

# OpenTheo

## #119 Old Testament Q&A: Noah, Moses and where to start

May 26, 2022



### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers questions on the Old Testament - Where should a new Christian start? Did events like Noah's flood and Jonah and the whale really happen? Why did God attempt to kill Moses in Exodus 4?

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## Transcript

[MUSIC] The Ask NTY anything podcast.

[MUSIC] Welcome back to the show where you get to ask the questions of New Testament historian pastor and former Bishop of Durham Tom Wright and brought to you in partnership with SBCK and NTYT online. I'm your host Justin Braley and this show is part of many shows we now offer from Premier Unbelievable.

Today, Thomas answering questions on the Old Testament like where should a new Christian start? Did events like Noah's Flood and Jonah and the Whale really happen? Why exactly did God attempt to kill Moses in Exodus 4? Here's a listener in the USA who says, "Lots of practical wisdom. Unapologetically theological yet never, never pugmatious." Try saying that with your teeth in. Great podcast for Christian thinkers.

Thank you very much and thanks for all who leave a review of the podcast. It helps others to discover the show too. Before we leap in, I want to tell you about the new season of the big conversation from Premier Unbelievable.

Tom, of course, has been a guest on it in the past. But our new season kicks off with Richard Dawkins and Francis Collins debating biology, belief and COVID. It's an unmissable conversation.

Do go and check it out. You can find links from our show page at [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com) or indeed the big conversation.show, which has got its own dedicated website. Links are with today's show.

While you're there, sign up to receive a free ebook on the case for God and to ask a question here on the show. Here come today's set of questions. Well, we begin today with the first of a couple of shows looking at the old and new Testament.

Obviously, Tom is a New Testament historian primarily, but he often takes your questions on the old Testament as well. And so we've got a number of those today from people like Tim and Tori and Naz in different parts of the world. Let's start with the first question, which is quite a general question from someone who's a new Christian, Tim in California.

He says, "My question is if someone who has never read the Bible before, "asked you which books of the Old Testament they should read, "and in what order do you think they should read them to better understand the context of the New Testament, "what would you tell them?" So, yeah, what's your advice to Tim wanting to make a start in the Old Testament, but not get too confused or bogged down? It's a great question, partly because I know, I know from my own young experience, but from many others, that people who think, "Oh, I ought to read the Bible." They tend to start at the beginning with Genesis and Exodus, and they get bogged down halfway through Exodus, because suddenly the great narrative which has carried you forward seems to disappear in two or three chapters of detailed instructions about how to make the tabernacle and all that sort of thing, plus a lot of other miscellaneous instructions. Where is this going? What's this all about? And then when they turn over the page and get to Leviticus, it appears even worse, because these detailed regulations for sacrifice and so on aren't scratching where most modern Christians are itching to put it bluntly. So even if they make it through numbers, which has a lot of good stories, and into Deuteronomy, which is more obviously exciting in some ways, there's still a big puzzle.

I would say it isn't just a question of what to read, but of how to read, because there are some passages of the Old Testament which really demand to be read very slowly and thoughtfully. And I would say that about the Psalms. In fact, I would say the Psalms are one of the key places to start, but you have to start wisely and prayerfully and take one or two Psalms a day or one or two Psalms per prayer session, which might be morning and evening, and simply to allow them to wash over you and allow yourself to sink into them and see where they're going and what they're saying.

But then other bits, and certainly Genesis and Exodus would be among them, there's

nothing wrong with actually reading them straight through. Don't just take a chapter every day. Why not take ten chapters at a time? Why not read the whole book? If it was a novel you were enjoying, you'd read a chunk as big as the book of Genesis.

If you'd settle down one afternoon with nothing else to do to read a novel, you would read that amount. So why not take some of the bits of the Old Testament in great swathes? And I would say certainly Genesis and Exodus, but I would want to stress why the building of the tabernacle is important. You need to know that because for most people in the modern Western world, that seems very odd.

But really the whole point of the story is God wants to come and dwell with his people. And so read Genesis and Exodus to see that story unfolding. But then I would say do read one and two kings as well.

Those stories about the rise of Saul, David, Solomon, and then the fall and the awful things that happen. But then the later kings with the twoing and froing. Those stories are full of insight and you get a Lidren Elisha in the middle of that.

So I would say Genesis, Exodus, Samuel and Kings, and with the Psalms going on, and also with Proverbs, I said in answer to a question on a previous podcast, there's something to be said for taking the 30 chapters of Proverbs and reading one chapter a day. Try that for a month or two and just see what's bubbling up in your own understanding of yourself and the world and how that's all working. But then at the heart of the whole thing, I would say Isaiah, the great prophet Isaiah, obviously one of Jesus' favorite parts of the Old Testament, particularly chapters 40 to 55, but actually also 40 all the way on to 66.

The first half of the book is hugely important as well. But that passage, Isaiah 40 to 66, seems to have informed and infused the life of both Jesus himself and of his first followers in a way that is just quite extraordinary and goes on being fruitful today. So those are the places I would start.

But again, as I say, it's like different types of drink. There are some drinks which demand that you drink a whole pint all at once and others where you really want to sip it very slowly. So be wise in terms of styles of reading.

Be prepared to read whole huge sections or be prepared to focus in on just a few verses and to pray them in slowly and meditatively. And that may change over time as to how you want to take different sections. I've always found it helpful myself as well to have a basic understanding of where this particular book or story or whatever fits into the bigger timeline of scripture because that often helps to place it in its context.

And there are some great resources out there to do that. Many different seminaries have produced and there's the Bible course by Andrew Ollerton that we've used in our church

recently. And of course, individual commentaries.

So if you're in the New Testament, we can highly recommend "Tom's for Everyone" series. But there is a floor everyone for the Old Testament written by John Goldengate and others. So these are all useful resources, aren't they, to help people on that journey? Yes.

And it really does help because so many people in today's world who may know a great deal about other things have only the sketchiest idea of ancient history. I remember one time when I was leading a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and it became clear in the preliminary meetings that some of the people who were coming on this pilgrimage, even though they were quite sophisticated in their own ways, their idea of history was this sort of big blob back there somewhere with people like, I don't know, Abraham and Saladin and Jesus and Ben-Gurion miscellaneous floating around in the back there sometime with no sense of sequence at all. So I would give them a single sheet of A4 with the basic timeline.

"Oh, that's when Herod was. Oh, that's when the prophets were doing this. Oh, I see that's when they went into exile." And so even many Bibles actually print that sort of timeline in the back cover or somewhere like that.

And so the timeline and the map really help. And I would encourage anyone reading the Bible to keep an eye on all that. Let's turn to another question that, again, this is a common kind of question that we have dealt with in different ways in previous podcasts, but Tori in Trenton, Ontario in Canada is asking it this time and says, "Long time listener of unbelievable and have found asking to write anything through it." I'm curious as to Tom's opinion on the factual basis of Old Testament stories like Jonah and especially Noah and the Ark.

Does he believe these events actually happen? Certainly, I believe a God who is capable of creating the universe is more than capable of authoring these events. But more and more today, Christians are looked at laughably for believing these as children's stories in light of how implausible they seem scientifically. Much appreciate the consideration, keep up the good work and God bless.

So these stories in particular, you know, the two mentioned here are often cause of contention because some people would say Jonah, for instance, fits in a different sort of genre. Let's say of work to say the more kind of what field power possibly like, more historically, backgrounded stories around the story of Israel and so on. Obviously, Noah and the Ark comes in that first 12 chapters of Genesis where people often talk about it being almost pre-protohistorical or something like that, you know.

So how do you divide up the nature of the stories and where they fall in the Old Testament, Tom? Yes, I think I want to take a step back and say that all this emerges

from the Great Revolution which took place in the 19th century, where along with all the genuine proper scientific discoveries, there were also a lot of points of view emerging from the philosophy which we can call Epicureanism, which was a way of saying, if there was a God or gods, they're out of the picture, they don't intervene and the world just makes itself and does its own thing. And people used that. It wasn't just Charles Darwin.

It was a lot of other people before him as well as after him. They used that philosophy as a way of saying, therefore, we can't believe any of those silly children's stories about God stepping in and doing this or God reaching down and making such and such happen. Because we now know that those things just never occur.

And that was a major feature of 18th and 19th century philosophy, people like David Hume and Gibbon and so on, denying that the miraculous could ever happen. On the basis, the a priori basis, that if there was a God, he was right out of the picture and would never dream of, quote, intervening, unquote. That whole picture of an interventionist or non-interventionist God, that's behind these questions and that picture is itself unhelpful.

The Christian approach has always been to say that it's as we look at Jesus that we discover who God really is. Jesus says, he who has seen me has seen the Father and says things like, no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son reveals him. So knowing how God works in the world, the early Christians say the only way we know that is by looking at Jesus and seeing what goes on there.

And that really reshapes the questions away from that 19th century, either or. And it's, of course, on the back of the 19th century, either or, that many people in the 20th century have said, oh, now we are grown up. We are not those primitive fundamentalists who believe in the literal truth of all this and that.

The trouble is that as you read from Genesis right the way on through, there's all sorts of different levels of truth. You know, most devout Christians to this day do not believe that Genesis 1 and 2 is kind of a video script of what happened in seven days when the world is made and then what happened with the serpent talking to Eve in the garden and so on. Most Christians, the most devout Christians I know would say this is an extraordinary picture language way of saying something which can't be said in any other way, like the monsters in Daniel chapter 7. Nobody today imagines that they're the sort of sea monsters that David Attenborough would be showing on some new version of Blue Planet.

These are wonderful literary ways of saying something that can't easily be said any other way. If you want to use the word mythical for that language, well, okay, but remember that that's about the language, not about whether something happened or not. There are, of course, other non-biblical accounts of a great flood, the Epic of Gilgamesh.

Ancient text has an account of a great flood. It looks as though they may well have been some such thing. Whether we say that the account of the flood in Genesis is again what a video camera would have told you, what a spy satellite would have seen, that in a sense is neither here nor there.

Because the book of Genesis is talking about historical reality, but talking about it as being part of God's larger purpose. Of course, the problem comes when then suddenly people spring it on you and say, well, if you don't take Genesis literally, maybe there was never a David, maybe there was never a Solomon, maybe there was never a Moses, and so on. And to be sure, people have asked all those questions, but these are actually different questions and we shouldn't be bullied by the sneering skeptics into saying, okay, okay, maybe none of it actually happened.

Because there are different layers of truth, different layers of history, and it's the task of wise Old Testament scholars still to this day to be looking at those layers. And you mentioned John Goldengate. I mean, if people were to get hold of his big books on the Old Testament, they would see all sorts of wise wrestling with these questions in a way which I think would really help.

And many others, whether it's Walter Bruegerman or other great Old Testament scholars of our day. Just to answer the specific question, for instance, and the Jonah example, I mean, does it matter to you, Tom, whether a prophet called Jonah did get swallowed by a big fish and then spat up and went to the city of Nineveh to tell people to repent? I don't see any problem about somebody being swallowed by an enormous C.C. monster and being spat out again. Very strange things have happened.

We mentioned on a previous podcast, Dale Allison's recent book on the resurrection. And it's very interesting that Dale faces down the skeptics and says actually, when you look at the actual testimonies of people in the real world, all sorts of very strange things have actually happened. And the fact that they don't normally happen doesn't mean that they never happened.

So I want to say beware of the sort of skepticism which cuts everything down and makes it rather like the sort of intellectual equivalent of those horrible housing projects in the old Soviet Union, which just looked like brutalist blocks. And life is much more interesting than that. That isn't a carte blanche for every wacky idea that comes up.

It's a way of saying we've only got one source for this. We have no other means of knowing whether, you know, we don't have the historical annals of the people of Nineveh saying once upon a time there was this strange Hebrew prophet who came into our midst. And if we did, somebody would doubt that as well.

So when in ancient history, when you've only got one source, you often just have to say, well, that's a very interesting, unusual story. Maybe something like that happened. After

all, there were skeptics in the ancient world as well.

When the Greek historian Herodotus reports the stories that people have told, he says, some people have sailed from down from south of Egypt, and they say that if you go far enough south, well, the sun, instead of going round to the south view, goes round to the north of you. Herodotus shakes his head and says, well, we know that sailors tell funny stories, and obviously they had a few too many drinks in the pub. And actually, we want to say, sorry, Herodotus, we have been south of the equator, and that is precisely what happens.

It may have seemed crazy in your world, but it was the truth. And I suspect there are many, many times where we want to say that. And that reminds us, of course, that this isn't a question of ancient people who are ready to believe anything and modern people who are skeptical about everything.

There were skeptics in the ancient world just as there are credulous people in today's world. I mean, on the subject, interestingly, of the credibility of Old Testament events and so on, that I don't know if you've come across just very recently the announcement of a potentially groundbreaking discovery, a cursed tablet discovered in an archaeological dig in Shiloh, where which appears to date back, probably to the very earliest form of Hebrew writing we have, and the first, the earliest to mention Yahweh, and this, I actually spoke just recently to Scott Stripling, who was the lead archaeologist on this. And while it's undergoing peer review at the moment, you know, it shows that in a sense, every time we do dig up the soil and we find something, it's, we sometimes have just assumed that well these stories were made up a long time later, written down in some post-exilic time.

And those kinds of discoveries suggest that actually sometimes we need to check our assumptions because sometimes, you know, people were more literate than we thought and that kind of thing. Oh, yes, absolutely. And this is constantly happening with archaeology.

I watched a program on the television the other night, digging up stone circles in the Orkney Islands, and it was extraordinary. At certain points, the senior archaeologists were saying, well, this means we have to date such and such, 2000 years earlier than we've always thought. And archaeologists are constantly being faced with this.

All our historical conclusions are just rather like scientific ones, actually. This is the best hypothesis we've got at the moment, but at any moment, like the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls, all sorts of things suddenly became, oh, not only possible, but actual, there was the actual evidence. So it always behoves us not to be too dogmatic about what we say can and can't have happened.

We're just time for one more, Tom. And this is one that I come across several times

before. It's just a very odd moment in the story of Moses.

So we find it right there in the story of Exodus. And it's Nazin London asking this one who says, why after commissioning Moses, dealing with Moses's objections before he cased a pharaoh and so on, did the Lord suddenly pitch up in Exodus chapter four, an attempt to kill Moses? I don't know if you want to read the specific portion of scripture so we can get our bearings and context. It's Exodus four verse 24 when when Moses has just been commissioned, as Naz says, and then verse 24 of Exodus four, it says, on the way at a place where they spent the night, this is Moses with his wife and his son, the Lord met Moses and tried to kill him, but Zipporah, that's Moses' wife, took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it and said, truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me, so he let him alone.

And it was then she said, a bridegroom of blood by circumcision. Now, most modern Christians reading that would just say, as Naz does, what on earth is that all about? It looks as though, and I've not done the detailed commentary surveys on this, but it looks as though this is a way of saying, Moses, you have married this girl who is the the the daughter of the the shepherd who you met in the wilderness, and you have a son by her, but if he is going to be part of the team, part of the true Israel, then there is this thing called the Abrahamic covenant back in Genesis 17 when God says that you have to be circumcised, and that anyone who isn't circumcised will be cut off from among his people. So Moses, are you trying to play with both on both sides here? Are you trying to say, well, I'll go back and liberate the people, but that covenant won't really matter.

I suspect that's what's behind it, but it's a very strange moment in the story. It looks as though the Lord has called Moses, but is now saying, well, actually, if you're not prepared to be fully on board with the covenantal practices, then game over. How that works out theologically is a whole other question, and I would recommend you a good commentary on Exodus to have a look at that.

But I think that's what's going on. It's about the failure to that point to circumcise in some. Well, there are many similar questions that the Old Testament throws up at us, and indeed, in the New Testament as well.

And that's where we're having a helpful person who can give us some of the context and background is often so key, isn't it, to helping us to understand these stories in our day? But thank you very much for the time we've spent on some of these issues on today's podcast, Tom. And again, we can recommend that series by John Golden Gay and another helpful resources from the Old Testament, if you wanted to make a start. Next time, we're going to pick up your questions on the New Testament.

So do join us again for that. But for now, thank you very much for being with me today, Tom. Thank you.



Thank you. Thanks for listening today. Next time, we're turning to the New Testament.

Tom answers, listen to questions like, were the Pharisees all bad? How do we reconcile the different gospel endings about where the disciples stayed after the resurrection? And is the oral tradition before the Gospels were written down reliable? If you want to ask your own question, just sign up at the Premier Unbelievable newsletter at our website, [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com). The links with today's show will even send you a free ebook if you do that. Check out all the other great shows and resources we're now offering there to, including links to our new season of The Big Conversation. It's kicked off with a great conversation between Richard Dawkins and Francis Collins, starting a series of great conversations to come.

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See you next time.

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