

PHILOSOPHY 1600 HONORS - PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Exercise 1: Is Everything in the Bible True?

Due Date: Monday, September 8

Proportion of Final Grade: 5%

In recent years, especially in the United States, but also in other countries such as Australia, the question of evolution versus creation has once again become a much-discussed issue. One of the main things at stake in that debate is, of course, the fundamentalist conception of the Bible. For, on the one hand, fundamentalists maintain that the Bible, interpreted in a straightforward and natural way, is free of all error, while, on the other hand, the account of the origin of living things advanced in *Genesis* is incompatible with the theory of evolution. So the fundamentalist belief in the absolute correctness of the Bible, and its freedom from all error, can only be sustained if the theory of evolution is false.

There is, however, a very common misconception that needs to be avoided. Most people seem to believe that, until Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species* in 1859, the fundamentalist view of the Bible was the natural and reasonable one to take. In fact, however, many people within Christianity, long before Darwin, thought that there were serious objections to the view that the Bible, interpreted in a natural and straightforward fashion, was free of all error. Thus one can find, for example, in chapter 27 of book 15 of St. Augustine's *The City of God*, a discussion of some doubts that others had raised concerning the literal truth of the story of Noah. Augustine himself held that those objections could be answered, but there were other eminent Christian thinkers who took a different view. Among the latter was Origen, who argued very vigorously, in his *De Principiis* (IV 3.1) and (I 17), for the view that there are a number of passages in the Bible that it is absurd to treat as literally true.

Many people find it somewhat difficult, initially, to approach religious writings in a critical fashion. The present assignment, however, should provide you with the opportunity of gaining some practice in doing this.

The assignment involves reading a small part of the Bible - namely *Genesis* chapters 1 through 8, with an eye to determining whether - aside from the obvious issues of evolution versus creation, and of whether God really does exist - there is other material that seems relevant to an evaluation of the fundamentalist view that the Bible, interpreted in the natural way, is totally free of error. In particular, some people have claimed that the passages in question not only contain a number of very implausible beliefs, but some outright contradictions. Your task is to locate passages that provide the best support for these two claims.

Finally, there are, of course, ways of approaching the Bible that are very different from fundamentalism, and many religious thinkers - both Christians and Jews - think it is important to reject a fundamentalist view. (See, for example, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, by the Episcopalian bishop, John Shelby Spong.) Fundamentalists, on the other hand, feel that if the Bible does contain factual and/or moral errors, then that undermines the claim that it can reasonably be viewed as a revelation from God. The present exercise, and the next, will provide you with an opportunity to think about these issues.

Note: A scholarly translation of the Bible has been placed on reserve in the Reference Room.

Part I: Implausible Beliefs in *Genesis*, Chapters 1 to 8

List 14 passages, from *Genesis*, Chapters 1 through 8, which contain beliefs concerning purported non-moral facts, and which satisfy the following three conditions:

- (1) The vast majority of people today would hold that the beliefs in question are mistaken;
- (2) Even most present-day Christians and Jews would think that the claims in question are mistaken;
- (3) The passages do not involve either the issue of creation versus evolution, or the question of the existence of God.

In each case, indicate the chapter and verse, and describe, very briefly, the belief in question. Avoid beliefs that are very similar, and which are implausible for essentially the same reason. Each convincing answer is worth one point.

1. Chapter _____ Verse _____

2. Chapter _____ Verse _____

3. Chapter _____ Verse _____

4. Chapter _____ Verse _____

5. Chapter _____ Verse _____

6. Chapter _____ Verse _____

7. Chapter _____ Verse _____

8. Chapter _____ Verse _____

9. Chapter _____ Verse _____

10. Chapter _____ Verse _____

11. Chapter _____ Verse _____

12. Chapter _____ Verse _____

13. Chapter _____ Verse _____

14. Chapter _____ Verse _____

Part II: Contradictions in *Genesis*?

Just as a single statement may express an implausible belief, so a single statement may contain a contradiction. But contradictions of the latter sort are rather rare, outside of logic textbooks. What you're really looking for, then, are pairs of passages where what is said in one passage appears to contradict what is said in the other passage.

Finding such inconsistent pairs of passages does require very careful reading, and most people will probably find this part of the exercise more difficult than Part I.

Part IIA. The most familiar Biblical account of creation is found in *Genesis*, chapter 1, verse 1, through chapter 2, verse 4. But chapter 2, verses 5 through 25 of *Genesis* also seems to contain an account of creation. and many people have held that these two accounts are not entirely consistent with one another. To see if this contention can be supported, try to find two claims that are advanced in the first account, and that are inconsistent with the second account. State those claims, and indicate the location of the relevant passages. (One point for each claim, and one point for each pair of relevant passages, for a possible total of four points.)

One claim which is advanced in the first account, but which is rejected in the second is:

The above claim is advanced at the following place in *Genesis* _____

through *Genesis* _____.

The above claim is inconsistent with what is said at the following in *Genesis* _____
through *Genesis* _____.

A second claim which is advanced in the first account, but which is rejected in the second is:

The above claim is advanced at the following place in *Genesis* _____
through *Genesis* _____.

The above claim is inconsistent with what is said at the following in *Genesis*
_____ through *Genesis* _____.

Part IIB. Confining yourself to a consideration of the story of Noah and the flood, as set out in Chapters 6, 7, and 8 of *Genesis*, list two passages dealing with God's instructions to Noah that are inconsistent, giving the location of each passage, together with a brief indication of how they are inconsistent. (Correct identification of the two passages is worth one point, and a correct specification of at least one way in which they are inconsistent with each other is worth one point, for a total of two points.)

The locations of the relevant inconsistent passages dealing with God's instructions to Noah are:

1. _____
2. _____

One way in which these two passages are inconsistent is:
