

## 10 DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

Thursday Bible Study

ACA Avadi Church

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### Psalm 119:18 -

Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law.

We think that the Bible is a simple book.

- For sure, there are core ideas in the Bible that are straightforward and quite within the grasp of most readers to understand.
- But most of the Bible isn't like that.
- You can't just immediately understand the content of its pages after one read.
- A number of passages take sustained attention for days, weeks, months, and perhaps years.
  
- Because the Bible has references to historical events - some look at it as a History Book
- Because the Bible has many stories - some look at it as a Story Book
- We cannot simply pick up the Bible and read it like a familiar book
- Anyone who has invested serious time into studying Scripture knows that it isn't always easy to understand.

Some of these difficulties include the following:

#### 1. The Difficulty of Time

- The various books of the Bible were written from two to four thousand years ago in an era that has long passed into history.
- 1st 5 Books of the Bible: 1400 BC
- Revelation: 90 AD
  
- More than 1,900 years have passed since its last words were written.
- The world has changed in substantial ways
- Most of us lack essential information about the world "back then"
  
- We may be at a loss to understand what a text means because it involves subjects far removed in the past.
- Consequently there is a time gap that needs to be bridged.

#### 2. The Difficulty of Geography

- Books were written mainly in the Middle East, Egypt and Mediterranean
- Unless we have had the opportunity to visit the places mentioned in the Bible, we lack a mental, visual databank that would aid our understanding of certain events.
- Ancient Israel began in an area known as Canaan, which became modern day Israel, Jordan and Lebanon.
- The area was bordered by the Mediterranean Sea on the west and included desert and mountains, creating a contrast between arid and fertile zones.

- Israel is a small country but with a relatively diverse topography,
- **Israel has four geographic regions—**
  - a. the **185 km long** Mediterranean coastal plain
  - b. the hill regions of northern and central Israel,
  - c. the Great Rift Valley - Running the length of the country from north to south along its eastern border
  - d. the Negev desert in the south which is sparsely populated
  
- The River Jordan, flows southward from Dan in the North
- There it is 500 feet above sea level
- It then falls into the freshwater Lake Tiberias, also known as the Sea of Galilee
- This lies 686 feet (209 metres) below sea level.
- Finally the Jordan River falls into the highly saline Dead Sea,
- This is at 1,312 feet (400 metres) below sea level
- It is the lowest point of a natural landscape feature on the Earth's surface.
  
- Jerusalem (located in the hill country of Judah) has an elevation of 2,474 ft above sea level.
- As you begin to go down the eastern side of the hill country of Judah, you begin the descent into the Jordan Valley whose lowest point is 1,300 ft (400meters) below sea level.
  
- Israel has a wide variety of climatic conditions, caused mainly by the country's diverse topography.
- **There are two distinct seasons:**
  1. a cool, rainy winter (October–April) and
  2. a dry, hot summer (May–September).
  
- Rain fall is light in the south — about 1 inch (25 mm) per year
- In the north it is up to 44 inches (1,120 mm)
  
- The geography influenced everything from the settlers' diets to where they lived.
- Those who herded sheep and goats relied heavily on milk and cheese,
- those who settled in agricultural areas could grow olive trees and grapes. Barley, wheat, lentils and nuts were common staples of the ancient Israeli diet.
- Because Israel bordered the Mediterranean Sea, fish also became an important staple of the daily diet.
  
- Much of ancient Israel's economy relied on either laborers like those who worked the fields or herded sheep, or on crafters who could work the metals and the native clay.
  
- knowledge of geography helps us understand why Jonah, in seeking to avoid God's call to prophesy against Assyria (to the northeast of Israel), headed for Tarshish (far to the west of Israel).

### 3. The Difficulty of Language

3 Languages: Hebrew, Greek & Aramaic

- Style of writing is different for each language
- Most of us who read the Bible are not native Hebrew or Greek speakers, neither are most of us Jewish.
- Even those who speak modern Greek or modern Hebrew are still separated by two to four thousand years of history in which the meaning of words and phrases change.
- Since we are not first-century readers of the original languages, problems can and do occur when we attempt to understand the meaning of some words and phrases.
  
- Many of our problems result in our lack of understanding of the idioms of the day.
- Incomplete knowledge of words and expressions can cause us difficulty in interpreting Scripture.
  
- This is especially true in the Old Testament where some of the words used are found only once in Scripture and nowhere else in the Hebrew language.
- This can create doubt as to their exact meaning.
  
- There are also some difficulties that are due to the grammatical construction in the original language.
- Some of the difficulties we encounter are based upon a wrong understanding of the translation of a text.

### 4. There Are Literary Difficulties in Scripture

- there is the fact that the Bible contains different types of literature.
- The Bible contains **history, law, poetry, songs, wisdom literature, prophecy, personal letters, and apocalyptic literature.**
  
- Historical literature must be interpreted differently from wisdom literature.
- Poetry cannot be understood in the same way as apocalyptic writings.
- A personal letter, while having meaning for us today, may not have the exact application to us as it did to the person(s) to whom it was written.
- Recognizing the fact that the Bible contains different genres is key in avoiding confusion and misunderstanding.

### 5. There Are Cultural Difficulties in Scripture

- Since biblical events took place in a different cultural setting far separated than ours, we need to understand the cultural background to interpret the text accurately.
- On the pages of the Bible we encounter customs, beliefs, and practices that make little sense to us.
  
- The biblical world was essentially agrarian, made up of landowners and tenant farmers using machinery that was primitive by our standards
- Methods of travel that were slow and wearying.
- Different Customs (Domestic, Public, Family, Social customs)

- Different Practices (Food, Eating style, Clothes and Clothing style )
- Different Systems (Economic, Political, Legal)
- Different Habits
- Sports and Entertainment
- Architecture

## 6. Scripture Records Changing Circumstances

- The difficulties are sometimes due to the changing circumstances found in the different passages.

- For example, the Bible says that everything was originally created good.

- The Book of Genesis reads:

Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was excellent in every way.

This all happened on the sixth day. **(Genesis 1:31 NLT)**

- Yet, after humanity sinned against God (Genesis 3), things were no longer good.
- What was true before the fall of humanity was not necessarily true after the fall because of the changed circumstances.

- When we read the Bible, we must appreciate that what was true at one time was not necessarily true afterward.

- There is also the record of laws that have been done away with.

- The New Testament says of these Old Testament laws:

Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. **(Colossians 2:16-17 NASB)**

- The interpreter needs to recognize the progressive character of God's revelation.
- God may add or change certain things He previously revealed.
- While Old Testament believers were forbidden to eat certain foods, this is not the case with New Testament believers.

- For example, the Old Testament forbids the people to eat pork.

- This commandment is rescinded in the New Testament.

- Paul wrote the following about false teachers who commanded people to abstain from, or not eat, certain foods:

### 1 Timothy 4:1-5 NKJV

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, 5 because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

- Failure to recognize that God has revealed His Word progressively will cause all sorts of problems with interpretation, and will cause the reader to assume there are contradictions where there are none.

## 7. The Bible Uses Different Names for the Same People

- Sometimes we find the Bible using a number of different names for the same person.
- This feature can certainly cause the reader difficulty.
- For example, **Ahasuerus** in Esther 1:1 is known to history as **Xerxes**.
- **Esther** herself was also called **Hadassah** (Esther 2:7).

- **The reasons vary for the different names carried by some Bible characters.**

### Reason 1: God changed their names.

In the Old Testament, Abram ("exalted father") becomes Abraham ("father of a multitude") in Genesis 17:5.

Sarai ("my princess") becomes Sarah ("princess") in Genesis 17:15.

And Jacob ("heel-catcher" or "deceiver") becomes Israel ("God's fighter") in Genesis 32:28.

In the New Testament, Jesus changed Simon's name (meaning "one who hears") to Cephas ("rock") in John 1:42.

In each case, the name change reflected the work of God in the individual's life. As God made a promise or changed the nature of the person, He sometimes applied a new name.

### Reason 2: Other people forced a name change.

For example, "Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah" (Genesis 41:45) in order to make Joseph more "Egyptian."

Pharaoh Necho changed the name of King Josiah's oldest son, Eliakim, to Jehoiakim (2 Kings 23:34).

Nebuchadnezzar changed the names of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah to Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in honor of Babylonian gods (Daniel 1:7).

The same thing happened to Hadassah in Persia, whose name was changed to Esther, probably in honor of the goddess Ishtar.

### Reason 3: Because of an event in a person's life or to signify the person's character.

The men of Gideon's town gave him the additional name of Jerub-Baal ("let Baal contend") because, in their minds, Gideon had picked a fight with Baal by destroying that god's altar (Judges 6:32).

Naomi, upon losing her husband and two sons in Moab, returned to Bethlehem calling herself Mara ("bitter").

The name *Mary* is a form of *Mara* (Ruth 1:20).

### Reason 4: Changes aren't really changes at all, but translations from one language to another.

*Cephas*, for example, is the Aramaic form of the Greek name *Peter*; they both mean "rock."

*Joshua* is an Anglicization of the Hebrew form of *Jesus* (see [Hebrews 4:8](#) in the KJV).

*John* is Greek for *Jona* or *Jonah* (compare the KJV and the NIV translations of [John 1:42](#)).

### Reason 5: People in the Bible sometimes had more than one name

In [Matthew 1:9](#), Matthew mentions **Uzziah as the father of Jotham**; however, [2 Kings 15:1-7](#) and [1 Chronicles 3:12](#) say that **Jotham's father was Azariah**.

The passages are easily reconciled by reading a little further in [2 Kings 15](#).

The biblical historian makes it clear that Jotham's father was called both **Azariah (verse 7) and Uzziah (verse 32)**.

Different names, same person.

- In some translations, such as the *King James Version*, the same name is spelled a number of different ways.
- This can add to the confusion.

### 8. There is a Division of the Nation of Israel after Solomon's Reign

- In about the 10th century BCE something took place that dramatically affected the people of Israel and still affects them today.
- It was the great divide, which split the people into the kingdoms of Israel and of Judah.
- Rehoboam, Solomon's son, was rightful heir to the throne and reigned after Solomon's death.
- Jeroboam was a servant who rebelled against Solomon.
- The 10 tribes of Israel made Jeroboam king and the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, along with the Levites, remained with Rehoboam.
- The split was prophesied by the Lord (1 Kings 11:11-13, 29-39) because of Solomon's sin.
- The northern 10 tribes kept the name of Israel.
- They each became strong and independent and created two distinct lineages in history.
- Each had their own kings, and even their own prophets.
- We see throughout the rest of the Old Testament how these two nations fought with one another.
- Sadly, also both Israel and Judah fell into captivity, although to different powers and at different times.
- God sent the Babylonians to capture the House of Judah, and He sent the Assyrians to conquer the House of Israel.

- And while the Babylonian captivity of Judah lasted for a period of 70 years, Israel never fully came out of the Assyrian captivity.
- The Samaritans were considered half-breeds from the House of Israel.
- But many tribes were considered lost.
- Eventually, the northern tribes became the “lost sheep of the House of Israel.”

### 9. There Was Selectivity among the Authors

- Each biblical author is selective in the material he records.
- The omission of certain details, that other authors may include, does not indicate that he is disagreeing with that author.
- Sometimes a writer follows a more topical outline than a chronological one.
- This has caused some to believe there is a discrepancy between two accounts.
- John made this clear about the gospel he wrote:

#### John 20:30-31 ESV

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but **these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**

- From this statement we understand that the author is only giving us a partial report of what he knows to be true.
- Therefore, when he records a story about Jesus that is found in another gospel, we should not expect him to tell us every detail that the other gospel writer records.
- The points that he mentions are those that fit *his* purpose.
- Differing accounts of the same event are not necessarily false accounts.
- The difference can simply be one of perspective.
- An example of this selectivity is found in the genealogy in **Exodus 6:13-27**.
- In this passage only three of the twelve sons of Jacob are listed (Reuben, Simeon, and Levi).
- This is because the author’s purpose is to emphasize two particular descendants of Levi —Moses and Aaron.
- Therefore, he goes no further and does not list the other people in the genealogy.

### 10. We Must Determine Whether the Bible Is Approving or Merely Recording the Event

- Another concern is determining whether the writer is endorsing a statement, or event, or merely narrating it.
- Narrating misconduct does not make one responsible for the actions, nor is it an endorsement of that conduct.
- There are times in which the Scripture accurately records sinful acts without applauding the deeds.

- The Bible gives an accurate picture of the lives of its characters, and often this includes recording their evil actions.
- The life of King David is an example of this. His great deeds of faith are recorded alongside his murder and adultery.
- The entire picture is given for us with nothing whitewashed.
  
- There are many occasions in Scripture where the author tells what happened without giving any commentary on the matter.
- Silence should not be regarded as approval.
  
- Recording some evil deed is not the same as authorizing it.
- Because the Bible does not commend everything that it records, we must always study carefully the context of the particular statement or act.
- When this is done, many of the problems and difficulties will simply vanish.
  
- Even when interpreted properly, the Bible does contain a number of difficulties.
- However, these difficulties, once understood, do not prevent the reader from understanding the teaching of Scripture.

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