



## Stoning and the Cherry Pickers

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Sam Harris : Let Him Who is Without Faith Cast the First Stone

*This essay responds to Sam Harris' assertion that one can justify stoning someone to death for adultery by appealing to the New Testament.*

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### Introduction

When considering Sam Harris' comments about faith, religion, theism, the Bible, Islam, creationism, etc. it may be noteworthy to keep in mind that we are considering the opinions of a man who believes that "Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them. This may seem an extraordinary claim, but it merely enunciates an ordinary fact about the world in which we live."<sup>[1]</sup> A man who seeks to "present an argument for the use of torture in rare circumstances."<sup>[2]</sup> A man who wrote, "Mother Teresa's compassion is very badly calibrated if the killing of 1st trimester fetuses disturbed her more than all of the suffering she witnessed on Earth."<sup>[3]</sup> What more can be said? We are dealing with a man who believes that his worldview is the one true way.

In Sam Harris we are also dealing with a man of whom Daniel Blue has written:

*"Under pressure, Harris reveals ideological biases that will trouble some readers... He seems to loathe Islam with a fury the more surprising because he doesn't seem to know much about it. (His quotes on the subject stem mostly from the works of Bernard Lewis and a university Web site.)"*<sup>[4]</sup>

Sam Harris' Biblical references also appear to be no better researched than the mis-quotations, mis-citations, mis-interpretations, and mis-applications for which he is famous/infamous. As stated above, I will be dealing with his claim that we can justify stoning someone to death for adultery by appealing to the New Testament. While this may seem a succinct claim it is a claim that he saturates with enough assertions and fallacies that it required quite a bit of verbiage to respond to responsibly, fairly, and carefully.

### Cherry Pickers

Sam Harris has lamented that his writings have been misquoted, and *ergo* misapplied, as he refers to:

*"...the fine art of selective quotation to make me appear to hold positions which I do not hold... While I stand by everything I have written in 'The End of Faith'... I cannot be expected to parry every malicious sampling of my text. It is unfortunate..."*<sup>[5]</sup>

While misquotations and misapplications, purposeful or due to sloppy scholarship, ought to be criticized and rectified we seek to demonstrate how Sam Harris himself has engaged upon this practice.

Sam Harris made the following statement during an interview (the question is in **bold**):

*"...the real word of God in Islam is that if you change your religion, you should die for it. **Isn't that also the case in the Bible? Don't we see similar edicts and punishments for apostasy?** Yes ... most Christians think that Jesus brought us the doctrine of grace, and therefore you don't have to follow the law. While it's true that there are other moments in the New Testament when Jesus can be read as saying that you have to fulfill every 'jot and tittle' of the law (this is in Matthew) — and therefore you can get a rationale for killing people for adultery out of the New Testament — most Christians, most of the time, don't see it that way.*

*The Bible is a fundamentally self-contradictory document. You can cherry-pick it.* “[6]

Perhaps we should ask if Sam Harris could provide one single example of one single text that cannot be cherry-picked — I am referring to any text of any literature, from the classics to today’s newspaper. As we read above, Sam Harris himself complained that his own writings have been cherry-picked. We human beings have an amazing, and perhaps unique, desire and ability to justify our actions. Just because someone quotes a verse, or even an extended text, does not mean that they are doing so viably. We can cherry-pick any text, yet it is its original context that determines if the cherries are good fruit. Otherwise, we may find that we are taking a text out of context as a pretext for a proof-text.

Let us also point out the importance of citations. Sam Harris states that what he was referring to “is in Matthew.” Fine, but just where in Matthew? How many of Sam Harris’ supporters, or for that matter anybody, knows the context? In which of Matthew’s 28 chapters is it found? In which of Matthew’s 1,071 verses? How many know *where* in Matthew it is in order to find the context? How many would read the entire Gospel of Matthew in order to ascertain the context? Perhaps we should give Sam Harris a break since he did refer us to Matthew. Although more detail would have been nice even if Blair Golson, who was conducting the interview, had asked for a more precise citation, or provided one in brackets after further research.

## The Gospel of Stoning?

Let us consider the Matthew text to which Sam Harris referred. Jesus states:

*“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.”* (Matthew 5:17-18 NKJV)

We immediately notice that while Sam Harris stated, “Jesus can be read as saying that **you** have to fulfill every ‘jot and tittle’ of the law,” Jesus actually stated that **He** will be fulfilling. But, this must mean that Jesus was not only in favor of

stoning but was to conduct a stoning Himself. Clever attempts at argumentation aside, there are at least three ways to consider what is being said here without committing logical or hermeneutical (relating to or consisting in the interpretation of texts) fallacies.

These are:

- Was Jesus given an occasion to carry out a stoning — and if so, what did He do?
- Did Jesus teach His Apostles / Disciples to carry out stonings — and if so, did they do so?
- At any time in the history of Christendom has the Church practiced stoning — and if so, did they viably justify their actions by appealing to the Matthew text or any other?

First, we note that Jesus was given an opportunity to command a stoning for adultery as found in John 8:2-11:

*“Now early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people came to Him; and He sat down and taught them. Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?’ This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, ‘He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.’ And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, ‘Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.’”*

Firstly, Sam Harris claims that “you can get a rationale for killing people for adultery out of the New Testament,” but Jesus must have missed this.

Secondly, we have no indication of a stoning

being carried out by the Apostles / Disciples.

Thirdly, the Church has never been known to have practiced stoning. And if the Church has attempted to justify its violent and oppressive conduct it has done so in a wholly unviable manner.

Thus, while Sam Harris claims that “you can get a rationale for killing people for adultery out of the New Testament,” we find that in the two thousand years of Christendom no one seems to have noticed this. Jesus did not conduct a stoning (and in fact, rejected an invitation to do so). The Apostles / Disciples did not conduct a stoning. The Church has not conducted a stoning.

Just because “you can get a rationale” does not mean that it is in the least bit viable. In fact, as we saw above, “you can get a rationale” for torturing entire families from Sam Harris’ writings (if you cherry-pick), which is particularly what he was complaining about [7], but not viably. It would seem safe to conclude that: either Sam Harris is the only person in two thousand years who has correctly understood the text of the New Testament or that he is one of many people who for the past two thousand years have sought so diligently to discredit the New Testament that they end up discrediting themselves.

But just how did Jesus fulfill the law? By keeping every single commandment, i.e. by stoning people? No. It may be useful to point out that while there are 613 commandments, that Jews as **individuals** never had to keep them all. This is because some of the 613 were just for priests, some just for kings, some just for certain tribes, some just for men and others just for women etc.

The ultimate fulfillment of the law / commandments appears to have taken place by Jesus’ life and death. Having lived a life that did not violate the law He therefore fulfilled it. Finally, upon breathing His last breath He declared the fulfillment complete. He kept the law and thus became the perfect advocate, or intercessor, for humanity.

*“So when Jesus had received the sour wine [or vinegar], He said, ‘It is finished!’ And bowing his head, He gave up His spirit.” (John 19:30)*

Moments before His death on the cross Jesus cried out “It is finished” or “Paid in full.” The Gospel writers employ the Greek word *tetelestai*, which is the perfect tense of the word *tel-eh'-o* which means: finish, fulfill, accomplish, pay, perform, expire, to bring to a close, to end, passed, complete, to pay. The word *tel-eh'-o* comes from *tel'-os* which means: end, uttermost, finally, ending, termination, the limit at which a thing ceases to be, the last in any succession or series, that by which a thing is finished, its close. The perfect tense in Greek corresponds to the perfect tense in English and describes an action which is viewed as having been completed in the past: once and for all, not needing to be repeated. The Bible repeats over and over that Jesus suffered once, once for all, once and for all in order to pay the price for sin. Thus, the law was fulfilled.

#### Leading By Word and Example

There is further evidence in the New Testament that rejection of the Gospel is to be reacted towards with patience and freedom rather than besmirchment, oppression, or violence (such as stoning). One such instance is when Jesus invited a young man to follow Him:

*“Now behold, one came and said to Him, ‘Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?’ So He said to him, ‘Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.’ He said to Him, ‘Which ones?’ Jesus said, “You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and your mother,” and, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ The young man said to Him, ‘All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?’ Jesus said to him, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.’ But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. ‘And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.’” (see Matthew 19:16-24, Mark 10:17-25 & Luke 18:18-26)*

Jesus points out that the young man's wealth was holding him back from true freedom, he was keeping himself from salvation by his reliance on worldly goods. Jesus shared the truth and let the young man make his own decision.

Another example of how to deal with the rejection of the Gospel is found in the following text:

*"[He] sent messengers before His face. And as they went, they entered a village of the Samaritans, to prepare for Him. But they did not receive Him, because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, 'Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?' But He turned and rebuked them, and said, 'You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them.' And they went to another village."* (Luke 9:52-56)

This text could not be clearer — *"should we kill them for rejecting us, Jesus, the Gospel?"* God forbid!

It may be that unfathomably malicious "Christians" have held to a twisted concept such as: unbelievers are going to hell, so believe or I will send you there right now. However, the New Testament's concept is that since unbelievers are going to hell we should warn them against going there, share with them the way out, and leave them to make a freewill decision.

## Seeming Cessation of Symbolism

Sam Harris wrote:

*"While the stoning of children for heresy has fallen out of fashion in our country, you will not hear a moderate Christian or Jew arguing for a 'symbolic' reading of passages of this sort. (In fact, one seems to be explicitly blocked by God himself in Deuteronomy 13:1 — 'Whatever I am now commanding you, you must keep and observe, adding nothing to it, taking nothing away.')."*[8]

We must be careful when reading the works of Sam Harris as he tends to either pepper his statements with statistics or, as in this case, make very bold and emotionally charged statements.

While in and of themselves, bold and emotionally charged statements are not inaccurate, I would advise caution because it is easy to get so caught up emotionally that research, citations and context seem irrelevant — how does one argue against an emotion?

Let us begin by opening up the Bible and seeing what Deuteronomy 13:1 states:

*"If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder."*

Do what I advise and look it up for yourself - that is all that the verse states. However, perhaps the Bible does state what Sam Harris claims but does so elsewhere. We find that Sam Harris was actually referring to Deuteronomy 4:2; here is the statement from verse 1-6:

*"Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you. 'You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. Your eyes have seen what the LORD did at Baal Peor; for the LORD your God has destroyed from among you all the men who followed Baal of Peor. But you who held fast to the LORD your God are alive today, every one of you. Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."*

In this case Sam Harris mis-cited the quotation. He was also careful enough to include a qualifier to his statement – did you catch it? Reread it carefully. He stated, "...seems to be explicitly blocked by God himself...". The qualifier is "seems" which is fair enough because he did not conclusively state that the Bible states what he claims, but it *seems* to do so – although, he makes the rest of his statements as though the Bible most certainly does. Now we can seek to ascertain whether or not the Bible actually states

it or merely seems to do so.

The context is God's triumph over Baal of Peor, a god whose adherents, to name just one rite, sacrificed their children by fire. God is commanding that such rites not be added to His word. This has nothing to do either with interpretation or symbolism. But how do we know this? Is it just a convenient loop-hole in an attempt at "moderation" in religion" as Sam Harris puts it?[9]

Let us see what the Bible actually states, rather than what Sam Harris thinks that it seems to state. Ezra, the priest and scribe, and some fellow scholars and Levites...

*"brought the Law before the assembly ... read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading."* (see Nehemiah 8:1-9)

This is an indication of reading the text and interpretation ("gave the sense"). But why do interpretations exist? The very moment that someone asks, "What does that mean?" Behold, an interpretation is born. However, all interpretations are not created equal.

Now let us consider Daniel's vision of the image whose "head was of fine gold; his breast and his arms were of silver; his belly and his thighs were of bronze; his legs were of iron; his feet were part of iron and part of clay" (Daniel 2:32-33). There it is, a statue and nothing else, right? Daniel tells King Nebuchadnezzar, "You are this head of gold" (Daniel 2:38). But a moment ago, it was a statue with a head made of the substance known as gold. Is this a contradiction? No, it is symbolism. Daniel then goes on to explain other bits of symbolism, "the fourth kingdom shall be as strong as iron" (Daniel 2:40). Iron was meant to symbolize the strength of iron and so on.

Moreover, Jesus is known for his parables which are stories whose purpose is that they carry a symbolic meaning.

Consider that Mark 16:15 states, "He said to them, Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all the creation" (New American Standard Bible) or as the older King James Bible states, "he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." To "all the creation" and /

or "to every creature." But it is utterly unknown in the history of Christianity that missionaries have preached the gospel to chinchillas, pineapples, mollusks, or lava. Are they not keeping the great commission? Of course they are, but people who read the Bible in order to understand it, instead of simply to disprove it, take such things into consideration.

Lastly, consider the Book of Revelation that includes a statement that is much like the one that Sam Harris alluded to from Deuteronomy:

*"For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and [from] the things which are written in this book."* (Revelation 22:18-19)

However, the Book of Revelation is known to be saturated with symbolism, much of which is explained right then and there. For instance:

*"The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches."* (Revelation 1:20)

Sam Harris proposed that symbolism seems to be explicitly blocked by God Himself, yet we have seen that it is not.

## The Bottom Line

Is the issue that Sam Harris hears Bible believers asserting a literal reading of the text, then takes them to task, and thus demonstrates that Bible believers are not being consistent but are cherry-picking the text? Or is the issue that Sam Harris, and others, do not apply hermeneutics? It appears that they do not take into consideration: historical context, grammatical context, cultural context, etc. They do not consider that to take something literally means to take it **as it is intended**. For example, if there is a historical reference, we take it as a historical reference. If something is symbolic, we take it as symbolic. If it is a metaphor, a figure of speech, etc., etc. we

take it as it comes across in the text.

What Sam Harris is not taking into consideration, what ultimately causes him to discredit himself despite his witty and emotionally charged statements, is that the greater context of the Law of Moses is a judicial system. No one had the right to instantly pelt someone to death with stones. Each case in which the law was thought to have been broken was carefully adjudicated. This began with Moses himself and, with time, only became more refined:

*"... Moses sat to judge the people; and the people stood before Moses from morning until evening. So when Moses' father-in-law saw all that he did for the people, he said, 'What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit, and all the people stand before you from morning until evening?' And Moses said to his father-in-law, 'Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a difficulty, they come to me, and I judge between one and another; and I make known the statutes of God and His laws.' So Moses' father-in-law said to him, 'The thing that you do is not good. Both you and these people who are with you will surely wear yourselves out. For this thing is too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself. Listen now to my voice; I will give you counsel, and God will be with you: Stand before God for the people, so that you may bring the difficulties to God. And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do. Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. And let them judge the people at all times. Then it will be that every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they themselves shall judge. So it will be easier for you, for they will bear the burden with you. If you do this thing, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all this people will also go to their place in peace.' So Moses heeded the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. And Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people: rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. So they judged the people at all times; the hard cases they brought to Moses, but they*

*judged every small case themselves."* (Exodus 18:13-26)

Consider the "eye for an eye" concept which has led to the inaccurate statement: *an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind*. An "eye for an eye" does not mean that if you cause someone to lose their vision (in one or both eyes) that the payback will be that you will be made to lose your vision. What would happen if a blind man causes you to lose your vision? How would he pay for your eye / vision with his? No indeed, since the context is a judicial system, an "eye for an eye" means that you make amends for the value of an eye.

One of the major pits into which Sam Harris, and many other skeptics, falls is that he appears not to take into consideration that reading is about context. Context expands: if a sentence is unclear, consult the sentence before and after it. If the paragraph is unclear, consult the paragraph before and after it. If the chapter is unclear, consult the chapter before and after it. Take the whole work into consideration. If we do not do that we may end up cherry-picking the text and end up claiming something unviable such as: the Bible does not allow symbolism and you can get a rationale for stoning people from the New Testament.

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## References

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[5] Sam Harris, *Sam Harris Strikes Back*.

[6] Blair Golson, *Sam Harris: The Truthdig Interview*.

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[8] Sam Harris, *The First Ten Pages*

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