main player in the development of the entire scientific method and foundational disciplines of science from Francis Bacon to Newton to right on down the line. I can't remember all the names.

We're all Christians. There was no conflict. This idea that there's a conflict between Christian and science is a fabrication.

Okay, it's just not true. And if it is a conflict, then tell me, Professor Dawkins, what is the conflict? I don't know what he's going to say. Now, he might say evolution.

Well, some Christians reject Darwinian evolution and others accept it as a tool God used. Now, that's not my view, but it does show there's no inherent contradiction in the existence of God. And Darwinian evolution which just talks about a natural process of development doesn't tell you where you get where you get life to begin with.

Darwin isn't doesn't address that. It doesn't tell you where you get stuff to begin with to work with. Okay, that's a that's the cosmological question.

That didn't tell you why the universe is so designed. That's a whole different question. That's the teleological argument.

And that's one that really shakes Dawkins up. He's admitted this is really hard. You know, and the multiverse explanation doesn't work.

It's just a lame way out. And so, but in any event, Christianity is not based in science. It is based science is based in a Christian worldview.

And if there is no God, it presumes that there is a world that is made in an orderly fashion that can be examined. And since it's orderly and the so-called laws of nature operate a certain way, then we can learn how to use those things, the regularities of nature. But this all fits perfectly with a Christian worldview.

It doesn't work with a Hindu worldview, for example, and others, but it does with a Christian. So I'd want to know precisely what Dawkins has in mind when he says, when he implies that Christianity is not based in science. Now, I'm going to give you one example of a mistaken thinking about how people look at this.

And he's and they use science to invade against the resurrection. All right. And here's I actually got this illustration out of Natasha's Crane's new book and faithfully different.

And she's citing some atheist who's opining against Christianity and says, look at science says, when a body is dead, it's today's dead. Science says that. So we know there is no are no resurrections.

Okay. Science does not say that. Science can tell you when a body is dead and when a body is alive.

Science doesn't tell you whether a dead body can come alive. That's philosophy. That's philosophy.

Science can describe what is there physically in front of you. It can identify regularities. It does not allow us to conclude that the regularities are inviolable.

That is a philosophical intrusion into the discussion. And this kind of thing is done all the time. People are assuming metaphysical materialism and imposing it on science.

None of the founders of science ever assumed that none of them. So what often passes as science versus Christianity is not science at all as a methodology. It is science as an applied metaphysical philosophy called materialism.

That's why when you say, well, you can't have God because God's not science, that's philosophy. That is philosophy. But it's a it's a shell game.

It's a trick. Getting people to think, well, the Bible is not scientific. And by the way, there's another thing that folded into there and I'll let you jump in, Amy, is the idea that that science is the thing you can rely on to give us true information about the world, but you can't rely on anything else.

Well, the problem with that view is, is it defeats itself? Because science doesn't work. Here's the way I put it. I can't believe in God.

Why not? Well, there's no scientific evidence for him. Okay, well, you shouldn't believe in science either. Why not? Because there's no scientific evidence for science.

Science doesn't support itself. Philosophy supports science is called the philosophy of science. That is, there's a whole bunch of things have to be in place for science to even begin as a discipline.

And those things that are in place are not scientific. They are the things that are required for science to work, like an existence of an empirical world for one, and the regularities of nature for two, and the ability of our the reliability of our sense sensory organs to perceive the world as it actually is. That's three and reason and rationality.

That's four. None of these are science. These are all things that science requires.

So science is the only thing that gives us true information about the world. What are we going to do with all these other things that are not scientifically validated, that are required to be in place for science to work? I mean, there's like kind of things that people don't think about who make these statements like Richard Dawkins. Okay, and it just affirms what Einstein said that scientists are lousy philosophers, which is true, but it doesn't keep them from doing lousy philosophy.

Well, I don't have much to add to that, Greg, but just to reiterate, science can only measure regularities. It can only measure things that are caused by forces that are repeatable, that you can test, that you can measure. And whenever you have agents



involved in history, in particular, you can't do experiments to find out what happened in history.

That's impossible because historical events are initiated by agents, not by natural forces. And since Christianity is a religion that is based on God working in history, you can't discover that by scientific experiment. But as you mentioned, Greg, that's not the only way to know things.

And that's not the way we know history. That's not even the way we know science. Right, exactly.

So I just want to conclude by saying, Greg, taking this right back to the beginning of the question and tell people that we actually have a post on our website where you wrote about this approach when you find something, you find a claim against Christianity. And the title of the post is, try this simple three-step maneuver when you're hit with a barrage of objections. And by the way, I checked it is Aaron Rogers.

Aaron Rogers, isn't it? That's the article you wrote about what his objections. Oh, okay. Thank you.

And Amy, our little scribe, she's checking all things out for me. That's great. So just to sum up that approach, you take each, you slow down, then you isolate the objections, and then you assess the challenges one by one.

So that's the very briefest explanation there of the three steps that you'll find in that post that Greg described at the beginning of this episode. So Greg, I was right. That one took us the whole time.

So thank you, K for a, yeah. Thanks for a great question. This really applies to everything.

I being able to respond to know how to respond is so crucial. And that's why I really appreciate all the work that you've put into this, this whole enterprise, Greg of tactics. And because not everyone has the answers, not everyone's going to know all the information you just gave, but everyone can break down the arguments and look them up and work on each one one by one.

That's right. Which is what I did. So how do I get this backlog of just by doing this, you know, addressing these things and writing about these things like with solid grounds or mentoring letters, any individual thing like misquoting Jesus question mark was the piece I wrote in the solid ground a number of years ago about the Bartermans approach to the New Testament showing his conclusions are flawed.

But going through the whole process of doing that helped the content to stick in my mind. And so it's accessible to me. I'm not trying to wave my flag with the point I'm

making here is if you take these pieces one by one and you pour over them and reflect on them, and especially if you write about them, if you blog on them, and everybody can be a writer now with the blogosphere, then they are going to be stickier for you individually and you'll be able to recall them more easily in conversations.

Well, thanks, Greg and thanks, Kay. And we'd love to hear from you in your question on Twitter with the hashtag #SDRask. This is Amy Hall and Greg Kocal for Stand to Reason.

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