

Logical Fallacies in Attacks Against the Bible: Eleven Examples

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In this essay, I describe, by way of examples, eleven fallacies of logic and their use in attacking the Bible and its claims. The same fallacies are used against the Christian faith in general, as well as specific issues like the existence of God. With each example I also provide a refutation of the argument.¹

We begin with a formal fallacy,² that of *affirming a disjunct*:

1. Either you think for yourself or you simply accept Biblical creation.
2. You do accept Biblical creation.
3. Therefore, you do not think for yourself.

The source of the fallacy is that the “either-or” form of the major premise leaves open the possibility that both the disjuncts (“think for yourself” and “accept Biblical creation”) are true. The argument seems valid because it *presumes* some further information not explicitly mentioned in the argument (a *suppressed premise*): that the conjunction of the disjuncts is false (i.e., it is not both true that you can “think for yourself” and “accept Biblical creation”). This fallacy is common in pressurizing believers into rejecting beliefs for fear of being considered a “pushover.” For this reason, this argument also commits the *argumentum ad baculum* fallacy.

A related fallacious argument is that of the *false dilemma*, also known as the *excluded middle* fallacy:

1. Either you reject Biblical creation or you are irrational.
2. You do not reject Biblical creation.

¹I assume a basic familiarity and understanding of logical fallacies and associated nomenclature. For example, an extensive list of logical fallacies is easily accessible on *Wikipedia*, a free encyclopedia: http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Logical_fallacy. See also *Stephen's Guide to Logical Fallacies*, <http://www.datanation.com/fallacies>, the *Fallacy Files*, <http://gncurtis.home.texas.net/mainpage.html>, and *Bruce Thompson's Fallacy Page*, http://www.cuyamaca.net/bruce.thompson/Fallacies/intro_fallacies.asp.

²For a definition of a *formal fallacy*, see *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Second Edition, R. Audi, Gen. Ed., 1995. Also <http://gncurtis.home.texas.net/formfall.html>.

3. Therefore, you are irrational.

Like the previous fallacy, this rhetoric pressurizes believers into rejecting beliefs for fear of being considered irrational—it also commits the *argumentum ad baculum* fallacy. The false-dilemma fallacy presumes that the two disjuncts exhaust the range of choices, i.e., there are no other possibilities. In this example, the two disjuncts, “rejecting Biblical creation” and “irrational” are not exhaustive, in which case the major (first) premise is false.

The false-dilemma fallacy is thought to be the first example of a logical fallacy in the Bible.³ In Genesis 3:1, the “crafty” serpent confuses Eve by fallaciously suggesting that God’s command was either “eat from all trees” or “do not eat from any tree,” creating a false dilemma.

The above argument may also be considered to commit the fallacy of *begging the question* (*petitio principii*) or *circular reasoning*. For if we *assume* that the conclusion is true, then the major premise is true. However, the argument fails nonetheless.

Along the lines of accepting the Bible without rationale, consider this argument:

1. Faith involves believing without basis.
2. You have faith in the Bible.
3. Therefore, you believe in the Bible without basis.

This is a syllogism hinging on the major (first) premise. But the major premise appears to be *prima facie* true—it is a common description of what faith is.⁴ Indeed, it even appears to be consistent with Hebrews 11:1. The argument is in fact invalid because it commits the *fallacy of accident* (*dicto simpliciter*). While the premise is an informal expression of what faith is, it does not define what it means to have faith, for example, in the Bible. The sense here is similar to how the word “faith” is used when a mother reassures her son just before his spelling bee: “I have faith in you, son.”

Some refuse to read the Bible on the grounds that there is nothing to be gained from it, often using an argument that goes something like:

1. I know people who have read the Bible but got nothing out of it.
2. Therefore, there is nothing to be gained from reading the Bible.

This is a clear case of *hasty generalization*, also known as the fallacy of *converse accident*.⁵

A common fallacious argument used to dismiss the claim that the Bible is God’s word goes something like this:

³See [http://www.faithfromfacts.com/Bible-Study%20Quiz/bible_first_logical_fallacy .htm](http://www.faithfromfacts.com/Bible-Study%20Quiz/bible_first_logical_fallacy.htm).

⁴For example, in Aaron Davidson’s essay, “Science as a Belief System,” the following definition is adopted: “Faith is the notion of accepting a belief without adequate proof.” See <http://spaz.ca/aaron/school/science.html>.

⁵See S. M. Engel, *With Good Reason: An Introduction to Informal Fallacies*, Fifth Edition, 1994, pp. 137–140. Also <http://gncurtis.home.texas.net/hastygen.html>.

1. The Bible was written by people.
2. People are not God.
3. Therefore, the Bible is not God's word.

Although not immediately apparent, this argument involves an *equivocation* on the word “written.” The error becomes clearer if the conclusion is stated as, “Therefore, the Bible was not written by God.” The Bible was certainly (physically) written by people. But the sense in which it was “written” by God is clearly different.

The next related fallacy is a case of *appeal to ignorance (argumentum ad ignorantiam)*:⁶

1. There is no evidence that the Bible is the word of God.
2. Therefore, the Bible is not the word of God.

This fallacy is common in debates about the existence of God:⁷ it is easy for the atheist to support his or her case by declaring that there is no evidence that God exists. The argument is fallacious simply because “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”

Continuing on the theme of Biblical inspiration, let us consider an argument that refutes the existence of God based on the nonexistence of miracles and Biblical claims to the contrary:

1. The Bible claims that God performs miracles.
2. But miracles cannot happen.
3. Therefore, either the Bible is false or there is no God.

This argument is confused in more ways than one. But a significant fallacy here is that of *begging the question (petitio principii)* or *circular reasoning*. To see this, first note that the intended conclusion is that either the Bible is false or that God does not exist. But the truth of the minor (second) premise *presumes*, essentially, the conclusion. For it is *only* if we know that God does not exist (or that if He does, then the Bible is false) can we be sure that miracles do not exist.⁸ Otherwise, the existence of miracles *cannot* be dismissed.⁹

This next fallacious argument is all too common in anti-Biblical propagandist literature:

⁶See “Appeal to Ignorance,” by E. C. W. Krabbe, in *Fallacies: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, H. V. Hanson and R. C. Pinto, Eds., Penn State Press, 1995, pp. 251-264. Also <http://gncurtis.home.texas.net/ignorant.html>.

⁷For example, the debate between William Lane Craig and Brian Edwards, Easter 2002, <http://media.gospelcom.net/rzim/Nzdebate2.mp3>.

⁸People who reject miracles outright often refer to the writings of philosopher David Hume, notably *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, Section X, “On Miracles,” available at <http://www.uq.edu.au/philosophy/res/hume-miracles.html>.

Hume's arguments against miracles are not without refutation—for example, in the 18th century, by Paley, Less, and Campbell. Also, most contemporary philosophers reject it as fallacious, including philosophers of science Richard Swinburne and John Earman, and analytic philosophers George Mavrodes and William Alston. Supporting references are provided by William Lane Craig in *God, Are You There?*, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, 1999.

⁹I have more to say about this in “Defending the Historicity of Jesus Christ: An Examination of the Jesus Seminar,” <http://www.engr.colostate.edu/~echong/pubs/apologetics/jesus-seminar.pdf>.

1. It is important to liberate humanity from its superstitious baggage.
2. Therefore, we should reject the Bible and faith.

Indeed, the premise here is almost a verbatim quote from an article of the *Freethinkers of Colorado Springs*¹⁰ (see also my essay analyzing this article in detail). The form of the argument above commits the fallacy of *irrelevant conclusion (ignoratio elenchi)*. The first statement bears no relation with the second. It is simply an emotive appeal to the listener to accept the conclusion in the name of “humanity.”

The next fallacy is not so much an attack against the Bible, but one that undermines the Bible by drawing questionable conclusions from it:

1. The Bible speaks of God seeing.
2. Seeing entails having eyes.
3. Therefore, God has eyes.

This argument involves the fallacy of *false analogy*. The Bible does indeed speak of God seeing (e.g., Genesis 1:31). But such a description of God is clearly *anthropomorphic*—one that uses human terms to describe God’s actions. No useful conclusion about God’s ontological nature can be obtained from such anthropomorphisms of God. But some do take such descriptions literally, leading to departure from orthodox theology—for example, the Mormon’s view of God’s corporeality.¹¹

Moving on to a humorous fallacy,¹² consider the following quote, attributed to comedian Lynn Lavner:¹³

The Bible contains 6 admonitions to homosexuals and 362 admonitions to heterosexuals. That doesn’t mean that God doesn’t love heterosexuals. It’s just that they need more supervision.

Without actually verifying the numbers of admonitions mentioned here, it is clear that this claim commits a fallacy that might be termed *appeal to numbers*.¹⁴ Even if these numbers are true, nothing useful follows.

I end with a fallacious argument that may take on greater use in the current milieu of increasing American patriotic sentiments.¹⁵ To undermine Biblical integrity, some (especially in America) use

¹⁰P. Stahl, “Mind Viruses and Memes,” *Freethinkers of Colorado Springs*, available at <http://www.freethinkerscs.com/articles/memes.html>.

¹¹See E. K. Watson, *Mormonism: The Faith of the Twenty First Century, Volume 1*. Liahona Publications, 1998. See also Shandon L. Guthrie’s essay, “Response to: Man: Made In the Image of God, by Rusty Wells,” <http://sguthrie.net/repmormon.htm>.

¹²*Appeal to humor* is among the commonly listed fallacies of reasoning; see, for example, <http://www.cuyamaca.net/bruce.thompson/Fallacies/humor.asp>.

¹³See http://www.cyberlyle.org/cl_relish3.html.

¹⁴*Appeal to numbers* also refers to the fallacy where a belief is declared true because more people hold the belief than not; see http://atheism.about.com/library/glossary/general/bldef_numbersarg.htm.

¹⁵I am referring to the patriotic sentiments associated with America’s war with Iraq.

the argument that President Thomas Jefferson was so dissatisfied with the Bible that he wrote his own, commonly known as the *Jefferson Bible*.¹⁶ A typical claim is:¹⁷

President Thomas Jefferson was so disturbed by this admixture of dross with the gold, he edited a condensed Bible with the dross removed.

This fallacious argument is based on *appeal to authority* (*argumentum ad verecundiam*). Thomas Jefferson's alleged dissatisfaction with the Bible should be no more significant than Adolf Hitler's views of the Bible in influencing our position on Biblical integrity.

It turns out that the claim that Jefferson questioned Biblical integrity is controversial. Indeed, it has been pointed out that Jefferson was a Christian, and that "his intent for that book was not for it to be a 'Bible,' but rather for it to be a primer for the Indians on the teachings of Christ."¹⁸

¹⁶See <http://www.angelfire.com/co/JeffersonBible>.

¹⁷This quote is from <http://mindprod.com/biblestudy.html>.

¹⁸See <http://www.straight-talk.net/heritage/h-jbible.shtml>.