

Palisades Community Bible Church

Online Sunday School

## What Is The Illusory Truth Effect?

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I'm pretty sure you don't spend a lot of time wondering about the Illusory Truth Effect. Maybe that's about to change....

To answer our title question, let me first ask you another: "Was the universe truly created in seven days, or did it take millions of years?"

Whether you are a Christian, or atheist, you'll struggle with the answer. As an American Christian, you have been educated in the "science" of how the earth was formed over millions and millions of years. Supposedly, all the geological evidence shows that vast amounts of time were involved in the result we call the universe. Though this conflicts with a number of scriptures in the Bible, "most" clergy stick to teachings that are non-controversial. So, the repeated (secular and biblical) teachings tend to be what dominate the Christian's belief on the origin of the universe.

An agnostic, or atheist, has been immersed in the same teachings as the Christian through the same state-run education system and fully believes the Bible is false on the matter of a divinely created universe. Since there is no comparative study on the matter, they stay firmly seated in their assigned beliefs.

What is the operative factor in each of these scenarios? REPETITION. Both the unsure Christian and committed atheist are conditioned by of the "Illusory Truth Effect."

**"Repetition can affect beliefs about truth. People tend to perceive claims as truer if they have been exposed to them before. This is known as the illusory truth effect, and it helps explain why advertisements and propaganda work, and also why people believe fake news to be true."**

Aumyo Hassan & Sarah J. Barber: Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications volume 6, Article number: 38 (2021) Published: 13 May 2021

Can it be that the Christian might be just as wrongly conditioned on a Biblical matter as an atheist? How many Christians actually believe the universe was created in a week? I admit to having struggled with this issue for many years. On the one hand, I believe the Bible – ALL of it. On the other hand, there is so much “scientific evidence” engulfing our society that says millions of years were involved, that Genesis 1 seems better explained in the context of...

**1 Peter 3:8 “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.”**

The pesky little problem with this explanation is that it is talking about God’s infinity, not His act of creating the universe. Consider the context provided by...

**1 Peter 3:3 “Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. 4 They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.”**

**5 But they DELIBERATELY forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. 6 By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. 7 By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.”**

So, time is under the control of God. He created time to be measured by His own creation of the sun, moon and stars and the rotation of the earth. This leaves the serious Bible student with having to recognize the absolute divinity of our God and the fact that all things are fitted into His timetable. It is God’s time frame that is under attack by the atheist view of origin.

The unsure Christian and the atheist may be in full agreement on the matter of the origin of the universe because the manner in which they formed their beliefs may be the same (secular education). Was its simple repetition that caused each to believe what they believe to be true? Or, is there more to it?

Let’s look at the definition from Webster’s. **Belief:** 1. an acceptance that a statement is true or that something exists. 2. trust, faith, or confidence in someone or something.

As the study cited, above indicates, “repetition affects belief.” Advertisers know this, or else 30% of cable TV and free radio would not be commercials. Behavioral science studies show that one of the greatest educational tools available is repetition. The human brain does not accept new information easily, so the more frequently it’s presented, the more readily it’s learned.

The opposite of learning by repetition is “extinction.” If you train your puppy to ‘go’ outside, what do you use most? Repetition. If you don’t keep the repetition up until the puppy KNOWS to ‘go’ outside, you may be scrubbing a floor. If you let the puppy ‘go’ inside often enough, even after he’s been trained, you’ll be buying new carpets. What you taught him can become ‘extinct.’

### **So, What Does This Have To Do With Bible Study?**

I’m glad you asked. Think about the many things you have come to believe in, or about, the Bible. Did you study them for yourself? Did you only hear them second hand? Have you only accepted them because they appear so frequently in sermons? Do you take every word in the Bible literally? How KNOWLEDGABLE are you on the Bible? Do you know why you believe what you believe?

The question before us is not the time frame of creation. Rather, it is the “HOW” of your beliefs and convictions. Have your beliefs about God, the Bible, Jesus, etc., been formed by true study of God’s word? Have they been formed by the things you’ve heard/seen repeated so often that you accept them as true?

If you’ve accepted as true that which has been repeated, and those things are VALID, no problem. Do you know the difference? In other words, if you’re not a great pool player and you sink a ball, is it luck or skill? The amateur will glory in sinking the ball, even if it’s a “lucky roll.” The pro will see a ‘lucky roll’ as a mistake, because he cannot repeat the maneuver at will.

The illustration means; if you fall for a truth, that may just be a ‘lucky roll.’ But, will you fall for a lie in the same way? How will you know? Maturity, righteous judgement, and discernment are a large part of your walk with Christ.

**Matthew 7: 21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”**

Let's see how confident you might be in answering these questions:

- What is the difference between a miracle of God and God's providence?
- Where did Cain get his wife?
- Did Jesus literally descend into hell after dying on the cross?
- Was Jesus born in a stable?
- Does this commandment; 'Thou shalt not take the name of thy Lord God in vain', refer to curse words?
- When you get saved, will your life get better?
- Is money the root of all evil?
- Is this true: In the Old Testament, God is seen as judgmental and vindictive. In the New Testament, God is seen as loving and kind?
- Did the Jews crucify Jesus?
- Does the Bible command wives to be subservient?
- How can the scriptures be reliable if there are so many versions?
- Is it true that God tolerates some sins?
- Can our loved ones who have gone on before us look down from heaven and see us?
- Do animals go to heaven when they die?

I'm not trying to trip anybody up. But, unfortunately, a lot of Christians would fare poorly on this simple set of questions. It's not that getting any of them wrong means the person is not saved. However, it can support the idea that many of our assumptions may have been formed – not by proper Bible study – but by repetitively hearing things.

**James 1:22, But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.**

### **Where Are You Going With This?**

Again, I'm glad you asked. Let's look at another word; **Discernment**. Webster's defines it as the ability to **judge well**. The ability to judge, or discern, between right and wrong, good and bad are critical to maturity. If we are to grow in our Christian walk, we cannot rely on things we hear without knowing whether they comport to the words of God – the Bible.

**John 7:24 “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.**

Wait a second! Aren't Christians commanded NOT to judge? Quite the opposite. But, let's see where this assumption originates:

**Matthew 7: 1 “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.**

Seems pretty plain and clear, right? But the context does not support the assumption. If someone took a picture of the back of your head, would a stranger be able to look at it and recognize your face? We need the full context, right? We also need the context of Jesus' words, here....not just the part that fits into one's argument. Jesus was preaching His 'Sermon on the Mount' and there were peasants, wealthy people, rulers, religious leaders, all listening.

If you look at the original Greek word that was translated; “Judge” you find it actually fits better with the modern English word; “Condemn.” A Judge discerns right from wrong. The law condemns. Jesus was conveying that we have all broken God's law and that condemnation rests upon all of us. In v2, He says we will all be judged by the same measure (as sinners). This applies to every station of a society; king or pauper.

Jesus was NOT saying we should not discern between truth and lie, good and evil. He was saying we are all guilty...equally....of being condemned under the law. He was warning about unrighteous judgement.

If you called a babysitting service for a name, then found that name on a sex offender's list, would you “judge...discern” that you need to find someone else?

...or, would you harken to the stuff you've heard half your life about “not judging?” This is the kind of full understanding that comes from a proper approach to Bible study.

### **The Bottom Line**

The Gallup organization conducted a poll on social and policy issues in May 2017:

- 24% believe Bible is the literal word of God, the lowest in Gallup's 40-year trend
- View of Bible as secular stories and history at 26%, up from 21% in 2014
- The largest segment, 47%, still think Bible is inspired word of God

Fewer than one in four Americans (24%) now believe the Bible is "the actual word of God, and is to be taken literally, word for word," similar to the 26% who view it as "a book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by man." This is the first time in Gallup's four-decade trend that biblical literalism has not surpassed biblical skepticism. Meanwhile, about half of Americans -- a proportion largely unchanged over the years -- fall in the middle, saying the Bible is the inspired word of God but that not all of it should be taken literally.

From the mid-1970s through 1984, close to 40% of Americans considered the Bible the literal word of God, but this has been declining ever since, along with a shrinking percentage of self-identified Christians in the U.S. Meanwhile, the percentage defining the Bible as mere stories has doubled, with much of that change occurring in the past three years.

Still, while biblical literalism has waned, the vast majority of Americans -- 71% - - continue to view the Bible as a holy document, believing it is at least God-inspired if not God's own words.

I'm not trying to be a curmudgeon, here, but I have to wonder what percentage of those who believe the Bible is the inspired word of God arrived at that belief because they STUDY God's word. Or have many just continually heard that the scriptures are inspired then accepted it?

My point is that we American Christians do not have the luxury of simply going with the flow, as our great grandparents may have had. Christianity was a foregone conclusion a hundred years ago. Today, we are in a minority and that percentage is shrinking FAST. If we Christians are going to bless Jesus, and be blessed by Jesus, we need to be in His word.

We cannot expect that a 30-minute sermon once a week is going to teach us all we need to be working through in our walk. When you were in college, you needed 3-5 hours per week per subject – maybe more – of devoted study in order

to pass a course. How can we expect to grow into mature Christians if we simply dabble in the Word of Life?

Furthermore, how can we expect to inspire others to have an interest in God's word if we cannot even make the scriptures come alive for them? Can you tell someone about Daniel in the lion's den, or Esther, or Paul? I truly hope so. These are exciting events that reveal God's character.

**1 Corinthians 4:2, "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful."**

I had a friend who taught Karate. He told me that a lot of tough guys would come into his gym with tons of confidence and not take the lessons and drills seriously. So, he'd pair them with a disciplined kid who would wipe the mat with their face. They'd get up, embarrassed and in pain, and confess that they were ready to learn. I pray that you don't have to experience such a lesson before you open your Bible.

Why not consider spending one of the 167 hours per week that God has blessed you with to study His word? Take it to the Lord and ask His opinion. Don't let the Illusory Truth Effect convince you that you're too cool for school. On the other hand, if you're educated on the Bible, perhaps you can help others learn from your experiences?

**Mark 10:45 "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."**

For heaven's sake, let's put on the entire armor of God so that He can use us!

**Matthew 25: 23 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.'**

By the way....are there 167 hours in a week? NOPE!

167 is a prime number. That means it cannot be divided by any whole number other than 1 and itself. 167 cannot be divided by 7. So, I fibbed! Did you smell a rat, or just accept it? Let's get serious about our Bibles.