

The 21st century presents many challenges to faith. Are religious teachings still even relevant? Does religion do more harm than good? Combining personal stories and insights, the author of Wrestling with Faith explores these issues. He shares how he reconciled his doubts to again be able to consider himself a committed Christian.

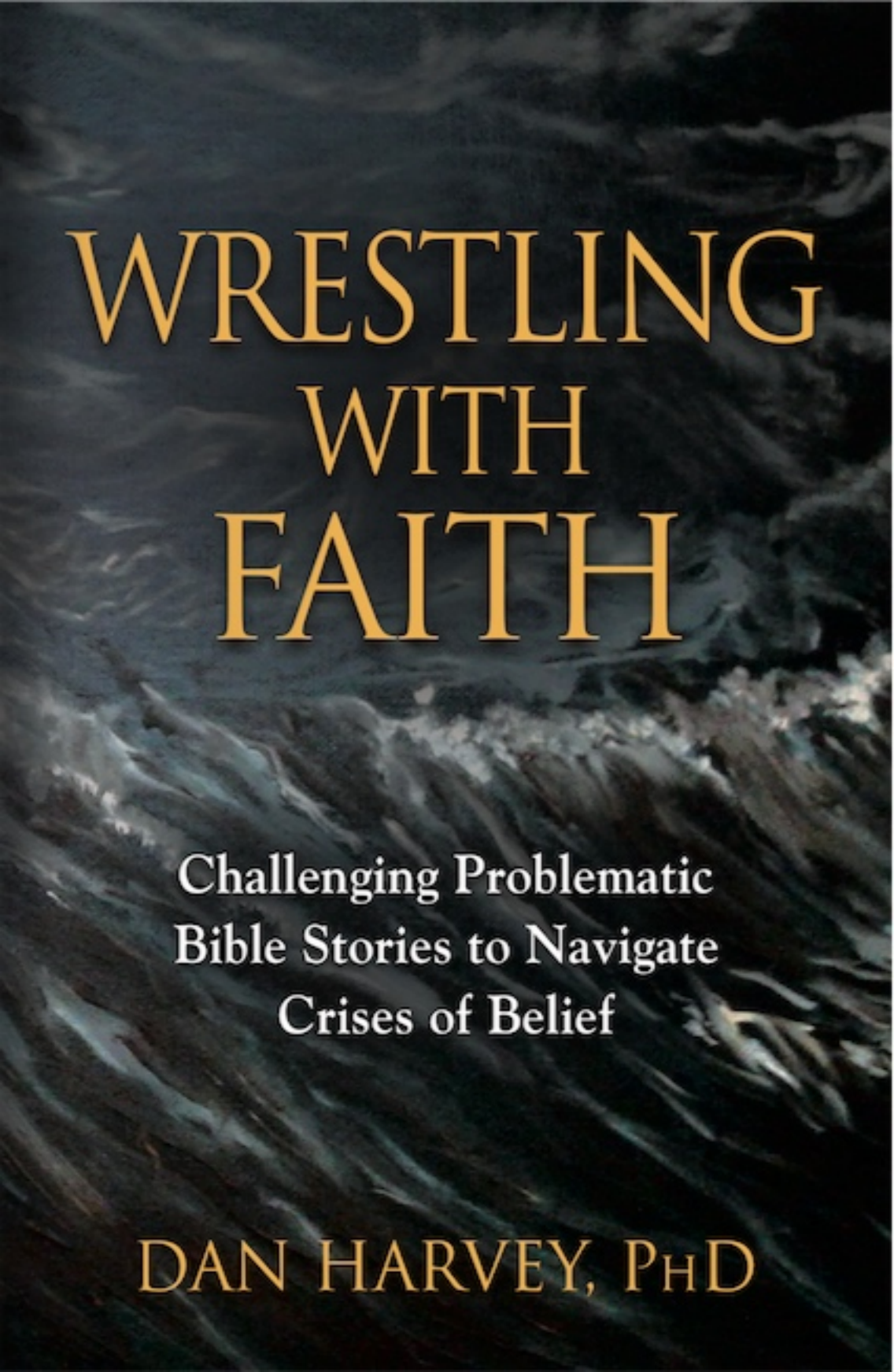
Wrestling with Faith: Challenging problematic Bible stories to navigate crises of belief

by Dan Harvey, PhD

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WRESTLING WITH FAITH

Challenging Problematic
Bible Stories to Navigate
Crises of Belief

DAN HARVEY, PHD

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Introduction

At age fifteen, Eli Wiesel was deported from his childhood home in Hungary. The local authorities rounded-up Eli, his family, and all his friends. They packed them into box-cars, and three days later, the prisoners arrived at Auschwitz, the infamous Holocaust prison camp. Upon arrival, and on the very first day, Eli's mom and sister were burned to death. Meanwhile, he and his father were ordered to walk past crematoriums, seeing the bodies of thousands of dead Jews as they went. Eli and his dad were spared, at least for a time. He later recalled that day with the quote, "Never shall I forget those flames that murdered my God."

More than forty years later, in 1986, this same Eli Wiesel received the Nobel Peace Prize, and his young son accompanied him to the award ceremony. During his acceptance speech, he asked permission to recite a traditional Jewish blessing. He commented that it was not his right to be the end of a rich tradition that spanned some thirty-five hundred years. Somehow, through it all, though the pain remained, Eli Wiesel recovered his faith.

Few of us experience the grief, loss, and pain suffered by Eli Wiesel and other Holocaust victims. It is certain, however, that life will bring difficulties, even for those who skate through their years relatively unscathed.

I did not grow up in a Christian family, though for a time my parents were nominal Catholics. For most of my childhood, my father was an atheist, and my mother agnostic. It wasn't till my early twenties, shortly after I met my wife-to-be that I became a follower of Jesus.

For many years, this was enough. I listened to sermons from various preachers, and it all seemed good. In hindsight, I see how they carefully avoided the problematic areas. I don't remember any sermons about a young woman being cut up into pieces and sent to the twelve tribes of Israel. In fact, I recall little systematic teaching on the books of the Old Testament. There were bits and pieces.

Perhaps a pastor would dive into the books of Esther or Ruth, here a Psalm and there a Proverb. Occasionally, they might consider isolated verses from Deuteronomy or the prophets. Malachi is a popular way to convince the congregation to tithe.

Then in 1994, my seventeen-year old son died; a faith crisis ensued. My wife opened up about her traumatic missionary boarding school upbringing. In working with indigenous tribes and creating software to support their efforts to restore language and culture, I learned about the sorrows they suffered during the colonial period. This was more than I wanted to know. I also observed changes in the culture that the Church has been slow to reconcile. As a result, hearing the same sermons that I previously heard for twenty-five years no longer resonated. Nothing made sense any more.

I was at a crossroad. I could simply walk away as many have done in recent decades. Or, I could take a deeper look and determine whether the Christian faith still has relevance to me in this modern world. The question I faced was: “Are there answers to be had?” So, year by year, I decided to use research skills developed as a Computer Scientist to carefully analyze those areas that seem problematic, at least for me. For example, how can a loving God throw people into a literal, eternal furnace called hell? Is this just punishment for even the worst of people? Why does he seem slow to anger in some passages of scripture and quick to anger in others? Does the Bible teach that the Earth is 6,000 years old? What do we do with the theory of Evolution? Why are Christians so obsessed with end time prophecies? What do we do with past atrocities committed by the Church and by believers?

As I consider the testimony of Eli Wiesel; it causes me to reflect. In the West, growing numbers of people who were raised Christian report that they no longer consider religion important in their lives.¹ Many of these are convinced that religion does more harm to society than good. Scientific dogma tells us that belief in God is a superstition whose time is past. Historians recall the bloody wars and genocides of previous generations. Culture is leading us into an age of spiritual freedom, declaring that religion, especially Christianity, is small-minded, exclusive, and racially-based. Former believers often become the faith’s most potent adversaries. At the same time, another religious

¹ Betsy Cooper, Daniel Cox PhD, Rachel Lienesch and Robert P. Jones PhD, “Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion—and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back,” *PRRI* (9/22/2016).

tradition, Islam is growing rapidly, and it is contending to become the world's largest faith.²

My tradition is Christian and I do my best to follow the teachings of Jesus. What should I do? How should I respond to the challenges of our times? I could deny my faith, and quietly assimilate into the mainstream of twenty-first-century culture. I could embrace elements of other traditions, like Hinduism, Buddhism, and the like. Yet Eli Wiesel's testimony rings in my mind, and I realize that it also applies to me, and to every person of faith. We shouldn't be quick to cast off a Judeo-Christian tradition that spans thousands of years. The tradition lives on through the message and teachings of Jesus, and so it should.

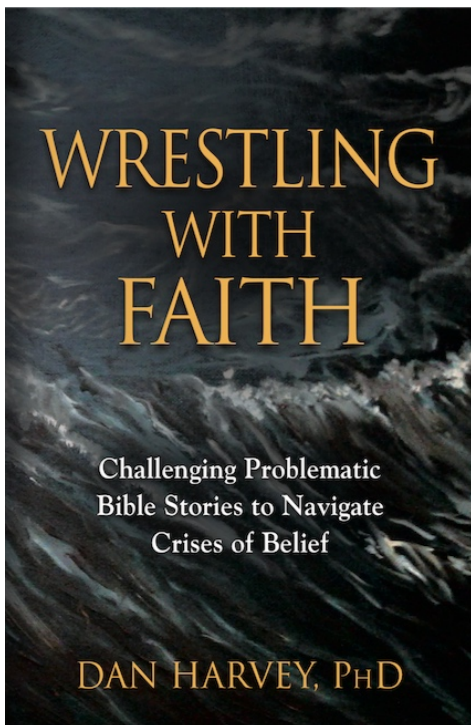
It seems to me that the time has come for all of us who identify with the Christian faith to take a careful look at our sacred scriptures and our traditions. By saying this, I don't mean that we should discard certain texts as many are doing and have done. I also am not trying to transform the faith into something that it is not. We need rather to do what the Jews have always done in their Talmudic debates. That is, we need to challenge, probe, and express our doubts without guilt or fear. We should be able to evaluate ourselves, not by some special revelation received from God, by some miraculous event, or by some private new insight, but instead by whether we've thought of good questions to ask. Rather than judging our fellow believers by whether they agree with the denominational positions of our various congregations, we need to ask ourselves whether his or her way of looking at scripture could perhaps have some validity. We should be defined by the fruit of our faith, not by a rigid set of beliefs that determine whether we do or do not belong to this or that group or whether we worship in a designated way.

A goal for this book is to challenge some long-standing interpretations and to honestly face the Bible's troubling verses. The purpose is not to convert or even to persuade; it is to open a dialogue, a debate if you will. Is the Christian faith rational, or is it wishful fantasy? Is it a living faith, or will it inevitably die, like many other ancient religions? Is it possible to hold our sacred writings in high

² "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050," Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (April 2, 2015), <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>, April 7, 2018.

regard, and yet still to ask questions, challenge accepted interpretations, express our doubts, and still be unified as fellow believers? Can we unearth possible explanations for well-known troubling verses? I believe we can.

I am fully aware that a book like this will not convince every reader. There simply is too much ground to cover. It also would be arrogant for me to think that I could definitively settle issues that have been debated for thousands of years. Nevertheless, I hope that this work can serve as a starting point for those who are on similar journeys. It is time to take a second look.



The 21st century presents many challenges to faith. Are religious teachings still even relevant? Does religion do more harm than good? Combining personal stories and insights, the author of Wrestling with Faith explores these issues. He shares how he reconciled his doubts to again be able to consider himself a committed Christian.

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