This is the 6th letter in a sequence. To refresh your memory my first letter focused on whether there is a strong case for a Godless universe and I concluded that God can't be ruled out and instead should be investigated more. Letter 2 showed that scientific discoveries leave plenty of room for God to exist. Letter 3 arrived at Christianity as the most reasonable place to start an investigation of God among the 3 other main religious options: Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism. Letter 4 investigated how Christianity successfully addresses existential dilemmas and Letter 5 concluded that Jesus' resurrection from the dead makes the most sense of historical data.

The next logical step to me seems to involve looking into what the guy who came back from the dead had to say about God, Himself and us. Of course learning about Jesus means reading biblical literature because that is where the record of His life and teachings exist and yet I could see an obstacle to my understanding off in the distance. While many parts of the Bible, especially those in the New Testament, have passages that feel good and make reasonable sense, it doesn't take long to discover links to Old Testament stories that are strange and unsettling. These Old Testament writings are hard to ignore as they were Jesus' Bible containing the stories that Jesus Himself grew up on and to which He constantly references. And yet a surface reading through the Old Testament reveals such baffling language, strange, harsh and disturbing stories that it seems to be impossible to ever make sense of them.

Tim Mackey from the Bible Project puts it this way "The New Testament is easier to engage with. Jesus is compelling. He is a nice guy. Anything He does is awesome! But soon you learn that Jesus is into the first 3/4 of the Bible." He references Old Testament ideas, turns of phrase, stories and theology and seems to think His readers should understand His references. Mackey continues "But the Old Testament stories are messed up with Abraham raping his slave and his wife Sarah giving the idea the okay. People lie and cheat and murder each other and yet God is committed to them! It is intriguing, fascinating, entertaining and repulsive. The way God behaves is uncomfortable. He defends Abraham when he lies about his wife and later God strikes Egypt with plagues. The Old Testament is like a weird uncle with a checkered past who smells funny and says both profound and disturbing things that no one wants to address. It leaves you thinking I'm going to just read the New Testament some more." It's a head scratcher how Jesus and the apostles can get so much meaning out of such a disturbing and meandering set of scrolls.

You may have noticed by now that I have an odd preoccupation with investigating obstacles in the road to God to see if they block the way forward. I do this because finding insurmountable problems is the quickest way to conclude my investigation into God. For better or worse every obstacle I've encountered hasn't been the faith stopping type. In my past letters I've investigated the possibilities that either philosophy or science or other religions or existential dilemmas or historical findings might provide an insurmountable obstacle to God or the Christian faith and yet in each case not only did I not find the obstacles but instead found evidence in support of both. But I wasn't done. I found another likely obstacle sitting right smack in the middle of the Christian faith from an unexpected and unsettling source, The Bible itself. From the creation narrative discussion about heavens and the earth to Adam and Eve to the flood stories there seemed to be no way to make sense of what was written. It felt like a game of chess with Christianity and this time I had faith in checkmate. That's when I discovered Tim Mackey and John Collins from the Bible project along with other biblical scholars. They unpack illuminating

responses to explain what I saw as unreconcilable inconsistencies over hundreds of their podcasts, videos and Bible courses. I've attempted to summarize some of the explanations they share. The brilliant insight is theirs and I take no credit for their ideas which I have paraphrased to share their explanations. I am not an academic merely a guy trying to find good ideas wherever the surface and as such don't want the authors to suffer any criticism for any lack of understanding I may have pulled from their ideas. But before I talk about what I learned about how to read the Bible from hundreds of hours listening to the Bible Project, I'd like to preface my summary of their ideas with an analogy about flight.

Plane Analogy

I love analogies and think that perhaps understanding how the Bible can make sense is a bit like having faith that an airplane can fly. Faith in flight doesn't require a personal knowledge of aeronautics. Anyone who's seen a bird fly knows flying is possible. Both planes and birds have tails and wings. Combine that with trust in the competence of the creators of the plane and anecdotal stories of successful flights and for many they have faith that a plane can fly, no need for additional questions. This type of faith may be the fastest way to put trust into action and board a plane. Perhaps a similar phenomenon happens in Christianity where some people hear the basic story of the faith and believe, no need for additional questions. They just step onto the Christian spiritual airline and that's enough for them. But what about those who question?

Getting back to the plane analogy these people who question plane flight raise valid concerns. They note that birds have feathers and planes don't, that birds flap their wings and planes don't, that birds are light and planes aren't, that birds fly low and planes fly high. When you dig into the details of planes and birds you discover that the two have very different ways of flying. Where a bird uses lightness and dexterity to land on feet, a plane uses power and speed which requires wheels to take off and land. Planes have a counterintuitive strategy of loading themselves up with heavy liquid in order to fly, something antithetical to a bird who relies on being light and nimble. Planes have a different functional purpose than birds. They don't deviate from their course to hunt down prey but instead deliver cargo from place to place.

How a plane can accomplish this pushes way past similarities of wings and tales. It requires a paradigm shift made possible through aeronautical design, engineering, materials and manufacturing processes. Aeronautics are used to design the precise lift of a wing, engineering to design the hydraulics to move the flaps, processes for transforming bauxite into aluminum to sheath the plane, materials like nickel-based superalloys and processes like CNC milling are used to shape turbine blades. Observing and learning about specific examples of engineering serves to remove some of the mystery and increase the faith that perhaps additional technology may exist that may solve a host of other functional challenges needed for flight.

This process of belief through demonstration of new processes appears to be mirrored in Christianity when it comes to understanding the Bible. While making sense of every story in the Bible in just as overwhelming as making sense of every system in a plane all at once, an awareness of techniques with powerful explanative power can build faith in taking a step forward to see if in fact the next challenge in a biblical scroll might be able to be explained. Just as it takes thousands of experts over time to articulate the specific systems that make up a plane, it

takes scores of scholars to make sense of the detailed stories of the Bible. That said if you just trust that the plane will fly your intuitions are correct. It will fly regardless of what you understand about the physics of flight. The same can be said about the Bible supporting Christianity.

For me making sense of the Bible involves a degree of triage to get a handle on the ways it can go sideways because there are many ways to read it wrong. Tim Mackey from The Bible Project shares some of his strategies for making sense of the Old Testament to which I've added other techniques discussed by other authors like John Walton and Bill Creasy. Together they provided me with 10 powerful insights that have been a game changer for me in trying to see if it's possible to make sense of The Bible. Here is a summary of each insight followed by specific explanations.

1. The Bible has a unique way of communicating its message which is unlike a textbook and more like an artistic **mozaic or a family quilt.**
2. Reading the Bible accurately is about discovering the **intent of the biblical authors**.
3. Many of the apparently crazy things talked about in the Old Testament lose their sting when they are understood in the **time, culture and context** in which they were written.
4. Ancient authors and readers were far more interested in the **functional significance of their world than its material origin.**
5. Characters in the Bible are almost always **portrayed as tragically flawed and not as models of good behavior.**
6. The Bible is **written for insiders** from a time and place when the literary references were biblical scriptures. The stories are heavily hyperlinked to create wisdom literature with each part understood in terms of the whole.
7. The Bible is **not uninterpreted video footage**. That type of raw data is too impractical and boring to warrant being passed on.
8. The Bible only **uses words** to communicate meaning. Those words do heavy lifting by standing in for other modes of communication we use now like pictures, video, audios and theater.
9. The biblical narratives **were not dropped down out of heaven fully formed** nor were they written by one guy sitting by himself at a desk in a trance.
10. The Bible is not written about me or to me. **It's written about the Messiah** and through Him it is about all of us.

That is quite a list which I tried to trim down but found each item to be really helpful in making sense of the Bible. Before I spend time talking about each technique and how it reframed my idea of the Bible I'd like to take a breather for both of us. I'll be back shortly.

Welcome back. To refresh your memory I shared a list of 10 techniques for making sense of the Bible and am about to dig into the first which was this:

1. The Bible has a unique way of communicating its message which is unlike a textbook and more like an artistic **mozaic or a family quilt.**

In the 21st century we are used to information being presented to us in an efficient, organized, logical and systematic way. Terms are clarified, a thesis is spelled out in an introduction and summarized in a conclusion. We exist in a unique moment in time and are inclined to assume that people 2000 years ago communicated information in the same way. We forget that The Bible was created long before these current cultural practices. For example, the way in which biblical authors communicate can be artistic rather than linear. One way of seeing this visually is to imagine a giant photomosaic with thousands of individual snap shots of Jesus, his followers and biblical stories. All of the photos are pinned up covering a wall with each photo next to another. Backing up from the wall and looking at the collection as a whole they have been assembled such that the color shading of each picture combines to create a giant visual image of Jesus. He is both the big picture image you see when you step back and the subject of each tiny image that make up the big image. No one wrote a note telling the viewer how to view the photomosaic, people just figure it out for themself. This is similar to how the Bible shares individual stories that together make a unified story that points to Jesus.

Another useful analogy in thinking about the formation of the Bible is to see it analogously to a family quilt. A family quilt is not intended to be an exclusive work of originality, but rather a work of unity where the designer pulls together textile pieces created by their ancestors to create a cohesive quilt that connects past to present. Sometimes that may include attaching an entire section from an ancestral family blanket even though it takes up a fourth of the project. This happens all the time in biblical stories when it comes to story telling in which the narrative is assembled like a quilt with an author imbedding a version of the historical Adam and Eve's story within a new narrative. This recycling of historical narratives was an effective way to leverage familiarity and establish credibility. This explains why there is so much repetition and so many historical references in The Bible.

2. The second insight is that reading The Bible accurately is about discovering the intent of the biblical authors.

To understand an author's intention it is helpful to back up and look at two different words connected to communication. The words are "meaning" and "significance"**.** Meaning refers to what an author or person speaking intends to communicate whereas significance is what the listener takes from what was said. You can't always predict the significance your meaning will have on somebody else. Just as an innocent comment can offend a listener who takes it the wrong way, add a 2000 year time gap, a totally different set of cultural practice, multiple languages and it is easy to see how a 21st century reader might imply a significance never intended by a biblical author. One glaring example of this happens in early creation myths which were not meant to contemplate creation of material objects, even though that is a topic significant to us today. They were meant to establish an identity for humanity, clarifying meaning and purpose for people on earth. Why we exist was far more important to ancient people than how the materials we are made of came together. Modern science is concerned with the mechanism of how things work? The Bible is concerned with agency, which refers to purpose and personal intention. It says nearly nothing about mechanics. Science cannot rule out agency and The Bible can't refute mechanics. Neither one is intended to impinge on the expertise of the other. They are two different methods. The Genesis narrative in the Bible is about "who" we are, not "what" we are made of. It offers accounts of cosmic identity and human identity, how we relate to one another, to the land, to animals and to God.

We can also misread the intent of the biblical authors by making the mistake of searching for modern issues that simply weren't on their radar. While it would be nice to know the material origins of our universe, biblical authors, who lived at least 1700 years before the discovery of the scientific method would not be a source for this kind of information. Even people today who are interested in science know that they aren't going to find advice on how to optimize a social media algorithm from a scientist who lived in the 1970's because social media hadn't become a relevant technology at that time.

Another way authors establish their intention is through the type of literature they choose as a vehicle for communication. For example, an author uses poetry to communicate accentuated meaning. Poetry is a form of communication that invites the reader to partner with the writer to discover meaning. The reader has to work to find meaning with poetry. To read poetry like a car manual or textbook is to read it wrong by definition. To make things more challenging poetry is extremely dependent on the language in which it was written. Lines may rhyme in the original language but sound awkward in English. Sometimes an author may leave out a word on purpose knowing that the reader will fill it in. "Roses are red violets are _____." To make things more complicated sometimes a three word Hebrew line of poetry is translated into 12 words of English. If the poem also has the trick of leaving out a keyword in its original language then doing so in English could mean leaving out four words, resulting in a hopelessly incoherent sentence.

Parables are another example of a nuanced literary form used by biblical authors and Jesus Himself. Parables are not meant to simply explain things. Parables are created for the reader to meditate on. They're memorable and powerful and often have a twist making them difficult to immediately understand and instead require the reader to work to make sense of them. They aren't like a three-point sermon that makes sense when it is first delivered but then is forgotten a few minutes later. The parables are designed to keep an idea top of mind through a sort of time-release puzzle allowing a parable to be continually mined for insight. Parables are a form of non-literal, indirect communication and were Jesus' number one way to communicate. So when Jesus talks about taking the log out of your own eye before you try to remove the splinter from someone else's eye we all know he's not talking about wood. Jesus didn't design parables to be literal, but rather to cause the listener to take action spiritually to change or refresh their paradigm.

Jesus' parables were told in such a way that those who were on the same page with Him learned about the material He shared while those who were stuck in the old paradigm or disagreed with him would hear something different. For people who thought He was crazy, His parables sounded kookie. In this way what He said either concealed or revealed His message depending on what kind of soil you found yourself in as a listener. As Jesus put it, "Those who have ears to hear, let them hear".

3. The third insight is that many of the apparently crazy things talked about in the Old Testament lose their sting when they are understood in the time, culture and context in which they were written.

Not focusing on a 21st century literal reading of the English words in a translation is a great place to start. Ironically some of those who insist on a "literal interpretation" of the Bible overlook the fact that such an interpretation would have to be rooted in the time, culture and language of the author who created the scrolls rather than in a modern English translation devoid of the original context. To capture the meaning of the author the reader needs to match his encyclopedia up with the author's encyclopedia otherwise the listener hears what is significant for them rather than what the author intended.

An example of this can be seen in the poetic descriptions of what the earth and heaven looked like to ancient people. Their descriptions of God creating a firmament to divide the waters above from the waters below represented their best understanding and shared cultural understanding of reality as it relates to rain and the sea at the time. They lived in a time when people didn't have the luxury of reflecting on the nature of matter much less the tools and technology. Out of necessity they were interested in practical things like who was in charge and where they sat in society. The idea of collecting uninterpreted facts to be analyzed 1700 years later after the invention of the scientific method was understandably unimportant especially in an oral tradition.

The New Testament letters are another example of how a detailed contextual understanding totally changes the meaning of the scrolls. Each letter is only one side of a two-sided conversation, meaning as a reader you don't even know what the other party has said in a past letter. To understand the meaning of the letter you would need to know the history of the two parties and where in their communication chain the letter falls. This is on top of the fact that the letter was written in Greek 2000 years ago by an author thinking in Hebrew who had to navigate his message in a Roman occupied military zone. So it's easy to see why someone simply picking up the letter now would not be able to decipher the letter's original meaning.

4. The fourth insight is that ancient authors and readers were far more interested in the functional significance of their world than its material origin.

A walk through a hoarder's garage reveals the difference between what can be called a functional ontology verses a material ontology. The first thing you may notice walking through the garage is disorganized chaos; used batteries mixed with diapers, plastic bags, yard debris, clothes and decaying pizza boxes. To interact with the mess most of us would be inclined to adopt a functional perspective and try to organize the chaos first to see if any of it is functional. Perhaps after separating the valuable items from the trash we might concern ourselves with the details of a material perspective to understand how any one of the items was made.

John Walters does an excellent job of explaining how biblical authors focused on a functional ontology rather than material ontology in his book "The Lost World of Genesis 1". He explains that our modern culture is primarily interested in a material ontology to determine where physical matter comes from. We are not like ancient cultures. They were primarily interested in a functional ontology to understand where they stood in an organizational hierarchy, and their purpose in the cosmos. They had little concern for material structures.

Walter's says that in the Genesis account, where God creates the heavens and the earth, the biblical author is communicating the functional origins of the cosmos for people. The Hebrew word that is translated as "create" is the word "Bara" which actually concerns the assigning of functions, not the creating of material. In the first three days of Genesis 1 God assigns the three main functions of life which are time, weather and food. Days four through six concern functionaries in the cosmos being assigned to their roles and spheres. The week culminates on day seven with God resting. In an ancient culture a deity "rests in a temple" so the phrase is more accurately interpreted as "God took up residence in a temple". This action is akin to a newly elected president taking up residence in the White House after the completion of an electoral campaign. In other words, the assignment of the functions was successful and so God moved in ready to roll up His sleeves and begin a relationship with his creatures.

This claim is very different from a material perspective of Genesis where God is reported to have formed an earthly sphere out of an unarticulated material blob in space in 24 hours then created the physics of light and darkness followed by land, fruit and herbs only to wait until day 4 to create the sun. John Walter's reframing of the creation story in Genesis 1 as an explanation of functions beneficial for humans rather than as an explanation of material origin is a hopeful example of how longstanding dividing lines between science and faith can be erased by recognizing that each is answering a different question. Genesis 1 is addressing meaning and purpose while physics addresses the composition of the material universe. Our modern culture is the first and only in the history of the human race to so accurately describe the composition of the universe that we think that we can give a full account of the universe while leaving out all questions related to meaning and purpose.

5. The fifth insight is that the characters in the Bible are almost always portrayed as tragically flawed and not as models of good behavior.

The Bible is largely a tragedy. God isn't psyched about what the people in it are doing. So if you find yourself scratching your head at biblical behavior you're not alone, the biblical authors use commentary to show the reader that what the characters in the stories are doing is wrong. The story of how the nation of Israel came into being is a good example of such a tragedy. The biblical narrative isn't just unflattering. It's damming to the Jewish people. It clearly paints the treachery in the history of the founding family starting with Jacob. Jacob is married to both Rachael and her sister Leah which is a bad idea as it already goes against the ideal in Genesis 1 of marriage between one man and one woman. This leads to in-fighting and chaos in his family line. The sister wives use their servant girls to have sex with Jacob in a twisted attempt to elevate their own status by claiming the offspring of their corresponding servants. Even the names they chose for their kids are obviously against God's will. One of Leah's daughters is named Fortuna after the Canaanite deity in defiance of the one God Yahweh. So in the opening and foundational account of how the nation of Israel came into existence the biblical authors are willing to spell out the treachery of their ancestors. The only way to make sense of such an unflattering national history is to frame it as a cautionary tale.

The Bible is full of stories that display human failure. For example, in the book of judges, there are terrible stories about women being taken advantage of. They are being taken advantage of because the men in the stories stopped following Yahweh and instead follow Baal and other gods. It's another cautionary tale of what happens to women when men stop following Yahweh. A surface level criticism is that behaviors in these stories are not explicitly condemned in the

language of the text. What this criticism overlooks is the fact that the Bible doesn't often preach right and wrong didactically. You think it would all be Moses and the 10 commandments but it's not. Perhaps the authors are aware that people aren't crazy about cold and impersonal rules and so instead choose to place the moral choices before the reader so that the reader can figure it out for themselves. Doing so keeps the stories interesting and helps them to survive over time in an oral tradition. To their credit the authors give strong hints to their readers about how they might think of the stories by framing them analogously to prior biblical stories to provide moral guidance.

6. The sixth insight is that the Bible is written for insiders from a time and place when the literary references were other biblical scriptures. The stories are heavily hyperlinked to create wisdom literature with each part understood in terms of the whole.

Stories in the Bible can sound weird. But sometimes they add awkward sounding details to signal a connection to a prior biblical story. These can be turns-of-phrase, lines of scripture, memes, direct quotes or entire storylines. All are examples of insider communication intended to add meaning for the readers of their time. It may sound strange to us today until we recognize that we use different types of insider communication all the time. Anyone who's quoted Yoda from Star Wars "No try, only do" has used the weight of the Star Wars series to convey meaning. Kids reference TikTok videos and Instagram reels as common reference points to leverage additional meaning. But unlike today where cultural reference points are constantly changing, in biblical times there were far fewer options with the stories of Bible serving as the standard. The Bible was the one common reference point for millennia so when people wanted to enrich or expand a point they did so through biblical references.

An example of this occurs in Matthew 21:13 where Jesus refers to the temple in Jerusalem as a "den of thieves" when he drives out the money changers from the temple. His quote serves as a hyperlink to the "den of thieves" reference from the book of Jeremiah in The Old Testament where God says, "Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?" For those new to The Bible it may seem an obscure reference but for people of the time raised in the biblical stories His reference to Jeremiah was crystal clear. A second reason why the story sounds weird is because biblical authors didn't follow our modern news article writing format where we place the most important things at the beginning and a recap at the end. Instead, biblical authors were interested in literary symmetry which is a writing style where the most important thing is placed in the middle of a section with parallel literary points before and after that mirror one another. A reader, not aware of this will find repetitive biblical writing very odd.

Biblical authors also had other ways of referencing prior biblical stories. One way was to use parallel narrative structure to link a more modern story to an ancient one. It's like a director filming a modern suspense movie by using the same filming style used to film Alfred Hitchcock's movie "The Birds" in an attempt to connect to it to leverage the power of that memorable horror film. This is seen in The Bible in Mathew's gospel where Mathew adopts the same literary style to talk about Jesus as the authors in Deuteronomy used to talk about Moses. Mathew portrays Jesus as a new Moses through parallels in his infancy narrative, such as the flight to Egypt and the return, as well as in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus delivers a new law similar to Moses sharing the ten commandments. Paralleling the narrative structure of the story of Moses emphasizes Jesus' role in fulfilling Jewish prophecy and leading his people.

Another overlooked detail that may have made scripture read oddly is the practical reality that biblical authors were likely writing for a people group who communicated with one another through oral story telling. They lived before the invention of the book where parchment was expensive and scribes to record ideas were rare. This meant any story written on a scroll needed to be read to the intended audience at the synagogue and talked about among followers before being forgotten. Since listeners didn't have ready access to scrolls like we do today, stories were written to leverage the understanding listeners had which were largely prior biblical stories that were already part of the tradition.

7. The seventh insight is that the Bible is not uninterpreted video footage. That type of raw data is too impractical and boring to warrant being passed on.

Sometimes biblical critics will fault the Bible for not presenting a scientific viewpoint about the origin of matter. But I asked myself about the last time I recounted my family history, did it involve scientific facts or was it a faithful representation of events mixed with my interpretations of their significance? Ask your parents to tell you how they met and you won't get a line by line transcript of their conversation instead you'll get an interpreted story. If your parents are happily married when you ask them you may get a version of their meeting that foreshadows their successful relationship. And if they divorced perhaps a cautionary tale of two people who weren't right for each other. Now step back in time into an oral tradition where people passed on what they believed was important through stories communicated orally. How crazy and impractical would it be to hear parents reciting the scientific origins of abstract matter to their children? The Bible's way of recounting events in terms of meaning is actually more rational for the people of the time than a modern cold and scientific approach.

Not seeing the Bible as video footage also recasts the misguided question about biblical inerrancy which seems like a strange and ineffective way of addressing whether scripture is trustworthy, reliable and truthful. It is. You can trust the collective wisdom of the biblical authors if you take the time to understand what they are trying to communicate. We all know from human interaction that whether you can trust a person to give a faithful interpretation of something that happened is a different question than whether that person has a perfect scientific understanding of materiality. For example, I know I can trust my mom, but if I began to insist that every fact she utters be understood as an inerrant scientific truth then I'm in trouble because my mom never claimed to be a scientist and me claiming that her statements are "inerrant" scientifically is in an attempt to preserve her honor that ends up compromising her integrity. It's the same thing with the Bible when it steps away from theology and into science. In the Chicago statement on inerrancy in 1978 two hundred evangelical leaders affirmed that the Bible is divine, authoritative, trustworthy and requires the holy spirit for interpretation. They state that inerrancy applies to the original manuscripts meaning that what we read now matches up as a representation of the original and that Inerrancy does not require words to be technically precise by modern scientific standards. All this to say that there is significant room for viewing the Bible in a non hyper-literalist way while still trusting in its authority.

For the sake of argument let's assume that the scientific method is the most accurate way to communicate the facts about the universe. One thing we forget is that what constitutes science changes over time with each successive generation believing that their understanding is better than the last. So if in the year 300 AD the Bible appealed to the theory of relativity, for the next 1,600

years everyone in history up until Einstein in the early 1900s would find these statements meaningless at best. It would require 100 generations each passing on a mathematical formula relating energy, matter and the speed of light to the next even though none of them had a clue what the formula $E=mc^2$ represents. So even if we play out the notion of a need for a scientifically accurate historicity in biblical texts it still falls apart.

8. The eighth insight is that The Bible **uses only words** to communicate meaning. Those words do heavy lifting by standing in for other modes of communication we use now like pictures, video, audios and theater.

The Bible is all about words. This may seem obvious, but there are no photos, diagrams, drawings, sculptures or specific artifacts to reference in the Bible so words have to do a lot of heavy lifting to make up for the absence of other modes of communication. Imagine trying to communicate your experience living through a devastating thunderstorm where you felt like you were going to die. Today you could try to recreate some of your experience by sharing a video showing the rain pouring, winds blowing and thunder erupting. Absent a video camera biblical authors used poetic language and powerful analogies to try to get the same effect. This explains why language was so important and hints at the power of language. The greatest debates in the Christian tradition have often been about the meaning of words. There is a slippery relationship between words and meaning. Language doesn't exist in a vacuum. It exists in a time, place and culture. This is why an encyclopedic approach when considering words in the Bible is far more accurate than using a dictionary approach.

Words don't mean things. People mean things when they use words making the context critically important. Like when a 5 year old says "I'm boring" when he means "I'm bored'. Every human has their own encyclopedia for speaking and creating. When we assume that our modern encyclopedia of reception matches up with the encyclopedia the biblical authors used when putting together the scriptures we find ourselves misinterpreting the authors.

Often a word by itself does not communicate a specific meaning. For example, in using the word run you could mean moving your legs quickly, a car engine idling, going out for a quick errand, leaving the faucet on or needing to move on to the next thing. It is the context in which the word is used that makes the meaning. "Enough said, I've gotta run". With so much potential ambiguity surrounding words it may be tempting to throw in the towel and conclude that the ancient meanings attached to the words used in the Bible are hopelessly obscure. This is where tools like a concordance come in handy. In it you can find all of the occurrences in the Bible of a specific word used at the time by the author. You can read each to better see how ancient biblical authors may have defined it. In this way it is possible to refine the meaning of the texts to more closely follow the intent of the biblical author.

9. The ninth insight is that the biblical narratives were not dropped down out of heaven fully formed nor were they written as autobiographies by one guy sitting by himself at a desk in a trance.

The Old Testament is not a document that someone sat down and wrote. It's more like a curated museum with exhibits chosen to convey specific points of meaning. It's a collection that took over 1000 years of documenting, cross referencing and refining to assemble into the form we see

it in today. Books of the Old Testament weren't simply written by the guy the book was named after. Sometimes Old Testament scrolls weren't even written during the lifetime of the person they are named after. They were instead narrated by someone else sometimes centuries later. In the case of the New Testament, some of the scrolls may have been architected by a collection of people who had to raise money to pay scribes not just to write the first edition, but to write the 50 or so copies afterwards to share.

The Bible is both human and divine, a partnership analogous to Jesus being both human and divine, but it is not always portrayed that way depending on the winds of favor towards biblical authority. The Reformation in the 1600's questioned the nature of the church's religious authority after which the 18th century enlightenment exacerbated the challenge by emphasized reason, science, and individual liberty resulting in some feeling a cultural crisis related to biblical authority. Some denominations responded to what felt like an attack on the power and status of the Bible by trying to polish off the human fingerprints from the biblical texts to leave them looking more divine. The result are traditions today that avoid talking about human involvement in the creation of the Bible for fear of weakening the scriptures.

However, reading biblical stories reveal what appear to be commentary from the author. This is analogous to what takes place in a director's cut of a movie where the director talks about his intentions behind the shooting of film scenes. Biblical stories also have breaks in the action where the narrator comments about what's happening in the story. This makes it plain to see that a human author is present in the biblical accounts and that author may not be the same person the book is named after. An example of this occurs in the books of Samuel where Samuel dies in chapter 25 of his first book of Samuel and yet there are 30 more chapters afterward moving into the second book of Samuel which appear to exist without Samuel as a living author. Later in 1st Chronicles 29:29 it mentions others contributors to writings of Samuel including Nathan the prophet and Gad the seer. This doesn't mean the account written about in Samuel are not credible but it does mean that a simplistic view of Samuel sitting down and writing his own book by himself as his life unfolded is not a realistic scenario.

Biblical authors also often used language calculated to hit hard and be memorable which if taken literally is difficult to believe. This practice shouldn't seem that strange. Today we see news articles that also draw attention, often at the expenses of the raw reporting of facts in favor of strong statements to establish relevance. Why else write it, why else read it, why else pass it on?

Since the biblical narratives were not dropped down out of heaven, and since they're not a collection of video camera footage, they appear to be complicated and intricate stories, intentionally created by human beings through the inspiration of God to communicate something, and not the simple documentation of facts in a neutral way for humans to piece together later. This means that the author of Genesis chose to portray Abraham as a sneaky dude who still gets God's blessing which is a complicated message. It is anything but idealistic and simplistic fact reporting.

10. The tenth insight is that the Bible is not written about me or to me. It's written about the Messiah and through Him it is about all of us.

There can be a desire among Christians to see the Bible as being "all about me and my relationship with God, how Jesus came and died for me personally so that I can have eternal life". And while that is true, it's just one teeny part of the larger story. Many followers with such a mindset have a habit of taking statements that Jesus makes about a bigger reality and squeezing them down into how they affect them personally. The main job of the scriptures isn't to tell us about how to get to heaven or even how to be in the world. Their purpose is to describe what Jesus said He was doing on earth which in turn informs how we are to be in the world.

One place to see this is in the parables. Jesus did not talk about the parables to instruct people he'd never met in abstract theology lessons or moral ideals. Rather He used them to show the people around him what He was doing at the time He told them. As an example, in the parable of the wealthy farm owner who prepares his land for harvest and trusts his farm hands to look after it, the owner later sends several rounds of servants back to collect the profits only to see each servant beaten up or killed. Finally, the farm owner sent his only son to collect and the farm hands kill him as well. This is a story about Jesus and what was going to happen to him in Jerusalem shortly after He told this parable. It is intended to prepare Jesus' apostles for what would happen to Him.

Jesus also tells parables to help people reorient themselves to grasp His message which is about the nature of God's Kingdom. One example of this occurs in the story of Jesus having dinner with outcasts including a prostitute and a tax collector. Why does He spend time with such outcasts? Because like a physician Jesus came to heal the sick, not the healthy. This is a story designed to reframe the Pharisee's paradigm about the nature of God and His people. The parable is not intending to create a permission structure to design programs to support the practices of tax collectors and sex workers.

Conclusion

That is the last insight in my list but not the last insight into understanding the Bible. When I first started reading stories in the Bible I thought they were an assault to common sense and a liability to a faith based on reason. I felt like the only way to make sense of biblical stories was through repeated leaps of blind faith into the void. However, after learning about and investigating these ten techniques I feel that perhaps biblical stories can make sense. I've seen these insights turn around what looked like impossible contractions to the point that I am inspired to see just how much of the Bible they can explain.

Going back to my original plane analogy, the take-home message was that plane flight can be understood through the lens of material science, aeronautics and engineering to the point that as a passenger I gain faith that perhaps flight systems I am not yet aware of may be explainable. Likewise, it appears that parts of the Bible can be understood through the lens of the 10 interpretive tools I discussed. By investigating examples of each I have gained confidence that perhaps other biblical stories that seem crazy may actually be able to be understood in a way that makes sense. On first glance the Bible looked like a heavy and dead hunk of metal restricted to the ground and yet with a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the culture, context, language and intentions of the biblical authors I see the promise that perhaps the collection of scrolls may indeed take flight.