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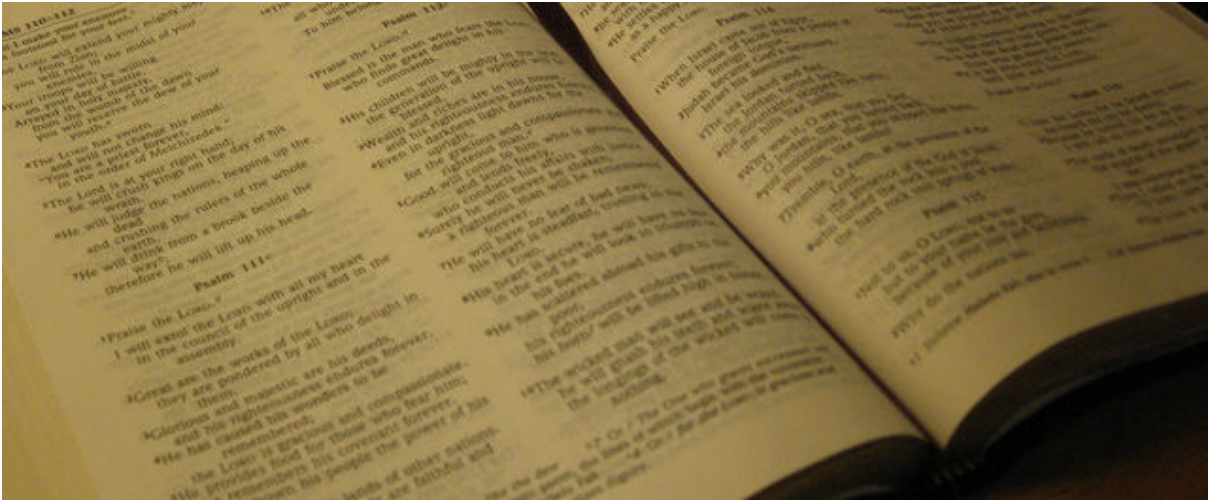


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5 Misconceptions about the Bible

Posted May 24, 2016 by Sean McDowell

5 Misconceptions about the Bible

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The Bible is the most influential book of all time. Given its impact over literature, history, governments, philosophy and more, it should come as no surprise that there are many misconceptions about its nature. Christians need to avoid these misconceptions because Paul said, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

It is also critical for non-Christians to avoid these misconceptions. After all, in my experience and research, many non-believers reject the Christian faith as a result of one of these misconceptions. If non-believers are going to reject Christianity, they at least need to know what it really teaches rather than rejecting a straw man.

Here are my top five misconceptions of the Bible:

MYTH #1: The Bible is a magical book. People often use the Bible to find God's will for their lives by randomly opening the pages and drawing conclusions from the first passage they read. I have seen people blindly open the Bible, point their finger at a random passage, and then finding meaning for their present predicament from the particular passage. Such an approach is more like magic than good exegesis. Since the Bible condemns the use of magic (Mal. 3:5; Rev 22:15), but encourages careful study (Titus 1:9), we should avoid using it in such a mystical fashion.

MYTH #2: The Bible is a literal book. The Bible undoubtedly includes factual material, which is meant to be taken literally, such as the claim that John preached a baptism of repentance during the reign of Tiberius Caesar (Luke 3:1-3), or that Jesus experienced crucifixion (Mark 15). But the Bible also has poetic and metaphorical language *not* meant to be taken literally. For instance, Isaiah 52:10 says: "The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God." The "arm" of the Lord does not refer to God's *physical* arm and is not meant to be taken literally. Rather, it refers to His power against his enemies.^[1] The Bible frequently uses a variety of literary means to express important truths.

MYTH #3: The Bible is a timeless book. The Bible undoubtedly has timeless

principles and application, but it is a mistake to conclude that *each* passage in the Bible is written in a timeless manner for all people, in all places, and for all times. In his teaching on The Sermon on the Mount, for instance, Jesus made use of particular cultural and religious ideas to communicate a broader message. According to R.T. France, "The beatitudes thus call on those who would be God's people to stand out as different from those around them, and promise them that those who do so will not ultimately be the losers."^[2] While this truth is transcendent, it does rely upon certain cultural understandings. The Bible has timeless application, but it was written in a way to be intelligible to its contemporaries.

Paul Woolley has said it well: *"All Scriptural statements must be understood and applied in the light of the conditions and circumstances which they were intended to describe or under which they were originally written. The truth of these statements, in the strict sense, is not dependent upon those circumstances but the meaning frequently is, and the truth can only be understood if the meaning is understood."*^[3]

MYTH #4: The Bible is a science book. The Bible was written (roughly) between 3,000-1,600 years before the Scientific Revolution. While there were precursors to modern science in cultures such as ancient Greece, the modern scientific enterprise did not emerge until at least a millennia and a half after the close of the biblical canon. This doesn't mean that there *may* not be some intersection between the Bible and modern science—such as the claim that the universe had a beginning (Gen 1:1) or that animals were made according to their kinds (Gen 1:25)—but it should caution us from too eagerly finding scientific confirmation from a book written in a very different age.

MYTH #5: The Bible is a rulebook. The Bible certainly has rules to direct people how they ought to live. Both the Israelites in the Old Testament and the modern church have received commandments to rule their behavior (e.g. Exodus 19; Ephesians 5:1-21). But the Bible is not primarily a rulebook, such as the Chess Rules & Basics (<https://www.chess.com/article/view/chess-rules--basics>). Rather, the Bible is about God entering into relationship with His people. Sure, there are commandments we need to follow to relate to a holy God, but the rules exist as an extension of God's character so we can be in loving relationship with Him and other people (Matthew 22:34-40).

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^[1] John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 371.

^[2] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 159.


^[3] Paul Woolley, "The Relevancy of Scripture," in *The Infallible Word*, ed. N.B. Stonehouse & Paul Woolley, 2nd edition (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1967), 213.

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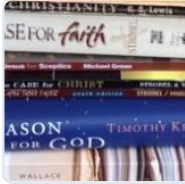
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