

researching two highly important subjects: Covid 19 and global warming. In both areas they are looking for facts. When they reach consensus, these facts become life-saving truths. People, whether they are individuals, religious leaders, politicians who reject life-saving truth can become responsible for deaths, potentially on a huge scale.

Currently, a wave of conspiracy theories is flooding the internet and social media. The theories depend for their survival and appeal on ignorance of science (knowledge). The initial lie that we cannot trust science (knowledge) is often fostered by people who base their ideas on taking every word of the Bible literally. Bible believers, who should be promoting truth, can easily end up promoting lies. Literal lies can lead to literal death. Spiritual lies can lead to spiritual death.

### Conclusion

Believing every word of the Bible appears to be the right foundation for our faith. Is not the Bible the rock on which we should build our lives? Not according to Paul. Here are his relevant words, “**For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ**” (1Cor 3:11). The Scriptures point us not to themselves, but to Jesus.

How can we know which words of the Bible to take literally and which words to take spiritually? Happily, I have the answer: “Ask the Author!” Seriously, that is the right answer and the only answer.

The disciples continually failed to understand the words of Jesus. He knew it and here is his answer to the problem: “**I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth**” (John 16:12,13).

On the road to Emmaus he **opened** the Scriptures to two of his followers ([Luke 24:32](#)). To the natural human mind, the Scriptures are a **closed** book; not a good foundation on which to build a spiritual life!

Only the Holy Spirit can open the closed book for us and teach us how to understand its precious and inspired words. And he will!

# Taking the Bible Literally?

My daughter studied geology and my son biology at university, two of the worst subjects for people who take every word of the Bible literally. They came through college with their faith undamaged.

## **Problems with Science**

We must return to the important subject of science.

Literal interpretation of parts of the Bible, especially the first 12 chapters of Genesis, easily leads to the rejection of science and scientists with potentially disastrous consequences.

Some people say, “If science disagrees with Bible, then science is wrong”. What they are really saying is, “If facts disagree with the way I interpret the Bible, then the facts are wrong”.

The English word science comes from the Latin word *scientia*, which simply means *knowledge*. Science is knowledge of facts - not theories or opinions but solid, proven facts. The world is round; it rotates on its axis and it travels round the sun. These are not theories, but facts that are easy to prove. The world and the sun and the universe are all much more than 6 thousand years old; far more even than 6 million years old. That is not a theory but a fact. It is a fact because several different branches of science (knowledge) and methods of measuring time all point to the same conclusion.

Things that were totally unimaginable 200 years ago - television, telephone, internet, air travel, space travel, modern medicine - are now part of everyday life. These are all built on the three main branches of science (knowledge): physics, chemistry and biology. The extraordinary success of all this modern technology proves that the underlying science (knowledge) is correct. Sat navs base their calculations on trigonometry modified by Einstein’s theory of relativity; and they work! That proves that Einstein’s theory is correct.

People who dismiss science (knowledge) and scientists, because they clash with literal interpretations of the Bible, are walking on very dangerous ground. They are rejecting truth. Sooner or later, rejecting truth leads to believing lies.

Scientists, often among those with some of the best brains in their countries, have recently been spending large amounts of time and money in

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Will there be exactly 144,000 standing on Mount Zion? 12,000 Jewish people miraculously re-assembled from each of the 12 tribes of Israel? Will the 10 lost tribes of Israel finally be found? I believe it is much better to look for the spiritual meaning of Mount Zion and the number 144,000.

I have expanded this subject in [666 and 888](#).

Common teachings on 7 years of Tribulation followed by 1000 years of the millennial reign of Jesus lean heavily on literal interpretations of numeric periods in the book of Revelation. In the past a few predictions have been right, and many have been wrong. We need to exercise caution.

## **More Problems of Literal Interpretations**

I want now to consider further problems of taking every word of Scripture literally.

### **Problems with Personal Credibility**

To the vast majority of people, anyone who believes the universe was created 6000 years ago is living on another planet (maybe even literally!). If you were to tell any of your friends who had not read the Bible that you believed that a family of 8 humans and pairs of all the animals, birds and insects in the world all boarded a large boat; they then lived, ate, exercised and slept together in harmony for a year on this boat (with few if any toilet facilities); and thus they became the only survivors of a global catastrophe; your friends would quickly conclude that you had taken leave of your senses. Your credibility would fall through the floor. They would not want to waste their time listening to anything else you said you believed.

### **Problems with Personal faith**

Some young people who have been brought up on “creationist” teaching have serious crises when they go to college. They hear scientific teaching on evolution and the age of the earth and other matters and can easily lose their faith. If Jesus is the rock and foundation on which their faith is built, they have no problems. If literal belief in the Bible is their rock and foundation, they are in serious danger. If they lose their faith, science of course will get the blame, rather than the teaching they received in their church.

## **Introduction**

Should we understand every word of the Bible literally? Did God create the universe in 6 literal days? Did Noah’s flood cover the whole earth and destroy all living beings except those in the ark? Did all inhabitants of the earth speak the same language until the Tower of Babel?

Should we take all the words of Jesus literally? Should we eat his flesh and drink his blood literally? Will he come again literally?

Should we take the prophecies of the book of Revelation literally? Will literal stars fall from the skies? Will a third of the earth be burnt up? Will 144,000 people stand on Mount Zion? Will the number 666 be written physically on people’s foreheads?

In this writing I will look for answers to some of these questions.

## **Noah’s Flood**

[Chapters 6 to 8](#) of the book of Genesis tell us the story of Noah’s flood. According to the story, Noah and the 7 other members of his family and a huge number of animals and birds lived together on a large boat and were the only survivors of a flood that covered the whole earth.

Can we treat this story as literal historical fact and believe that everything took place exactly as recorded in Scripture, or must we look for another explanation? We will look at some major problems of taking this story literally.

How did Noah and his family get all the animals into the ark? Did two polar bears swim from the Arctic and back? Did two yaks do the round trip from Tibet - enduring burning desert heats on the way? Did two kangaroos make it all the way from Australia and back again - by island hopping? And what about the kiwis? Did all these animals, birds and insects miraculously undertake months’ long journeys and arrive at the right place just in time for the flood?

What about all the animals that are common in other parts of the world, but do not live in the Middle East? What about elephants, giraffes, hippopotamuses, rhinoceroses, tigers, monkeys and many others? None of these are mentioned anywhere in the Bible. Were all these animals

miraculously guided to set off on journeys of hundreds or thousands of miles and did they arrive just in time to board the ark before the rain began to fall?

According to the Genesis account, Noah and his family and the animals spent about a year in the ark. Estimates for the number of animals vary from 2,000 to 35,000. God told Noah to provide food for them all ([Gen 6:21](#)). How did Noah and his family collect and store enough food even to feed 2000 animals for a year? That would include a year's supply of meat for the lions, tigers and leopards. How did they catch it, store it and keep it fresh? Truly a mammoth task!

Did all these animals, birds, reptiles and insects all live together with Noah and his family on the ark for a whole year? Were the lions, tigers and leopards not tempted beyond endurance by the delicious smell of sheep, goats, cattle and deer? Or were they all locked up safely in cages for the whole period? Without any exercise? And were there no problems with the reptiles, snakes and crocodiles? Only an unbelievable series of daily miracles could have kept this vast menagerie together in peace and harmony and without bloodshed and death.

Is it possible that all the earth's mountains were covered to a depth of more than 20 feet? If so, where did all that water come from and where did it go to? And where is the geological evidence of such a massive global event that occurred so recently?

Some people suggest that the flood was only local and did not cover the whole earth. That would solve or at least simplify some of the problems; but what, we must ask, would be the point of gathering all the animals on board the ark if there were thousands more of each species just a few hundred miles away in Asia and Africa?

Look also at Gen 6:6,7: "And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them'." This language could only describe a global flood and not one that was purely local.

The website [Problems with a Global Flood](#) gives a much longer and more detailed list of the many difficulties of taking the Genesis account literally.

of humans that had died, could not be thrown into a literal, physical lake of fire and sulphur.

These, and many more statements and pictures in the book of Revelation, cannot be taken literally. The problem is with statements which can be taken either literally or spiritually. These include many statements about numbers:

- "you will have affliction for 10 days" (Rev 2:10).
- The foreigners (non-Jews) will trample the holy city for 42 months ([Rev 11:2](#)).
- 144,000 will stand on Mount Zion ([Rev 14:1](#)) (Space permitting!).
- Satan will be bound for 1,000 years ([Rev 20:2](#)).
- "His number is 666" ([Rev 13:18](#)). The best known of all!

Many books have been written and websites created about future fulfilment of prophecy. They base much of their teachings on the book of Revelation. Some predict 7 years of tribulation followed by 1000 years of the millennial kingdom. Particularly common is the teaching that no one who does not receive the mark of the beast will be able to buy or sell.

Let's think about the number 666 which we find in the following passage: "Also it (the beast) causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666" (Rev 13:16-18). People commonly interpret these words to mean a literal mark, probably electronic, without which people will not be able to buy or sell.

However, we must look at the words which immediately follow: "Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads" (Rev 14:1). Here, the name of Jesus (which has a numeric value of 888) is written on foreheads, but no one suggests it will be done electronically. I suggest that the real meaning of having the name of Jesus written on the forehead is having the mind of Christ; the real meaning of having 666 written on the forehead is having the mind of the beast.

Allow me to share my own experience. In my younger days I moved in circles that believed in the imminent return of Jesus. In 1968, I set off for Nepal to serve the Lord, and, as my plane flew out across the English Channel, I looked back for the last time at the White Cliffs of Dover. Five years later, I returned to England with a wife, two small children and two suitcases and no savings and no job training. God was gracious and met all our needs and our children did not suffer; but I would not recommend the same course of action to others.

I've examined this subject further in [The Coming of the Lord](#).

## The Book of Revelation

We began with the book of Genesis and must now turn to the book of Revelation. Should we take it all literally?

The book of Revelation contains a series of visions which are rich in symbolism. Very obviously, many features of these visions cannot be taken literally. Here are just a few:

- “The stars of the sky fell to the earth” (Rev 6:13). A total physical impossibility. Stars are far heavier than the earth and billions or trillions of miles away.
- 12,000 members of each tribe of Israel were sealed (see [Rev 7:5](#)). Impossible! 10 of Israel's tribes are lost, and if they still exist they have all doubtless intermarried.
- “A third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light might be darkened, and a third of the day might be kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night” (Rev 8:12). Astronomically impossible.
- “The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number” ([Rev 9:16](#)) - i.e. 200 million and they were riding on horses (v17). Even China couldn't manage that.
- “Take and eat it (the scroll); it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey” (Rev 10:9). A book might upset your stomach if you had to eat it, but it would hardly taste like honey!
- “The devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur” (Rev 20:10). A spiritual being like Satan, or the spirits

Several “creationist” websites provide literal explanations of the flood. I recommend searching them out and reading them and listening to both sides of the argument if you feel you need to. Some of these websites believe the whole earth was one large continent until the flood caused it to break apart into the separate continents we have today. Scientists believe this happened about 200 million years ago.

The flood story can only be literally true if God performed a massive series of extraordinary miracles.

A literal understanding of this narrative clashes with modern science, but it is rich in spiritual truth. It is a picture of God's judgment on sin and the salvation of those who hear and obey his word and are saved by entering the ark which is Jesus.

## Creation

[Genesis chapter 1](#) describes God's creation of the world.

The first words are, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” This took place on the first day. In verse 16 we read, “God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars”. This took place on the fourth day. This means there were 3 days between the creation of the earth and the creation of the sun, moon and stars.

Were these 3 days literal 24-hour days, or were they long periods of time? The Hebrew word *yom* like the English word *day* literally means a period of 24 hours. No doubt you've heard of *Yom Kippur* - the *Day of Atonement*. *Yom*, like day, can also mean a longer period of time as in the phrase *yom YHWH* - the *day of the Lord*. However, in Genesis 1 after the description of God's work on each day we find the repeated words, “the evening and the morning were the first (second, third ...) day”. This means beyond doubt that *yom* here was intended to mean a 24-hour day.

Whichever way we look at this, it totally conflicts with science. According to astronomers, other stars existed long before the sun, and there is no way the earth could have existed before the sun. If the days were long periods of time, the earth was there long before the sun and the stars. If the days were just 24 hours, everything effectively happened at the same time.



A further problem is the age of the universe.

Scientists say the universe is about 13 billion years old and the solar system (the sun, the earth and the planets) about 4.5 billion years old. Astronomers say light from the furthest known star has taken 9 billion years to reach us. Geologists say the oldest known rocks on earth are 4.28 billion years old.

[Genesis 5:1-28](#) gives the ages of all the patriarchs from Adam to Noah. [Genesis 11:10-26](#) continues the genealogy down to Abraham. Bible students have used these and other genealogies in the Bible to calculate a date for the birth of Adam. All calculations lead to approximately 4000 BC. If we take every word of the Bible literally this would make the world, and in fact the universe also, about 6000 years old.

Scientists say about 13 billion years old. The Bible, taken literally, says about 6 thousand years old. A vast difference!

A literal understanding of the creation story does not agree with modern science, especially with regard to the time scale. It is still rich in inspiration and vastly superior to creation myths of other cultures and religions. When we read it as a picture of God's new creation in us, we find a wealth of spiritual truth. I have expanded this thought in the writing [Creation and Evolution](#).

## Babel

Archbishop Ussher dated the Tower of Babel to 2242 BC, about 200 years after the flood. Before this, according to Genesis 11:1, "[the whole earth had one language and the same words.](#)" After the Tower of Babel, everyone spoke different languages.

Archaeologists say some Egyptian hieroglyphics date back to the 27<sup>th</sup> century BC and some Sumerian writing to the 26<sup>th</sup> century BC and some Canaanite texts to the 25<sup>th</sup> century BC. In other words, separate languages were written down before Babel.

They say (see [Oldest civilisations](#)) that the Mesopotamian civilization dates back to 3500 BC, the Indus Valley civilization to 3300 BC and the Chinese civilization to 3300 BC. If these dates are at all accurate, separate languages must have existed many centuries before the Tower of Babel.

Did he mean these words literally? No doubt his disciples thought he did. They probably believed he would return in person and take them to wonderful dwellings in the sky.

Did Jesus fulfil these words literally in the lifetime of his disciples? If he spoke these words to comfort his disciples, but was not planning to come again until 2000 years after they had died, it would have been an empty promise. Their hearts would have gone on being troubled for the rest of their lives!

What happened on the day of Pentecost? Was that the time when Jesus came again? Had he prepared a place for his disciples? And did he then take them to it? That is exactly what Paul said when he wrote to the Ephesians: "[God raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus](#)" (Eph 2:6). And did their hearts stop being troubled? It looks like it! The local people thought they were all drunk!

Expectations of the personal physical return of Jesus have continued from New Testament times right up until this present day. Many religious leaders have set specific dates for this event to happen. Among the best known are the following:

- John Wesley: 1836
- Joseph Smith, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints: 1891
- Jehovah's Witnesses: 1914
- Herbert W. Armstrong: 1935, 1943, 1972 and 1975
- Seventh-Day Adventist Church: 1964
- Harold Camping: 1994 and 2011 (twice)
- Isaac Newton: 2000

Others have predicted dates which are still future.

See [Predictions for the Second Coming of Christ](#) for a full list.

Believing that Jesus will return in the near future (and getting it wrong!) can have many disruptive effects on one's personal life. All preparation for the future becomes pointless. Why save any money? Why purchase a home? Why do any further study? Why train to be a nurse or teacher or doctor or even a pastor if Jesus will probably come back before you finish your training? Maybe not too serious if you're young and single, but could be disastrous if you have family responsibilities.

Jesus told the Samaritan woman he would **give her living water**. She knew nothing about living water and so took him literally, **“You don’t even have a bucket, and the well is deep”** (John 4:7,11).

He said to the Jews, **“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”** They took him literally, **“How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”** (John 6:51,52).

So also with his words, **“Destroy this temple”** (John 2:19). His hearers thought he meant the literal temple.

He told his disciples to **“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees”** (Matt 16:6). They thought he meant ordinary physical leaven.

Again and again, Jesus spoke words of deep spiritual significance, which his hearers totally failed to understand. They took his words literally.

None of these people understood the words of Isaiah: **“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are **higher** than the earth, so are my ways **higher** than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts”** (Isa 55:8,9). If I’m not much mistaken, many modern teachers of the scriptures have also either never read, or else not understood, these words of the prophet Isaiah.

I’ve written in detail on this subject in [Understanding Jesus](#).

Jesus also said, **“I will come again”**. Did he mean that literally? Most people from then till now have believed that he did. We will look at that question now in greater detail.

## **“I Will Come Again”**

**“Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also”** (John 14:1-3).

Jesus spoke these words to prepare his disciples for the terrible traumatic events of his crucifixion and death.

Scientists tell us that the human race had spread over large areas of the earth tens of thousands of years earlier, rather than all living close enough to each other to join in building their tower. If that is correct, then a single event in the Middle East would have no effect on whatever languages were spoken in other parts of the world.

A literal understanding of the Babel story clearly clashes with modern archaeology and science; but once again we have a theme which is rich in spiritual truth and runs right through the Bible. Babylon, the Greek form of the Hebrew name Babel, represents man’s effort to reach God and has its totally corrupt climax in the book of Revelation. I have discussed this in detail in the article [Babylon](#).

## **Miracles**

Do I believe God is omnipotent? Yes!

Do I believe God can do anything? No! The Bible says, **“God cannot lie”**. I believe also that he cannot **“bear false witness”**. Could God create the earth in six literal 24-hour days? Yes, he could, but he could not at the same time create geological, astronomical and evolutionary evidence that it was millions or billions of years old, when in fact it was only a few thousand. That would be a serious breach of the ninth commandment, **“Do not bear false witness”** (Ex 20:16).

Do I believe in miracles? Yes! 100%! The Bible records many miracles. In the Old Testament, God performed many miracles in the times of Moses and Joshua and again in the times of Elijah and Elisha. Apart from these times, almost no miracles occurred. In the New Testament Jesus and his disciples performed many miracles, especially the healing of the sick. Many of us have seen or at least heard of similar miracles today. Most of the time, whether in the Bible or now, God works within the laws of science which he himself has made. Sometimes, for special purposes, when he wishes to do so, God overrules these laws and performs miracles.

Sometimes, God sends judgments. Jesus spoke of wars, famines, diseases and earthquakes; but all of these are natural occurrences within the laws of science. Covid 19 may well be a judgment from God, but it’s not in any way a miracle. It’s a purely natural occurrence.

God's miracles are mainly small-scale and often only visible to very few people. Only Mary and Joseph (and perhaps the angel Gabriel) were first-hand witnesses of the virgin birth. The resurrection of Jesus had more publicity; on one occasion he appeared to more than 500 people ([1Cor 15:6](#)), but even that was a small fraction of the overall population. No miracles took place on a massive international scale.

## Ancient Times

People in ancient times had an earth-centred view. Obviously to them, the sun, the moon and the stars all went round the earth. The earth itself could not possibly be rotating, as everyone would fall off when it went upside down. The sun and moon looked about the same size as each other and both were clearly much smaller than the earth. They could disappear behind small hills when they went down. The stars were minute and could easily fall to the earth as the Bible describes later.

The size of the earth was completely unknown. Hebrew has only one word עֶרֶץ (erets) which can mean either *earth* or *land*. (*Erets Yisrael* means the *Land of Israel*.) They knew little of lands beyond their immediate vicinity. Americans didn't exist and Chinese were unknown. No one had heard of elephants, polar bears, kangaroos or tigers. A large flood almost certainly took place in the area and many accounts of it, with varying details, are found in other literature.

For these ancient people, all the previously mentioned problems with Creation, the Flood and Babel disappear. Naturally the earth would have been created first, followed by the sun, the moon and the stars. Noah could easily have loaded all the local animals onto the ark and fed them; probably just domesticated ones; no way would he want lions on board; far better to let them drown. None of the problems of the Babel story would have even crossed their minds.

God could have revealed scientific explanations to Moses, but no one at the time would have been ready or able to receive or understand them. His purpose throughout Genesis and the whole Bible was the revelation of spiritual truth, rather than scientific knowledge.

## A Choice

In each of the three big stories in early Genesis, although they would have made total sense to people of ancient times, we find that a literal understanding of them is completely contrary to modern scientific knowledge.

This leads us to a clear choice between two main approaches:

1. The Bible is the Word of God and every word of it is literally true. If science disagrees with the Bible, then science is wrong. Most scientists are atheistic and opposed to God and want to discredit the Bible. We cannot trust what scientists tell us.
2. If the vast majority of scientists agree on any subject, we cannot ignore what they say. We must adjust our understanding of the Bible accordingly. Most scientists are neutral regarding religion and are driven by the evidence they find in what they are studying.

In my younger days I moved in circles that took the first of these two approaches. Much emphasis was placed on the literal accuracy of every word of the Bible. Over time I moved to the second approach. I believe that modern science is a gift from God and has brought great benefits to the human race. When scientists agree, we cannot ignore their discoveries.

These two different approaches have very different consequences, both in our attitude to science and in our interpretation of Scripture and can have radical effects on the way we lead our lives. I want to explore these thoughts in the remainder of this article, but first we will look at some things that Jesus said.

## The Words of Jesus

Should we take all the words of Jesus literally? Many people in the New Testament did exactly that.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, “**Unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**” Nicodemus was not born again and could not see the kingdom of God and so he took Jesus literally, “**Can someone enter his mother's womb a second time and be born?**” (John 3:3,4).