

# Alleged Errors in the Bible—Part Two

By Dr. Norman Geisler

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## Approaching Bible Difficulties.

As Augustine said above, mistakes come not in the revelation of God, but in the misinterpretations of man. Except where scribal errors and extraneous changes crept into textual families over the centuries, all the critics' allegations of error in the Bible are based on errors of their own. Most problems fall into one of the following categories.

**Assuming the Unexplained Is Unexplainable.** No informed person would claim to be able to fully explain all Bible difficulties. However, it is a mistake for the critic to assume that the explained cannot and will not be explained. When a scientist comes upon an anomaly in nature, he does not give up further scientific exploration. Rather, the unexplained motivates further study. Scientists once could not explain meteors, eclipses, tornadoes, hurricanes, and earthquakes. Until recently, scientists did not know how the bumble-bee could fly. All of these mysteries have yielded their secrets to relentless patience. Scientists do not now know how life can grow on thermovents in the depths of the sea. But, no scientist throws in the towel and cries "contradiction!"

The true biblical scholar approaches the Bible with the same presumption that there are answers to the thus-far unexplained. When something is encountered for which no explanation is known, the student goes on with research, looking out for the means to discover an answer. There is rational reason for faith that an answer will be found, because most once-unsolvable problems have now been answered by science, textual study, archaeology, linguistics, or another discipline. Critics once proposed that Moses could not have written the first five books of the Bible, because Moses' culture was preliterate. Now we know that writing had existed thousands of years before Moses.

Critics once believed that Bible references to the Hittite people were totally fictional. Such a people by that name had never existed. Now that the Hittites' national library has been found in Turkey, the skeptics' once-confident assertions seem humorous. Indications from archaeological studies are that similar scoffings about the route and date of the Exodus will soon be silenced. These and many more examples inspire confidence that the biblical difficulties that have not been explained are not mistakes in the Bible.

**Assuming the Bible is Guilty of Error unless Proven Innocent.** Many critics assume the Bible is wrong until something proves it right. However, like an American citizen charged with an offense, the Bible should be read with at least the same presumption of accuracy given to other literature that claims to be nonfiction. This is the way we approach all human communications. If we did not, life would not be possible. If we assumed that road signs and traffic signals were not telling the truth, we would probably be dead before we could prove otherwise. If we assumed food packages mislabeled, we would have to open up all cans and packages before buying.

The Bible, like any other book, should be presumed to be telling us what the authors said, experienced, and heard. Negative critics begin with just the opposite presumption. Little wonder they conclude the Bible is riddled with error.

**Confusing Interpretations with Revelation.** Jesus affirmed that the “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). As an infallible book, the Bible is also irrevocable. Jesus declared, “Truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:18; cf. Luke 16:17). The Scriptures also have final authority, being the last word on all it discusses. Jesus employed the Bible to resist the tempter (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10), to settle doctrinal disputes (Matt. 21:42), and to vindicate his authority (Mark 11:17). Sometimes a biblical teaching rests on a small historical detail (Heb. 7:4-10), a word or phrase (Acts 15:13-17), or the difference between the singular and the plural (Gal. 3:16).

But, while the Bible is infallible, human interpretations are not. Even though God’s word is perfect (Ps. 19:7), as long as imperfect human beings exist, there will be misinterpretations of God’s Word and false views about his world. In view of this, one should not be hasty in assuming that a currently dominant assumption in science is the final word. Some of yesterday’s irrefutable laws are considered errors by today’s scientists. So, contradictions between popular opinions in science and widely accepted interpretations of the Bible can be expected. But this falls short of proving there is a real contradiction.

**Failure to Understand the Context.** The most common mistake of all Bible interpreters, including some critical scholars, is to read a text outside its proper context. As the adage goes, “A text out of context is a pretext.” One can prove anything from the Bible by this mistaken procedure. The Bible says, “there is no God” (Ps. 14:1). Of course, the context is: “The fool has said in his heart ‘There is no God.’” One may claim that Jesus admonished us “not to resist evil” (Matt. 5:39), but the antiretaliatory context in which he cast this statement must not be ignored. Many read Jesus’ statement to “Give to him who asks you,” as though one had an obligation to give a gun to a small child. Failure to note that meaning is determined by context is a chief sin of those who find fault with the Bible.

**Interpreting the Difficult by the Clear.** Some passages are hard to understand or appear to contradict some other part of Scripture. James appears to be saying that salvation is by works (James 2:14-26), whereas Paul teaches that it is by grace. Paul says Christians are “saved by grace through faith, and that not of ourselves; it is a gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). And, “to the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5). Also, it is “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us” (Titus 3:5-6).

A careful reading of all that James says and all that Paul says shows that Paul is speaking about justification *before God* (by faith alone), whereas James is referring to justification *before others* (who only see what we do). And James and Paul both speak of the fruitfulness that always comes in the life of one who loves God.

A similar example, this time involving Paul, is found in Philippians 2:12. Paul says, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” This appears to say salvation is by works. But this is flatly contradicted by the above texts, and a host of other Scriptures. When this difficult statement about “working out our salvation” is understood in the light of clear passages, we can see that it *does not* mean we are saved by works. In fact, what it means is found in the very next verse. We are to work salvation *out* because God’s grace has worked it *in* our hearts. In Paul’s words, “for it is God who is at work in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

**Teaching on an Obscure Passage.** Some passages in the Bible are difficult because their meaning is obscure. This is usually because a key word in the text is used only once (or rarely), so it is difficult to know what the author is saying unless it can be inferred from the context. One of the best known passages in the Bible contains a word that appears nowhere else in all existing Greek literature up to the time the New Testament was written. This word appears in what is popularly known as the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:11). It is usually translated, "Give us this day our daily bread." The word in question is the one translated "*daily*"—(*epiousion*). Experts in Greek still have not come to any agreement as to its origin, or its precise meaning. Different commentators try to establish links with Greek words that are known, and many suggested meanings have been proposed:

Give us this day our *continuous* bread.

Give us this day our *supersubstantial* (a supernatural gift from heaven) bread.

Give us this day bread *for our sustenance*.

Give us this day our *daily* (or, what we need for today) bread.

Each one of these proposals has its defenders, each makes sense in the context, and each is a possibility based on the limited linguistic information. There does not seem to be a compelling reason to depart from what has become the generally accepted translation, but it does add difficulty, because the meaning of some key word is obscure.

At other times, the words are clear but the meaning is not evident because we are missing some background information that the first readers had. This is surely true in 1 Corinthians 15:20 where Paul speaks of those who were "baptized for the dead." Is he referring to dead believers who were not baptized and others were being baptized for them so they could be saved (as Mormons claim)? Or, is he referring to others being baptized into the church to fill the ranks of those who have passed on? Or is he referring to a believer being baptized "for" (i.e., "with a view to") his own death and burial with Christ? Or to something else?

When we are not sure, then several things should be kept in mind. First, we should not build a doctrine on an obscure passage. The rule of thumb in the Bible is "The main things are the plain things, and the plain things are the main

things." This is called the "perspicuity" (clarity) of Scripture. If something is important, it is clearly taught and probably in more than one place. Second, when a given passage is not clear, we should never conclude that it means something that is opposed to another plain teaching of Scripture.

**Forgetting the Bible's Human Characteristics.** With the exception of small sections such as the Ten Commandments, which were "written with the finger of God" (Exod. 31:18), the Bible was not verbally dictated. The writers were not secretaries of the Holy Spirit. They were human composers employing their own literary styles and idiosyncrasies. These human authors sometimes used *human sources* for their material (Josh. 10:13; Acts 17:28; 1 Cor. 15:33; Titus 1:12). In fact, every book of the Bible is the composition of a *human* writer—about forty of them in all. The Bible also manifests different *human literary* styles. Writers speak from an observer's standpoint when they write of the sun rising or setting (Josh. 1:15). They also reveal *human thought patterns*, including memory lapses (1 Cor. 1:14-16), as well as *human emotions* (Gal. 4:14). The Bible discloses specific *human interests*. Hosea has a rural interest, Luke a medical concern, and James a love of nature. Biblical authors include a lawgiver (Moses), a general (Joshua), prophets (Samuel, Isaiah, et al.), kings (David and Solomon), a musician (Asaph), a herdsman (Amos), a prince and

statesman (Daniel), a priest (Ezra), a tax collector (Matthew), a physician (Luke), a scholar (Paul), and fishermen (Peter and John). With such a variety of occupations represented by biblical writers, it is only natural that their personal interests and differences should be reflected in their writings.

Like Christ, the Bible is completely human, yet without error. Forgetting the humanity of Scripture can lead to falsely impugning its integrity by expecting a level of expression higher than that which is customary to a human document. This will become more obvious as we discuss the next mistakes of the critics.

(continued next week)