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## False Pattern Recognition, Conspiracy Theories, and the Need for Well-Calibrated Perception

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Today I discuss the dangers of poorly calibrated pattern recognition in biblical study.

Within this video, I mention 'The Pyramid and the Garden' by Scott Alexander: <https://slatestarcodex.com/2016/11/05/the-pyramid-and-the-garden/>. I also mention Gordon Wenham's treatment of the Flood Narrative: [https://www.godawa.com/chronicles\\_of\\_the\\_nephilim/Articles\\_By\\_Others/Wenham-Coherence\\_Flood\\_Narrative.pdf](https://www.godawa.com/chronicles_of_the_nephilim/Articles_By_Others/Wenham-Coherence_Flood_Narrative.pdf).

My blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>.

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## Transcript

Welcome back. Today I want to discuss skepticism in relationship to patterns in scripture. This follows on to some extent from what I discussed yesterday in relationship to how do we see patterns and connections, how much weight do we put upon them.

Well, here I want to talk about some principles that I've found important to think about, particularly when dealing with things such as chiasms. Chiasms are bookend structures. So you have A, B, C, B, A. So it's a sort of there and back again pattern where you have

bookends, other bookends, and other bookends, and then you have a central element.

We see these in a number of occasions in scripture where a passage will mirror its beginning and its end, a particular segment. And sometimes that can be just a single verse or sometimes it can be a great narrative. So if you're reading the flood narrative, for instance, Gordon Wenham has done a very good piece on this.

I might link it in the notes below. But the whole flood narrative is a grand chiasm. It mirrors itself on either end.

And this was a device that many people used within the ancient world and still sometimes in the modern day. It's something that is used with various degrees of strength. So sometimes you'll see a weak chiasmic structure and other times you'll see one that's very, very pronounced.

If we're looking at the flood one, it's a more pronounced one. It's a grander pattern over the course of that narrative. The problem is that when we're looking at these sorts of patterns and others like them, it's very easy to recognize connections and patterns where there may not in fact be any.

And this has to do with the degree of give that we allow ourselves in relating elements together. So if we're talking, for instance, about the way that a particular reality fits in with a pattern, there are many ways in which we can force it or squeeze it into a pattern. It's important to be very much aware of this, to consider the snugness of the fit of certain things within patterns.

So let's say we're talking about the high priest and his clothing. We're talking about the high priest and his clothing and thinking about this in terms of, let's say, a seven day creation pattern. There are ways we could force it into every single one of those days.

We could say, oh, it's the first day. He's the light. He's the one that gives radiance.

He's the one at the centre of the. He's the centre of the garden. He's the centre of the sanctuary.

He's the one who gives radiance to the whole of the nation. He's the light of the first day. He's the one who establishes the divisions between times and seasons.

He's the one who has these morning and evening sacrifices, etc. We could think about it that way. We could think about it second day.

Oh, it's the division of the firmament. So the clothing of the high priest is related to the tabernacle and the tabernacle is internalised. It's mirrored in the high priest's clothing.

So you have the clothing of the tabernacle, this tent. And then, as it were, the high priest is wearing a tent. And that tent is that division between the heavens and the earth.

It's a firmament and it helps us to understand who the high priest is. Or we could think about the third day. The earth is clothed on the third day.

And the earth being clothed in that second great act of creation, the clothing of the earth is related to the clothing of human beings. And so we have this clothing of the human being in this paradigmatic clothing where human beings are clothed with the entire glory of the world. And the earth is clothed with grass and vegetation.

But human beings are clothed with vegetable, with linen, with animal, with wool, with stones and precious metals. And here we have this image of the glory of the man clothed with the glory of the earth. And that's something that relates to the clothing of the earth itself.

Or we can think about it's the fourth day because the fourth day is when the lights are placed in the firmament. And so we have the firmament, which is this tabernacle. And then the priest is placed within that firmament as the one to order that situation.

Or maybe we could think about the fifth day. The fifth day is the multiplicity, the multiplication of these different creatures to fly across the face of the firmament. And so it's connected with angels, perhaps that the high priest and the priest more generally are this host, this angelic host that run this divine temple on earth.

And so thinking about all these things, we might think, well, there's they are host like the creatures created on the fifth day. They fly across the face of the firmament. And in many ways, they are related to the birds.

They're related to the ones that multiply. We think about the sixth day. This is the vision of the true man, the man that's been set up to represent what humanity is in its fullness.

Or we could think about the seventh day that this is rest. This is clothing with all the glory of the world, the completed creation. And there's a sense of completion here.

And at the very final stage, the high priest enters the temple. And this is the completion of the whole creative work. Now, you wouldn't be wrong if you recognize many of those patterns, the symbolism that aligns between those different things.

These symbols are not just figments of our imagination. When we think about the high priest, there are many ways the high priest relates back to the creation narrative, not least in the creation of the tabernacle itself, being something that is paralleled with the creation of the world. The seven day pattern occurs to some extent in the story of the end of Exodus with the creation of the tabernacle.

But we should recognize that if we are going to apply this pattern to the high priest, we've not really made the fits very snug. There are many ways you can force this particular peg into any number of holes. You've given yourself a lot of leverage when

you're thinking about this particular alignment.

And you can think about the same thing when it comes to chiasms. How much give are you allowing yourself? Are you allowing yourself? Are you looking for direct verbal parallels? How many words need to be paralleled? How strong does it have to be? How tight does it have to be? How many do we have to have in a particular space? Could we have a period of 10 verses where there's just a single parallel with a single verse at the beginning? Do they have to be sort of equidistant? And in all these sorts of ways, we see people allow themselves a lot of leverage when they're thinking about what fits, what doesn't. And so there's good need to be skeptical about some of these patterns.

There's need to think about the possibility but not put too much weight upon them if we're not sure that these are fairly snug fit. And when we're thinking about snug fit, we need to think about what are the alternatives? So if you're thinking about the creation days, think about if this were in a different position, would it fit with one of the other creation days? Would you think, oh, this fits? Or would you actually think, well, no, that obviously doesn't fit. This defeats the pattern.

This undermines the pattern. Now, at certain points, we'll see there is a pattern in scripture and certain of the elements aren't very pronounced or they're weak or they don't fit. And in those cases, we hold that pattern a little bit weaker, but we can see there is a general pattern.

On other occasions, there are just too many things that are being squeezed in. And if you've got a very strong system that you bring to the text and you're looking for these patterns everywhere, it's very, very easy to just find confirmation for whatever. So we need to look for a lot of evidence.

We need to think about what are the alternative ways that this could be. How could we fit this otherwise? Are we fitting it in this particular way because we're forcing it into a pattern? Are we not recognising just how much leeway we've given ourselves on either side of this? Now, these are important questions to ask because we have a lot of confirmation bias. We have a strong pattern and we're wanting to see that everywhere in scripture.

And so we will find it everywhere in scripture if we're not careful. I often get accused of this in relationship to the Exodus pattern. Now, I can defend myself on that count by bringing out further details of these passages by showing, first of all, we should expect to find this pattern in various places, that it is something that the particular authors in question use and they're familiar with it.

But on other occasions, there are times when people are squeezing these things. And I've been guilty of that on myself on many occasions in the past. And even in the present, there are occasions where maybe I'm putting a bit too much weight upon a

particular pattern.

Maybe the pattern isn't as strong as I might think. But it's important to consider these things, to consider the way in which there can be a pattern and how much weight we put on it depends upon just how snug that fit is. And the need to discover how snug it is, that requires some consideration of how things would fit into an alternative pattern.

So give yourself an array of different options and say, OK, if this were the reality, would I be saying it fit? Or would I recognize, no, it doesn't fit. And if I would recognize in all these other cases that it wouldn't fit and it's only this particular case that fits, then it's a very snug fit. If it's not, then, well, it's a fairly weak correlation to depend upon.

Sometimes those correlations are illuminating because it shows that even a broader setting where there are many snug fits and then there's one element that doesn't seem to quite fit, that can help us to understand that element that doesn't seem to fit a bit better. It will help us to understand, well, maybe this gives us insight into what this actually means. And that can be helpful on occasions.

There are a few occasions where you encounter that. But most of the time it will be the other way around. Most of the time it will be that you don't see a snug fit.

There are a lot of loose fits that you have in the connections. And then there are some that stick out and those should be the warning, the whole thing should be scrapped. The system does not work.

These are things that we find a lot in conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories have one big idea that they'll bring to the world and they recognize that pattern everywhere in many cases. It's a matter of a break.

Often it can be a lack of trust within higher structures and authorities, a sense of disenfranchisement and the sense of we need to make some sense of providential order within our world. And that will be done by proposing some conspiracy that exists or positing some conspiracy and in terms of that conspiracy we make sense of things. And that pattern is something that can be seen everywhere.

Once you have thought in terms of the pattern, you will recognize it everywhere. There is a sort of confirmation bias. And this helps us to recognize also how these conspiracy theories can fall down.

First of all, you should be able after a while to sniff out conspiracy theories and conspiracy theory thinking. The way that it works more generally is not like regular science for instance. It's something that is very much depends upon giving a sense of distrust in other authorities, not actually testing its position enough, not asking enough alternative questions, how could things be otherwise.

And it gives itself a lot of latitude. There's a great piece on Slate's Dark Codex, Scott Alexander's blog, where he discusses some of this called The Pyramid in the Garden. And he talks about the way that the speed of light is coded into the Great Pyramid of Giza.

And if you look at the Great Pyramid, you'll see its latitude, I think it is, is correlated to the speed of light. Now, that is an incredible fact. But when you consider all these different variables and all the different ways you can cut up that particular pie, it isn't that incredible after all.

There are many different ways you could relate this. So first of all, it says to seven decimal places or something like that. Actually, if you cut off the last few decimal places, it's even more accurate.

So those decimal places at the end are just noise. Other things to notice that it's something that is very, you could think of a number of other significant sites that could have this sort of thing coded into them. Why not the Sphinx? Why not Stonehenge? Why not some other places like that, the Nazca Lines, whatever it is? And the fact that you've chosen this particular location, there's a number of different ones that you could choose from.

If we're thinking about, for instance, the significance of the latitude, why is the longitude insignificant? Why do we not have any particular weight given to that detail? Why are they working in terms of metres, which is a very modern measurement invented by Frenchmen in the 1600s? Why that particular unit of measurement? Why are we thinking about the speed of light in particular? Why not some other detail? Why focus on this particular dimension of the pyramid, this particular latitude? Why not focus upon its height or details of its base? So why not something else? There are all these different facts as well. We could think about the speed of light. We could think about DNA.

We could think about a host of other significant facts that could be placed into this building and details about the future and particular events that have befallen humanity. And it's the same sort of thing you find with Bible code stuff. If you think about the probability, if you think about the amount of leeway that people are giving themselves for recognising patterns and the way that they'll fudge things on either side.

So, for instance, this particular, it's something that you find in the context of something like 666. What is the meaning of 666? Is it something that you relate to the name of Nero? And then how do you do that? Do you have to say Ad Caesar at the end? Do you have to spell it in a particular unusual way? All these little things are that extra bit of fudge that allow you to squeeze something into a pattern. Now, that pattern may be correct, but it's not a very strong pattern.

If you have to allow for those sorts of that sort of leeway on either side, it may be a weaker pattern than people think. And a lot of the time, this is what you see in the

patterns that people make. There is a lot of give within the structure.

And he relates this, Scott Alexander relates this to science. The way that science will often, in order to establish some strong results, seemingly strong results, it will allow itself a lot of give. So if it has a drug trial and a lot of different people and it's not really getting any significant findings, it needs to find that  $P$  is less than 0.05, that these results would not occur randomly in the vast majority of cases.

Only in one case after 20 would these things occur randomly or less. So what they can do is say, oh, we didn't find any significant findings in relation to this drug test. But maybe if we divided it in men versus women, or maybe we divided it particular race of women, or maybe we divided it even further and it's significant for this particular group.

And as a result, what you've done is essentially you've multiplied because you've got a small likelihood of finding a significant finding. What you're doing, in effect, is multiplying your number of lottery tickets. And the likelihood is that one of those lottery tickets will work.

And that lottery ticket working doesn't necessarily mean that you found a significant finding. It just means that, well, if you try enough lottery tickets, one of them is likely to work. And in the same way with scripture, if you keep, if you think about these patterns in a very loose way and you're not always testing them and thinking about how could it be otherwise? How much give have I allowed myself here? How much have I just been throwing patterns at the text? Am I actually listening to the text itself and seeing what the text gives me or am I just forcing something onto it? And a lot of the time people are looking for chiasms everywhere.

They're not paying attention to the text and seeing what emerges from the text itself. Rather, they're saying, is there a chiasm in this text? And the more they say that often, they will recognize chiasms that aren't there. And so we need to be very careful when we're looking for these sorts of patterns.

We need to be attentive to the patterns that are there, but we also need to recognize how strong they are. Further thing to notice is the way that confirmation bias works and the way that when we're expecting to see something, when you've got this grand system or pattern you're expecting to see in the text, it's very easy to feel confirmed when there's nothing particular about the text at all that confirms that. We recognize those details that are significant to us and we miss a lot of other things as a result.

Bertram Forer was a psychologist who gave a test to some of his students and he gave a personality. He gave a personality test and then he gave them feedback on it. And this is what he gave to each one of his students.

Unbeknownst to them, they all got the same result. You have a great need for other

people to like and admire you. You have a tendency to be critical of yourself.

You have a great deal of unused capacity, which you have not turned to your advantage. While you have some personality weaknesses, you are generally able to compensate for them. Your sexual adjustment has presented problems for you.

Disciplined and self-controlled outside, you tend to be worrisome and insecure inside. At times you have serious doubts as to whether you have made the right decision or done the right thing. You prefer a certain amount of change and variety and become dissatisfied when hemmed in by restrictions and limitations.

You pride yourself as an independent thinker and you do not accept others' statements without satisfactory proof. You have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others. At times you are extroverted, affable, sociable, while at other times you are introverted, wary, reserved.

Some of your aspirations tend to be pretty unrealistic. Security is one of your major goals in life. Now, when he received the feedback for this, he asked for a feedback on the test between 0 and 5, 5 being the strongest.

And he got 4.3 was the average. Of course, everyone got the same results. But what this shows is it shows a number of things, perhaps, about our psychology that we will recognize when something is expressed specifically to us.

We will recognize it as relating, that correlation. We will not consider how this could be otherwise. We would not consider that there are many different situations that this could seemingly be correlated with.

Rather, we only notice the specific one that it has been addressed to. And so when we're looking at a system, we need to think very carefully about how much can this relate to? How many people would this relate to? And if you heard that description of a personality and did not recognize to some extent yourself in there, you're probably not a human being. Every single person should recognize something of themselves in here.

But the whole thing is when it's applied to you in particular, you think this is a correlation with me in particular. And in the same way, when we're looking for patterns in scripture, it can be very easy. When we see a pattern that's applied to a specific text, and that pattern is loose and broad enough that could include, in principle, all texts.

If it can include, in principle, all texts, then it probably isn't a very good system. It's probably a very weak system, a system that doesn't give us a lot of power to work with the text. It doesn't illumine much.

It just is tautological almost. And so the other thing about this is that it is confirmation bias. There are certain things that we want to believe about ourselves that are more



positive.

So if there'd been a very negative, an extremely negative personality report, even if it was well correlated, we would not want to believe it so much. We have an incentive to want to believe, incentive to believe things that fit our preconceptions, that fit our desires, things like that. When we're looking at the text of scripture, then, we need to take inventory of all these things.

What are the things that I'm bringing to the text that I want to see there? What are the patterns that I want to force upon this text, perhaps? How can I be careful about that? How can I listen to this text carefully and see what emerges from the text itself? And so if you're going to think about patterns in scripture, you need to be very, very careful that you're giving yourself a clear perception of how snug the fit is. How much leeway you're giving yourself, be honest with yourself about that. Because it's not wrong to give yourself some leeway on occasions.

But what that means is that your findings will be weaker and they should not be taken with as much weight. So consider that. Also, consider if you're thinking in terms of a grand system, a grand pattern, one system to rule them all, or a great pattern that you'll bring to scripture.

Be very careful. Because if you're doing that, it's very easy to lead yourself into a pattern, a system that is very weak and that every single passage can more or less be forced into. And then you over-determine that system at certain points where you want it to serve you.

You need to be very careful about things like that. These are just general principles that relate to science as well, to any sort of discovery in the world. As human beings, we are pattern-recognising creatures.

We recognise patterns in people's behaviour. Maybe that person has changed their opinion about me. They've been behaving in this particular pattern.

Or we can think about the pattern of certain events within the world that science formalises but we more generally recognise. As human beings, over a period of time, we build up a repertoire of perception where we can recognise things that will happen from certain patterns that we've perceived. And recognise over time that these are things that occur alongside each other.

This is the way that a particular person walks. I can recognise when they're walking past my house from their particular type of footfall, for instance. If we're very attentive, if we're very observant, we can see these sorts of things.

Likewise in scripture. But there is always the danger that we are, as pattern-recognising creatures, we can get into that and overdrive. And a lot of mental illness and other

things can be related to an excessive pattern recognition or a breakdown of pattern recognition.

And a miscalibrated pattern recognition as human beings is a very dangerous thing. So as students of scripture, we need to constantly hone and tweak the pattern recognition that we have. To be very careful about what we are bringing to the text.

How we recognise patterns. And it also helps us to think about pseudoscience. For instance, if you're thinking about things like homeopathy and other things like that.

A lot of the research on these things achieves results precisely by this poor sort of pattern recognition. By giving itself a lot of leeway for recognising correlations. And as the public, we need to be educated upon the dangers of that sort of false research.

And particularly when we come to conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories and the psychology and other things that come along with that. At some point, I would like to do extensive work on the subject of trust.

Exercising trust responsibly. Recognising patterns. These sorts of things.

Because these are all part of our belief mechanism. They're all part of how we come to understand certain things about our world. Who we should trust.

What we should trust. How we should trust. How much should we trust.

And these are things that we don't pay enough attention to. But if we're going to be studying scripture. If we're going to be thinking carefully about science.

If we're going to be thinking carefully about any sort of patterns in our world. We need to be very attentive to this sort of thing. Because if you're not, it can all go very wrong.

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