

(4) Approach to Biblical Difficulties

(b) Factual mistakes

That brings us to factual mistakes. Again, I think our response here is somewhat similar. We should do the best that we can (insofar as we are able) to reconcile what the biblical text says with what we learn from secular history with regard to some fact and try to show that, in fact, the biblical narrative is not mistaken.

Let's take this example of Quirinius being the official governor of Syria according to Luke during the census that took Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. With regard to Quirinius, many suggestions have been made. Although Quirinius may not have been governor of Syria at that time – that occurred later – nevertheless he could have been in charge of Syria's foreign affairs and therefore in charge of the census that was taken. Therefore, even if he wasn't technically the governor, he was acting in a governing capacity with respect to Syria's foreign relations.

We know from Luke's accuracy in the book of Acts that he is incredibly careful with respect to the various officials that Paul meets on his missionary trips. This is precisely an area where Luke's accuracy has been demonstrated over and over again. So we should be, I think, rightly reluctant to think that he has erred when it comes to the person of Quirinius.

There was a very interesting note on this subject shared with me by Lee Strobel who was interviewing Dr. John McRay, a professor of New Testament and Archaeology at Wheaton College for his book on *The Case For Christ*. In a taped interview for Lee's book, McRay said the following:

An eminent archaeologist named Jerry Vardaman has done a great deal of work in this regard. He found a coin with the name of Quirinius on it in very small writing or what we call micrographic letters. This places him as proconsul of Syria and Scilicia from 11 BC until after the death of Herod.

So this would be exactly the time that Luke says that Quirinius had supervised this census and was, in fact, the proconsul of Syria. This was apparently published in McRay's 1991 book *Archaeology & the New Testament* on page 154. Is Vardaman correct about this? I don't know. Maybe, maybe not. But I think what it illustrates is that it is at least possible that this is not an error on Luke's part, but that this could very well be the case.

I think what the illustration underlines is the fact that our knowledge of the ancient world is extremely sketchy. Therefore it is not at all impossible that certain things just haven't come to light, either in secular literary sources or archaeologically. Therefore, when we see these sorts of factual discrepancies, we can hope that further archaeological exploration and discovery might help to reconcile these.

This isn't at all an irrational sort of faith commitment. This has been an ongoing pattern, in fact, with the biblical documents.

One of my favorite examples concerns a man who was identified in the Old Testament as an Assyrian king named Sargon II. This was widely regarded as an error in these Old Testament narratives because there was absolutely no trace in ancient history of any king of Assyria named Sargon II. No archaeological discoveries, no literary reference to such a man. The Bible seemed to have clearly gotten it wrong about Sargon II. Until archaeologists

excavating in the region of Khorsabad unearthed the palace of one Sargon II! Now we know more about Sargon II than we do about any other ancient king of Assyria.

So when we run into these factual discrepancies, I think it is not at all unreasonable to hope that with future discovery and exploration these tensions could be resolved.

(C) Finally, what about the ethical errors in the Bible? With respect to the so-called Slaughter of the Canaanites, which so many are understandably offended at, I've written fairly extensively on this subject on our Reasonable Faith website in the Questions of the Week ##16, 225, an 331.. I attempt to provide an ethical theory that would make it consistent that God is all-loving and all-powerful and yet issued this command to exterminate the Canaanite tribes that were inhabiting the land when he brought Israel out of Egypt and gave them the land of Canaan. I would refer you to those articles.¹

It is important to understand that what is commanded here is not genocide. That is a loaded, emotionally tendentious term that unbelievers have used to describe this command. There was, in fact, no command given by God to chase down and pursue these people until they had all been killed off. Rather, the primary command that God gave was to drive them out of the land. These Canaanite tribes or clans that inhabited Canaan were being divested of their land. God had waited 400 years while Israel was held in slavery until the Canaanite culture had become so debased,

1 See Q&A articles #16 "Slaughter of the Canaanites" at <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/slaughter-of-the-canaanites> , #225 "The 'Slaughter' of the Canaanites Revisited" at <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/the-slaughter-of-the-canaanites-re-visited> , and #331 "Once More: The Slaughter of the Canaanites" at <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/once-more-the-slaughter-of-the-canaanites> (links accessed January 28, 2015).

so incredibly evil (and we know this from secular sources) that they were ripe for God's judgment. God used the armies of Israel to bring judgment upon these clans in exactly the same way that he would later use the pagan armies of Babylon to come in and judge Israel and remove *them* from the land. So what God does here is he divests these Canaanite clans of the land and delivers the land over to Israel.

So God commands, *Drive them out of the land*. If they had all just left as they saw the advancing Israeli armies, nobody needed to be killed. So this was not a command to commit genocide. Only those who chose to stay behind were to be utterly exterminated. As I've argued in the articles, I think that God in making so extraordinary a command wronged no one, certainly not the adults who were incredibly evil and ripe for judgment – the Israeli armies were the instruments of God's wrath and judgment upon them. With respect to the really, really difficult question of the children that may have been killed, I think that if you believe in the salvation of infants, their execution was actually their salvation. It saved them from growing up in an incredibly evil culture which would certainly have resulted in their eternal destruction, whereas this killing resulted in their eternal salvation. So God did not wrong *them* in issuing this extraordinary command.

So I think that it is quite possible to offer an ethical theory that would enable us to say that there is nothing inconsistent in this narrative between God's being all-loving and all-powerful and his issuing this command to drive the people out of the land and to exterminate anyone who chose to resist and stay behind.

What about the Old Testament laws which certainly, I think, strike us as, in many cases, bizarre and treat people unequally?

Particularly, we talked about the treatment of slaves and women, who seem to be regarded as second-class persons. We might think that this expresses their moral inferiority – that somehow they don't have the same moral worth as men do.

I think it is very important first of all to keep in mind that these Old Testament laws were provisional. They were case laws for the way Israel was to act at that time. Therefore, they may not have represented God's perfect will or ethical standards.

Take, for example, the Old Testament laws concerning divorce. Jesus was actually confronted with this question in Matthew 19:3ff:

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" He [Jesus] answered, "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" [If this is God's will for the marriage relationship, the Pharisees naturally ask, then why do we have this law from Moses about giving a certificate of divorce to put your wife away?] He said to them, "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

So what Jesus is saying here is that the God-given Old Testament law of Moses on divorce doesn't represent the perfect will of God. These laws that Moses gave about divorce were because of your hardness of heart. But they don't really represent God's perfect will about these matters.

I wonder, what would Jesus have said – and I so wish this had happened – what if somebody had come to Jesus and said, “Is it permissible to own slaves?” What would Jesus have said if they had done that? Maybe he would have said something like this. *Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning created man in his own image. In the image of God he created him man and female. So they are equal. What therefore God has made equal, let not men make unequal. We can imagine them saying to him, Why then did Moses command how one ought to treat slaves? And Jesus said to them, ‘For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to hold slaves. But from the beginning it was not so.’* I don't have any difficulty at all imagining that this is something like what Jesus of Nazareth might have responded to that question. You have in the creation narratives in Hebrew Scriptures the foundation, the basis, for the equality of all persons, including men and women, slave and free. Everyone is equal before God. Therefore these Old Testament laws allowing slavery or treating women in certain ways would not be perfect representations of God's will – the way God would really like it. These were concessions on God's part because of their hardness of heart.

So in view of the creation account, these Old Testament laws that imply a sort of second-rate status for women or for men may have been concessions to culture. Or they might have served some other

purpose, say, regulating Israeli society. This was a patriarchal culture and these regulations would be useful for regulating and ordering society. But they do not imply in any way less than full human value for slaves and women because that is grounded in the Hebrew creation narratives right in the very beginning.

I don't have any trouble in thinking of these Old Testament laws as, just as Jesus said about the laws of divorce, provisional case laws on God's part and not necessarily representing his perfect will.

What about New Testament ethical teachings such as Jesus' teachings about divorce and prohibiting remarriage, which many have objected to and many Christians have ignored? What about the New Testament teachings proscribing homosexual activities? Many people in our culture are deeply offended at that. Well, I think that when you come to these sorts of issues, it may be that we simply need to revise our moral intuitions about these things in light of God's commands to us. If God decrees that marriage is so sacred a union that you should not be remarried after experiencing a divorce, it seems to me that is entirely his prerogative. The marriage relationship, as we know from Paul's teaching, is a living symbol of the union of Christ and his church. If God wants to prohibit remarriage, that may be hard, but I don't see why we would say that he doesn't have the moral authority to regulate this institution as he wants. Or with regard to proscribing homosexual activity. The male-female union in marriage is a symbol of Christ's union with his church. So for two men to be engaged in anal intercourse is blasphemous in God's sight in light of the union of Christ and his church. There is a deeper significance here. It seems

to me, again, that God has the authority to command this, however it may offend our modern sensibilities.

What God is asking persons who have homosexual tendencies to do, if they do not marry heterosexuals, is to simply do the same thing that he calls single men and women to do; namely, live a chaste life that honors God and abstains from sexual activity. Single people are called to do exactly the same thing that God would be calling a homosexual person to do.

In this case, I think that we don't need to compromise New Testament ethical teaching, but we need to school our own moral intuitions in light of the person that God is and his authority to issue commands of this sort.

Suppose at the end of the day, however, in dealing with any of these biblical difficulties, we are convinced that the Bible does have an error in what it teaches. We just can't somehow make sense of it. We are convinced, in fact, that the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is false. What would we have to give up in what we've said so far? Well, it seems to me that what we would give up would be premise (2) of part (B) of our defense of biblical inerrancy. That was the premise that said, "Jesus taught that the Scriptures are the inerrant Word of God." Therefore the conclusion was that they are therefore that. The evidence for this premise is not overwhelming or undeniable. Jesus says the Scripture cannot be broken. Perhaps he means there that the central spiritual truths of Scripture are infallible or must be preserved or something of that sort. But I think this premiss is what we would give up. We would say we have not properly interpreted Jesus' attitude toward the Old Testament. We've taken it too strongly to say that there

cannot be errors. But I would not give up the other premises. I would first sacrifice this premise.

Obviously, I don't think we are at that point at all. I don't think we are pushed to that point. But I do want to say that clearly because some people, convinced that there is a single error in the Bible, walk away from Christ and apostatize and go to these incredible extremes. Michael Licona was just telling me of a Facebook posting that he recently saw where a kid had become convinced on the basis of the writings of certain New Testament critics that the Gospels do contain errors and therefore he had decided to cease to be a Christian and become a deist. This is just so heartbreaking: that a person would walk away from Christ because of something like this when it is so unnecessary. This is not a good argument for denying the deity of Christ or the resurrection of Jesus or his sacrificial atoning death for our sins. What this would mean is you would give up the doctrine of inerrancy. But you don't have to give up anything more than that. Our system of Christian beliefs is like a web. Near the center of the web are these cardinal beliefs like the existence of God, the deity of Christ, the deity of the Holy Spirit, the atoning death of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, our sinfulness before God. Then as you work your way out you get to these more peripheral doctrines related to, say, the sacraments or the Second Coming of Christ or church government. I think it will be out there on the periphery that the doctrine of biblical inerrancy lies. So it could be given up without causing catastrophic reverberations in the rest of the web.

I say that simply by way of precaution and concession lest there be anybody hearing my teaching on this subject who is tempted to

give up Christianity because he or she thinks that there is an error somewhere in the Bible. That would be an overreaction.

But I don't think we are at that point yet. I think, as I said, we can deal with the difficulties whether inconsistencies, factual discrepancies, or supposed ethical mistakes along the lines that I've described and therefore can hold to a strong doctrine of biblical inerrancy that the Bible is truthful in all that it teaches.