

Filed Under: Culture, Bible

They wave their Bibles at passersby, screaming their condemnations of homosexuals. They fall on their knees, worshipping at the base of granite monuments to the Ten Commandments while demanding prayer in school. They appeal to God to save America from their political opponents, mostly Democrats. They gather in football stadiums by the thousands to pray for the country's salvation.

They are God's frauds, cafeteria Christians who pick and choose which Bible verses they heed with less care than they exercise in selecting side orders for lunch. They are joined by religious rationalizers—fundamentalists who, unable to find Scripture supporting their biases and beliefs, twist phrases and modify translations to prove they are honoring the Bible's words.

This is no longer a matter of personal or private faith. With politicians, social leaders and even some clergy invoking a book they seem to have never read and whose phrases they don't understand, America is being besieged by Biblical illiteracy. Climate change is said to be impossible because of promises God made to Noah; Mosaic law from the Old Testament directs American government; creationism should be taught in schools; helping Syrians resist chemical weapons attacks is a sign of the end times—all of these arguments have been advanced by modern evangelical politicians and their brethren, yet none of them are supported in the Scriptures as they were originally written.

The Bible is not the book many American fundamentalists and political opportunists think it is, or more precisely, what they want it to be. Their lack of knowledge about the Bible is well established. A Pew Research poll in 2010 found that evangelicals ranked only a smidgen higher than atheists in familiarity with the New Testament and Jesus's teachings. "Americans revere the Bible—but, by and large, they don't read it," wrote George Gallup Jr. and Jim Castelli, pollsters and researchers whose work focused on religion in the United States. The Barna Group, a Christian polling firm, found in 2012 that evangelicals accepted the attitudes and beliefs of the Pharisees—religious leaders depicted throughout the New Testament as opposing Christ and his message—more than they accepted the teachings of Jesus.

Newsweek's exploration here of the Bible's history and meaning is not intended to advance a particular theology or debate the existence of God. Rather, it is designed to shine a light on a book that has been abused by people who claim to revere it but don't read it, in the process creating misery for others. When the illiteracy of self-proclaimed Biblical literalists leads parents to banish children from their homes, when it sets neighbor against neighbor, when it engenders hate and condemnation, when it impedes science and undermines intellectual advancement, the topic has become too important for Americans to ignore, whether they are deeply devout or tepidly faithful, believers or atheists.

This examination—based in large part on the works of scores of theologians and scholars, some of which dates back centuries—is a review of the Bible's history and a recounting of its words. It is only through accepting where the Bible comes from— and who put it together—that anyone can comprehend what history's most important book says and, just as important, what it does not say.

Playing Telephone with the Word of God

No television preacher has ever read the Bible. Neither has any evangelical politician. Neither has the pope. Neither have I. And neither have you. At best, we've all read a bad translation—a translation of translations of translations of hand-copied copies of copies of copies of copies, and on and on, hundreds of times.

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About 400 years passed between the writing of the first Christian manuscripts and their compilation into the New Testament. (That's the same amount of time between the arrival of the Pilgrims on the Mayflower and today.) The first books of the Old Testament were written 1,000 years before that. In other words, some 1,500 years passed between the day the first biblical author put stick to clay and when the books that would become the New Testament were chosen. There were no printing presses beforehand or until 1,000 years later. There were no vacuum-sealed technologies to preserve paper for centuries. Dried clay broke, papyrus and parchment crumbled away, primitive inks faded.

Back then, writings from one era could be passed to the next only by copying them by hand. While there were professional scribes whose lives were dedicated to this grueling work, they did not start copying the letters and testaments about Jesus's time until centuries after they were written. Prior to that, amateurs handled the job.

These manuscripts were originally written in Koiné, or "common" Greek, and not all of the amateur copyists spoke the language or were even fully literate. Some copied the script without understanding the words. And Koiné was written in what is known as scriptio continua—meaning no spaces between words and no punctuation. So, a sentence like weshouldgoeatmom could be interpreted as "We should go eat, Mom," or "We should go eat Mom." Sentences can have different meaning depending on where the spaces are placed. For example, godisnowhere could be "God is now here" or "God is nowhere."

None of this mattered for centuries, because Christians were certain God had guided the hand not only of the original writers but also of all those copyists. But in the past 100 years or so, tens of thousands of manuscripts of the New Testament have been discovered, dating back centuries. And what biblical scholars now know is that later versions of the books differ significantly from earlier ones—in fact, even copies from the same time periods differ from each other. "There are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament," says Dr. Bart D. Ehrman, a groundbreaking biblical scholar and professor at the University of North Carolina who has written many books on the New Testament.

Most of those discrepancies are little more than the handwritten equivalent of a typo, but that error was then included by future scribes. There were also minor changes made by literate scribes centuries after the manuscripts were written because of what they decided were flaws in the accounts they were recopying. For example, an early version of Luke 3:16 in the New Testament said, "John answered, saying to all of them...." The problem was that no one had asked John anything, so a fifth century scribe fixed that by changing the words to "John, knowing what they were thinking, said...." Today, most modern English Bibles have returned to the correct, yet confusing, "John answered." Others, such as the New Life Version Bible, use other words that paper over the inconsistency.

But this discussion is about something much more important than whether some scribe in the Middle Ages decided God had not been paying attention while guiding the hand of Luke. Indeed, there are significant differences in copies that touch on far more profound issues. Scribes added whole sections of the New Testament, and removed words and sentences that contradicted emerging orthodox beliefs.

Take one of the most famous tales from the New Testament, which starts in John 7:53. A group of Pharisees and others bring a woman caught committing adultery to Jesus. Under Mosaic Law—the laws of Moses handed down in the Old Testament—she must be stoned to death. The Pharisees ask Jesus whether the woman should be released or killed, hoping to force him to choose between honoring Mosaic Law and his teachings of forgiveness. Jesus replies, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone." The group leaves, and Jesus tells the woman to sin no more.

It's a powerful story, known even by those with just a passing knowledge of the Bible. It was depicted in Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* and is often used to point out the hypocrisy of Christians who

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denounce what they perceive to be the sins of others. Unfortunately, John didn't write it. Scribes made it up sometime in the Middle Ages. It does not appear in any of the three other Gospels or in any of the early Greek versions of John. Even if the Gospel of John is an infallible telling of the history of Jesus's ministry, the event simply never happened. Moreover, according to Ehrman, the writing style for that story is different from the rest of John, and the section includes phrases that do not appear anywhere else in the Bible. Scholars say they are words more commonly used long after that Gospel was written.

For Pentecostal Christians, an important section of the Bible appears in the Gospel of Mark, 16:17-18. These verses say that those who believe in Jesus will speak in tongues and have extraordinary powers, such as the ability to cast out demons, heal the sick and handle snakes. Pentecostal ministers often babble incomprehensible sounds, proclaiming—based in part on these verses in Mark—that the noises they are making show that the Holy Spirit is in them. It's also a primary justification for the emergence of the Pentecostal snake-handlers.

But once again, the verses came from a creative scribe long after the Gospel of Mark was written. In fact, the earliest versions of Mark stop at 16:8. It's an awkward ending, with three women who have gone to the tomb where Jesus was laid after the Crucifixion encountering a man who tells them to let the disciples know that the resurrected Jesus will see them in Galilee. The women flee the tomb, and “neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid.”

In early copies of the original Greek writings, that's it. The 12 verses that follow in modern Bibles—Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene and the Disciples and then ascending to Heaven—are not there. A significant moment that would be hard to forget, one would think.

The same is true for other critical portions of the Bible, such as 1 John 5:7 (“For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one”); Luke 22:20 (“Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you”); and Luke 24:51 (“And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven”). These first appeared in manuscripts used by the translators who created the King James Bible, but are not in the Greek copies from hundreds of years earlier.

These are not the only parts of the Bible that appear to have been added much later. There are many, many more—in fact, far more than can be explored without filling up the next several issues of Newsweek.

Translation Transubstantiation

Then comes the problem of accurate translation. Many words in New Testament Greek don't have clear English equivalents. Sentence structure, idioms, stylistic differences—all of these are challenges when converting versions of the New Testament books into English. And this can't be solved with a Berlitz course: Koiné is ancient Greek and not spoken anymore. This is why English translations differ, with many having been revised to reflect the views and guesses of the modern translators.

The gold standard of English Bibles is the King James Version, completed in 1611, but that was not a translation of the original Greek. Instead, a Church of England committee relied primarily on Latin manuscripts translated from Greek. According to Jason David BeDuhn, a professor of religious studies at Northern Arizona University and author of Truth in Translation, it was often very hard for the committee to find the correct English words. The committee sometimes compared Latin translations with the earlier Greek copies, found

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discrepancies and decided that the Latin version—the later version—was correct and the earlier Greek manuscripts were wrong.

The goal of the translators was to create a Bible that was a gorgeous work that was very accurate in its translation and clear in its meaning, but that didn't happen. "The King James Bible is a beautiful piece of English literature," says BeDuhn. "In terms of the other two goals, however, this translation falls short."

For subsequent English Bibles, those slightly off translations in King James were then often converted into phrases that most closely fitted the preconceptions of even more translators. In other words, religious convictions determined translation choices. For example, προσκυνέω, a Greek word used about 60 times in the New Testament, equates to something along the lines of "to prostrate oneself" as well as "to praise God." That was translated into Latin as "adoro," which in the King James Bible became "worship." But those two words don't mean precisely the same thing. When the King James Bible was written, "worship" could be used to describe both exhibiting reverence for God and prostrating oneself. While not perfect, it's a decent translation.

As a result, throughout the King James Bible, people "worship" many things. A slave worships his owner, the assembled of Satan worship an angel, and Roman soldiers mocking Jesus worship him. In each of these instances, the word does not mean "praise God's glory" or anything like that; instead, it means to bow or prostrate oneself. But English Bibles adopted later—the New International Bible, the New American Standard Bible, the Living Bible and so on—dropped the word worship when it referenced anyone other than God or Jesus. And so each time προσκυνέω appeared in the Greek manuscript regarding Jesus, in these newer Bibles he is worshipped, but when applied to someone else, the exact same word is translated as "bow" or something similar. By translating the same word different ways, these modern Bibles are adding a bit of linguistic support to the idea that the people who knew Jesus understood him to be God.

In other words, with a little translational trickery, a fundamental tenet of Christianity—that Jesus is God—was reinforced in the Bible, even in places where it directly contradicts the rest of the verse.

That kind of manipulation occurs many times. In Philippians, the King James Version translates some words to designate Jesus as "being in the form of God." The Greek word for form could simply mean Jesus was in the image of God. But the publishers of some Bibles decided to insert their beliefs into translations that had nothing to do with the Greek. The Living Bible, for example, says Jesus "was God"—even though modern translators pretty much just invented the words.

Which raises a big issue for Christians: the Trinity—the belief that Jesus and God are the same and, with the Holy Spirit, are a single entity—is a fundamental, yet deeply confusing, tenet. So where does the clear declaration of God and Jesus as part of a triumvirate appear in the Greek manuscripts?

Nowhere. And in that deception lies a story of mass killings.

The Sociopath Emperor

Why would God, in conveying his message to the world, speak in whispers and riddles? It seems nonsensical, but the belief that he refused to convey a clear message has led to the slaughter of many thousands of Christians by Christians. In fact, Christians are believed to have massacred more followers of Jesus than any other group or nation.

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Those who believed in the Trinity butchered Christians who didn't. Groups who believed Jesus was two entities—God and man—killed those who thought Jesus was merely flesh and blood. Some felt certain God inspired Old Testament Scriptures, others were convinced they were the product of a different, evil God. Some believed the Crucifixion brought salvation to humankind, others insisted it didn't, and still others believed Jesus wasn't crucified.

Indeed, for hundreds of years after the death of Jesus, groups adopted radically conflicting writings about the details of his life and the meaning of his ministry, and murdered those who disagreed. For many centuries, Christianity was first a battle of books and then a battle of blood. The reason, in large part, was that there were no universally accepted manuscripts that set out what it meant to be a Christian, so most sects had their own gospels.

There was the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, the Gospel of Simon Peter, the Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Barnabas. One sect of Christianity—the Gnostics—believed that the disciple Thomas was not only Jesus's twin brother but also the founder of churches across Asia. Christianity was in chaos in its early days, with some sects declaring the others heretics. And then, in the early 300s, Emperor Constantine of Rome declared he had become follower of Jesus, ended his empire's persecution of Christians and set out to reconcile the disputes among the sects. Constantine was a brutal sociopath who murdered his eldest son, decapitated his brother-in-law and killed his wife by boiling her alive, and that was after he proclaimed that he had converted from worshipping the sun god to being a Christian. Yet he also changed the course of Christian history, ultimately influencing which books made it into the New Testament.

By that point, the primary disputes centered on whether Jesus was God—the followers of a priest named Arius said no, that God created Jesus. But the Bishop of Alexander said yes, that Jesus had existed throughout all eternity. The dispute raged on in the streets of Constantinople, with everyone—shopkeepers, bakers and tradesmen—arguing about which view was right. Constantine, in a reflection of his shallow understanding of theology, was annoyed that what he considered a minor dispute was causing such turmoil, and feared that it weaken him politically. So he decided to force an agreement on the question.

Constantine convened a meeting in the lakeside town of Nicaea. Invitations were sent around the world to bishops and leaders of various sects, although not all of them. The group included the educated and the illiterate, zealots and hermits. Constantine arrived wearing jewels and gold on his scarlet robe and pearls on his crown, eager to discuss the true essence of a poor carpenter who had died 300 years before.

Things that are today accepted without much thought were adopted or reinforced at Nicaea. For example, the Old Testament was clear in declaring that God rested on the seventh day, making it the Sabbath. The seventh day of the week is Saturday, the day of Jewish worship and rest. (Jesus himself invoked the holiness of the Jewish Sabbath.) The word Sunday does not appear in the Bible, either as the Sabbath or anything else. But four years before Nicaea, Constantine declared Sunday as a day of rest in honor of the sun god.

At Nicaea, rules were adopted regarding the proper positions for prayer on Sundays—standing, not kneeling; nothing was said of the Jewish Sabbath or Saturday. Many theologians and Christian historians believe that it was at this moment, to satisfy Constantine and his commitment to his empire's many sun worshippers, that the Holy Sabbath was moved by one day, contradicting the clear words of what ultimately became the Bible. And while the Bible mentioned nothing about the day of Jesus's birth, the birth of the sun god was celebrated on December 25 in Rome; Christian historians of the 12th century wrote that it was the pagan holiday that led to the designation of that date for Christmas.

The majority of the time at Nicaea was spent debating whether Jesus was a man who was the son of God, as Arius proclaimed, or God himself, as the church hierarchy maintained. The followers of Arius marshaled

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evidence from the letters of Paul and other Christian writings. In the Gospel of Mark, speaking of the Second Coming, Jesus said, “But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.” In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he wrote that “there is but one God, the Father...and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ.” In his letter to Timothy, Paul wrote, “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

Paul’s writings are consistent in his reference to God as one being and Jesus as his son. Same with the Gospel of Matthew, where Peter tells Jesus that he is the “Son of the living God” and Jesus responds that “Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.” Jesus even called out to God as his “Father” as he was dying on the cross.

But Constantine sided with those who believed Jesus was both God and man, so a statement of belief, called the Nicene Creed, was composed to proclaim that. Those who refused to sign the statement were banished. Others were slaughtered. After they had returned home and were far from Rome, some who signed the document later sent letters to Constantine saying they had only done so out of fear for their lives.

About 50 years later, in A.D. 381, the Romans held another meeting, this time in Constantinople. There, a new agreement was reached—Jesus wasn’t two, he was now three—Father, Son and Holy Ghost. The Nicene Creed was rewritten, and those who refused to sign the statement were banished, and another wholesale slaughter began, this time of those who rejected the Trinity, a concept that is nowhere in the original Greek manuscripts and is often contradicted by it.

To this day, congregants in Christian churches at Sunday services worldwide recite the Nicene Creed, which serves as affirmation of their belief in the Trinity. It is doubtful many of them know the words they utter are not from the Bible, and were the cause of so much bloodshed. (Some modern Christians attempt to use the Gospel of John to justify the Trinity—even though it doesn’t explicitly mention it—but they are relying on bad translations of the Greek and sentences inserted by scribes.)

To understand how what we call the Bible was made, you must see how the beliefs that became part of Christian orthodoxy were pushed into it by the Holy Roman Empire. By the fifth century, the political and theological councils voted on which of the many Gospels in circulation were to make up the New Testament. With the power of Rome behind them, the practitioners of this proclaimed orthodoxy wiped out other sects and tried to destroy every copy of their Gospels and other writings.

And recall that they were already working from a fundamentally flawed document. Errors and revisions by copyists had been written in by the fifth century, and several books of the New Testament, including some attributed to Paul, are now considered forgeries perpetrated by famous figures in Christianity to bolster their theological arguments. It is small wonder, then, that there are so many contradictions in the New Testament. Some of those contradictions are trivial, but some create huge problems for evangelicals insisting they are living by the word of God.

No Three Kings?

To illustrate how even seemingly trivial contradictions can have profound consequences, let’s recount the story of Christmas.

Jesus was born in a house in Bethlehem. His father, Joseph, had been planning to divorce Mary until he dreamed that she’d conceived a child through the Holy Spirit. No wise men showed up for the birth, and no

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brilliant star shone overhead. Joseph and his family then fled to Egypt, where they remained for years. Later, they returned to Israel, hoping to live in Judea, but that proved problematic, so they settled in a small town called Nazareth.

Not the version you are familiar with? No angel appearing to Mary? Not born in a manger? No one saying there was no room at the inn? No gold, frankincense or myrrh? Fleeing to Egypt? First living in Nazareth when Jesus was a child, not before he was born?

You may not recognize this version, but it is a story of Jesus's birth found in the Gospels. Two Gospels—Matthew and Luke—tell the story of when Jesus was born, but in quite different ways. Contradictions abound. In creating the familiar Christmas tale, Christians took a little bit of one story, mixed it with a little bit of the other and ignored all of the contradictions in the two. The version recounted above does the same; it uses parts of those stories from the two Gospels that are usually ignored. So there are two blended versions and two Gospel versions. Take your pick.

There are also deep, logical flaws here that should be apparent to anyone giving the Bible a close read. Many Christians read the Old Testament as having several prophecies that the Messiah will be a descendant of David, a towering biblical figure who was the second ruler of the Kingdom of Israel. And both Matthew and Luke offer that proof—both trace Jesus's lineage to his father Joseph and from there back to David.

Except...Joseph wasn't Jesus's father. Jesus is the son of God, remember? Moreover, the genealogies recounted in the two Gospels are different, each identifying different men as Joseph's father and grandfather. Mary, the mother of Jesus, can be the only parent with a bloodline to David, but neither Gospel makes any mention of that.

The stories in the four Gospels of Jesus's death and resurrection differ as well. When brought before Pontius Pilate in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus speaks only two words and is never declared innocent. In the Gospel of John, Jesus engages in extended conversations with Pilate, who repeatedly proclaims this Jewish prisoner to be innocent and deserving of release. (The Book of John was the last to be written and came at a time when gentiles in Rome were gaining dramatically more influence over Christianity; that explains why the Romans are largely absolved from responsibility for Jesus's death and blame instead is pointed toward the Jews. That has been one of the key bases for centuries of anti-Semitism.)

And who went to anoint Jesus in his tomb? In Matthew, it was Mary and another woman named Mary, and an angel met them there. In Mark, it was Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, and a young man met them. In John, it was Mary alone; no one met her. As told in Matthew, the disciples go to Galilee after the Crucifixion and see Jesus ascend to heaven; in Acts, written by Luke, the disciples stay in Jerusalem and see Jesus ascend from there.

Some of the contradictions are conflicts between what evangelicals consider absolute and what Jesus actually said. For example, evangelicals are always talking about family values. But to Jesus, family was an impediment to reaching God. In the Gospel of Matthew, he states, "And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life."

Then there is what many fundamentalist Christians hold to be the most important of all elements of the Bible: the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world. What modern evangelicals want to believe cannot be reconciled with the Bible. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says of the Apocalypse, "This generation shall not pass, till all these things be done"—in other words, the people alive in his time would see the end of the world. Paul in 1 Corinthians is even clearer; he states, "The time is short." He then instructs other Christians, given that the

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end is coming, to live as if they had no wives, and, if they buy things, to treat them as if they were not their own. Some evangelicals counter these clear words by quoting 2 Peter as saying that, for God, one day is like 1,000 years.

Two problems: That does nothing to counter what either Jesus or Paul said. And even in ancient times, many Christian leaders proclaimed 2 Peter to be a forgery, an opinion almost universally shared by biblical scholars today.

None of this is meant to demean the Bible, but all of it is fact. Christians angered by these facts should be angry with the Bible, not the messenger.

God Wrestling Dragons

The next time someone tells you the biblical story of Creation is true, ask that person, "Which one?"

Few of the Christian faithful seem to know the Bible contains multiple creation stories. The first appears on Page 1, Genesis 1, so that is the version most people tend to embrace. However, it isn't hard to find the second version: It's Genesis 2, which usually starts on the same page. Genesis 1 begins with the words "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth"; Genesis 2 starts with "This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created."

Careful readers have long known that the two stories contradict each other. Genesis 1 begins with expanses of water that God separates, creating the earth between them. Genesis 2 describes a world without enough water, which is then introduced. Vegetation exists before the sun and the stars in Genesis 1; it's the other way around in Genesis 2. In Genesis 1, man is created after plants and animals; in Genesis 2, plants and animals come after man. In Genesis 1, Adam and Eve are created together; in Genesis 2, Eve is created out of Adam's rib.

This is nothing unusual for the Old Testament. In fact, even though many evangelical Christians insist that Moses wrote the first five books of the Old Testament (including Deuteronomy, which talks about Moses having died and been buried), biblical scholars have concluded that two Jewish sects wrote many of the books. Each prepared its version of Old Testament, and the two were joined together without any attempt to reconcile the many contradictions.

These duplications are known as "doublets." "In most cases," says Richard Elliott Friedman, a biblical scholar at the University of Georgia, "one of the versions of the doublet story would refer to the deity by the divine name Yahweh, and the other version of the story would refer to the deity simply as God." Once the different narratives appearing in the Bible were divided by the word they used to reference God, other terms and characteristics turned up repeatedly in one or the other group. "This tended to support the hypothesis that someone had taken two different old source documents, cut them up and woven them together" in the first five books of the Old Testament, Friedman says.

The doublets make reading the Old Testament the literary equivalent of a hall of mirrors. Take the Genesis story of Noah and the flood. In Genesis 6, God tells Noah to build an ark and load it with animals, and "Noah did everything just as God commanded him." Then, in Genesis 7, God again tells Noah to load the ark with animals, and "Noah did all that the Lord commanded him." Under the first set of instructions, Noah was to bring two of every kind of creature onto the ark. But the directions changed the second time, with Noah told to bring seven of every kind of clean animal and two of every kind of unclean animal.

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It gets stranger. In Genesis 7:7-12, Noah and his family board the ark, and the flood begins. Then, in the very next verse, Genesis 7:13, Noah and his family board the ark again, and the flood begins a second time. The water flooded the earth for 40 days (Genesis 7:17), or 150 days (Genesis 7:24). But Noah and his family stayed on the ark for a year (Genesis 8:13).

Even well-known stories have contradictory versions. As every child knows, David killed Goliath; it's right there in 1 Samuel 17:50. But don't tell those children to read 2 Samuel 21:19 unless you want them to get really confused. There, it says in many versions of the Bible that Elhanan killed Goliath. Other Bibles, though, fixed that to make it coincide with the words in 1 Chronicles, where Elhanan killed the brother of Goliath.

These conflicting accounts are only serious matters because evangelicals insist the Old Testament is a valid means of debunking science. But as these examples show, the Bible can't stop debunking itself.

In fact, the Bible has three creation models, and some experts maintain there are four. In addition to the two in Genesis, there is one referenced in the Books of Isaiah, Psalms and Job. In this version, the world is created in the aftermath of a great battle between God and what theologians say is a dragon in the waters called Rahab. And Rahab is not the only mythical creature that either coexisted with God or was created by him. God plays with a sea monster named Leviathan. Unicorns appear in the King James Bible (although that wasn't the correct translation of the mythical creature's Hebrew name). There are fiery serpents and flying serpents and cockatrices—a two-legged dragon with a rooster's head (that word was later changed to "viper" in some English-language Bibles). And in Exodus, magicians who work for the Pharaoh of Egypt are able to change staffs into snakes and water into blood. In Genesis, the "Sons of God" marry the "daughters of man" and have children; the "sons of God" are angels, as is made clear in the Books of Job and Psalms.

Evangelicals cite Genesis to challenge the science taught in classrooms, but don't like to talk about those Old Testament books with monsters and magic.

Sarah Palin Is Sinning Right Now

The declaration in 1 Timothy—as recounted in the Living Bible, the New American Standard Bible, the New International Version Bible and others—could not be more clear: Those who "practice homosexuality" will not inherit the Kingdom of God. But the translation there is odd, in part because the word homosexual didn't even exist until more than 1,800 years after when 1 Timothy was supposed to have been written. So how did it get into the New Testament? Simple: The editors of these modern Bibles just made it up. Like so many translators and scribes before them, they had a religious conviction, something they wanted to say that wasn't stated clearly enough in the original for their tastes. And so they manipulated sentences to reinforce their convictions.

The original Bible verse in Koiné used ἀρσενοκοῖται for what has been translated as "homosexual." For the Latin Bible, it was as masculorum concubitores. The King James Version translated that as "them that defile themselves with mankind." Perhaps that means men who engage in sex with other men, perhaps not.

The next thing to check here is whether 1 Timothy was based on a forgery. And the answer to that is a resounding yes. In 1807, a German scholar named Friedrich Schleiermacher published a letter observing that 1 Timothy used arguments that clashed with other letters written by Paul. Moreover, 1 Timothy attacks false teachings, but they are not the types of teachings prevalent when Paul was writing—instead, they are more akin to the beliefs of the Gnostics, a sect that did not exist until long after Paul's death. And at times, whoever

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wrote this letter uses the same words as Paul but means something completely different by them. Most biblical scholars agree that Paul did not write 1 Timothy.

But suppose for a moment that 1 Timothy was written by Paul, and that “defile themselves” does refer to homosexuality. In that case, evangelical Christians and biblical literalists still have a lot of trouble on their hands. Contrary to what so many fundamentalists believe, outside of the emphasis on the Ten Commandments, sins aren’t ranked. The New Testament doesn’t proclaim homosexuality the most heinous of all sins. No, every sin is equal in its significance to God. In 1 Timothy, Paul, or whoever wrote it, condemns the disobedient, liars and drunks. In other words, for evangelicals who want to use this book of the Bible to condemn homosexuality, most frat boys in America are committing sins on par with being gay. But you rarely hear about parents banishing their kids for getting trashed on Saturday night.

Now let’s talk about how 1 Timothy deals with women. U.S. Representative Michele Bachmann, the Minnesota Republican, slammed gay people as bullies last March for opposing legislation that would have allowed Arizona businesses to discriminate against same-sex couples. Well, according to the Bible, Bachmann should shut up and sit down. In fact, every female politician who insists the New Testament is the inerrant word of God needs to resign immediately or admit that she is a hypocrite.

That’s because 1 Timothy is one of the most virulently anti-woman books of the New Testament, something else that sets it apart from other letters by Paul. In the King James Version, it says women must dress modestly, can’t embroider their hair, can’t wear pearls or gold and have to stay silent. Moreover, they can’t hold any position of authority over men and aren’t even allowed to be teachers—meaning, if they truly believe the Bible is the inerrant word of God, women like Bachmann can’t be in politics. In fact, while 1 Timothy has just one parenthetical clause that can be interpreted as being about homosexuality, it contains six verses on the shortcomings of women and the limitations on what they are allowed to do.

Many Christians point to other parts of the New Testament when denouncing homosexuality. Romans, another letter attributed to Paul, is a popular choice. In the King James Bible, it condemns men who lust in their hearts for each other, a translation that holds up pretty well when compared with the earliest Greek versions. And scholars agree that Romans is a real letter written by Paul.

In other words, Romans is real Gospel, and what it has to say can’t be questioned by those who call themselves biblical literalists. Which means televangelist Pat Robertson should prepare himself for an eternity in hell. On his television show The 700 Club, Robertson recently went on a tirade about Barack Obama and, as he is wont to do, prayed for help. “God, we need the angels! We need your help!” Robertson said. “We need to do something, to pray to be delivered from this president.”

And with that, Pat Robertson sinned. Because in Romans—so often used to condemn homosexuality—there is a much longer series of verses about how the righteous are supposed to behave toward people in government authority. It shows up in Romans 13:1-2, which in the International Standard Bible says, “The existing authorities have been established by God, so that whoever resists the authorities opposes what God has established, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.”

So yes, there is one verse in Romans about homosexuality...and there are eight verses condemning those who criticize the government. In other words, all fundamentalist Christians who decry Obama have sinned as much as they believe gay people have.

It doesn’t end there. In the same section of Romans that is arguably addressing homosexuality, Paul also condemns debating (all of Congress is damned?), being prideful, disobeying parents and deceiving people

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(yes, all of Congress is damned.) There is no bold print or underlining for the section dealing with homosexuality—Paul treats it as something as sinful as pride or debate.

The story is the same in the last New Testament verse cited by fundamentalists who scorn homosexuals. Again, it is a letter from Paul, called 1 Corinthians. The translation is good, and the experts believe it was written by him. But fundamentalists who rely on this better stay out of court—Paul condemns bringing lawsuits, at least against other Christians. Adultery, being greedy, lying—all of these are declared as sins on par with homosexuality.

Of course, there are plenty of fundamentalist Christians who have no idea where references to homosexuality are in the New Testament, much less what the surrounding verses say. And so they always fall back on Leviticus, the Old Testament book loaded with dos and don'ts. They seem to have the words memorized about it being an abomination for a man to lie with a man as he does with a woman. And every time they make that argument, they demonstrate that they know next to nothing about the New Testament.

A fundamental conflict in the New Testament—arguably the most important one in the Bible—centers on whether the Laws of Moses were supplanted by the crucifixion of Christ. The basic tension there was that Paul led a church in Antioch where he attempted to bring gentiles into Christianity by espousing a liberal interpretation of the requirements to follow the Laws of Moses—circumcision, eating kosher food and other rules spelled out in the Old Testament. Hundreds of miles away, disciples of Jesus and his brother James headed a church in Jerusalem. When they heard about the goings-on in Antioch, a debate ensued: Did gentiles have to become Jews first (like Jesus) and follow Mosaic Law before they could be accepted as Christians?

Some of the original disciples said yes, an opinion that seems to find support in words attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets...” The author of Matthew made it clear that Christians must keep Mosaic Law like the most religious Jews, in order to achieve salvation. But Paul, particularly in Galatians and Romans, says a person's salvation is won by his or her faith in Christ's death and resurrection—nothing more. Those who try to follow Mosaic Law, Paul believed, risked losing salvation.

In other words, Orthodox Jews who follow Mosaic Law can use Leviticus to condemn homosexuality without being hypocrites. But fundamentalist Christians must choose: They can either follow Mosaic Law by keeping kosher, being circumcised, never wearing clothes made of two types of thread and the like. Or they can accept that finding salvation in the Resurrection of Christ means that Leviticus is off the table.

Which raises one final problem for fundamentalists eager to condemn homosexuals or anyone else: If they accept the writings of Paul and believe all people are sinners, then salvation is found in belief in Christ and the Resurrection. For everyone. There are no exceptions in the Bible for sins that evangelicals really don't like.

So apparently, God doesn't need the help of fundamentalists in determining what should be done in the afterlife with the prideful, the greedy, the debaters or even those homosexuals. Which could well be why Jesus cautioned his followers against judging others while ignoring their own sins. In fact, he had a specific word for people obsessed with the sins of others. He called them hypocrites.

They Haven't a Prayer

In August 2011, Texas Governor Rick Perry hosted a massive prayer rally in Houston at what was then known as Reliant Stadium, where the city's pro-football team plays. Joined by 30,000 fellow Christians, Perry stepped to a podium, his face projected on a giant screen behind him. He closed his eyes, bowed his head and boomed out a long prayer asking God to make America a better place. His fellow believers stood, kneeled, cried and yelled, "Amen."

Recently, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal announced he would be holding his massive prayer rally at a sports arena in Baton Rouge. More than 100,000 evangelical pastors have been invited.

Jesus would have been horrified. At least, that's what the Bible says.

It is one of the most incomprehensible contradictions between the behavior of evangelicals and the explicit words of the Bible. Prayer shows—and there is really no other word for these—are held every week. If they are not at sports arenas with Republican presidential hopefuls, they are on Sunday morning television shows at mega-churches holding tens of thousands of the faithful. They raise their arms and sway, crying and pleading in prayer.

But Jesus specifically preached against this at the Sermon on the Mount, the longest piece of teaching by him in the New Testament. Specifically, as recounted in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus spoke of those who made large public displays of their own religiosity. In fact, performance prayer events closely mimic the depictions in early Christian texts of prayer services held by the Pharisees and Sadducees, two of the largest religious movements in Judea during Jesus's life. And throughout the Gospels, Jesus condemns these groups using heated language, with part of his anger targeted at their public prayer.

While the words in the King James Bible might be a bit confusing because it is not written in modern English, the New Revised Standard Version is a good substitute here. In it, Jesus is quoted as saying "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."

But Jesus says much more, specifically cautioning against the kind of public performance prayer that has become all the rage among evangelicals of late. The verse in Matthew continues quoting Jesus, who says, "Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward."

Instead, Jesus says the truly righteous should pray alone and in secret, in a room with the door shut. "Your Father who sees in secret will reward you," Jesus is quoted as saying.

Indeed, in the dozens of discussions in the Bible about prayer, the vast majority focus on God's ability to know what a person wants. In the New Testament, it is often portrayed as a deeply personal affair, with prayers uttered in prison cells to a God who stays alongside the oppressed.

Moreover, babbling on as Rick Perry and so many like him have about faith and country and the blessings of America runs counter to everything that Jesus says about prayer in the Bible. "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words," Jesus is quoted as saying in Matthew. "Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

Because God knows what someone needs without being asked, there is no reason for long, convoluted prayers. Therefore, Jesus says in both Matthew and Luke, people who wish to pray should only say the Lord's Prayer. Of course, there is the problem that the Lord's Prayer cited in those two Gospels comes in two versions, so Christians have to choose one or the other.

It seems almost a miracle that those who effortlessly transform Paul's statement about "them that defile themselves with mankind" into "homosexual" can ignore the clear, simple words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. What's most amazing is that, unlike so many questions about the Bible, the instructions on how and where to pray are not only not contradicted; they are reinforced time and again.

The closest Jesus came to public prayer in the Bible was when he was feeding thousands with five loaves of bread and two fish. This story is recounted in each of the Gospels, and each time, Jesus is depicted as either giving thanks to God or looking to heaven and blessing the food. But he is also depicted as praying in all four Gospels, and each time, Jesus does so after heading off to be alone.

Some evangelicals have attempted to explain away this contradiction between the words of the Bible in Matthew and modern public prayer performances by saying Jesus condemned only mass prayer, when the people doing it had made that choice just to be seen. But with governors projected on giant, high-definition televisions, with thousands packed into sports stadiums weeping and waving, with thousands more doing their prayers on TV at mega-churches, it's hard to see what possible reason might exist other than to be seen. God, the Bible makes clear, didn't need anyone to drive to a football stadium so he could hear them.

Which leads to an obvious question: Why don't more Christians oppose prayer in school? If these people truly believe that the Bible is the Word of God, then their children should be taught the Lord's Prayer, brought to their rooms and allowed to pray alone.

That answer doesn't lend itself to big protests or angry calls for impeaching judges. But it does follow the instructions from the Gospels. And isn't that supposed to be the point?

Judge Not

So why study the Bible at all? Since it's loaded with contradictions and translation errors and wasn't written by witnesses and includes words added by unknown scribes to inject Church orthodoxy, should it just be abandoned?

No. This examination is not an attack on the Bible or Christianity. Instead, Christians seeking greater understanding of their religion should view it as an attempt to save the Bible from the ignorance, hatred and bias that has been heaped upon it. If Christians truly want to treat the New Testament as the foundation of the religion, they have to know it. Too many of them seem to read John Grisham novels with greater care than they apply to the book they consider to be the most important document in the world.

But the history, complexities and actual words of the Bible can't be ignored just to line it up with what people want to believe, based simply on what friends and family and ministers tell them. Nowhere in the Gospels or Acts of Epistles or Apocalypses does the New Testament say it is the inerrant word of God. It couldn't—the people who authored each section had no idea they were composing the Christian Bible, and they were long dead before what they wrote was voted by members of political and theological committees to be the New Testament.

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The Bible is a very human book. It was written, assembled, copied and translated by people. That explains the flaws, the contradictions, and the theological disagreements in its pages. Once that is understood, it is possible to find out which parts of the Bible were not in the earliest Greek manuscripts, which are the bad translations, and what one book says in comparison to another, and then try to discern the message for yourself.

And embrace what modern Bible experts know to be the true sections of the New Testament. Jesus said, Don't judge. He condemned those who pointed out the faults of others while ignoring their own. And he proclaimed, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these."

That's a good place to start.