

Bible Difficulties and Seeming Contradictions

William Arndt

Revised Edition of
Bible Difficulties and Does the Bible Contradict Itself?

Edited by Robert G. Hoerber
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Preface

The popularity of Dr. Arndt's books, *Does the Bible Contradict Itself?* and *Bible Difficulties*, which have served several generations, indicates that these two works merit an updating for the benefit of successive students of Scripture. Such revision has been done by the undersigned. The contents of the two books now appear under one cover, and the indices have been combined. Topics either added or expanded are initialed at the end of each section.

Dr. Arndt's use of the King James Version has been updated with The New King James Version. In our judgment, the NKJV sticks closely to the text of the original languages while retaining the literary quality of the Bible that nurtured and edified Christians for centuries.

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General Considerations

Are There Difficult Passages in the Scriptures?

It might seem to some readers that the title of this volume reflects negatively on our Holy Book and that we should not speak of difficult passages in the Bible. If it is the Word of God given to lead us to salvation, then it must be without blemish, clear, and intelligible. To say then that there are difficulties in it apparently does not agree with its divine origin and with its exalted character as our one and only guide to heavenly life. It is not the object of this volume to deny the divineness, clearness, and intelligibility of the Scriptures.

We must not forget, however, that the Bible itself declares that there are some things in it which are difficult to understand. Let the reader open the Scriptures at 2 Peter 3:16 and see what Peter says about the epistles of Paul. He states that in them there are “some things hard to understand, which those who are untaught and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.” The apostle does not say that all or many things in Paul’s writings present difficulties; he is merely referring to some things. Now, if there are some things in Paul’s letters that can be designated as difficult, it is not improbable that there are some things in the other sections of the Bible also which are not easy to comprehend.

Our experience bears this out. The Bible reader will now and then come upon a verse or paragraph that makes him or her ask: “What does this mean?” Like the eunuch reading the prophet Isaiah (Acts 8:27–39), he or she will be puzzled by the language of the sacred writers. Numerous commentaries on the Scriptures, written by devout Christian scholars, confirm the view that here and there a difficult passage appears in the Bible. Although it is not the sole purpose of commentaries to explain difficulties, this is at least one of their objectives.

The difficulties which are pointed to in the Bible by its friends and its foes are of many kinds. The great majority of them are entirely of the person’s own making and will vanish when prayerfully studied. A few are due to our inability to understand the language of the holy writers in the respective passages. Others must be attributed to our ignorance of historical, geographical, economic, and social conditions at the time when the books of the Bible were written. Some people maintain that they find difficulties in the Scriptures on moral grounds, thinking that there are statements in them which are objectionable and harmful. Others believe that they have found instances where science and the Bible clash and the statements of the latter are not tenable. Some passages seem to contradict each other, and this has caused some people to stumble.

It is the intention of this book to discuss the chief difficulties and seeming contradictions which people encounter in their Bible reading. The former will be discussed in part 1 and the

latter in part 2. But before taking up particular passages, we wish to look at what our attitude should be toward the Bible in general. First, the doctrine that the Bible is inspired will be examined.

The Biblical Doctrine of Inspiration

Among the many great subjects which the Bible discusses is its own nature, origin, and purpose. Just as the Scriptures tell us about Christ the God-man and Savior, so they tell us about themselves. Therefore, in speaking of the inspiration of the Scriptures, we are treating one of the doctrines of Holy Writ. Whether this doctrine is true or not is a separate question, which we shall touch on later; but for the present let us fix our attention on the Bible's teaching about itself. Without presenting an exhaustive treatment, we shall merely mention some points that appear most important and conclusive.

One cannot read the New Testament with any degree of care without observing that it offers clear and striking testimony about the character of the Old Testament. Recall what Jesus, our Lord, has to say about it. When He is tempted by the devil, He vanquishes the foe by means of quotations from the Scriptures (Matt. 4:1–11). We realize that at the time of His life among human beings the Old Testament was the only part of the Scriptures in existence. "It is written," He says three times. A majestic, powerful declaration! It recognizes the Old Testament Scriptures as a divine norm, standard, and authority. Jesus does not submit these Old Testament texts for discussion, but uses them to combat Satan. If we had nothing else from the lips of Jesus, this brief statement alone would indicate that the Old Testament was regarded by Him as possessing divine authority.

Another passage is Matthew 22:43–44, where Jesus, quoting the 110th Psalm, says: "How then does David in the Spirit call Him [that is, the Messiah] 'Lord?'" In referring to this holy song of David, Jesus declares that David produced it "in the Spirit," that is, by the Spirit, namely, the Spirit of God.

Well known are the words of Jesus recorded in John 10:35: "And the Scripture cannot be broken." It is a statement which must be studied in its context. The Jews had accused Jesus of blasphemy because He had said that He and the Father are one, ascribing deity to Himself. Then He points out to them that in their own Holy Book, the Old Testament, the title "gods" was applied to people who were receiving the Word of God, namely, the judges of Israel. The passage He alludes to is Psalm 82:6: "I said, 'You are gods, and all of you are children of the Most High.'" The argument of Jesus runs thus: God Himself gave the judges of Israel the exalted title "gods," and that is an appellation which no one can take from them because the Scripture cannot be broken, since it is of inviolate and absolute authority; how much less, then, should anybody be offended when He who had come from the bosom of the Father above called Himself the Son of God! "The Scripture cannot be broken." Olshausen is right when in his commentary he interprets these words of Jesus to mean that "the Scripture, as the expressed will of the unchangeable God, is itself unchangeable and indissoluble." God has spoken, and His Word no one can set aside—thus one may paraphrase this saying of our Lord. It implies quite distinctly the divine origin and authority of the Scriptures. And what makes this saying of Jesus particularly impressive is that it pertains to one word or expression in the Old Testament, not to a doctrine or a general truth. It teaches that not even single terms employed in the Scriptures can be disregarded, even if their function is subordinate.

2 TIMOTHY 3:16

One of the chief passages to cite here is 2 Timothy 3:16: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” It is the text from which the term “inspiration” has been derived. According to the context, Paul has in mind particularly the Old Testament Scriptures, which Timothy had known from childhood (3:15). But the text could include also part of the New Testament which already had been written and circulated, for Paul in 1 Timothy 5:18 includes under Scripture a citation from Jesus found in both Matthew (10:10) and Luke (10:7): “The laborer is worthy of his wages.” (RGH)

Some versions, as Luther does, render 2 Timothy 3:16 thus: “Every Scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness.” The apostle here presents teaching on the origin of the Scriptures, which he has spoken of in the preceding verse. There he has given them the attribute “holy.” Here he calls them “inspired of God.” Literally translated, this term means God-breathed. It is a beautiful figure which he uses, signifying that just as our breath proceeds from us, so the Scriptures have come from God.

If the objection is made that Paul, according to the latter translation, does not ascribe this quality to all the Scriptures, but that his meaning could be: If a Scripture is inspired of God, then it is likewise profitable, etc., and that hence we are not justified in basing on this passage our doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible or any part of it, we must reply that Paul certainly does not wish to make merely a hypothetical statement. On the contrary, when he follows up his remark on the power of the Holy Scriptures in verse 15 with the declaration that every God-breathed Scripture is also profitable for doctrine, etc., the unbiased reader at once perceives that the apostle is alluding to the very writings which he has spoken of before in such high terms and that he merely varies the expression, using “God-breathed” instead of “holy.” Every such God-breathed Scripture as he has made mention of is also profitable for doctrine, etc.—that is his meaning.

2 PETER 1:21

Peter makes a noteworthy statement about the holy penmen of God of the Old Testament when he says, 2 Peter 1:21: “Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” The preceding verse shows that the apostle is discussing the Holy Scriptures (“knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation,” v. 20). How did these Holy Scriptures originate? Holy men of God spoke, but they spoke as the Spirit of God moved them. What they said was in a sense their own product, and yet we have to say that it was not only their own product, but also the Word of the Holy Spirit.

In Hebrews several Old Testament passages are directly ascribed to the Holy Spirit as author. Thus when Psalm 95:7–11 is quoted, the passage is introduced by the words “As the Holy Spirit says” (Heb. 3:7; cf. Heb. 10:15). Many more passages of like tenor could be mentioned; but those that we have cited should suffice to show that, according to the New Testament, the Old Testament writings owe their origin to God, particularly to the Holy Spirit.

STATUS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Now, what of the New Testament? About it, too, we have Scripture declarations showing that it is of divine origin. As the titles of the various books indicate, they came from the pens of apostles and assistants of apostles. These men were endowed with the Holy Spirit and were made the infallible teachers of the church. When they spoke and wrote, it was really the Spirit of God who was speaking and writing. In proof of this important, far-reaching statement we can point to John 14:26: "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you." Matthew 10:20 affirms: "For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you." In 1 Corinthians 2:13 Paul declares: "These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual."

Let the reader furthermore remember that the Christian church, according to the words of Paul, is built not only on the prophets, but also on the apostles; in fact, the latter are mentioned first (Eph. 2:20). They rank with the inspired prophets of old, their writings being as much God-breathed as those of Moses and Isaiah. Compare 2 Peter 3:2: "That you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior." In addition we must cite the passage to which we referred previously: "As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which those who are untaught and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures" (2 Peter 3:16). Let the reader here note the words "the *rest of the Scriptures*." Peter is referring to Paul's epistles and assigns them the rank of Scripture; for in speaking of the rest of the Bible, he uses the term "the *rest of the Scriptures*." It is clear, then, that if we regard the writings of the apostles in the light of New Testament teaching, they must be viewed as being of divine origin, having been produced by the Holy Spirit.

INSPIRATION NOT MECHANICAL

A few general remarks need to be added here. While the Bible clearly indicates that God employed human beings to do the work of writing (cf. Matt. 1:22: "Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet"), there is nothing in Scripture to make us assume that the holy writers were mere machines, who in a mechanical manner were jotting down what was being dictated to them. On the contrary, the evidence we have makes such a view impossible. To point to but one circumstance, the epistles of Paul, while truly inspired, are evidently not merely something he passed on to others as a secretary, but they are the outflowings of the great heart of this remarkable servant of God. Compare Romans 15:15: "Nevertheless, brethren, I have written more boldly to you on some points, as reminding you, because of the grace given to me by God." Galatians 4:19–20 asserts: "My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you, I would like to be present with you now and to change my tone; for I have doubts about you." Galatians 6:11 declares: "See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand!" To assume that Paul was acting solely as a dictating machine would be to contradict his explicit statements.

Furthermore, the Scriptures teach that not only parts of the Bible, but all of it, and not merely its thoughts, but its very words have come from God. Scripture is declared to be God-

breathed, and we know it consists of sentences and words. “It is written,” says the Savior, appealing to the exact words as recorded in the Bible (Matt. 4:1–11). Paul likewise in Galatians 3:16, when referring to the Old Testament prophecy, stresses the fact that the singular is used and not the plural, saying: “Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed,’ who is Christ.” In his view every word of the Scriptures is God-given. We therefore have to reject the view that only the ideas or doctrines of the Bible may be considered inspired, but not the very words.

PROOF OF THE BIBLE’S TRUTHFULNESS

In the above paragraphs we glanced at what the Bible says about itself—the Scriptural doctrine of inspiration. The testimony of the Bible as to its origin and character is the chief factor inducing us to believe it to be inspired. The objection which is hurled against this position is that it will not do to prove the Bible’s inspiration by an appeal to what it says about itself (proving inspiration by assuming inspiration, as it is called); that, when a stranger comes to us, we are not satisfied to have him establish his identity by what he asserts about himself; but that identification has to be made by a reliable third party. However, the Bible has proved its worth and reliability to Christians; for that reason they can accept its statements without hesitation. You may be skeptical when strangers approach you using very complimentary language about themselves. But if a stranger befriends you before you can befriend him, if he shows himself a trustworthy, reliable person, you do not reject his statements when he gives an account of himself.

Think of how the Bible has given evidence of its truthfulness and credibility! It has told us of our sins, holding up to our view as in a mirror the condition of our hearts. It has told us of the judgments of God which we have deserved, and our conscience has confirmed the dread sentence of condemnation. Next it has told us of the help which the love of God has prepared for us poor sinners, speaking in such a convincing, winning way that our hearts were melted and we joyfully accepted the message of God’s mercy, finding there the peace and rest which we elsewhere had sought in vain. Moreover, by its proclamation of reconciliation and pardon it influences our lives so that we become different people, new creatures, serving God and our neighbor with a glad heart, anxious to please our Father in heaven. Thus it has proved that it is a divine force. You will not mistrust the stranger who assists you in many ways, who risks his own life to save yours when you are in danger and leads you to realize visions of happiness you had long entertained in vain. He ceases to be a stranger and becomes your friend, and you would spurn the thought of requesting him to identify himself by the witness of a third party. Similar is the case of the Bible as Christians view it. The truthfulness of the Book is apparent. Why should we believe everything else it says, but hesitate to accept what it tells us about its origin?

Infallibility of the Bible

A corollary of the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible is the teaching that it is infallible. If the Bible comes from God in every part, it is infallible. God—of that we are sure—will neither err nor willfully deceive us. If He did either, He would not be God, the holy, the omniscient Creator. Since the divine authorship of the Bible is settled for us, its infallibility follows as a

matter of course. Besides, there are clear Scripture declarations teaching the infallibility of the Bible. Psalm 119 has some specific statements to this effect. In verse 160 we read: “The entirety of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever.” Verse 140 exalts the Scriptures thus: “Your Word is very pure; therefore Your servant loves it.” To New Testament writings the words of Paul apply: “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle” (2 Thess. 2:15). These passages imply that the writings of the apostles and prophets, as they left the hands of their inspired authors, were without error. (RGH)

The Bible’s Chief Theme Is Christ and His Salvation

One great danger for people who engage in studies like the one we are starting is that the Bible may become for them a book of puzzles and problems, which engage their attention and industry to such an extent that they have no time for anything else in the Scriptures and are reading them solely with an eye to difficulties. It is very regrettable if anyone uses the Book of Life in such a fashion. The same thing is true of the person who reads the Bible merely on account of the exalted poetry it contains or its pure, forceful language. It is true also of the person who wishes to use it simply as a source book in historical and archaeological research and of the students who have been told that the Bible contains some of the best short stories that were ever written and who page through the sacred volume in quest of great literature. These people are right in a way—the Bible does offer what they are looking for; and yet they are wrong, because, in searching for pearls, they fail to lay hold of the one truly precious pearl, the pardon of God provided by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. These people are as foolish as the prisoner who is sent a letter of pardon by the governor and who admires the envelope, the seal, the beautiful script of the governor’s note, but fails to acquaint himself with its contents.

The purpose of the Scriptures is beautifully stated by Paul in 2 Timothy 3.15–17: “And that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” To bring us to faith in Christ Jesus, to teach us divine, heavenly truths, to correct us when we fall into error or sinful ways of living, to inform us as to the ways in which our God delights, and finally to lead us to heaven, that is the real purpose of the Bible. Its aims are spiritual. In dealing with some difficulties, it will be helpful if we bear this in mind. When we now and then find information on historical matters to be rather meager, when our curiosity is not satisfied with what is offered, when scientific data are not furnished, then let us ask ourselves whether the reason for what we count a disappointing feature does not lie in the special purpose of the Bible, to lead us to salvation by faith in Christ Jesus. (RGH)

The Bible Is a Clear Book

In giving consideration to the passages of the Scriptures that have been called difficult, we must likewise adhere to the fundamental principle that the Bible is a clear book in spite of all the talk of obscure sections and the great number of commentaries. Little details may have some darkness hovering over them, but the two great themes of the Scriptures, sin and grace, or Law

and Gospel, are treated with magnificent clarity, and the hearer whose heart is attuned to these central notes finds the lessons of the Scripture very intelligible. We are well aware that some people will call the Bible a hopelessly obscure volume, namely, all those who wish to understand what finite minds simply cannot grasp: the nature of God, the creation of the world out of nothing, the mysteries connected with Christ's person and work, the resurrection of all bodies at the end of the world, and similar things. Those who approach the Bible expecting to find information that shows, for instance, by means of what chemical process the omnipotence of Jesus changed water into wine, will be sadly disappointed. God and His works are spoken of; they are not explained in scientific formulas.

This makes many sections of the Bible unacceptable to those who reject as untrue whatever they cannot comprehend. Christians however, who trust in God's power and truthfulness, will not experience much difficulty when reading the Scriptures. Although they cannot demonstrate the truth of its statements on supernatural things by laboratory methods, what the statements signify is perfectly sensible to them. For example, they know of no reason why they should call the account of the raising of Lazarus after he had been dead several days an obscure passage. It is very true that they cannot show scientifically how Jesus performed this miracle (except by pointing to the deity of our Lord), but the narrative of this great miracle has nothing in it which they would call obscure. With this attitude we can understand those Scripture passages that call the Bible a light: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and light to my path" (Ps. 119:105); "The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple" (Ps. 119:130); "We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:19). (RGH)

Further Principles in Dealing with Difficult Scripture Passages

There are several other important general considerations which the Bible student ought to bear in mind when confronted by Scripture passages which appear difficult. The following discussion is not intended to be exhaustive; but we hope that readers will be benefited by it.

1. By all means, when we have come upon a Scripture passage which is causing us trouble, let us look at it prayerfully. What will a pious, obedient, loving child do when he hears the father make a remark which on the surface appears objectionable? Instead of criticizing him and condemning his utterance as wrong, the child will ask him for an explanation. If we find stumbling blocks in the Holy Scriptures, let us take the attitude of such a loving child. Many obstacles will be removed at once when God is implored for light and help. The grand promise: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Luke 11:9), will be fulfilled, and the pages of the sacred Book will become more luminous to us.

2. Hand in hand with the spirit of prayer must and will be found the spirit of humility. Those who approach the Bible thinking that their intellectual powers are quite capable of solving all difficulties, will either have to change their attitude, or they will soon flounder in the mire of unbelief. We should never forget the prayer of Jesus: "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight" (Matt. 11:25-26). The mysteries of God's revelation require humble hearts in order to receive them. The proud and

the haughty will turn away from the rich banquet table of God's holy Word without satisfying their hunger, while the meek and lowly find manna for their famished souls.

3. Another important piece of advice to give to all who speak of difficulties in the Scriptures is that they must not be satisfied with reading the passages in question once or twice, but must reread them again and again. Experience has shown that persistency in the study of difficult portions of the Scriptures will frequently yield surprisingly gratifying results. (WRR, RGH)

SCRIPTURE MUST INTERPRET ITSELF

4. One of the basic principles of Biblical interpretation is to let the Bible interpret itself. Where this principle is applied, not only will mistakes be avoided which are very commonly made, but difficulties will be overcome which can be solved in no other way. For example, we are all familiar with the cry of woe our Savior uttered on the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). No doubt many have wondered why Matthew and Mark, after reporting this cry, tell us that at once one of the bystanders took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a reed, and gave it to Jesus to drink. The matter is fully explained in John 19:28, where we are told that Jesus uttered another cry: "I thirst," which induced a bystander to take the action reported.

To give another example or two: Many a Bible reader has been perplexed when reading about Esau: "For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears" (Heb. 12:17). The reader might think that the Holy Book here states that Esau was not permitted to repent even though he wished to become a different person. But let us compare Scripture with Scripture. Turning to Genesis 27:34-40, where the story of Esau is first told, we find our difficulty removed. The latter passage shows that the repentance which Esau was seeking with tears was a change of mind *in his father*, whom he sought to persuade to bless him also. The Greek word for repentance literally means "change of mind." What Esau was denied, then, was not permission personally to undergo a change of heart, but to induce his father to alter his decision.

When Christians read the regulations concerning Old Testament sacrifices, they may wonder what purpose God had in mind when He ordered those numerous bloody ceremonies. This subject is far too complex and profound for a brief paragraph, but the point to be emphasized is that the patient Bible reader will find light in the Holy Book itself on this question. In Hebrews we read: "For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect" (10:1). The Law had a shadow of the good things to come, says the holy writer. These words throw light on the Old Testament ceremonies, which we too often are apt to find meaningless. The sacrifices, as the statement declares, could not make those perfect who offered them; but they were a shadow of the good things to come. They pointed forward and thus were prophetic, directing the gaze of the worshiper to that one great sacrifice which was to make full atonement for all sins. In this manner Scripture interprets Scripture.

5. Again, it is necessary to remember that in reading the English Bible we are dealing with a translation. While most are good translations, there is always the possibility that a certain difficult verse or word has not been rendered adequately. Now and then a reference to the

original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, or to another translation, will quickly clear up a difficulty which confronts us. Consider for instance Philippians 3:20, where the King James Version reads: "For our *conversation* is in heaven." This is an obscure statement to most readers. Even those who recall that formerly the English word "conversation" was used in the sense of conduct will find Paul's words hardly intelligible. The fog disappears at once, however, when the New King James Version is consulted, where the words in question read: "For our *citizenship* is in heaven." What a flood of light the word "citizenship" throws on the passage, and what a beautiful and important message rings out when the verse is thus rendered! Living here on earth, we are in reality citizens of heaven; our true home is above. (RGH)

INTERPRETATION OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

6. Furthermore, we must not overlook that certain passages or sections in the Scriptures are written in figurative language. Every Bible reader will at once think of the Book of Revelation, which is full of striking symbols and figures. All will agree that figurative language must not be treated as if the statements were to be taken literally. That would be doing violence to the meaning of the author. When a writer uses metaphors, he means his readers to understand him metaphorically. When, for instance, Scripture speaks of the "right arm" of God, it is not saying that God has a human body. In this case we are dealing with a figure of speech which has reference merely to the power of God. It is a metaphor which we still employ. Thus when we say that the strong hand of a certain political dictator crushes all opposition, no one will take this statement literally. The reverse of this principle is true also, namely, that an expression which is devoid of figurative features must not be interpreted symbolically. The dividing line between these two types of language is not always easily drawn. Here, too, the prayerful and humble Bible reader will progress in insight and knowledge.

7. Another major principle of Biblical interpretation is that we must interpret obscure and figurative passages by those that are clear and contain no metaphors. No matter who the author is, it is only fair that we interpret less intelligible utterances in the light of those which are perfectly clear. The unity of the Scriptures, the fact that one Author is speaking in all the books, from Genesis to Revelation, compels us to apply this principle in interpreting any part of the Bible. It follows that, since the New Testament fulfills the Old, we must interpret the writings of the Old Covenant by those of the New. If we proceeded in the reverse fashion, we would be unfair to our Holy Book.

THE CONTEXT

8. Again, we must remember to examine carefully the context of the passage under consideration. How unfair, for instance, to take the words of Jesus, "Do this and you will live" (Luke 10:28), out of their context and to interpret them to say that Jesus taught workrighteousness. Looking at the context in which these words were spoken, we see that He addresses them to a self-righteous lawyer who has just quoted the two chief commandments of the Law and to whom Jesus wishes to bring home the insufficiency and weakness of all his efforts. Similarly, the words of Jesus spoken of the sinful woman, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much" (Luke 7:47), might be interpreted to mean that love procures forgiveness. However,

a study of the context, especially of the parable Jesus told on this occasion (w. 40–43), shows that the love referred to here is the result of the forgiveness, much grace and mercy producing much love. (RGH)

9. Finally, the historical circumstances must be given consideration in studying a difficult passage. Often careful scrutiny of the time in which an author lived and the circumstances under which he wrote will shed light on the meaning of statements which at first appear puzzling to us. For instance, when John says, “Every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God” (1 John 4:3), we are surprised at the description of anti-christian spirits. Why are they characterized as spirits that do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh? The whole matter becomes very clear when we learn that John is opposing false teachers who taught the wicked doctrine that the Jesus who had lived on earth was different from the Christ, the Messiah, and that the Messiah had not assumed human form in Him. It is in opposition to these heretics that John writes, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

If the above brief directions, which are not meant to be exhaustive, are followed, most of the difficulties which people find in reading the Scriptures will disappear, and the Bible will appear more lovely and full of helpful meaning than ever.

We shall now look at some passages labeled difficult, it being our hope that the reader, by being shown how some of these difficulties can be overcome, will be enabled to solve others which are not specifically treated in this volume. (RGH)

PART 1

Bible Difficulties

CHAPTER 1

Miracles

Nature of Miracles

A frequent criticism of the Bible is that it relates things which are improbable or downright impossible; in other words, that it reports miracles as historical facts. The accounts under consideration are not attacked as obscure, but as untrue. Here we evidently have a large class of passages causing difficulty to some people, and we have to look a little more closely at them. A miracle is an act which transcends human powers of accomplishment and human ability of explanation. It is not an unnatural occurrence, but a supernatural one. At times it may be exactly like a natural event; but the conditions under which it takes place are such that we classify it as a miracle, for instance, when rain comes in answer to prayer, as in the case of Elijah (1 Kings 18:41–46; James 5:17–18).

When a miracle takes place, God Himself intervenes and makes His presence felt in a special manner. Egypt was visited by a destructive hailstorm when Pharaoh refused to let the children of Israel depart in obedience to the command of God (Ex. 9:22–35). Although hailstorms are perfectly natural occurrences, this particular one constituted a miracle because of its extraordinary vehemence and because it was sent by God as a special sign and as a punishment for the wickedness of the Egyptian king. The Bible is full of reports of miraculous happenings. The chain of such events begins in the first chapter, in the story of the creation of the world, and it continues to the last chapter, where the message of an angel who brought revelations to John is recorded (Rev. 22:8). These miracles are of many different kinds, some occurring in nature, others, on and in people; some visible, others invisible; some bringing health, others bringing punishment; some performed without human agents, others, through prophets and apostles. If we were to take everything miraculous out of the Bible, how little there would be left!

Why Are the Accounts of Miracles Rejected by Some People?

It is just this miraculous element in the Scriptures which is the chief stumbling block for many people when they are asked to submit to the guidance of the Bible. Unbelievers and agnostics who publicly and loudly opposed the divine character of the Scriptures, such as Tom Paine, Voltaire, and Robert Ingersoll, objected especially to the accounts of miracles. These critics

contend that miracles are impossible and that hence all these narratives of supernatural occurrences must be untrue. Miracles are not happening today, they did not happen in ancient times either—so runs the argument. What shall we say?

If a person does not believe in a personal God who has made and who governs the universe, heaven and earth and all they contain, it is natural for him or her to reject the Scripture accounts of miracles. The atheist is consistent when refusing to believe they can occur. But we hope that no reader of this book will adopt the view of the fool who says in his heart: “There is no God” (Ps. 14:1). It is of no use to argue with such people about the credibility of the Scriptures. Agreement has to be reached on something more fundamental before there can be profitable discussion, namely, on the question of the existence of God. The Biblical narratives throughout presuppose the grand truth that God “*is*, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6).

It cannot be denied, however, that there are people who do not wish to be atheists, but who nevertheless doubt the possibility of miracles. God works according to certain laws, the laws of nature, they maintain, and nothing can happen that is contrary to these laws. This is an extraordinary position to assume, we reply. To believe in an almighty and omniscient God, on the one hand, and to deny, on the other, that He can set aside, suspend, or transcend the laws of nature is an obvious inconsistency. Who is it that is God, the laws of nature or the One who has made nature with its laws? (RGH)

Two Important Considerations Concerning Miracles

Looking at the matter calmly, we have to say that it is unscientific to begin with the assumption that miracles cannot happen. How does one know? Science demands that an investigator have an open mind. The question whether miracles do happen is entitled to the same fair treatment as other questions. Just as one would hardly deny in advance that a new comet has been discovered, so one should not presuppose that miracles are out of the question. The position of Voltaire, who is said to have declared that, even if a miracle were performed in the market place before his eyes, he would not accept it, is grossly unscientific. The only question which is justified is whether there is any proof that the miracles related in the Scriptures actually occurred.

In a brilliant little book on radical Gospel criticism (*Die Modernen Darstellungen des Lebens Jesu*) Gerhard Uhlhorn, a celebrated German theologian, looks at the question whether the position that the Biblical miracles did not happen is tenable from the point of view of the scientific historian. For argument's sake he waives the inspiration of the Scriptures. One miracle the fair-minded critic will have to admit, he points out, and that is the greatest of them all: the resurrection of Christ. Even if one regards the New Testament as nothing but a collection of ordinary human documents, one will have to grant that this event occurred; the evidence for it is simply overwhelming. The same conclusion is reached, for instance, by the English author who, assuming the pen name Frank Morison, in 1930 published a book entitled *Who Moved the Stone?* What makes the verdict most impressive is that Morison started out to prove the very opposite of what he ultimately found to be true. The remarkable cases of Lord Lyttleton and Gilbert West are also very heartening instances of this nature. The former set out to disprove the miraculous element in the conversion of Paul, the latter the resurrection of Christ. When they met to compare notes, they confessed that they had been conquered by the evidence of

the Bible. It is not in keeping with the plan of this book to insert here a lengthy discussion on the evidence for the resurrection of our Savior. We must be content with quoting a paragraph from Frederic W. Farrar's *Life of Christ* (chapter 62) in which he summarizes well the facts which even the unbeliever, if fair-minded, will have to grant: "That His body had not been removed by His enemies; that its absence caused to His disciples the profoundest amazement, not unmingled in the breasts of some of them with sorrow and alarm; that they subsequently became convinced, by repeated proofs, that He had indeed risen from the dead; that for the truth of this belief they were ready at all times themselves to die; that the belief effected a profound and total change in their character, making the timid courageous and the weak irresistible; that they were incapable of a conscious falsehood and that, even if it had not been so, a conscious falsehood could never have had power to convince the disbelief and regenerate the morality of the world; that on this belief of the resurrection were built the still universal observance of the first day of the week and the entire foundations of the Christian Church—these at any rate are facts which even skepticism itself, if it desires to be candid, can hardly fail, however reluctantly and slowly, to admit."

Firmly believing, then, that the merely historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is absolutely convincing, we say that here we have a miracle whose acceptance is not conditioned by belief in the infallibility of the Bible and whose actual occurrence cannot be successfully denied. But if this one miracle took place, then the possibility of the occurrence of miracles has to be granted, and the position of those who deny that miracles ever happened becomes untenable. Considerations like this should help persons who balk at Bible stories of miraculous events to overcome their prejudice and to listen to the message of the Scriptures. (RGH)

Miracles and Our Times

Miracles do not happen today, we are told. Why should we assume that they did occur in days of old? Is it really true that there are no longer any miraculous events? There are but few believers in the Savior who cannot point to an occasion where God heard their prayer when the outlook was desperate and He furnished them the help they needed.

An explanation which has frequently been advanced regarding the relative absence of signs and wonders in our own day, and which does not seem farfetched, is that miracles no longer are needed as they were in the days when the church was founded. At that time, when skepticism and unbelief were encountered by the disciples of Jesus on all sides and the question was heard, "How will these people prove that the new message they proclaim is true?" it was of utmost importance that confirmation should come to their proclamation by special acts of God. Now that the church is established, it is sufficient that its message be proved true by the influence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians. The absence of spectacular signs and wonders in our days therefore can well be accounted for and need not disturb anyone. (WRR)

Clearness of the Accounts

As we examine a little more particularly some Biblical accounts of miracles, we shall soon perceive that these narratives do not need many comments, as though they were unclear. They are wonderful and awe-inspiring, but not obscure, as a rule.

The story of the collapse of the walls about Jericho can be understood by every reader of ordinary intelligence; no commentary is required to elucidate its language. How God did it, what unseen forces He summoned to hurl the proud battlements to the ground, whether He perhaps sent an ordinary earthquake, which rocked the region so violently that the walls were rent and thrown down, is something we cannot tell because the inspired narrative is silent on this point. But what we wish to stress here is that it is not the account that is obscure and unintelligible, but the manner in which the event took place. If we believe that God is omnipotent and that He can and will intervene to help His children in mysterious ways, then these reports of miracles will present no difficulty.

No Freak Miracles

Another feature worth noting is that many of the miracles follow what we term natural law, though at the same time transcending it. When Jesus feeds the five thousand (Matt. 14:13–21), how does He do it? He might have removed their hunger with a word; for with God nothing is impossible. But instead of employing such a method, He provides bread to feed the people, satisfying their hunger and sustaining their lives by the usual means. When the children of Israel were pursued by Pharaoh and, it seemed, would not be able to escape because the sea formed what appeared to be an insuperable barrier to further flight, God prepared a way for them so that they could cross to the other side without difficulty. It is clear that by the exercise of His omnipotence He might have saved them from Pharaoh's grasp in a different way. For instance, He could have transported the whole host through the air to a region of safety. Instead of this, Israel has to march just as it marched before.

The lesson which this suggests is an important one. God does not perform freak miracles. He helps His children through His power, but, as a rule, it is by using the very channels along which His gifts ordinarily come to them. A certain country is visited by a disastrous drought and the resulting famine. Relief comes from God, not in the form of gold falling down from heaven, but in the shape of rain and a few years of plenty. The cancer patient prays to God for help in what appears to be a case of fatal illness. God preserves his life, however, not by one majestic command, but through surgery and medication. The plagues in Egypt are very instructive if viewed in this light (cf. Ex. 7–12). In almost every instance they consisted of a visitation which might arise in the ordinary course of events, and yet a miraculous element was attached to each one, manifesting itself in the time when the plague occurred and in its peculiar virulence.

Few Miracles in Nazareth

A passage which requires some comment here is Mark 6:5–6, which refers to Jesus' visit to Nazareth. We are told: "Now He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. And He marveled because of their unbelief." Does this passage deny that Jesus is omnipotent and the true God? Nothing of the sort! It simply points out that, if the gifts of God are to be received, there must be a receptive attitude on the part of people, that our Lord will not force His beneficent ministrations on anybody, that those who persistently refuse to accept what He offers will not receive it. It is very true that this receptive

attitude itself is a gift of God. But what we are concerned with here is the truth that God's wonderful works are not performed for those who spurn them. (WRR)

The Healing of a Boy Who Had a Demon

Some readers may be perplexed by what is recorded in Mark 9:29: "So He [Jesus] said to them, 'This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting.'" Jesus was speaking to His disciples. On their journey through Galilee they had performed miracles of healing and had expelled demons. In the instance reported in Mark 9:14–29, they had not been able to bring about the expulsion. Jesus chides them for their unbelief, but says in conclusion: "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting." Was there, then, something more than faith required on this occasion? Must the saying of Jesus in which He depicts the power of faith as sufficiently great to move mountains be modified and held not to pertain to the healing of certain cases of demon possession? That is not what Jesus is saying. He is reminding His disciples that an affliction like that of the poor boy they had been dealing with was so dreadful, so terrifying in its nature that strong faith was needed if they wanted to help such an unfortunate sufferer and that their faith had to be strengthened through earnest prayer, aided by fasting, before entering upon this battle with Satan.

Miracles in the Early Church

In the early church many of the believers were endowed with miraculous powers, as is evident, for instance, from 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. See especially 1 Corinthians 12:8–10. It will be noticed that some of the spiritual gifts that Paul mentions must be classified as supernatural, while others would not be classified as such. But the apostle calls them all gifts of the Spirit. Some of the Corinthian Christians were given the word of wisdom. Their gift it seems, consisted in the ability to give wise counsel resting on the words of God. Others had been given the word of knowledge, that is, the faculty to discern the deep things in the Scriptures and to give fitting utterance to their thoughts on these lofty themes. Some had received "faith," which perhaps means a special or extraordinary measure or degree of faith, strong to withstand vehement attacks. Others had been endowed with the gift of healing, with the ability to perform miraculous cures.

Then there was a group that had been given the ability to work miracles in general, that is, to do mighty, supernatural things. Some had the gift of prophecy. To them the Holy Spirit granted special revelations, which they proclaimed and applied with penetrating, gripping power; at times they also foretold future events. Others were able to discern spirits, that is, to tell whether teachers with whom they came in contact were sent by God or whether they came of their own accord. Perhaps the most extraordinary gift, from our perspective, was that designated "different kinds of tongues," which, as far as we are able to establish, consisted in a sort of ecstatic speech, which no one could understand unless one possessed the gift of interpretation of tongues; and there were people on whom this latter faculty had been bestowed. The above shows that it was a marvelously endowed congregation which Paul had founded at Corinth, and we need not assume that he presents an exhaustive list of the gifts with which its members were adorned. In other congregations there may have been similar manifestations of supernatural endowments.