

Do We Need a PhD to Understand the Bible? | with Dr. John Ferrer

(February 2, 2023)

Ladies and gentlemen, do you need a PhD in ancient Near East culture to understand what the book of Genesis really means? Because some people have written me after the interview we had with Dr. John Walton that, wow, a lot of what Walton said requires some thought and some knowledge beyond just basic grammar to understand what's going on in Genesis. So, if we have to have a PhD in ancient Near East culture to understand Genesis, most people in the world can't understand Genesis, so what good is it? Would God do that? Would God make the revelation so complicated that the average person couldn't understand it?

Now, we covered some of this last week when we talked about, should you take the Bible literally? Today, I want to continue that discussion and drill down a little bit further into how we should interpret the Bible broadly. And then toward the second half of the program, we're going to really drill down on Genesis and we're going to bring Dr. John Ferrer on at that point. As you know, he is now a speaker here at CrossExamined and he's been on this program before. We're going to talk a little bit more about how to interpret Genesis itself.

But we're going to start more broadly right now. And I guess the first question that I want to ask you is: Does all truth that we know come from the Bible? And of course, some Christians seem to misunderstand sola scriptura. They seem to think that we get all our truth from the Bible. Now that would be impossible. You can't get all your truths from the Bible. Why? Well, the Bible presupposes you know certain things in order to understand what the Bible means. And I'll get to that here in a minute.

But before there was any Bible, people certainly knew things, right. I mean, you know things through your senses. You know things that are written on your heart, like the moral law. Some things are self-evident. The laws of logic, they're self-evident to you as well. You know many things just by observation through your senses. You know things from memory, stuff you knew in the past that you retain. So, there are many ways to know things. You don't get all of your truth from the Bible. The Bible even teaches this.



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In fact, let's point out that God has written two books. He's written the Bible and what we call the book of nature. The book of nature, actually, you need to know before you can understand the Bible or any other written communication. Without natural revelation - this is sometimes called general revelation or the book of nature - without natural revelation, apologetics and hermeneutics would be impossible. What's hermeneutics? That's how we interpret the text. If you didn't have principles that you knew before you came to a text, principles that would help you interpret the text, you could never understand what the text meant. And by the way, the Bible even teaches this. Natural revelation includes things like creation.

If you read Psalm 19, "The heavens declare the glory of God", you don't need a Bible to know there's a creator out there. Romans 1, same thing. Paul says in Romans 1 that God's invisible qualities are clearly seen through what has been made so that we are without excuse. When you see a creation, you know there must be a Creator. In other words, God's creation is all around us. We're part of God's creation. In fact, when people ask you how do you know that God exists? As we've said before, you should say I know God by His effects. If there's a creation that's in effect, we're reasoning back to a cause, a creator. If there's design that's in effect, we're reasoning back to a cause, a designer. If there's a moral law written on our hearts, that's the effect, we're reasoning back to a cause, a moral law giver.

If we have the capacity to reason, to know things outside of our skulls, there are these laws of logic and we have the ability to use these laws of logic, and use our senses, to discover truths outside of our skulls. If that's an effect, and it is, we have to reason back to a cause for that, a mind. If a man actually predicted and accomplished his own resurrection from the dead, that's the effect. We reason back to a cause. Who could cause a man to resurrect from the dead and actually know the future that he would be a being like God? So, we're always reasoning from effect to cause.

And that's, of course what scientists do. Scientists are trying to discover what particular causes have caused the effects we observe in the universe. So, the Bible teaches there's a creation, the Bible teaches we have conscience, that's Romans 2. The Gentiles have the law written on their hearts, that's an effect, we're reasoning back to a cause, a moral law giver. If we have a moral law written on our hearts, the effect, there must be a moral lawgiver. I just mentioned our ability to reason. Isaiah talks about the Lord saying, Come let us reason together. Paul goes on

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Mars Hill and reasons with people in Acts chapter 17. He doesn't even quote the Bible; he quotes Greek philosophers to try and get people to realize there is a God it's not the God that lives in temples built by human hands.

Ironic, or actually, a bit bold for Paul to say that when he's standing on Mars Hill in Athens because behind him is the Parthenon, the temple built to the goddess Athena, where we get the name Athens for the city. It's built to her behind him, and he said, Look, God doesn't dwell in buildings like you built behind me here, okay. He's trying to use reason to show that God exists. He's not necessarily using the scriptures there. And the fact there's order and design in the universe, you get that from Romans 1, and also Psalms 8. So, the Bible is teaching there are truths outside the Bible that you know before you even read the Bible.

Now, a few years ago, we did a, a series on our TV show. And by the way, our TV show is on the NRB network. If you have Direct TV, it's on channel 378, Wednesday nights at 9:00pm Eastern. If you don't have Direct TV, it's on Roku. Look for NRB TV. And if you don't have Direct TV, And you Don't have Roku, it's on this new technology sweeping the world right now. I Don't know if you're heard of it. It's called the internet. Yeah, the program is broadcast live on our website. Just go to CrossExamined.org, click on TV, and it'll take you to a link where you can see the program.

Anyway, we did a 12-part series on How to Interpret Your Bible. I don't have time to cover all that, obviously. That was 12 hours of teaching. You can take it in our online courses. But I just want to summarize one of the pieces of teaching we had in that series of programs and that is that there are certain things you need to know before you come to the text. I mentioned several of them, but one way of remembering this is the acronym COLUMNS. Picture that there are columns holding up the Bible, that's the visual we use in the teaching. There are columns holding up the Bible and each one of these letters are a piece of knowledge or an assumption you make that you need to have before you can actually understand what the Bible says or means.

So, let me go through them very quickly because we don't have time to dwell on them. The C stands for creation. The universe is an effect that has a cause. You have to know that. In fact, when you read Genesis 1:1 it says, "In the beginning God created the heavens in the earth".

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That presupposes cause and effect. It presupposes the universe had to have a cause. And that's what that's amplifying there, Genesis 1:1. The O stands for order. There's order and structure to reality. You have to know that before you come to the text. The L stands for logic. It could also stand for Language. You can't understand the Bible unless you know logic and language. It presupposes you know those things as you try and read the text.

The U stands for uniformity, which says cause and effect in history is uniform. That causes in the past were like those in the present. If something today requires a cause, we have to assume, by the principle of uniformity, that similar things in the past would also require a cause. If things in the past could pop into existence out of nothing, whereas today they couldn't, then we couldn't actually get at the past and understand things about the past. We have to assume the principle of uniformity. Now there's a few more in this columns acronym that I'll get you right after the break.

You're listening to I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist with me, Frank Turek, on the American Family Radio Network. 180 stations across the country. It's also a podcast called I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist. So, if you want to listen to this again, if you're listening on radio, just look for the podcast on our website CrossExamined.org. We're back in two minutes.

When people ask you, how do you know that God exists, you should say, I know God by His effects. And three of the greatest effects that have been discovered over about the past century or so, maybe a little bit less than that, are the fact that the universe was created, that it's fine-tuned, and that biological life shows the hallmark of intelligence. And there's no better person to unpack that for you than Steven C. Meyer. He's doing that in a brand new course based on his new book called Return of the God Hypothesis. That class started February 1, but the first zoom isn't until next week, so if you want to be a part of that, you'd better sign up this week, because it's going to close next week. We're about out of room anyway. Go to CrossExamined.org, click on online courses, you'll see it there. You'll be on Zoom live, if you take the premium version with Stephen, on at least I think six occasions.

And then if you have a fifth to eighth graders, and you want to teach them the principles of Christianity or why Christianity is true, you need to enroll them in Let's Get Real. It starts

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February 6 with the great Shanda Fulbright. I will also assist Shanda in one of the Zooms for that class. It's basically I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist for fifth to eighth graders. So, check all that out on our website CrossExamined.org. Click on online courses and you'll see it there.

Now, today we're continuing our discussion from last week when we were talking about, should we take the Bible literally? Now we're backing up a little bit and we're looking at the Bible as a whole. But in the next segment, we're going to drill down on Genesis 1, and ask: Do you need a PhD in ancient Near East culture to actually understand what Genesis 1 means?

All right, let's go back to natural revelation. We were talking about it before the break. We talked about the C standing for creation, the O standing for order, the L standing for language and logic, the U standing for the principle of uniformity, that causes in the past are like causes in the present. We have to assume that, otherwise we'd never get out of the past. The M stands for morality. Do you know that right and wrong exists outside of the Bible teaching you right and wrong? The Bible actually teaches, as we mentioned earlier, that you know basic right and wrong. It's written on your hearts. In fact, throughout the Old Testament, it's assumed, you know, for example, that gratitude is a good thing. Nowhere does it say in the Old Testament, you ought to be grateful. But repeatedly, God says to the Israelites, don't forget I'm the one that took you out of Egypt. I'm the one that got you out of slavery, as if you want to be grateful for that. So, it's assumed you know certain things about morality even before you read the Bible.

N stands for nature. You have to know that things have natures, that there's a human nature, there's a dog nature, there's a cat nature, there's a monkey nature, there's all these different natures out there. There's a difference between human beings and non-human beings. There's a difference between fish and mammals. You know certain things about nature, and natures, in order to know what the Bible means. You know when God says that He created all the land animals, we have to know what a land animal is, in order to know what he means by that, right. So, it presupposes the Bible does, it presupposes, you know certain natures. And the S in COLUMNS stands for senses. That our senses tell us the truth about the real world. Without that you couldn't understand, or even read the Bible, if you didn't have the ability through your senses to comprehend what the Bible is saying.

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So, I say all that to point out that, although we may take these things for granted, we never really think about it this way unless we're enrolled in a seminary and we take what is known as prolegomena. That's what you need to know before you can even study the Bible. I say all this to point out there may be some things here in COLUMNS that will get you to realize there is a right way to interpret the Bible and a wrong way to interpret the Bible. And we have to be clear on that. In fact, let's just ask the question: Where do you find the principles for interpreting the Bible? You don't find them in the Bible. If you found them in the Bible, you wouldn't be able to get them out without having them before you looked at the Bible, right. These principles come from natural revelation. These principles come from what we just mentioned a minute ago, COLUMNS. And so, we have to come to the Bible with this amount of knowledge, or these areas of knowledge.

Now, I think before we look at the Bible, we have to realize - I've said this many times before but let me reiterate it here - there are no verses in the Bible. There are no verses in the Bible. The chapter and verse divisions were put in about 500 years ago to help us navigate the text, which is important, right. Because it'd be really difficult to find your way around if there weren't numbers in your Bible. I mean, imagine if there were no numbers in your Bible and you went to church one Sunday and the pastor didn't have numbers in his Bible and he simply opened the Bible and said, Let's go about two thirds of the way in. Let's see if we can find the same spot. You go, that wouldn't work pastor. You need numbers.

The problem is, we tend to think if it's got a number in front of it, we can take it out and make it say whatever we want. You can't do that. You've got to read around the passage to see what's going on. You've got to know the context. This is why, as I've said many times before, Jeremiah 29:11 is not a promise to 21st century Americans. Oh, the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you, all that. That was a promise to people that lived 2600 years ago in Babylon after the exile. And yet, people will stitch that into pillows, they'll put it on posters, they'll put it on coffee cups, on birthday cards, as if it's a promise to 21st century Americans. It does show you that God is faithful to his people. It does show you something about the character of God. But it's not a promise to 21st century Christians.

I always ask people who quote Jeremiah 29:11, as if it's somehow a promise to them, Why don't you quote Jeremiah 44:11? Because in Jeremiah 44:11, God tells the people who went to

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Egypt during the exile what their fate would be because God said, Don't go to Egypt. So, in Jeremiah 44:11, here's what he says to the people that went to Egypt. "I will destroy you and all Judah". You don't see that stitched into a pillow. You don't see that on a birthday card. Happy birthday, I will destroy you and all Judah. Thanks so much, grandma. That was so sweet. No, you don't see That. Why? Because we selectively pick out verses that we like and we ignore others because we don't know the context. So, we have to be sure that we read around the passage to figure out what's going on.

Secondly, when it comes to looking at the Bible, realize there's only one meaning but many applications. There's one meaning. If you're in a Bible study and someone says to you, Hey, Bill, or Mary, what does this verse mean to you?, you want to say, It doesn't matter what it means to me, it matters what it meant to Paul, or to Jesus, or to Luke, or to Moses, or whoever. Because the meaning is in the text. The meaning is not in you, the meaning is in the text. Now, there may be many applications. You know, if a passage says, love your wife, well, that may mean something slightly different to me than it might mean to you, dependent upon the temperament or the likes of my wife. Right? And you might have a wife that has a different temperament or different likes, so the meaning is the same, but the application is different. Okay.

Also, a biblical passage can't mean now what it didn't mean, then. Let me say that again. A biblical passage can't mean now what it didn't mean, then. In other words, we have to go back to the time at which the passage was written to understand the intent of the passage. Now, sometimes there's a dual application of a prophecy where there's a short term application and a long term application, but the meaning is still the same. And it's the meaning from the past, not the meaning that we want to apply to ourselves that wasn't intended to apply to ourselves with this new kind of interpretation. The meaning it meant in the past is what it means to us today. And you can't apply a passage correctly until you know what it really means. So, what is the way we can discover what a passage means?

And right after the break, we'll get into Genesis 1. Well, we have an acronym... I just like acronyms because it helps you remember how to do this without consulting a book, or without having to go, what was that principle again? So, the acronym we've developed, and it's in the How to Interpret Your Bible course, is called STOP. Whenever you come to a passage, you have

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to stop and figure out at least four things if you want to discover what the passage really means and then how to apply it to yourself. The S stands for the situation, the T stands for the type of literature, the O stands for the object of the passage, and the P stands for, is this passage prescriptive or descriptive?

Let's just stop for a second and talk about the situation. In fact, let's talk about Genesis 1. What is the situation when Genesis 1 is being written? Well, people have just left the slavery in Egypt, they've been through the Exodus, they're about to come into the promised land. And Moses writes the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, Genesis all the way to Deuteronomy. That's the situation. These people have been slaves and they're about to come into the promised land. And Moses writes the first five books. The T stands for the type of literature. Well, Genesis is as historical book, but it does have some poetic elements to it, so not everything is expressed in a wooden literal way. So, that's the type of literature And obviously, You're going to interpret different types of literature differently, You're not going to interpret poetry the same way you would law, or parable, or narrative, or apocalyptic literature. That's why the type is important.

The O stands for, who is the object of the passage? The objects of the passage are the ancient Israelites from 3500 years ago. The object of the passage is not us. I mean, in a certain sense, Genesis is written is written for us, but not to us. It was written for us so we could understand how God revealed Himself to the Israelites 3500 years ago and gave them certain laws, and also obviously recanted their history so we could know something about God and the history of Israel. And there are commands in there that may apply to us now. That's a whole other subject we'll have to table for now. But not all of them do. Some of them are just applying to ancient Israel. So, we've got to know who the object of the passage is. Just like in Jeremiah 29:11, the object of the passage is the exiles that went to Babylon, the object of the passage is not us.

And then the P stands for, is this a prescription or a description? And in this case, it's a description. Genesis is a description of what God did. There are passages that are prescriptive, like for example, do not murder. But Genesis 1 is a description of what happened. So, if we go through the STOP acronym, we can get a good idea of what's going on, and therefore then have a better chance of interpreting and then applying the passage properly. So, we're gonna do that right after the break. I'm gonna bring Dr. John Ferrer on so don't go anywhere. We're back in

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two minutes. You're listening to I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist with me, Frank Turek. See you in a couple.

February 17th and 18th I'm going to be with the Discovery Institute down in Dallas. The Discovery Institute puts on a conference in Dallas, Texas. It's at Dallas Baptist University. Go to our website CrossExamined.org and click on Events. You'll see the Frank Turek calendar. I'll be down there with Stephen Meyer, and Nancy Pearcey, and a bunch of other folks from the Discovery Institute. That is going to be a wonderful event because the folks at the Discovery Institute just have so many great speakers and so many great insights on intelligent design. And of course, Nancy Pearcey has the great book, *Love Thy Body*, which is such an important topic right now. So, you want to be a part of that if you're anywhere near Dallas.

Okay, back to my friend and colleague, Dr. John Ferrer. He has been on the show before. He just joined us the beginning of the New Year. Dr. John has PhD in Ethics from Southwestern. Is that right, John? Is it Southwestern?

John:

Yeah, Southwestern Seminary, philosophy of religion with a minor in ethics?

Frank:

Actually, you major in ethics, man. You better. Anyway...

John:

I did my dissertation on body ethics, speaking of Nancy Pearcey, and that's one of those sources I was combing through for my work.

Frank:

Before you went to Southwestern, you actually went to SES, Southern Evangelical Seminary. You were working on your masters while I was working on my DMin there, And then you went off to get your PhD at Southwestern. And last time you were on we talked about some ethical issues, but today, I want to have you on because you are skilled in this area on Bible interpretation. And as a result of the show we had with Dr. John Walton a couple of weeks ago, people have emailed me and said, Oh, man, do you have to have a PhD in ancient Near East

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culture to understand Genesis? If so, who could understand it? Just a few people in the world. I mean, why would God make it so complicated? Well, John, how do you respond?

John:

Well, it certainly helps to have a PhD in Ancient Near Eastern culture, but it's not necessary. The way the Bible is written, it is accessible to even the nubious noob that comes to the Bible, who's never read a page of Scripture, never heard anything about God before. And they can still access it. And I'm not even counting the enlightenment brought on by the Holy Spirit, who shows you the relevance and the significance of it in one's life. But the newest eyes can still get something out of it.

And yet, scripture is also written in such a way that the oldest eyes looking at it, the most experienced seasoned Bible scholars, can still find more and more to study, and to interrogate, and to question, and to understand. And this ocean, you might think of it sort of like the shallow end of the deep end of a pool. The Bible has material that you don't need to be very deep or very seasoned to be able to get something out of it, to enjoy that time at the pool, so to speak. But it also has depths that are so deep that you could spend your lifetime plumbing the depths for jewels and still be coming up for more.

Frank:

Let's go a book later than Genesis. Let's go to Exodus to illustrate this principle. This section of scripture is not quite as controversial as Genesis 1, but I think it illustrates a principle that we can apply to Genesis 1. John, when you read the book of Exodus, and you read that the Israelites were to be taken out of Egypt by Moses, and Moses ultimately gets Pharaoh to acquiesce and to let my people go - Charlton Heston finally got Euel Brenner to finally say, Let my people go. And he did it through a series of plagues. God brought plagues on them.

Now, at a surface level, obviously, we can understand that we don't have to know anything about Egyptian culture, we don't have to worry anything about Ancient Near East culture, we don't have to anything about any of that to know, okay, plagues are a bad thing. People are not going to want to put up with it, they'll eventually give in. And that's what Pharaoh did. But there's a lot more to this than just the plagues. If you know, the Egyptian culture, what do you know about these plagues, John?

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John:

Well, regarding those plagues, it's more or less a polemic against the Egyptian gods. But as we were just saying, you can get something out of it without knowing all that historical cultural context. You don't necessarily have to have profound understanding. And frankly, I think it's unnecessarily discouraging to people to suggest you need all of that to really appreciate what's going on there. What's happening, even at a surface level for a new believer is you're seeing God demonstrating his character in the saving of his people to fulfill promises he's made long ago. And that's the same God still speaking the same kind of story coming back up, and up again, throughout the course of biblical history, in church history, even to today.

And you don't necessarily have to have that ancient Near Eastern background or understanding to appreciate the personal revelation that God is giving of his person, that this is a real being, an individual God who communicates on a personal level, that we can hear and understand what he's communicating. I would say, scripture has material on the top shelf, that you would have to be a scholar to be able to access; the biblical languages, understanding the grammar and the syntax, but it also has material on the bottom shelf that even kids can access and get everything in between. So, that story in Exodus where Moses throws down his staff and it turns into a snake, as you've pointed out before, it doesn't just turn into a snake, it eats the other snakes.

Frank:

Yeah, the snake of the Egyptian magicians. Why is that a polemic against Egypt?

John:

That would be something like if Russia and the United States were at war and we saw an eagle fly in and terrify and drive away a whole bunch of bears. Well, eagle against the bear, that would be pretty cool. I'd want to watch that on YouTube. I mean, that's interesting on a surface level, but it has layers of significance that you don't necessarily need to understand to appreciate at a surface level. But if you can't understand it, the richness, the depth of Scripture just proves that much more, I dare say miraculous, because it speaks of God's divine revelation, which itself is a miracle.

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Frank:

Because the cobra was the symbol of Egypt. If you think about the sarcophagus of King Tut, what does he have on the top of his head? He's got this cobra, right. And that's supposed to be the symbol of Egypt. Well, Moses comes along, throws his staff down, it turns into a snake and eats the snake of the magician. That is basically saying, my God is bigger than your God. My God can beat up your God. And the same thing is done through the plagues. John, once you understand who the Egyptians worshipped, why are the plagues something beyond just these are bad things?

John:

Well, you see in the different plagues a witness to the different kinds of deities that they had in their Egyptian pantheon. You have gods over light and darkness, you have gods over the Nile. The Nile was huge. That civilization was built around the Nile. So, you had several references to the Nile in the course of the plagues. And each time one of those plagues comes up, you see God showing that all of these supposed deities that you worship, I'm bigger than them. I'm bigger than that. And it could be argued, and I think this is fair, given the biblical teaching about angels and demons, that they were worshipping demonic characters, or at least, having been deceived by demons into thinking that these characters exist.

And God's just having to prove that all of these different polytheisms, whether we're talking ancient Mesopotamian polytheism that is potentially alluded to in the Genesis creation story, all the way to Exodus, the Pantheon that is the Egyptian gods, and Gods saying, I'm bigger than that, too. And his people are effectively being weaned and nurtured and grown to a point where they're ready to really grapple with monotheism, that ultimately, there's only one God. There can be other angels and demons, but there's only one God and everyone else claiming to be God, they can't fill those shoes.

Frank:

So, ladies and gentlemen, when you're reading Exodus, you're reading about these plagues, and you're going, okay, those are bad things. I understand why Pharaoh eventually called uncle. But when you know, something about the gods the Egyptians worshipped, when they worship the Nile and then God turns the Nile to blood, or they worship the sun and God blocks the sun out, or they had deities that had frog heads on it and suddenly God sent them all sorts of frogs, you

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get the idea that, okay, this is richer than just what you see on that surface here. There's a lot more to it. That's why John just said, the cookies are on the bottom shelf. You know what happened historically. But the cookies are also on the top shelf. And if you're a scholar, and you want to make yourself a scholar by studying this stuff, you can go a lot deeper.

You know, there's one other thing here that a lot of people don't recognize when you're just looking at the text, and that is this concept of hardening the heart. God hardened Pharaoh's heart, right. And people go, why would God do that? Well, first of all, Pharaoh hardened his heart first and then God just completed the process. And Paul even says, God is going to do that to us in Romans 1. That if you give up, if you continue to suppress the truth about God, God's ultimately going to give you up to your own desire and he's going to let you go your own way. That's kind of a hardening in itself.

But the hardening of the heart, friends, is actually something that is slamming the afterlife views of Egypt. Because when the Pharaoh died, his heart would be weighed on a scale against a feather. And if his heart weighed more than a feather, he wouldn't get into the afterlife. If it weighed less, he would. So, what God is saying here, through Moses in Exodus, is that Pharaohs a bad guy. His heart is hard, which means it's going to outweigh the feather, which means he's not going to make it in the afterlife.

Now, you don't need to know this in order to get the gist of what Moses is saying, but it enhances it when you know the history. Now, what about Genesis one? We're going to talk about it right after the break. Don't go anywhere. You're listening to I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist with Frank Turek and John Ferrer. Back in two minutes.

Genesis 1: 1-5: "1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. 3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night."

Now, the question we're trying to answer here is, how much of the ancient Near East culture do you need to know in order to properly interpret Genesis? And so far, our answer is, you don't

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really need to know any of it to get the gist. But if you want to go a lot deeper - and you'd imagine if an infinite God were to give us a revelation, it would be a little bit deeper than just the surface - it would be helpful to know some of the culture surrounding it. Now, John and I both learned from a man by the name of Tom Howe, who teaches at Southern Evangelical Seminary. By the way, they have a scholarship. If you go to SES.edu/Frank, you can get half off your tuition. Go check it out.

Tom Howe used to say, first of all, you got to figure out what the text says, because so often, we just gloss over it like, oh, yeah, we know what it says. Come on. No, read it. What strikes you about the first couple of verses of Genesis?

John:

It's very fascinating, because with you, I'm working on the archaeology slides for this big lesson that you're doing. But in some ways, it's a trans-cultural type of claim that they're making there. It says, in the beginning. The beginning of what? It doesn't say in the beginning of our culture, in the beginning of our civilization, it's just saying, the beginning. What beginning? Well, THE beginning. There wasn't a before, as far as all of recorded history is concerned, and that's a really fascinating something. At some level, I don't know that you have to have some cultural context to understand verse one.

Now pretty quickly, it starts to go into things that do start to bear upon culture and how much of it you understand. And you'll be able to get more out of it, the more familiar you are with that culture. But I think it's really important to point out that there is - even though culture informs the text, the background knowledge informs what we're getting out of it and can help expose different levels of depth - the culture doesn't limit the text, in the sense that surprising things can still be said that you wouldn't have predicted given that culture. I could walk into a women's conference and say something that reflects a men's conference next door and it doesn't reflect a women's conference. Would you have predicted that, given the context that I'm among a lot of women? Well, no. But you can have surprising things that aren't what you would expect given that context. In fact, context matters, but it's not everything.

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Frank:

In fact, in that culture - and you just mentioned this archaeological course that we're developing right now for our TV program. We're calling it Digging up the Bible: The Top Archaeological Discoveries. And we've just looked at, as we recorded the sessions - we just recorded the first one the other night, and this coming Monday night, the sixth of February at 7:30pm - if you go to our YouTube channel you can see us doing the second lesson in the archaeology. Last time we did the ancient creation stories from Mesopotamia, basically in Egypt. And one thing about those Mesopotamian and Egyptian creation stories, is that they were polytheistic, whereas Genesis is monotheistic.

And a couple of other differences that we should point out is that in the Egyptian Mesopotamian accounts, the gods somehow just spontaneously generate, or they're not explained as to why they're there, whereas in Genesis, God is self-existing. So, there are differences between what was going on culturally then, and the context in which Genesis is written. Is it possible that Genesis 1 is at least partially a polemic against these other ancient accounts?

John:

I think that's absolutely a viable interpretation of what's going on there in Genesis 1 and the early parts of chapter 2. Because when you compare the creation accounts from Mesopotamia, Babylon, Egypt, to those of Genesis, you see exactly what you would expect if there was a literal creation event. And they're trying to access it through the goggles, through the filters that are their culture's, and they're reflecting the bias, they're reflecting the theological expectations, and that does come across in their stories. But it's not identical and it's not entirely different either. They overlap, which is what you would expect when you have multiple witnesses effectively, or in this case, multiple traditions that trace back to an actual event. And when there's reporting on how these events play out, you see the Genesis account, it's clearly not borrowed. It's clearly not just repeating what those guys said, because it's a monotheism, which was very radical and would have been considered confrontational to all of these different polytheisms that were the norm there. And their conception of the gods was usually these petty anthropomorphized kind of, like sibling rivalry.

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Frank:

Superheroes. They're fighting one another. Yeah.

John:

Superheroes. And they're always angry, and upset, and petty, and trivial. But here we've got a God who is at peace with himself and has no needs to be met in creation and has no conflict internally. That's a God who's above all of all of this, all of the different mess. And that's a challenge. That's saying your theology is portraying lesser beings, whereas we've got a God who's above all that. A God who is at the beginning of all beginnings, whereas these other creation accounts are talking largely about what looks like an ex materia creation, ordering from prior materials. We've got an account that says, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. He didn't just organize civilization post flood, he's creating everything prior to the flood too. And that's getting pre-historic for the Mesopotamian and Egyptian accounts.

Frank:

It's also interesting in the Mesopotamian and Egyptian accounts, which these have been discovered archaeologically, some of them have been discovered into the tombs of the pharaohs, they have man as a slave to serve the gods, where in Genesis man bears God's image and we represent God here on earth, so there's striking differences between the ancient near east and Egyptian creation accounts and the Genesis account. So, what we're saying here, ladies and gentlemen, is that when you read Genesis 1, you can get the basic idea obviously that God is the Creator, he brings order to chaos, he's the true unmoved mover, as Aristotle might say, he's the ultimate being; you get all that from Genesis 1. But if you know also what's going on in the culture at the time when Moses writes this account, you get a lot more depth out of this account.

Just like if you know the culture of Egypt when you read Exodus. Yeah, you know that plagues are bad things and people are going to finally cry uncle if you're throwing up plagues at them, but if you know the Egyptian culture, it's a whole different text in the sense it's so much richer. You go, oh man, I see why he did this plague and that plague, because they're worshipping the Nile, they're worshipping the sun, they're worshipping frogs. You see, it seems like Genesis 1 could be a polemic against the Egyptian and Mesopotamian creation accounts. So, when you

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know the culture, it helps you. So, while we don't agree with everything Dr. Walton says, we do agree it does help you to know the culture. Dr. Walton was not saying the culture determines the truth of the text. He's saying the culture in which the account was written, may help you understand why the account was written the way it was written.

John:

Speaking to what you're talking about, it reminds me of doing some travel. I've traveled a little bit, usually for mission trips. and occasionally I'll have the luxury to travel with someone who is a history major and they're a history buff. And I want to go see some of the sights. And I could see it and say, wow, that's beautiful. I can understand why people 1000s of years ago would have stood here and just been in awe at this beautiful site. Oh, these buildings are magnificent. That's really interesting. And I've got a surface level understanding of it because I'm not that kind of history buff. I'm growing, but I'm not there yet.

But when I have that friend who understands the context, understands what's going on there, they can tell me so much more. And then it's like going from two dimensional to three dimensional. Now there's a depth here that the story has gone from a flat piece of paper to this live action reenactment in front of me that I can see, oh, that's where they did this. Walking in Rome and seeing the Sistine Chapel and understanding St. Peter's Basilica and how this came about, and that they were funding St. Peter's Basilica through indulgences. And that just adds a whole different layer to what you're experiencing there.

Frank:

Right, exactly. We're running out of time here. In the mid-week podcast, we're going to deal with the question of, how old is the universe? Because I know everyone wants to know the answer to that question. What's our view on it from Genesis? We'll cover that in the mid-week podcast. In the meantime, you can go back and listen to the John Walton interview and then the show I did last week. It's called, Should We Interpret the Bible Literally. And then next week, in the mid-week podcast, we'll cover a little bit more of this. So, check all that out. And also check out our TV show on Wednesday nights at 9:00pm Eastern. You can see it on our website at CrossExamined.org. Don't forget about Return of the God Hypothesis. Last chance to get in with the great Steven C. Meyer. Go to CrossExamined.org and click on Online Courses. You'll see it there. See you here next week.

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