

The Bible Tells Me So

Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable To Read It

by PETER ENNS

My Two-Minute Take

How people understand and relate to the Bible is perhaps *the* fundamental distinction among Christian communities today. This is why I believe *The Bible Tells Me So* is such an important book.

Peter Enns takes what is a huge, and often confusing, topic—the Bible—and makes it palatable, pertinent, and enjoyable to explore.

The basic idea Enns wants his reader to know is that the Bible is the product of an ancient world, written by an ancient people, and as such, it doesn't behave like many might expect it to.

Enns explains that the Bible is not an instruction manual or a cookbook; it doesn't aim to be that straightforward. No, the Bible is an ancient library of stories, laws, myths, songs, and letters meant to illustrate what a life of faith looks like.

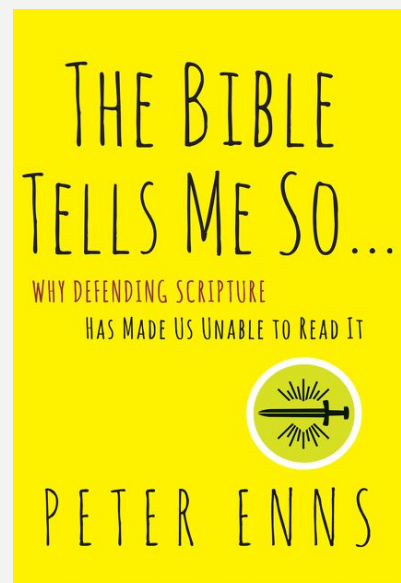
And to best understand these ancient stories, laws, myths, songs, and letters, we have to take time to understand the people who wrote them.

What was their world like? What questions were they asking? How did they relate to their God?

Whether you're a fan of the Bible, you used to be a fan of it, or you don't see what the big deal is, *The Bible Tells Me So* is a book worth reading.

It was among the first books I read a few years ago when I started to explore my own Christian inheritance. In my view, it is courageous, liberating, and helpful.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading *The Bible Tells Me So*, and I wholeheartedly recommend it.



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An imperfect Bible is perfectly capable of helping us meet God.

A Closer Look | *The Bible Tells Me So*

The Bible Tells Me So | by Peter Enns | © 2014 | HarperOne | 267 Pages

(Summary by Kevin Knox)

The Bible Doesn't Behave Like A Typical Holy Book

“Many Christians have been taught that the Bible is Truth downloaded from heaven, God’s rulebook, a heavenly instructional manual—follow the directions and out pops a true believer; deviate from the script and God will come crashing down on you with full force. If anyone challenges this view, the faithful are taught to “defend the Bible” against these anti-God attacks. Problem solved.

That is, until you actually read the Bible. Then you see that this rulebook view of the Bible is like a knockoff Chanel handbag—fine as long as it’s kept at a distance, away from curious and probing eyes.

What I discovered, and what I want to pass along to you in this book, is that this view of the Bible does not come from the Bible but from an anxiety over protecting the Bible and so regulating the faith of those who read it.”

– Peter Enns (pgs 3-4)

The Bible is an ancient collection of writings written by an obscure tribe of people living some two-to-four thousand years ago along the eastern Mediterranean on a plot of land roughly the size of New Jersey.

Often, if not always, the ideas contained within it come from people. As others have said, “the Bible offers us the words of God through the words of men.”

In this way, unlike the Koran or the Book of Mormon, the Bible never claims to be a word-for-word account of something God said.

And if we hope to read the Bible with any integrity, we must remember who wrote it, when they wrote it, and why writing it like they did may have served their interests at the time.

Understanding the Bible in this light will solve all sorts of problems people often have with the text.

Problems like...

If the history of Bible proves historically inauthentic or downright false, it’s likely the story being told wasn’t meant as history, but was perhaps used like a myth, to serve its original audience (ancient Israel/Judah) in a particular

The Bible doesn’t claim to be a ‘perfect’ collection of writings. It never uses words like inerrant, infallible, or perfect to describe itself.

way.

Or when the science of the Bible doesn't add up, it's beneficial to remember that the science of the biblical writers was ancient, lacking the knowledge and tools we have available to us today.

Reading the Bible demands we understand the people who wrote it—when they lived, where they lived, what their intentions and desires were at the time, and how people in general understood God (or gods) at that point in human history.

The Bible Isn't The Problem

“I don't believe God wants us to live our lives wringing our hands over how to make the Bible behave itself, expending energy 24/7 to make the Bible into something it's not, and calling that 'serving God.'”

The problem isn't the Bible. The problem is coming to the Bible with expectations it's not set up to bear.

If we come to the Bible expecting something like a spiritual owner's manual complete with handy index, a step-by-step field guide to the life of faith, an absolutely sure answer-book to unlock the mystery of God and the meaning of life, then conflict and stress follow right behind and, like a leech, find a place in your heart and soul to latch on.”

– Peter Enns (pg 8)

*“The problem is coming to the Bible with **expectations** it's not set up to bear.”*

It can be exhausting trying to get the Bible to work like we want it to. A step-by-step cookbook it is not.

Instead of throwing the Bible out, though, why not read it for what it is?

Why not shift *our expectations* of the Bible and read it like any other ancient collection of writings?

We have to ask ancient questions of the text, especially when the stories and history within it encourage us to do so.

If God does a lot of killing and plaguing, ask why the writer may have placed God—instead of human beings—behind such actions.

If the story being told doesn't match up with actual history, ask if the author had any compelling reason to change the narrative.

And on the occasion that two biblical writers disagree, of which there are plenty to choose from, ask why a specific writer may have had his own version of things.

In general when reading the Bible, don't be afraid to be honest about your questions, confusions, and even (especially) your doubts.

The Bible can take it.

God Lets His Children Tell Their Stories

“God killing people, both Israelites and others, isn’t a last-ditch measure of an otherwise patient deity. It’s the go-to punishment for disobedience. To put a fine point on it, this God is flat-out terrifying: he comes across as a perennially hacked-off warrior-god, more Megatron than heavenly Father.

We’re not the first ones to be puzzled and bothered about God’s violence in the Bible; both Christians and Jews have worked on this issue ever since there’s been a Bible.

And hands down, God’s command to slaughter the population of Canaan so the Israelites can take over the neighborhood strikes most readers as over the top.”

– Peter Enns (pg 31)

“To move forward, we need to look at the Canaanite issue from a different, and perhaps very new, angle. And here it is: God never told the Israelites to kill the Canaanites. The Israelites believed that God told them to kill the Canaanites.”

– Peter Enns (pg 54)

*“God **never** told the Israelites to kill the Canaanites. The Israelites believed that God told them to kill the Canaanites.”*

Most people would agree that genocide is evil and exterminating a nation in God’s name probably isn’t something God really wanted to happen.

So why does Deuteronomy 20 say God told Israel to do just that—to kill every Canaanite that breathes—every woman, child, and farm animal?

It’s passages like this one that some Christians use today to justify all sorts of violence and war. Reading the Bible like a how-to book, some suggest, ‘If ‘God did it back then, how could it be so wrong for us to do it today?’

How do we reconcile this?

When the God of the Bible comes across as an ancient, tribal warlord, it’s important to remember the nations of Israel and Judah had an ancient, tribal view of the world.

For them, God was like an ancient, tribal warlord. It’s, in part, how they understood the world and how they understood God.

Why is this okay to be included in the Bible, then?

Because God lets his children tell their stories.

God seems okay to operate within the ancient, limited perspectives of the people who worshiped him.

In this way, Biblical history is less concerned with communicating what actually happened—getting all the facts straight—and more concerned with telling the story as people understood it in their time.

Back to God and genocide: at one point, Enns says bluntly, “God never told the Israelites to kill the Canaanites. The Israelites believed that God told them to kill

the Canaanites.” (pg 54)

(In every good book, there are at least a few lines that stand out from the rest. This sentence from page 54 was it for me. I was on plane when I first read it. I calmly shut the book. I said out loud, ‘Wow!’ I opened the book again and reread the sentence.)

“God never told the Israelites to kill the Canaanites. The Israelites believed that God told them to kill the Canaanites.” (pg 54)

In the Bible, we see a God who is okay with letting his children tell their stories.

The Bible Is Edited...A Lot

“To do their thing, storytellers ‘shape’ the past. They decide what to include, what order to put things in, how to compress or combine scenes to save time and get the money shot, and so on. They also invent dialogue and scenes to knit the narrative together. They have to, since much of the past is inaccessible to storytellers—they themselves weren’t there to see and hear what happened...

Recalling the past is actually never simply a process of remembering but of creating a narrative out of discrete, imperfect memories (our own or those of others), woven together into a narrative thread that is deeply influenced by how we see ourselves and our world here and now.

All attempts to put the past into words are interpretations of the past, not ‘straight history.’ There is no such thing. Anywhere. Including the Bible.”

- Peter Enns (pg 75)

“The Bible contains four Gospels, four stories of Jesus, four very different stories. So different, in fact, that if you think that they merely report historical facts, get ready for one massive headache.”

- Peter Enns (pg 78)

The Bible seems to be much more storytelling than it is history writing. See the gospels as an example.

Matthew and Luke are the only two Gospel writers who take the time to mention anything about Jesus’ birth. And the stories are different.

In Matthew, King Herod orders the death of all boys around Jesus’ age. This plotpoint seems to be included to remind us of Pharaoh’s edict to throw male infants into the Nile in the book of Exodus. Matthew also writes about a star guiding the Magi to Jesus; this is an obvious allusion to the pillar of fire that led the Israelites across the Red Sea (a la Moses).

Matthew’s stories of Jesus’ birth are crafted in such a way as to point to Moses and the exodus story. Matthew wants us to see Jesus as the new Moses.

In Luke’s version of the Christmas story, there’s an angelic announcement of

*“Recalling the past is actually never simply a process of remembering but of **creating.**”*

Jesus' birth, which is 'good news' and brings 'peace.' This echoes how the Romans talked about the birth of Caesar Augustus, the Caesar at Jesus' birth.

Luke hopes, upon reading his story, Jesus is seen as the rightful king of the world, not Caesar.

The Old Testament writers are even more creative in their storytelling, often blatantly editing previous accounts of Israel's monarchy to get a particular point across.

For example, 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings tell one version of Israel's monarchy, while 1 & 2 Chronicles cast the same stories in a different light.

In Samuel/Kings, David is a flawed character—an adulterous, murdering, at-times-full-of-himself King—who God says must have nothing to do with building the temple.

In 1 & 2 Chronicles, however, David's sinful exploits are omitted altogether, and not only is there no prohibition from building the temple, David has a major role in overseeing its construction.

Why are these stories so different? Because the different writers were asking and answering different questions.

Samuel/Kings was written two hundred years before Chronicles, during the period when Israel was in exile in Babylon. The Samuel/Kings writers wanted to answer questions like, "What did we do to deserve this?"

When Chronicles was written, though, the people were no longer in exile and had been back home for some time. The Chronicles writers wanted to answer, "Are we still the people of God?"

In Samuel/Kings and Chronicles, the Bible showcases two distinctly different versions of Israel's history.

This kind of creative storytelling is used throughout the Bible to get across a multitude of points.

In the Genesis creation accounts, in the telling of the exodus story, in the common theme of the younger brother receiving favor over the elder, as well as many other examples, these stories are always linked to Israel's social, political, and geographical concerns at the time of their writing.

The Bible, it seems, isn't afraid to showcase its creative editorial efforts.

The Bible was originally written in three languages: Classical Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. It contains 66 books, from 40 different authors, written across a 1500 year timespan. It includes poetry, prophecy, biography, history, law, myth, parable, and correspondence.

The Bible Doesn't Want To Tell Us What To Do

"Spiritual maturity won't happen by looking to the Bible as a one-size-fits-all-how-to-grow-up-Christian instructional manual. We can't 'go to the Bible' for ironed-out answers, or even principles, to many—or most—of the specific and important decisions we make every second of the day, on the fly.

Waiting for the Bible to ‘tell me what to do’ means we’ll either be waiting forever, in silence, paralyzed about making any decisions, or we’ll wind up baptizing our bad decisions with a Bible verse that, let’s face it, has about as much to do with what we’re dealing with at the moment as a Shakespearean sonnet has for guiding roof repair.”

– Peter Enns (pgs 134-135)

“The Bible, as we’ve already seen, is a story—a story of God’s people on their long, diverse, up-and-down, spiritual journey; a story written by different people, under different circumstances, for different reasons, spanning more than a thousand years.

It was written during times of peace and war, in safety and exile, in Israel’s youth and chastened adulthood. It’s writers were priests, scribes, and kings, separated by time, and geography, not to mention Myers-Briggs personality types.

A book like this isn’t going to be a consistent one-size fits-all instructional manual that tells us—in all our varied circumstances—how to grow into a life of faith. A book like this shows us what a life of faith looks like.”

– Peter Enns (pg 136)

*“The Bible, as we’ve already seen, is a **story**—a story of God’s people on their long, diverse, up-and-down, spiritual journey”*

The God of the Bible seems inconsistent.

Sometimes he’s all-knowing, other times he’s still figuring things out.

Sometimes he’s un-moveable and decided, other times he changes his mind after being persuaded.

He gives one command in one place and the exact opposite in another.

No matter how much we want it to, the Bible doesn’t work like an owner’s manual. See Proverbs 26:4 and Proverbs 26:5 as examples.

Proverbs 26:4: *“Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself.”*

Proverbs 26:5: *“Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes.”*

Here, the Bible isn’t meaning to contradict itself. Although, that would be the case if the Bible simply wanted to tell us what to do.

No, the Bible is offering us wisdom.

In some circumstances, it’s the right thing *not* to answer a fool in his folly. In other circumstances, it’s the right thing *to* answer the fool.

Wisdom is about thinking on our feet. And thinking on our feet is less rule-following than it is circumstance navigating.

The Bible wants to show us what a life of faith looks like, not prescribe every

step we take along the way.

Jesus Is Bigger Than The Bible

“In the Gospels, Jesus quotes and interprets the Bible in ways that might make some Bible readers today very uncomfortable...He didn’t read the Bible the way we today might expect him to. He wasn’t bound by the words on the page of his Bible and what they meant...however strange it might look to us, (this kind of reading of the Bible) fits right in to the creative approach to handling the Bible that Jesus shared with his fellow Jews.

And so to understand how Jesus read his Bible we must, once again, leave our expectations at the door and see Jesus—yes, even Jesus—as a man who was a full-fledged member of the ancient Jewish world.”

– Peter Enns (pgs 168, 169)

“Jesus often read his Bible in fresh ways that challenged old ways of thinking about God and what it means to be the people of God. Specifically he often focused attention on himself, as in he was someone not simply interpreting the Bible but that he was the Bible’s focus. Jesus did that enough to attract a lot of negative attention from Jewish teachers and other authorities of Judaism...

Jesus, of all people did not feel bound to follow strictly what the Bible said. Jesus was no rulebook reader of the Bible. Jesus was bigger than the Bible.”

– Peter Enns (pgs 170)

“Jesus, of all people did not feel bound to follow strictly what the Bible said.”

The ancient stories recorded in the Old Testament became Scripture over time, eventually achieving an authoritative status (the Bible).

Jesus was Jewish, and like all Jews of his day, he loved his Bible. That said, like many Jews of his day, he handled his Bible creatively.

Jesus’ creative handling of the Bible aimed to make sense of this paradox: the stories and writings within the Bible were static, but the world in which the Jews found themselves was ever-changing.

Christians today who expect Jesus to read the Bible like they do are conflicted.

Although they enjoy Jesus’ habit of interpreting the text on himself personally, they can’t get on board with the actual practice that affords him the ability to do so.

Enns writes, *“For Jesus, interpreting and respecting Torah meant—when necessary—not following the script, but being creative and adapting the past to speak to changing circumstances in the present. And in some cases, like divorce and oaths, Jesus finds (the Bible) to be inadequate and in need of correction.”* (pg 182-183)

For Christians, the Bible is God’s nonnegotiable, authoritative word, but it’s

not God's final word. Jesus is.

The earliest Christians writers (Paul) arrived at this idea by utilizing this kind of creative interpretive practice.

Paul helped turn the Bible from a story of Israel centered on Torah into a story of humanity centered on Jesus.

In the end, the question the Bible wants to answer isn't 'How do I get the Bible right?' but, 'How do I get Jesus right?'

The Bible, As Is, Still Works

"The Bible is not, never has been, and never will be the center of the Christian faith. Even though the Bible (at least in some form) has been ever present since the beginning of Christianity, it's not the central focus of the Christian faith. That position belongs to God, specifically, what God has done in and through Jesus. The Bible is the church's nonnegotiable partner, but it is not God's final word: Jesus is.

Of course, the Bible is what tells us about this Jesus, but that doesn't put the Bible in the center. As theologians tell us, the Bible, in various and complex ways, 'bears witness' to Christ. That is the Bible's role, to encourage the faithful to live in its pages in order to look up from the pages and, by the power and love of the Spirit of God, see Jesus.

The Bible doesn't say, 'Look at me!' It says, 'Look through me.' The Bible, if we are paying attention, decenters itself."

- Peter Enns (pgs 237)

"The Bible is not, never has been, and never will be the center of the Christian faith."

When read intelligibly, we gain wisdom, courage, encouragement, and hope from the Bible.

The uneven, strange, and challenging nature of the Bible is the perfect match for the unevenness, strangeness, and challenging nature of life itself.

Don't be afraid of the Bible's complexity; rather, understand what it is and what it isn't.

The Bible is a collection of writings meant to help us meet God.

About the Author

Peter Enns is an biblical scholar, theologian, and writer. His books include *Inspiration and Incarnation*, *The Evolution of Adam*, *The Bible Tells Me So*, and *The Sin of Certainty*. He's taught at a variety of distinguished institutions (Westminster, Princeton, Harvard, and Fuller, to name a few). At this writing,

he serves on the faculty of Eastern University.

Grounded by the stories of five conservative Christian families, the film explores how the religious right has used its interpretation of the Bible to support its agenda of stigmatizing the gay community and eroding the separation between church and state. Rating: PG-13. Progressive clergy provide enough historical context to neutralize the handful of Bible verses prohibiting homosexual acts, but Karlslake never confronts the broader issues of sexuality and procreation that bedevil even moderate Christians. Jan 11, 2008 | Full Review | J. R. Jones. [Outro] Oh, the Bible says have faith, hope and charity That's the way to live successfully How do I know, (oh, how does he know) How do I know, (oh, how does he know) The Bible tells me so. More on Genius. "The Bible Tells Me So" Track Info. Release Date January 1, 1955. Home. In the 263 page book titled "The Bible Tells Me So.", The author, Peter Enns, attempts to help readers understand just what the Bible is intended to be and why he feels that way. Many Christians are under the impression that the Bible is a manual that is supposed to be filled with step-by-step instructions on how to be a "good Christian" and are extremely disappointed when the Bible falls short of these expectations. The Bible Tells me So aims to convince Christians that the Bible is a story to help guide a spiritual journey, not a rulebook and that it is okay to question what is within scri

Grounded by the stories of five conservative Christian families, the film explores how the religious right has used its interpretation of the Bible to support its agenda of stigmatizing the gay community and eroding the separation between church and state. Rating: PG-13. Progressive clergy provide enough historical context to neutralize the handful of Bible verses prohibiting homosexual acts, but Karlslake never confronts the broader issues of sexuality and procreation that bedevil even moderate Christians. Jan 11, 2008 | Full Review | J. R. Jones. Related Items. Search for "For the Bible Tells Me So" on Amazon.com. Share this Rating. Title: For the Bible Tells Me So (2007). 7,8/10. Want to share IMDb's rating on your own site? The stories told by these nine parents and four adult children alternate with talking heads - Protestant and Jewish theologians - and with film clips of fundamentalist preachers and pundits and news clips of people in the street. They discuss scripture and biblical scholarship. A thesis of the film is that much of Christianity's homophobia represents a misreading of scripture, a denial of science, and an embrace of quack psychology.