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#27 Can I trust the Old Testament?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers question about when the Book of Daniel was written, is the book of Job historical and does studying the Old Testament undermine faith?

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Transcript

[Music]

[Music] Hello and welcome along to the show. I'm Justin Briley, Theology and Apologetics editor for Premiere, bringing you another edition of the program that gives you the thought and theology of Tom Wright in a very accessible podcast form. It's brought you in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright online and we're going to be looking at questions about the Old Testament on today's program.

Now we're releasing this in the round to Christmas, so very happy Christmas to you wherever you find yourself and there is a special Christmas video that we've just recently released of Tom answering a question on whether we can trust these stories of the birth narratives of Jesus in Matthew and Luke. So look out for that over the askNT Wright dot com website and if you're not subscribed to the newsletter for the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast then do get yourself subscribed there at askNT Wright dot com because then you get all this stuff sent straight to your inbox and you won't miss a thing plus you get all the extra bonus content that goes to newsletter subscribers. Got some exciting things to tell you about.

Firstly this show has been going for over a year and we've never asked you for a penny but if you would like to support the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast and help us continue this programming strong into 2020 well there'll be an opportunity from the next edition of the podcast. I'm just giving you a warning about it now though because we'll be making it possible to give and to support the podcast and as a thank you and this is around New Year that we'll be launching this will be making available the Ask NT Wright Anything ebook yes that's right we have an ebook from the show in which Tom responds to 12 tough questions on things like biblical inerrancy, atonement, life after death, the return of Christ female ministry and much more so that's something exclusive you'll get if you feel able to support the show for any amount so I'll tell you more about that on next week's program because that's when we're going to be making that possible to do that but I'd also like to tell you about a very important date in 2020 I want you to save this date Ringfencer in your diary Saturday the ninth of May in London why because NT Wright is going to be at unbelievable the conference in London yes Tom has managed to make some space in his diary and will be joining me as our key speaker at this year's London conference if you love theology if you're interested in apologetics you'll love coming along to this year's unbelievable conference as I say Saturday the 9th of May and as part of that we will be doing an Ask NT Wright Live audience episode so you want to be part of that I'm sure we don't have anywhere to send you to book in yet but do Ringfencer in your diary Saturday the ninth of May that's all from me by way of housekeeping let's get into today's show welcome back to the program and we're going to be talking about the Old Testament today and Tom now obviously your specialty 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 but also a common theme is the historicity of the Old Testament and 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 book of Daniel and I had about three people actually send questions in on this so I read all three Alex and 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 Meade 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 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 you know history of the Old Testament and specifically books like Daniel will soon run up against common trees and historians who say no this this was written a lot later than it's presented as in the book 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 7 and 9 and chapter 2 as well that's another story so inevitably one bumps one knows 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 2 and then it switches back again after chapter 7 and that's odd because that doesn't usually happen in the Old Testament but it's also specially 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 6 where we finish these great stories about Daniel and his friends in the in the pagan court and we start in these extraordinary visions so that 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 it exactly exactly and 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 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 is 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 a 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 dream coat when somebody says I know of a bloke in jail who is hot on dreams and so 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 7 onwards though already there in chapter 2 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 8 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 seemed 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 that 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 don't think that's a necessary part of inspiration Jesus clearly knew 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 is 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 of Nazareth would be responding carefully and wisely and to his calling from God so I I'm not bothered by what Bartherman or Porphyry or anyone else says well we'll come back to the more general issue of the historicist as I've got another one coming up which is someone who's 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 it's bought it 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 and obviously some people take it as essentially detailing something that that really happened to a person called Job another's take it as more a sort of wisdom literature that it is a a an allegory or a parable of its time of a man called Job coming to terms with the problem of suffering right in the face of God so few doesn't 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 mean 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 exactly exactly the two disciples on the road to Emmaus that is rather like a parable particle and I want to say no actually that actually happened and I think Luke intends us to think that it's then all 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 world have got stuck there where the enlightenment critique of 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 and classically when the Psalms say that God has smoke coming out of his nostrils I don't think it actually means he has little smoke coming out 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 it 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 yeah 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 all 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 not and of course the thing that speaking is a historian is that if we had substantial records from Egypt from Canaan etc 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 start 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 etc etc 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 this makes considerable sense I suppose I suppose it for a lot of people it's it's having to contempt themselves with the fact that we can't literally get back there we sort of and so to some extent you have to satisfy yourself with the fact that this is the story has received and as that as you would say the story God wants us to know 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 today shows brought to you in partnership with SBCK the UK publisher of Tom's material 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 anti-right and Mike Bird provide a thorough overview of the New Testament for students church leaders and indeed everyday Christians and another brand new book from Tom history and eschatology Jesus and the promise of natural theology it's the book version of Tom's Gifford lectures of which Miraslav Volf said a creative and arresting contribution to natural theology this book argues for the plausibility of the Christian vision and the relation between God and the world by taking seriously the history of Jesus Christ both books available at sbc publishing dot co dot UK just search for anti-right well let's come to Matthew in Louisiana's question it's rather long because he's tells something of his own background as someone who is sort of very into apologetics and finds that very helpful to him when when trying to you know think through his faith but he started to really go through the Old Testament and he says he's running to 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 some parts of his question here he asks were 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 off and as I ventured online for answers I kept encountering these questions and more all casting doubt 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 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 including this podcast precisely precisely 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 oh 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 Trimper Longman in 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 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 and you know it doesn't matter if things were edited later a great many things were edited later when that book of mine finally came out history in eschatology 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 none the worse 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 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 three thousand 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 on love right and 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 Moses the old which and it has to fit some kind of very narrow modern version of what accounts as historical biography and then they're given some evidence that it the people who wrote it down had different categories that they were interested in writing in and and sometimes it's just simply about adjusting our expectations sometimes absolutely and our expectations again sorry to sound like 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 are modern biography but actually having written a biography of Paul but having read a lot of biographies a biographer like everybody else has to select an 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 um let's move on to one or two other questions that are related to the old testament and a few people have asked this um someone I wanted to get on my unbelievable show actually um 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 compared 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 it I haven't I haven't read Heiser's book but I've met people who have been very enthusiastic about it have talked to me about it and I've just scanned and skimmed it to see um 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 Mykai Aben 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 um 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 the more to suddenly you'll find people say oh yeah that's interesting my aunt said that a couple of years ago she had an 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 to minions rulers authorities all things they're all created in in the through you know Paul assumes that they're hierarchies and levels and that these overlap with what we think of as human hierarchies that when you give somebody authority when you elect somebody to 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 for 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 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 it 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'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 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 that 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 going to drive a coach and horses through your Sabbath as well actually 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 jubilee the Sabbath of Sabbaths because he's here and you don't put up signs saying this way to London in the middle of white hall 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 10 commandments they miss out the Sabbath Paul never mentions it and never mentions it as part of the commandments because it's fulfilled

and so if we elevate oh here are the 10 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 there's not a problem dare I say great to have you on the show thank you again Tom until we meet again thank you very much and thanks for all the questions that have been sent in for this week's edition thanks so much for listening to today's edition of the program just another reminder to save the date of Saturday the 9th of May 2020 when NT Wright will be joining us at the unbelievable conference in London and we'll be hosting a live episode of Ask NT Wright Anything plus do make sure you subscribe to the newsletter for all the offers updates and bonus content that's at askentyrite.com and look out on next week's edition of the show for ways you can support the program and receive in return a special new ebook from the show ask NT Wright anything's 12 tough questions that he responds to for now thanks for listening and have a very happy Christmas you've been listening to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast let other people know about this show by rating and reviewing it in your podcast provider for more podcasts from premiere visit premiere.org.uk/podcast [Silence]