

The Washington Post

PostEverything

Why doubting the Bible is good for Christians

It lets people ponder their faith without losing it.



By **Jacob Lupfer** March 25

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As a professional observer of American religion, I am fascinated by how people decide which biblical stories must be understood as literal accounts of historical events and which may be interpreted as mythic, metaphorical or exaggerated.

Easter, of course, is the Big Miracle. Though religious belief is difficult to measure empirically, surveys report that between 80 and 95 percent of American Christians believe Jesus *literally* rose from the dead. Christians almost universally believe he performed miracles and that the Bible records God's supernatural interventions in the life of his people.

But plenty of Christians interpret at least some biblical material non-literally. Maybe Jesus did not actually walk on water. Maybe the story of Jonah living in a fish's belly for three days is a myth. Maybe Job was not a historical figure.

Traditionalists typically fear a slippery-slope dynamic: Once you deny the “minor” miracles, you are on the road to rejecting the more theologically consequential ones, namely the Resurrection and the Virgin Birth. And once you reject those, they argue, it’s a hop, skip and jump to atheism. A 1924 fundamentalist cartoon titled “The Descent of the Modernists” says it best. It shows men descending down a staircase from Christianity to atheism. Each step is labeled with a progressively more disastrous heresy: “Man not made in God’s image,” “No virgin birth,” “No resurrection,” and, finally, unbelief.

The slippery slope can unravel a lifetime of faith at a doubter’s first rigorous questioning of doctrines. It can cut many faithful people off from the church as soon as they begin to have any doubts at all. And it can promote an unthinking Biblicism. Once you accept the historicity of the resurrection, you already hold the conditions for believing that Jesus walked on water, that he literally fed 5,000 people with only a few loaves and fishes. And perhaps, when this happens, believers stop thinking critically about the Bible and miss out on a lot of the lessons buried beneath the literal stories.

What strikes me is that, for all my studies and doubts, very few everyday Christians seem to be plagued by the nagging questions that linger so weightily in the dark nights of my soul.

At age 18 or 19, I abandoned my belief in the resurrection as a historical event. This is fairly typical, I suspect, except maybe for the fact that I was majoring in religious studies at a conservative evangelical college.

“If Christ be not risen, your faith is in vain,” my freshman philosophy professor admonished, quoting the King James translation of 1 Corinthians 15:14. Maybe, maybe not, I thought. But I was already certain that the resurrection was a myth. In the course of my academic study of the Bible, I realized that many stories were not literal reports of historical events. If Jonah did not really spend three days in the belly of a fish, I reasoned, then why believe in the virginal conception of Christ or his bodily resurrection?

As I rejected fundamentalism, I retained a key fundamentalist tenet: Either all the Bible is true or none of it is. I chose none.

I expected that a kind of ethical non-theism would illumine the paths to justice, human flourishing and existential contentment that Christianity had for two millennia obfuscated.

I was wrong.

I turned out to be, to borrow novelist Ann Rice's phrase, a Christ-haunted atheist. The longer I did not believe, the more sense theism made to me. Because I had been so formed (intellectually and culturally, if not emotionally) by Christianity, it just seemed sensible to me that God was the source not only of values like freedom and dignity, but also of justice and morality.

But there was still the matter of the resurrection, a thing I did not believe in. Thus I had gone from a revisionist Christian who loved Jesus but doubted God to a rational theist who believed in God but doubted Jesus. Years after dropping out of church, I began having serious concerns about the philosophical and ethical causes and consequences of my apostasy.

While I vacillate along the slippery slope from doubt to believing, I become less insistent on rendering my personal judgments about the historicity of every biblical or saintly miracle. Instead, I think seriously about what it would mean to follow in Christ's footsteps.

I struggle to believe the tomb was empty that first Easter morning. But it is easier for me to believe in, or at least hope for, the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. He may well be the central figure in human history. And besides, legions of people who surpass me in knowledge and wisdom accept Jesus's resurrection as a trustworthy historical fact.

For my part, I usually find popular Christian apologetics to be unpersuasive,

even from the minds of literary geniuses such as C.S. Lewis or scholars like the Anglican N.T. Wright. I would prefer a faith that can withstand the most stringent intellectual scrutiny, even as I am skeptical that such a thing exists.

But I will find my way to some church on Easter morning, less as a journalist or scholar and more as a once-and-maybe-future worshiper. I will find my voice exclaiming, “He is risen indeed. Alleluia!” Will I finally believe? Maybe not, but I will silently concede that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not the craziest thing I ever thought about believing in.

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