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Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

The Outlook

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"Exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."
—Jude 3

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About the cover: *"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son . . ." —Galatians 4:4a*
Concept composition by Jeff Steenholdt

The Fullness of Time
Understanding the Context of Christmas

Rev. William Boekestein

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son . . ."
—Galatians 4:4a

For my family, living in a community with a coal-mining heritage has been a new experience. Since we didn't grow up hearing the stories about the days when "coal was king," we have found that taking coal mine tours and reading books on the industry has helped us appreciate the impact coal has had on our community.

Since is impossible to extract any particular point in time from its broader context, the better we understand history, the better we understand the present. The fact that time itself is inextricably interconnected has a bearing on how we celebrate Christmas. There seems to be a tendency today to extract Christ's birth from its broader historical and redemptive context. We often look back only to the events immediately surrounding the birth of Christ. When we do this we miss the powerful background that set the stage for the coming of Christ.

Galatians 4:4 says that Christ was born at a particular and important time in history; it is called "the fullness of time." God is telling us that the time of Quirinius's governorship was "ripe" for Christ's advent (Luke 2:2). Here's the point: We will not appreciate the good news of Christ's coming if we fail to realize what his coming was fulfilling.

The Heidelberg Catechism (Q&A 19) helps set the context for Christ's coming. It says that the holy gospel was "first revealed in Paradise; afterwards published by the holy patriarchs and prophets, and foreshadowed by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the laws; and lastly fulfilled by God's only begotten Son." The Catechism briefly sketches out the revelation of the gospel from the beginning of time to Christ's birth in Bethlehem. Christ's advent is given a context as we see the gospel previewed, proclaimed, portrayed, and performed.

The Gospel Previewed

God himself began to reveal the gospel in Paradise to Adam and Eve. We read of this revelation in Genesis 3:15, which has rightly been called the first gospel promise. Here God says, "I will put enmity between you [the Serpent] and the woman and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." Remember that at this point in redemptive history Adam and Eve were two condemned and hopeless sinners trembling on the edge of Paradise Lost. No two people had ever given up so much so quickly and so foolishly. If you have ever felt completely discouraged and hopeless, then you know something of how our first parents felt that day in the Garden. In fact, by *nature* you are in the same position as your first parents, trembling and naked before God. *In that setting* God delivers their punishment.

But he also reveals a message of hope; he reveals the gospel. What does God promise in Genesis 3:15? That He Himself will work deliverance through the seed of the woman. The deliverer will be a conqueror, crushing the head of the serpent. How they needed to hear these words! The serpent had just carried out the greatest deception of all time. Adam and Eve had lost everything. But God promises to send a Son to crush the serpent—to set His people free from his tyranny. They also heard that the deliverer will suffer; His heel will be bruised. He will be a conquering king *and* a suffering servant.

This first promise is so important because the rest of the Bible unfolds the hope first revealed here. "The promise was vague at first; but the fulfillment was sure" because God had spoken.[1] The gospel in Paradise has been likened to a tiny sapling. It will grow. It will expand. But everything that makes it a tree is there. God first began to unfold this gospel promise through the patriarchs (or early fathers) and the prophets.

The Gospel Proclaimed

Patriarchs as Gospel Proclaimers

We don't always consider Old Covenant saints gospel preachers, but they were. Believe it or not, the first way in which the early fathers communicated the gospel was by having children. God told our first parents in Genesis 3:15 that salvation would come through the *seed* of the woman. The rest of Genesis is focused on this idea of "seed." The word is used almost fifty times, far more than in any other Bible book.

From the first pages of Scripture the gospel promise is communicated through the continuance of the seed of promise. In every generation, there

is a child of promise. Adam had three sons, but in time Seth comes to the fore. Seth also had many children, but it is Enoch through whom the promise will come. Noah had Shem, Ham, and Japheth, but Shem is chosen. And on it goes.

Every time the Bible focuses on the seed of promise, the gospel is proclaimed. Salvation will not be accomplished by humanity but by a single seed. This is why two of the gospel books begin with a genealogy. The seed progresses through time until it stops at "Jesus, who was born of Mary who is called Messiah" (Matt. 1:16).

Notably, Matthew's genealogy begins with Abraham. To him the gospel promise was first clearly given by way of a covenant, or a pact of friendship. God said, "I will establish my covenant . . . to be your God and the God of your descendants after you" (Gen. 17:7). We learn that salvation is a union between God and man. God gives Himself to His people (cf. John 3:16)

Second, the gospel was proclaimed by the patriarchs through real words. Noah was a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5). Enoch preached the gospel (Jude 1:14). Called a patriarch in Acts 2:29, David preached the Messiah as King and Priest. He even spoke specifically of Christ's crucifixion and divine dereliction (Ps. 22).

The patriarchs preached the gospel. But the clearest example of Old Testament gospel preaching was left for the prophets.

Prophets as Gospel Proclaimers

Consider the famous words of Isaiah 9:6. Here Isaiah is prophesying concerning the Messiah: "For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders." Wasn't this the message from the beginning? That "a seed of the woman" would be the redeemer and King? But here we learn the Messiah will be more than a human son. Notice his names: "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." The Christ would be "truly human and truly righteous, yet more powerful than all creatures, that is . . . true God."[2]

It is worth noting that this prophetic preaching took place largely during the decline of God's physical kingdom on earth. Gone were the glory days of David and Solomon. Instead the people of Israel faced military conquest and exile. In this setting, what is the theme of the prophets? The gospel of Christ. They preached the coming Messiah and his glorious kingdom.[3]

God not only previewed the gospel of His Son and caused it to be preached; He also presented it in picture form.

The Gospel Portrayed

Specifically, the gospel is portrayed by the sacrifices and ceremonies of the law. These bore witness as symbols of the good news of Jesus. They were types or foreshadowings of Christ's life and work (Col. 2:17).

The Old Testament sacrifices never accomplished salvation; they were

never seen as the end of God's redemptive plan. God's promised salvation would come from the body of a woman, not an animal. The ceremonies and sacrifices of the law served as types in several ways.

First, they were substitutionary in nature. That is, they taught that the sinner cannot pay for his own sins but must have his sins taken away by someone else. Second, they were a picture of perfection. God required that the sacrificial animal must have no blemish (Ex. 12:5). The mediator must be sinless. Third, although they were supposed to be flawless, the sacrificial animals were entirely inadequate. This fact is demonstrated in the repetitious nature of the sacrifices; they were never finished. The flawed character of the sacrifices is also graphically illustrated in that the animals died on the altar and were never raised up. They were not able to bear the weight of God's anger; His wrath destroyed them. For this reason they were an inadequate shield from the just anger of God toward sin.

The catechism has walked us through the unfolding of the gospel prior to Christ's birth. From the end of the Old Testament to the coming of Christ there is a period of silence of almost four hundred years. God wanted the world to wait. The prophecies had been made, but they could not be fulfilled by human work. During this time, God's people had virtually no human prophet, no priest, and no king. Prior to this time, these offices had deviated from their intended use, so as to show that someone else must fulfill them. The time was indeed ripe for God to send His Son to be prophet, priest, and king for His people.

"In the fullness of time, God sent his Son . . ." He performed the gospel through His own dear Son.

The Gospel Performed

Jesus Christ was that deliverer who was born of the seed of the woman, Mary. Through His perfectly righteous humanity, He was flawless. He approached the cross as a substitute for His people. Through His death, He crushed the head of Satan. Through the power of His divinity, He was raised to newness of life. This sacrifice was finally accepted by God!

The gospel is progressively revealed in the Bible. It continually demands a response of faith. This is how the first promise was received. From our perspective, Adam didn't have that much to go on. God had said, "An offspring will come from the woman's body, and he will save you." Shortly thereafter, Adam named his wife Eve "because she would become the mother of all the living" (Gen. 3:20). Clearly Adam trusted God.

As the first prophet, Adam declared that salvation would come from the woman. God continued to speak this message "to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1). God is calling us to place our trust in Jesus Christ today.

Thankfully, we have four thousand years of recorded redemptive history to bolster our faith! According to Peter, " . . . We have the word of the prophets made *more* certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it . . ." (2 Peter 1:19). Let us be people who have confidence in the word of God's promise. And let us praise the Lord, who in the fullness of time, for us and for our salvation, sent His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. William Cowper sums up well:

> Jesus, I love to trace
> Throughout the sacred page,
> The footsteps of thy grace,
> The same in ev'ry age!
> Oh grant that I may faithful be
> To clearer light, vouchsaf'd
> to me![4]

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1. J. Gresham Machen, *The New Testament,* 45.
2. Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 15.
3. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Prophets,* 8.
4. From *The Complete Poetical Works of William Cowper,* Olney Hymns XX.

Rev. William Boekestein

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"I Am the Good Shepherd": A Devotional on John 10:11–30

Rev. Steve Swets

We are up to our fourth of seven meditations on the seven "I am" statements of Christ in the Gospel of John. In each of these statements, our Lord reveals something about Himself. He has referred to Himself as bread (John 6:35), light (John 8:12), and a gate or door (John 10:7). In each of these statements we learn something of our Savior's work on our behalf. We see our need of Him, our fulfillment in Him, and our way to the Father through Him. In those passages, and the one of our present study, look to the Savior who graciously provides for us. (Read this with your Bible open.)

As we turn to the statement that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, we are reminded of Psalter Hymnal #417:

Savior, like a shepherd lead us,

Much we need thy tender care;

In thy pleasant pastures feed us,

For our use thy folds prepare.

Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus,

Thou hast bought us, thine we are,

Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus,

Thou hast bought us, thine we are.

In that first stanza, we have a beautiful glimpse of the Good Shepherd. He cares for us, He feeds us, He prepares us and protects us. A shepherd should always do those things, but there is something that the Good Shepherd does which no other shepherd can do. In John 10:17, Jesus says that the Father loves Him because He lays down His life, only to take it up again. Jesus died in order to live forevermore. Let us look deeper at what Christ has done.

His Sacrifice

In the last meditation we saw that Jesus is the gate for the sheep. Jesus was pictured there as the entrance into eternal life, a full, abundant life. Now, to continue in the realm of caring for sheep, He calls Himself the Good Shepherd. The term *good* distinguishes this shepherd from "bad." The people knew all about bad shepherds (read Jer. 23:1–4; see also Jer. 25:32–38; Isa. 56:9–12; Ezek. 34). The people of God had been oppressed by their own leaders. What they were left longing for was a Messianic shepherd, one who would love and care and lead them, like a good shepherd ought to do. What they desired was the shepherd of Isaiah 40:11 (ESV): "He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young."

This is what they receive in the person of Jesus Christ. In the same sentence which declares His love for the sheep, He declares His right to the sheep, in that He calls Himself the "I am." This Old Testament covenant name angered the Pharisees because they knew it was a claim to divinity. He was the God-Man. This God-Man had come to lay down His life for the sheep, as He says in John 10:11.

Jesus contrasts Himself to a hired hand. A hired hand is someone who does not own the sheep. He works for the owner of the sheep. He is not invested personally in the sheep. He will watch the sheep and care for the sheep until danger comes to him. When the wolf attacks, the hired hand isn't going to wait around to fend off a wolf with a shepherd's staff. He might lose; he might get hurt or even killed. His life isn't worth giving up for a few dozen animals. He is out of there.

Jesus, by contrast, as the Good Shepherd, does not run. In John 10:14 He says, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me." This knowledge of the sheep is not to be understood in the sense that He knows their breed, their color, their purpose, or even more personally, their name. Rather, He knows them. Substitute the word *know* for "love." He knows them intimately. He loves them. How do we know? He not only gave as a word picture of a shepherd who is willing to risk his life to save the sheep. In the case of Jesus, He gave His life for the sheep. The shepherd became the sacrifice. But even more.

Listen to the words of John 1:29: "The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'" God the Son becomes a lamb in order to save lambs. The Shepherd of Psalm 23 becomes the sheep of John 1, who saves the sheep of John 10. This is why there is this important pronoun before the word *shepherd*. The word is "good." It is a unique word in the original. It isn't the common Greek word for "good." It is the same word used later to describe Jesus as the true or good vine. So, it could be translated as true or perfect or fulfilling. It means that He is unique unto Himself. He is in a category of His own. He is the priest who becomes the sacrifice, the prophet who becomes the word, the king who becomes the servant, and the shepherd who becomes a

I AM...

sheep. When Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd," our salvation is wrapped up in that phrase.

The hired hand scatters when danger appears. The Good Shepherd walks right toward that wolf as the sacrifice, to exchange Himself, to substitute Himself in the place of the sheep. "Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, thou hast bought us, thine we are."

His Sympathy

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. However, most of these verses (John 10:11–30) look at the care and sympathy the shepherd bestows. Look just at the personal pronouns our glorious Savior uses: "I know my sheep" (v. 14); "they too will listen" (v. 16); "my sheep" (v. 27); "they follow me" (v. 27); "no one can snatch them" (v. 28). This is not a picture of a farmer who leaves his sheep scattered in a field while he sits and relaxes in his house. He is not a shepherd out of touch with the sheep. Rather, he is a sympathizing shepherd.

Jesus knows the sheep, and He loves them. In verses 14–15, Jesus even compares His love and relationship with the sheep with the knowledge and love between the Father and the Son. That love is beyond comprehension. There is a perfect unity of Father and Son. This is a startling claim. Once again, the Pharisees didn't like it. They were divided (vv. 19–24). These leaders of Israel had just threatened and expelled the man born blind who Jesus healed (John 9). In John 9:28, they hurl insults at him. In John 9:32–33, the man born blind makes a simple statement implying that if this man was not from God, he could do nothing, right? In John 9:34, we see the Pharisees respond again with excommunication. That is the great contrast between the wicked shepherds and the good shepherd.

The Good Shepherd does not throw His people out. He cares for them. He loves them. What does this mean?

It means we can go to Him. Hebrews 4:15–16 reminds us, "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." Have you been treated poorly? Have you been misrepresented to someone else? Have your words ever been twisted by someone? Have you ever had your friends leave you when you needed them? Have you been pushed away from someone you were trying to help? Have you felt all alone? Have you felt burned out to the point that you needed to take a break? Have you prayed with tears in your eyes (probably no drops of blood)? Have you been mocked, called a liar wrongly, and wanted to give up? So has our Savior. We do not have a Savior who cannot sympathize with us in our weaknesses.

Another tremendous comfort we can have from this relationship is the fact that when we belong, in

body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ, we cannot be lost. "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28). This teaches the perseverance of the saints. God preserves His people. Hallelujah for that. If that isn't exciting to you, then you don't understand your own heart. This sympathizing Savior/Shepherd is the one who leaves the ninety-nine to go and look for the one sheep that has gone astray. The shepherd of Psalm 23 shepherds with his rod and his staff, which are a comfort. How does a shepherd use his staff? Have you ever wondered why a shepherd's staff looks like a giant wooden candy cane? It is so that the shepherd can take the crook of his staff and reach sheep who have gotten themselves into compromising situations. It is so that he can give the sheep a loving smack on the backside before it falls upon the rocks. The shepherd's staff is for the protection of the sheep. The rod is likely a weapon of defense.

The prophet Isaiah says that we all like sheep have gone astray. How many of us does that include? "We all." We have all been grabbed hold of by the shepherd as we peeked over the cliff of eternal death.

These truths also become a tremendous comfort to believing parents. As a parent stands before God and presents a child for baptism, the prayer of the parents must be, "Loving shepherd of thy sheep, all thy lambs to safety keep, nothing can thy power withstand, none can pluck them from thy hand." Let it be a comfort, parents, that the Lord preserves His sheep. Sometimes the sheep walk beside quiet water, sometimes they can lie down in green pastures, but sometimes they must walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Will you fear evil? You need not, when you understand the preserving grace of God.

Maybe you are in a place right now in life where it seems like no one understands. Or maybe you are caught up in a sin that you feel that you cannot talk to anyone about. Maybe you feel alone and vulnerable, like a sheep left on a hillside when night is falling. Dear child of God, you are not alone. The Good Shepherd knows you and is with you. He calls you to listen to His voice. Do you trust Him? Then go with Him and let Him lead you. He is faithful, always faithful.

His Search

The picture of the Good Shepherd is of one who lays down His life for the sheep, who sympathizes and graciously cares for the sheep, but also who searches. Last time, we looked at John 10:3, which says, "To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own by name and leads them out." Picture three small flocks all sharing one fenced-in sheep pen. The sheep listen to the voice of their shepherd.

In John 10:16, our Savior makes clear that there are other sheep not in that sheep pen. This is a reference primarily to the inclusion of the Gentiles into the church of God. They will be gathered together not as two churches or as two people of God, but as one church of Jesus Christ. There are a couple of closing implications to these truths.

The first is that when the Good Shepherd calls the sheep and they hear His voice, they follow Him. But what about those baptized sheep who do not follow? What about those sheep who stay back with the other flock or are not interested in going out to pasture? These are unbelieving covenant breakers. So many families have members who have walked away from the Lord. Everyone will, by the fact that we are human, follow someone. But there is only one Good Shepherd. To stay back in the pen when the gate closes is not where you want to be. We must pray for and petition these wayward sheep. They might ask in sincerity and in different words, "What if it seems like the flock has already left you behind and you haven't been walking with God?" They must call out to the Good Shepherd. He will leave the flock to come and find them. Call out in faith and repentance, and they will see that He is very near. This all applies as well to the backsliding sinner.

The second point is that Jesus is a missionary. He went to the Jews preaching the gospel of His salvation. He sent the disciples out to all nations (Matt. 28) to bring the gospel to the world. This is still the calling of the church. God in His wisdom is bringing the world to us. How much has God loved you? Tell others that there is always room in the flock of the Good Shepherd.

Finally, a note to parents and grandparents of covenant children. God has claimed these children. The parents presented them for baptism, but that is because God told them to in His Word. They have been branded with the name of the Good Shepherd. They are His sheep. He is their shepherd. The Good Shepherd calls parents to be undershepherds. This means the parents must ensure safe pasture, clean water, the use of a rod and staff to comfort our children. This speaks of protection for our children, training and preparation for our children, teaching and loving. Raise them in the nursery of the Holy Spirit and always point them to the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." The shepherd of our text doesn't save us with the crook of His staff; rather, He saves us with the cross of salvation. "Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, thou has loved us, love us still."

Rev. Steve Swets

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Which Books Belong in the Bible?

Rev. Daniel Hyde

WALK into your local bookstore chain and ask an associate where you can find the section with the "sacred scriptures." What do you think would happen? They won't look at you funny but instead will walk you to a section full of books. On several shelves you will find the Tanach of Judaism (the Old Testament); the Qur'an of Islam, and maybe even the Hadith for Sunni Muslims; the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, and the Vedas of Hinduism; the Tao-te-ching of Taoism; The Analects of Confucianism; and even the Bible, both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox versions with the so-called Apocrypha, and Protestant versions with just the Old and New Testaments. With all those choices, how do you know which one to take down off the shelf?

Why is it so important to know which book is Scripture? For example, the Roman Catholic Church's Council of Trent decreed on April 8, 1546, that what are known as the apocryphal books—Esdras, Tobit, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and 1–2 Maccabees—are canonical. They went on to declare that those who do not receive the Old Testament, New Testament, and the apocryphal books in the Vulgate translation of the Bible, and Rome's many traditions are anathema—condemned. It's important to know which books are Scripture not only because this is a debate between Rome and us but also in a multicultural world we need to know where we can hear the voice of God.

In a well-known story of Jesus after His resurrection, we read in Luke 24 how he preached Himself from the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:27, 44). From these three parts of the Old Testament Jesus proclaimed His death and resurrection. Note well how He equates the law, the prophets, and the writings with "the Scriptures" (vv. 27, 44; cf. 45, 46). In a word, the books within these divisions were "canonical."

The ancient Greek word *kanōn* was used for a ruler or a measuring line. When opposition arose in the ancient church to which books were the Word of God for the church, the church adapted this word to describe which books were within the canon. An ancient document known as the Synopsis Scripturae Sacrae, the synopsis or summary of sacred Scripture, said, "All of our Christian Scriptures are inspired by God, and these books are not indefinite but set apart and designated as canonical." We also use the word *canon* in another sense. As William Whitaker said, "The books of scripture are called canonical, because they contain the standard and rule of our faith and morals." The Word functions in the church as the standard of truth and error.

So how do you and I know which books belong in the Bible? In particular, are the apocryphal books of the Roman church canonical?

Jesus and the Jews Did Not Recognize Them

The canon of Scripture is closed to the apocryphal books of the Roman church because Jesus and the Jews did not recognize them. We see Jesus in Luke 24 following the Jewish distinction of books within the Old Testament. What this means, then, is that He did not consider any other books to be canonical. Against our Roman Catholic friends, all we need to do is point them to this text and tell them that we are following Jesus. And Jesus, as a Jew, was following the tradition of the Jews. The Jewish historian Josephus said, "For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us . . . but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine . . . for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add any thing to them, to take any thing from them, or to make any change in them" (*Against Apion* 1.8).

But why did the Jews not receive any other books into the Old Testament than those we have in our Bibles? First, the apocryphal books were not written in the language of the Jews, Hebrew. The apocryphal books, instead, were written in Greek, which testified to their being foreign books much later than the period of the prophets. Second, all the apocryphal books came after the writing of the prophet Malachi. Malachi's prophecy ends with the expectation of Elijah's return to herald the coming of the Lord Himself. Third, the style and matter of the apocryphal books testify of their human origin and not their divine origin. Let me give you a brief list of the errors and absurdities contained in the Apocrypha.

> The book of Judith calls Nebuchadnezzar king of Nineveh, although Scripture and history call him the king of Babylon.
>
> The book of Wisdom attributes the Olympics to the days of Solomon (who reigned 970–930 B.C.),

although they did not exist until the days of the Greek Empire.

In Bel and the Dragon, Daniel proves to the king that his god is really no god at all, only a fierce dragon. He proves this by showing that the king's god does not eat the daily food offerings laid before his idol statue, but a dragon does, by laying out indigestible cake, which kills the dragon. As a result, Daniel is thrown into the lions' den.

In the book of Tobit, Raphael the angel gives magical directions for driving away the devil by taking a fish's liver, burning it, and causing a magical smoke (6:6).

The book of Tobit says Raphael the angel accepted prayers offered to him (12:12), which angels never accept in Scripture (Rev 22:8–9).

Jesus and the Apostles Never Quoted Them

The canon of Scripture is closed to the apocryphal books of the Roman church because Jesus and the apostles never quoted them. We have a saying, "The silence was deafening." What that means is that when you listen to people speak on a subject, we can tell what they believe not only by what they say but also by what they do not say.

Again, in Luke 24 we read of Jesus' explaining to His disciples that He was the Christ who was to die and rise again only from the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. His silence about the apocryphal books is deafening. I challenge you to read through the New Testament and write a list of every time Jesus and the apostles quote other writings. When it comes to the Apocrypha, the silence is deafening.

The Ancient Church Never Received Them

The canon of Scripture is closed to the apocryphal books of the Roman church because the ancient church never received them. I have read and read and read various church fathers looking for their approval of the apocryphal books. I have read Roman Catholic authors giving their reasons for including them in the canon, and I've read Protestant responses. Here is what is clear: we are the true catholics. We follow the ancient church, which recognized no other books than those we have. Yes, every once in a while some writer quotes an apocryphal text or even lists a book we do not have in the canon in their list of canonical books. But this is the exception. And even when one church council received one non-canonical book and another council received another, the one thing that remained common among them both was the list of books we know as the Old and New Testaments. For example, around the year 170 Melito of Sardis listed our Old Testament canon. The Synod of Laodicea in the mid-fourth century said non-canonical books were not to be read in public worship but only those of the Old and New Testaments. The great Athanasius listed the Scriptures of our Bibles and then said, "These are the fountains of salvation, that he who thirsts may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone the teaching of godliness is proclaimed. Let no one add to these; let nothing be taken away from them."

The reason these books are called apocryphal is that their origin and authorship are unknown, or hidden. In fact, the ancient fathers Epiphanius and Augustine said "apocryphal" meant that they were removed from a hidden crypt, while Jerome and Rufinus said this meant their authority was hidden. So much for the fathers being on Rome's side!

Further, church fathers such as Jerome and Augustine belabor this point, that there is a distinction between what they called the canon of faith and the canon of ecclesiastical reading. What they meant was that the books in our Old and New Testaments alone were read to prove points of doctrine, while other books, while permitted to be read for moral inspiration, were not to be read for doctrinal instruction.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by saying that when Rome decreed that those who do not receive the Old Testament, New Testament, and the apocryphal books in the Vulgate translation of the Bible, and Rome's many traditions are anathema—condemned—they condemned the prophets, the apostles, and most importantly, Jesus Himself! I'll take my chances with Jesus. How about you?

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Liberalism

Dr. Jeff L. Doll

The lack of a proper reverence for God's name and irreverent worship are not the only things that should concern us as we take a realistic look at the portrait of the visible church of our time. We should be equally concerned about the lack of respect for God's Word.

God's Word is not being given the honor of serving as the final authority among many professing Christians in our day. Many liberal theologians, pastors, teachers, and counselors give only lip service honor to the Bible, rarely if ever bringing its timeless principles to bear in the lives of those they serve. Others misquote, misapply, and twist passages to make Scripture appear as a mouthpiece of the flesh or the world (which is under the sway of Satan) than the mouthpiece by which God speaks to His chosen people. Satan's jackhammer of liberalism being manifested through the agency of liberal professors continues to chip away at the apostolic foundation of the faith "which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). It is, therefore, important that we spend a little time discussing this topic in order that we might be used of the Lord to counsel effectively and break free those souls which have been taken captive within this spiritually dark prison.

A Definition of Liberalism

Whenever a discussion ensues around the term *liberalism*, it is important that it is disentangled from all the nuances of meaning in our time. For "liberalism" can apply to any number of philosophical bents, systems of thought, or sets of ideas held by political parties or other groups. When we speak about liberalism in the context of the visible church we are best served to qualify the term by using the adjective *theological* along with it. There are a number of good resources available today to help one grasp a deeper understanding of the meaning of theological liberalism. One is an article by Dr. R. C. Sproul entitled "The Liberal Agenda,"[1] which you are encouraged to read because it provides a historical perspective on the term. We will use for our definition a statement made by Wayne Grudem[2] in one of his works because it succinctly sets forth the essence of theological liberalism. Grudem defines theological liberalism as "a system of thinking that denies the complete truthfulness of the Bible as the Word of God and denies the unique and absolute authority of the Bible in our lives."[3]

It is obvious that when liberalism creeps into the church, all kinds of problems begin to appear. Professing (liberal) Christians deny not only the complete truthfulness and the authority of Scripture but also fundamental pillars of the Christian faith such as the virgin birth and resurrection of Christ as well as belief in a literal hell. Add to that the acceptance and propagation of things like Darwinism and homosexuality and you have nothing less than an extremely dangerous and destructive system of thought. What disasters liberal professors have caused in the sphere of Christianity! The fact that they and their teachings have been tolerated in Christian churches and institutions in America throughout the years is a disaster in itself. Our hearts should lament as we think of the countless thousands of covenant youths' souls that have and continue to be injured by liberals in Christian learning institutions. Reader, please don't skip over this terrible tragedy of our time. Let the reality of the injuring of tomorrow's soldiers of the church militant sink into your heart: Thousands of our precious covenant youth are being led to the edge of rocky spiritual cliffs by liberal professors. Many of them are falling off the edge to incur great damage to their souls while those who are sound in their theology stand by silently and watch. Please pause and offer prayer for covenant youth who are in Christian education institutions where savage wolves are being allowed to prey upon their souls. Also pray that the people in the landscape of those schools (i.e., parents, society and board members, administrators, congregations, and denominations) will be given the wisdom and courage necessary to confront and remove these false professors from their respective institutions. Finally, pray that God will give all of His people the wherewithal to fight against the cancer of liberalism that is rapidly spreading through an increasingly large segment of the visible church.

Liberal doctrine is not only being spread within liberal churches and schools. It is also being introduced and even propagated, although many times unknowingly, in theologically conservative circles. Really? How? By Christian counselors employed for those in families and churches who are wrestling with different types of counseling-related issues. Many worldly philosophies are being introduced and embraced in our conservative circles via counselors

functioning under the umbrella of "Christian counseling." It is important that readers understand there is a fundamental difference in what normally occurs in the practices of those who counsel under the heading of Christian counseling versus biblical counseling. Dr. David Powlison expresses well the primary difference in the following statement: "Most Christian psychologists view the Bible as an inspirational resource, but their basic system of counseling, *both theory and methods, is transferred unaltered from secular psychology.* Most are frankly and self-consciously eclectic, picking and choosing theories and techniques according to personal preference. In contrast, biblical counselors follow the Bible's view of itself as the source of a comprehensive and detailed approach to understanding and counseling people (2 Tim. 3:15–17; 2 Pet. 1:4)."[4]

Human Philosophies Are Placed Above Scripture[5]

As you have likely concluded by considering Powlison's explanation, the potential for liberalism being imported into the church is much greater in the field of Christian counseling than in biblical counseling. In many cases the "unique and absolute authority" of Scripture is usurped as numerous "Christian counselors" indiscriminately import to their counselees (as well as whole congregations via lectures and courses) systems of thought from humanistic theorists. The fathers of modern psychology either redefine human personality or introduce concepts and principles for tending to the soul which contradict Scripture. Examples of the fathers of contemporary psychology include Sigmund Freud, Abraham Maslow, and Carl Rogers.

Sigmund Freud is considered the father of psychoanalysis. Freud's system of thought completely reconstructs human personality (Id, Ego, and Superego). He viewed man as an instinct-ruled beast dominated primarily by the drives of sex and aggression. Psychoanalysis focuses on the human unconscious by practices such as dream analysis, transference, and free association. The psychoanalytical objective is to make the unconscious, conscious because Freud theorized that human behaviors were driven by unconscious motives.

Abraham Maslow's five-stage model is divided into basic needs (physiological, safety, love, and esteem) and growth needs (self-actualization). These basic needs motivate people when they are unmet. One must satisfy lower-level basic needs before progressing on to meet higher-level growth needs. The ultimate goal is for people to reach their full potential; at which point they are self-actualized.

Carl Rogers's system of thought and accompanying "oerson-centered therapy" (PCT) teaches that human nature is inherently good. It also teaches that self-actualization for individuals will generally yield goodness. PCT is based on the presupposition that (subjective) experience determines a counselee's concept of truth. Rogers theorized that when individuals grow psychologically it is due to their therapist and/or environment granting them unconditional positive regard (acceptance), empathy, and genuineness. One of several objectives of PCT is for individuals to develop a state of congruence between their self-image and their ideal-self.

You can see that the systems of thought set forth by Freud, Maslow, and Rogers clearly contradict the teachings of Scripture. Whenever counselees embrace these corrupted systems of thought, untold damage is done. For one thing, their confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture to address adequately the needs of their souls is compromised as they are led to look to man instead of God for answers. The process of sanctification is also inhibited as the instrument of the Word. which the Spirit uses to conform the elect to the image of Jesus Christ. is replaced with one or more systems of thought that aim to conform counselees to the self-focused pattern of this world (Rom. 12:2). The greatest tragedy is God is robbed of the glory that is due His name as souls are taken into bondage by these antithetical systems.

It is of utmost importance that elders and families fully understand what theories[6] and methods are employed by counselors to whom their loved ones are entrusted when outside "Christian counseling" resources are employed. You may wish to consider utilizing the following clusters of questions when interviewing a potential counselor.

• **Are you a Christian?** It is important to ask this question even if you are interviewing a counselor who works in a Christian counseling center, hospital, organization or church. I recently was involved with a case involving a psychiatrist from a Christian hospital who said he was an atheist when I asked about his world and life view. **What is your definition of a Christian?** This question is important because there are many conceptions about what it means to be a Christian today.

• **Do you believe in the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture? Do you utilize the Bible and prayer in your practice of counseling? How often?** (All sessions, most sessions, or rarely.) If Scripture is used, try to determine if the counselor uses eisegesis (reads meaning into Scripture) or exegesis (gets meaning from Scripture). You may wish to ask, **What method(s) of interpretation do you use to interpret the Bible?**

• **Do you believe in a historic Adam and Eve and their fall into sin? How does your view of the Fall factor into your practice of counseling?**

• **Do you believe there is a difference between sin and sickness? If yes, how do you discern the difference between sin and sickness** (neurological or biological system dysfunctions, etc.)?

• **How do you typically address sin-based problems in your counseling practice? What measures are taken if a counselee persists in sin?**

• **How do you (and the members of your team) typically deal with issues that are rooted in sickness? Would you say that most of your treatment plans tend toward addressing problems with therapies or medication? Is the psychiatrist utilized in making prescriptions for a professing Christian? Do you know if the psychiatrist makes a distinction between sin and sickness when making determinations about the use of medication to treat a problem?**

• **Provide several examples of common therapies you utilize in treating those who suffer from depression or anxiety. Provide for me a basic explanation of how these therapies function to cure the counselee.**

• **Would you consider yourself an eclectic counselor (one who selects what appears to be the best system of thought, theory, or philosophy from secular psychologists and sociologist)?** If the counselor answers in the affirmative ask, **How do you reconcile the utilization of such in your practice with a passage such as Luke 6:43–44, which says, "For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush"?**

Optional:

• **What is your position on divorce?** What types of issues or scenarios would you consider to be legitimate grounds for recommending a divorce? When recommending the possibility of divorce to Christian counselees, do you inform the overseeing church body and/or inform the counselee of his or her responsibility to proceed forward with the recommendation only in consultation with the overseeing church body? If not, why not?

Asking questions such as these will often expose theological liberalism. Christian counselors or therapists who cannot provide substantially sound answers to these types of questions should not be employed as counselors by individuals or congregations.

As you informally counsel and consider those with advanced training to whom you will make referrals it is important to affirm within your heart that the Bible is sufficient to address the spiritual needs of God's people. You may wish to adopt for yourself the two following statements[7] which IRBC uses to express its belief in the sufficiency of Scripture:

• **Holy Scripture** is entirely sufficient to meaningfully and relevantly address all of man's spiritual needs in every situation in every period of time.

• **Holy Scripture** is the only sufficient means whereby a comprehensive system of counseling principles and practices that can affect genuine change in the human heart can be derived.

Science Is Placed Above Scripture

Liberalism is also spreading in the visible church via the wardrobe of counseling, which sports the fashion of science via the various branches of psychology. The truth of the matter is a lot of what passes for science in these branches is unsubstantiated theory. The late G. G. Simpson of Harvard once said, "It is inherent in any definition of science that statements that cannot be checked by observation are not really about anything . . . or at the very least, they are not science."[8] A lot of the theories circulated in the mainstream of psychology "are not really about anything" because they fail to undergo the scrutiny of scientific observation. Even if the principles and systems propagated within the field of psychology could be sustained by such scrutiny, knowledgeable and responsible Christians would still subject them to the authority of Scripture and interpret them in its light. Because liberals deny the complete truthfulness of the Bible and the unique and absolute authority it is to have in the lives of God's children, they place science above the Scripture in their practice of counseling. Because their practices are not built upon solid truth from the realm of either special or general revelation, they often fail to provide the fruit of sound guidance to those they counsel.

A couple of qualifying points need to be made before we conclude our discussion on liberalism. First, not everyone who serves under the rubric of Christian counselor is a liberal. I have a conservative Reformed friend who serves as a licensed psychologist in a Christian psychiatric hospital. This man has a solid grasp of Scripture and the Reformed faith as well as the applicable aspects of true science surrounding his counseling practice. By God's grace he is a credit to his profession and a great blessing to the broader Reformed community and the counselees he serves.

There are also fairly orthodox Christians who labor as Christian counselors who have never deconstructed and evaluated in the light of Scripture the theories they utilize in their practices. They learned these theories from instructors, possibly even in a theologically conservative Christian college, and reasoned "this stuff has to be sound if it is being taught here." Because most Christian counseling programs consist primarily of theory and applied psychology courses which are taught by professors who have a minimum academic background in biblical studies, graduates are often not equipped to evaluate the theories they have been taught. Even though a core of lower-division Bible courses is often required in such programs, the training necessary to properly evaluate systems of thought as well as properly interpret, divide, and apply scriptural truth to those who struggle with spiritually based problems is often inadequate.

Second, there is a place for true science in counseling. God's truth discovered in the realm of general revelation can be beneficial for God's people in the world of counseling. For example, some of the work done by neuroscientists (via brain scan technology) has provided helpful insights into brain structure and function. When their discoveries of truth are correctly interpreted (through the lens of Scripture) and wisely applied to the lives of counselees who struggle with neurological diseases such as Parkinson's or Alzheimer's or disorders such as Autism Spectrum Disorders, counselees and their families can be greatly blessed both physically and spiritually. The physical blessings often come in the form of relief. Spiritual help may come by the enablement of affected counselees' brains functioning more effectively and efficiently. When the "neuro-abilities" of the brain are restored, their souls[9] can more fully utilize them to interact meaningfully with the means of grace. This, in turn, greatly increases their potential for bearing fruit for the glory of God (via works) and enjoying communion with God and the saints.

We can also gain a great deal of insight from secular psychology when sound scientific methodology is utilized in observing human behavior. For example, there is benefit to our interacting with the work of people like Jean Piaget (1936), who was the first psychologist to make a systematic study of cognitive development. His detailed observational studies of cognition[10] in children and accompanying series of tests designed to reveal different cognitive levels and abilities can be helpful in understanding how much a child can understand at different stages of cognitive development. When his studies and conclusions are evaluated through the lens of Scripture and placed in a proper theological framework, God's truth can be profitably extricated and used for His glory and the good of His people. Such truth can, indeed, be useful in helping us understand the cognitive limitations of children at different developmental stages, thereby assisting us in setting realistic expectations for them at home, church, and school. It also can be helpful in assisting us to challenge mature adults who are not exercising good stewardship over the gift of their intellects.

> In the reading of profane authors, the admirable light of truth displayed in them should remind us that the human mind, however much fallen and perverted from its original integrity, is still adorned and invested with admirable gifts from its Creator. If we reflect that the Spirit of God is the only fountain of truth, we will be careful, as we would avoid offering insult to him, not to reject or condemn truth wherever it appears. . . . If the Lord has been pleased to assist us by the work and ministry of the ungodly in physics, dialectics, mathematics, and other similar sciences, let us avail ourselves of it.[11]

1. This article can be accessed online at http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/liberal-agenda/.

2. Wayne Grudem's works are helpful. The author cautions readers to exercise discernment when reading about his conception of the New Testament prophet and his associated conclusion regarding the nature of New Testament prophecy.

3. Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 15.

4. John, F. MacArthur Jr. and Wayne A. Mack, I*ntroduction to Biblical Counseling: Basic Guide to the Principles and Practice of Counseling* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1994), 362 (emphasis added).

5. The author expresses thanks to Dr. Maria Hansen, associate director of tSw (Holland) for fortifying this section. Dr. Hansen possessed a PhD in clinical psychology from the United States International University. She serves as a counselor at the Hope Biblical Counseling & Training Center, Ft. Myers, FL.

6. It is important to make a distinction between a system of thought (or a theory) and a particular point that may be contained within it, as there may be some (scripturally discerned) points that can be extracted from a secular theory and used profitably.

7. These and other statements IRBC uses to reflect its belief in the sufficiency of Scripture are reflective of those held by the Biblical Counseling Coalition.

8. Robert T. Pennock and Michael Ruse, *But Is It Science: The Philosophical Question in the Creation Evolution Controversy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009), 232. The author does not endorse this book.

9. The brain mediates between the human soul and body.

10. Cognition is defined as conscious mental activities: the activities of thinking, understanding, learning, and remembering (Merriam Webster's Dictionary).

11. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.2.15–16, Beveridge edition.

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Letter to the Editor

Interim Editor
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Dear Editor,

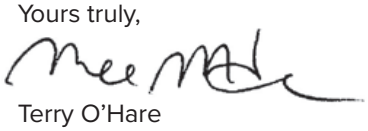
Kudos on the article by Lems: "The Dangers of Neglecting the Assembly" in which the benefits of church attendance are presented. With eleven well-thought out points, he outlines the significance of Christian assembly. In addition, he invites discussion, so please indulge me for a minute.

From my perspective, the approbation is due for making a case for the regular weekly assembly of Bible-believing Christians on the first day of the week *without* directly appealing to Exodus 20:8-11 (notwithstanding his obligatory references to secondary standards and the fourth commandment). The Sabbath is on Saturday and the Lord's Day is on Sunday. I noticed that Lems did not once refer to the weekly day of the celebration of Christ's resurrection as the "Lord's Day." Neither did he refer to the resurrection as the rationale for coming together or Christ's especial presence in the theater of our worship. On it, we celebrate not only the former foreshadowing works of redemption, but the pivotal and perfect redemption of our souls through the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

I think that an honest examination of the key verse in Hebrews 10:24-25, taking into account the theme of the whole letter, will lead to the deduction that the faltering Hebrew-Christians were tempted with returning to the "safety" of their traditional observation of the Sabbath and other familiar Jewish customs and laws. We cannot suppose that those absenting themselves from Christian assembly preferred nothing over the Lord's Day or the Sabbath. One could almost argue that returning to the Sabbath on Saturday couldn't be that bad. After all, they're still getting their 24-hour rest every seven days and avoiding commerce and recreation. But the apostle of Christ urges them to choose the higher and better road of gathering together instead on the Lord's Day in respect for the blood of Christ, His bodily resurrection, and His ascension to the right hand of God (Heb 10:26-29). The abstention from work on the Sabbath (i.e., rest) is a shadow cast from the Lord Jesus Himself (Col 2:16), who proclaimed to be the true and abiding rest that mankind yearns for (Matt 11:28-10). Therefore, the Lord's Day is not a replacement, repositioned, or remodeled Sabbath, but a new experience of a different order, which is all the more reason to continue steadfastly in the apostle's doctrine, the fellowship of the saints, the breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42).

I realize that the view above does not necessarily represent the opinions of the editors, but I did want to assure you that I really enjoy *The Outlook* and look forward to each new publication.

Yours truly,



Terry O'Hare
11/5/16

Bible Studies on Ezra
Lesson 7: The Devil's Distortions

Dr. Norman
De Jong

Scripture Reading: Ezra 4:6–24
Background Reading: 2 Chronicles 36:1–21; 2 Kings 25:22–26; Jeremiah 52:1–11

Discussion Starters

1. What motivated the enemies of Judah and Jerusalem to "frustrate [the] purpose" of the Israelites? Who was there encouraging God's people? (Read Haggai 1; see Note 4:2.)

2. What specific actions did Israel's enemies take as soon as Cyrus had died? (See Note 4:6.)

3. How did the enemies of Judah describe themselves in the opening paragraph of their letter? Did they actually represent "the Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites," and so on? How would such descriptions of themselves support their efforts to stop the rebuilding of the temple? (See Note 4:9.)

4. In what language was the letter written? Why would this be important to their cause?

5. How do the enemies of the Jews describe the city of Jerusalem? Is that accurate?

6. What horrible predictions do the enemies of Judah present to the king of Persia? Is there validity to their accusations? Is there good foundation for making such predictions? (See Note 4:13.)

7. What did the enemies of Judah hope to prove by having a search made in the archives of earlier Persian kings? Was it reasonable to expect that their hopes might be realized when such a search would be conducted? (See Note 4:15.)

8. What did the search of the archives reveal? Were those findings supported by historical fact? Could the Israelites deny the validity of those findings? Who appears to have won the battle? (See Note 4:18.)

9. What orders or commands did the king issue in response to the search of the archives? Was he justified in stopping the rebuilding of the temple? (See Note 4:23.)

Text Notes on Discussion Starters

[4:2] We have here the efforts of the world to shape religion to fit their own agenda. We saw that the Samaritan peoples around them had tried to assist the Israelites in the rebuilding of the temple, with the blatantly false assertion that "they, too, wanted to sacrifice to Jehovah" (4:2). These idol worshippers knew that a pure worship of God, according to the dictates of the first and second commandments, would be a refutation of their own worship practices and might become a fatal blow to their syncretism and their idolatrous practices. They wanted to feign obedience while working to undermine and destroy the worship of God. They turned against the Israelites when they were denied participation and then hired "counselors" or legal agents to "frustrate their purpose" and to prevent the work from progressing.

[4:6.1] The great antithesis. What we have here in Ezra 4 is a classic demonstration of the prediction that God had made in the garden, after Adam and Eve had violated God's law and had dragged all of us into sin. In condemning Satan, God had said to him, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen. 3:15). God had decreed then already that there would be a perpetual antithesis, that there would be perpetual warfare between the children of God and the followers of the devil. It might appear for a time that there is relative peace, even that there is a temporary truce, but the conflict will always be there.

[4:6.2] Waiting for the right time. The text tells us that they hired these lawyers to work for them "all the days of Cyrus King of Persia" (4:5), but that they did not write an accusation against the people of Judah and Jerusalem until "the beginning of the reign of Xerxes" (v. 6). These people were smart enough to realize that Cyrus would not listen to them and that he knew what he had said in his proclamation. As soon as Cyrus is gone, though, they make their move. The text tells us that "at the beginning of the reign of Xerxes, they lodged an accusation" (v. 6). It then goes on to say that "in the days of Artaxerxes King of Persia" (v. 7), suggesting that there were two Persian kings in quick succession, which is exactly what happened. There were a number of kings in the history of Persia who

had the name of either Xerxes or Artaxerxes, some of whom lived in the next century and are not to be confused with these two men, both of whom ruled for only a very short time between the death of Cyrus and the rise of Darius. This Artaxerxes is also known as Ahasuerus and as Cambyses, causing a great deal of confusion among commentators.

[4:9.1] Notice that "in the days of Artaxerxes Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel and the rest of his associates wrote a letter to Artaxerxes, . . . in Aramaic script" (4:7). Who these people are the Bible does not say, except to connect them with the opposition to the temple reconstruction. Without ever giving us any information, the text goes on to tell us, "Rehum the commanding officer and Shimshai the secretary wrote a letter" (4:8). Apparently these latter men, who have far more influence in the capital, take and revise that letter and send it out over their signatures, for they have high standing in the empire. Notice, further, what these enemies of the church do: They make this a class-action lawsuit, filing the letter on behalf of "the rest of their associates—the judges and officials over the men from Tripolis, Persia, Erech, and Babylon." They simply add the names of all these other peoples, who seemingly come from various parts of the empire, as though all of them had a legitimate stake in it. In fact, these co-signers are simply referring to their original places of birth and implying that all of those regions were concerned about this problem, when in fact they probably knew nothing of it. What a conspiracy! What bold opposition! The powers of evil are ever on the lookout for new opportunity.

[4:9.2] Notice their skillful apology. How can these men in far-off Transjordan get the attention of the royal officers in Susa? By calling attention to a seemingly legitimate threat to the throne and by dressing themselves in professed loyalty. These accusers of the church present themselves as being loyal to the government and greatly concerned for the honor of the king. With politically appropriate appeals to the new king, they say, "Since we are under obligation to the palace and it is not proper for us to see the king dishonored, we are sending this message" (v. 14). The enemies of the gospel will not readily admit that their motives are based on anger or on envy but try to couch their hatred in the form of righteous pleas for justice and virtue. They feign disinterest in their own situation, while pretending to be concerned only for the welfare of the country, thus masking their totally selfish motives.

[4:12] Israel's obedient present. So far in the book of Ezra we have seen the people of Israel, the remnant that had returned from Babylon, only in a positive light. God had moved the hearts of the family heads in many of the families of Judah and Benjamin, plus the hearts of many priests and Levites, to make the long journey back to Jerusalem. Leaving their homes where they had lived for seventy years, along with many of their family members and friends, these people responded with the same kind of obedience and trust that had characterized their ancestor Abraham so many centuries before, when he was called by God to leave the Ur of the Chaldees and to go to a land that God would show him. When these Israelites got to Jerusalem, they did everything that God had required of them: they gave of their wealth and immediately began to set aside funds for the rebuilding of the temple. They consulted the writings of Moses and learned from there, that is, from the Law, exactly how they

were to worship Jehovah, the God who had sent them to Babylon for punishment and had now chosen them to restore His kingdom. They came at the appointed time to offer their sacrifices to God. They had their priorities straight and built the altar so that they could celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, with all of its many sacrifices. In short order they also began to rebuild the temple of God, which was the primary purpose for which God had sent them back, and the express command in Cyrus's proclamation. These people, like the people during Joshua's time, had truly repented of their sins and were trying to live godly lives. We see no sign of rebellion or of distrust but only a sweet and obedient, trusting spirit.

[4:13] Israel and Judah, however, had not always been so obedient and so willing to listen to the voice of God. During the time of the prophets Isaiah, Amos, Jonah, Hosea, and Micah, and all during the reign of Jereboam II and his successors, Israel (the ten northern tribes) had been constantly involved in idol worship and had their golden calves at both Dan and Bethel. They had persecuted the prophets God had sent, so God finally sent them into permanent exile. The powerful kings of Assyria had taken them captive and had scattered them throughout the whole of their empire. During the time of Judah and Benjamin, ever since the reign of Manasseh, there had been a steady pattern of evil within the southern kingdom, with the exception of the reign of Josiah, who was a good king (reigned from 639 to 609 b.c.).

[4:15] What these enemies of Israel do is to make a clever appeal to history and then tell the king exactly what to look for. They request of him "that a search may be made in the archives of your predecessors . . . and that in these records you will find that this city is a rebellious city, troublesome to kings and provinces" (v. 15). The last three kings of Judah, who were already under the rule of God's appointed servant Nebuchadnezzar, were notoriously rebellious and earned for Judah a reputation that found its way into the history books of Babylon and later those of Persia. Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah were all trying to rebel against the power of Nebuchadnezzar and refused to accept the prophets' claims that this king was being sent by God Himself to chastise His people. This horrible reputation comes back to haunt them, even though the people of Israel have truly changed their ways and now are living in beautiful obedience to God. That often happens to us, too. We may have done something that was wrong and wicked twenty years ago, and we may have repented of that sin a dozen times, but we still have it thrown in our faces by those who want to put us down. That is what the Bible refers to when it talks about the sins of the fathers being visited upon the third and fourth generations. Present sins have future consequences.

[4:18] There is enough truth in this claim to make it plausible and to satisfy the casual researcher that their complaints have validity. But this is also very selective history and is deliberately using the past record to condemn the present. This is lying in its most clever form. An example of this type of historical twisting of history comes with the efforts by atheists and humanists to outlaw Bible reading and prayer from the public schools of our land. By going to the Supreme Court in 1947 and subsequent years, and by telling the court exactly what to look for in the historical record, the atheists and humanists called attention to words of Thomas Jefferson in which he expressed his desire that the church and the state be totally separated from each other. This was not the intent of the framers, or even of President Jefferson, but that is what the Supreme Court justices decided, on the grounds that someone had told them what to look for, while deliberately hiding other, contrary information. The accusers knew full well that the Israelites were not now rebellious but had instead demonstrated exceptional citizenship and were some of the most law-abiding subjects in the empire. But they put their claims in the present tense, while digging up historical facts that had been true before the Babylonian captivity. By appealing to their past reputation, they made the claim that "this city is a rebellious city" (v. 15), thus twisting history to their own ends. Given the acceptance of that lie, they can now move on and predict to the king that "no more taxes, tribute or duty will be paid, and the royal revenues will suffer" (v. 13). Such a prognostication is wholly without basis in fact and should be regarded by the king as absurd, but the king swallows the bait because the historical record supports the claim made against them.

[4:23] The greatest lie of all. The Samaritans knew full well that the Israelites were only working on the temple, but they never mention the temple to the king. On the contrary, notice that all of their complaints are about them restoring the walls and repairing the foundations "of the city" (vv. 12, 13, 16). This is grossly false information and cannot be attributed to ignorance. They knew that the king would not have to worry about any threat to national security by the erection of the temple, for there were all kinds of pagan temples throughout the empire, with each people or area allowed to establish its own brand of religion. Knowing that, the Samaritans had to lie as boldly as possible.

Bible Studies on Ezra
Lesson 8: The Righteous Remnant Responds

Dr. Norman De Jong

Scripture Reading: Ezra 5
Background Reading: Haggai 1–2

Discussion Starters

1. Chronology is important to a correct reading of the Bible, since God gives us specific dates and times on which to hang events. How much time has elapsed between the end of Ezra 4 and the beginning of Ezra 5? How much time has elapsed since the rebuilding began? (See Note 5:1.)

2. Who is it that stirs the people to action so that the rebuilding of the temple is once again put in motion? How does that illustrate the primary theme of the book? (See Note 5:2.1.)

3. What roles do Zerubbabel and Jeshua play in this unfolding drama? Are they leaders, or are they followers? (See Note 5:2.2.)

4. Compare the actions of Tattenai and his associates with that of the Samaritans in Ezra 4. Were they more honest and just than were the Samaritans, or just as evil? Were their demands just? (See Note 5:3.)

5. How did the people of God respond to these demands? Were their responses righteous and just? Did they stop the building process? Why? (See Note 5:4.)

6. Is the letter that Tattenai and his associates addressed to King Darius an honest, fair representation of the facts? Were these men trying to do their civic duty, or were they enemies of the gospel? (See Note 5:9.)

7. What is the political status of Judah at this point in history? Do they have to get permission from the king of Persia for a permit to construct their church building? (See Note 5:8.)

8. How do the Israelites respond to the demands of Tattenai and his associates? Did they have to confess their past sins to these civil authorities? What kind of witness did they offer to the world by making such a response? (See Note 5:11.)

9. Evaluate the Israelites' appeal to the historical record. Was this a wise and just request on their part? Are we justified in making appeals to the historical past in our countries? Name some instances in recent memory where our religious leaders have made appeals to our history.

Text Notes on Discussion Starters

For those who need a refresher, we will need to give a refresher of the events thus far. Remember the theme: God is sovereign and uses His agents (e.g., the kings of Persia) to do His will and to advance His kingdom. God has been working in the hearts of Cyrus and of His people so that approximately fifty thousand Jews have returned to Jerusalem and began the rebuilding of the temple. This small remnant begins the work in earnest, starting reconstruction in 536 b.c., under orders from King Cyrus.

God's people have been obedient and have tried to worship God exactly as He had outlined for Moses in the Law. The Samaritan people, who have been assigned to live in northern Palestine, are syncretists who want to play a major role in rebuilding the temple. The Jews, knowing that God is a jealous God, rebuffed them. The Samaritans then become enemies of the church. They have used lawyers and falsehoods (see Lesson 7, "The Devil's Distortions") to stop the work of rebuilding. They got an edict from King Artaxerxes to put a halt to the rebuilding of the temple and used force to compel the Jews to stop (Ezra 4:23).

[5:1] We know that "the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia" (4:24). We know, too, that it was Artaxerxes' letter to Rehum and Shimshai that brought the work to a halt (4:23). How much time elapsed between 4:23 and 5:1 is uncertain. Matthew Henry calculates that there were fifteen years where nothing was being done, but it is more probable that the work stopped in 530 B.C., when Cambyses (Ahasuerus) ascended to the throne (see 4:6, 23). Standard chronological calculations for the Persian Empire place Darius on the throne from 522 to 486 B.C. Since we are told that the work was stopped until the second year of his reign, we can assume that the work was begun again in 520 B.C. This is reinforced by Haggai 1:1, where we are told that on the first day of the sixth month of the second year of Darius's reign, things began to change.

The original zeal of the Israelites had cooled considerably. Wilting under the efforts of the Samaritans, they allowed themselves to be intimidated by the unfriendliness of their Samaritan neighbors. Love is replaced by languor and laziness. Nothing is being done! The temple lies in ruins, while the people concentrate on putting paneling in their family rooms, new cupboards in their kitchens, and swimming pools in their back yards. In the words of Haggai, they needed to ask, "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" (Hag.1:4). Instead of eagerly watching for an opportunity of commencing the great work to which God had called them and seizing the first opportunity that offered itself, the people had come to acquiesce in the indefinite postponement and said among themselves, "The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built" (Hag. 1:2).

[5:2.1] Ezra tells us that Haggai and Zechariah "prophesied . . . in the name of the God of Israel" (5:1), seemingly putting the spotlight on these two ministers (prophets) of God. Haggai himself takes none of the credit, though, and makes it plain that "in the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came" (Hag. 1:1). He later adds, "On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai" (Hag. 2:1). God is at work again. God has taken note of the fact that His people have been forced, against their wishes, to stop the work on His temple. He goes on to assert the same idea a third time when he writes, "On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Haggai" (Hag. 2:10). It is not the prophets who are taking the initiative, nor can that be ascribed to the secular authorities. The temple of God is not to be built by secular force or by civic power, but it must be done by the Word of God. As Christians the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but spiritual. It is not the people who are taking the initiative, but it is God who creates activity. God had moved the heart of Cyrus, and He had moved the hearts of those fifty thousand people to pack their belongings and to make the long trek to Jerusalem. Now God is again the one who initiates, this time through His prophets. At approximately the same time, but on different days and in different months, God is also using Zechariah to bring the same message. It is almost as though God is providing mutual support for these prophets who have to stir a lethargic church to action. The first vision to Zechariah occurs "in the eighth month of the second year of Darius, when the word of the Lord came to the prophet" (Zech. 1:1). This message comes just two months after the first one God directed to Haggai and midway between the second and third messages of Haggai. God is obviously serious about getting the rebuilding started again and is not stymied in any way by the fact that King Artaxerxes has issued a stop order. Whereas Cyrus had done what God had wanted him to do, Xerxes and Artaxerxes were unfaithful servants who stood in opposition to God.

[5:2.2] Even though Zerubbabel and Jeshua are God's chosen leaders, the righteous remnant must have been confused and discouraged with their situation. They had tried diligently to honor God and to live according to His law. They had finally overcome their spirit of rebellion and had learned obedience. But now they are confronted with conflicting demands coming from the civil government, both of which could be construed as having the sanctions of God on their side. King Cyrus had told them to go back and rebuild the temple, but King Artaxerxes had told them to stop. Whom should they obey? The old decree of Cyrus, or the later decree of Artaxerxes? When Jesus addresses a similar situation with the Pharisees and they ask whether or not it "is lawful to pay a poll-tax to Caesar, or not" (Matt. 22:17), Jesus tells them that they should "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's" (v. 21). It is the business of God's prophets to stir up God's people to that which is good, and to help them in it and to assist them. In response to the preaching of God's prophets, the leaders of Israel once again take up the work of rebuilding the temple. It is important to note here that the work starts up again, not in response to some decree from Darius but in obedient response to the preaching of the Word.

[5:3] No sooner did the Spirit of God stir up the leaders of the church than the evil spirits of Satan stirred up its enemies against it. As long as the people of the church were preoccupied with the building of their own homes, Satan paid no attention to them. As soon as they take up the work of the church, however, the enemies once again stir themselves to action. Satan becomes alarmed when people begin to devote their lives to the kingdom of God and immediately moved his own agents to hinder them. All the enemies of God are not equally wicked and unreasonable, however. Tattenai, Shethar-Bozenai, and their associates are not as vile and dishonest as were the Samaritans before them. These men come with their interrogations and insinuations, asking, "Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and restore its structure?" (v. 3). But God is watching over His people and will not let the work be stopped. The enemies cannot overcome that power of God, even if they had wanted to, for God's power is always greater than that of Satan. Instead of coming with lies and accusations, the governor comes with questions: "Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and restore this structure?"

"Let it be known to the king that we have gone to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God, which is being built with huge stones, and beams are being laid in the walls; and this work is going on with great care and is succeeding in their hands."

(v. 3). "What are the names of the men constructing this building?" (v. 4). In the earlier confrontations, the Samaritans had come with flagrant lies, accusing the people of still being rebellious and insisting that the people were rebuilding the walls of the city when they were only trying to rebuild the walls of the temple. These later people are honest enough to tell Darius that it is just the walls of the temple that are being rebuilt. God is obviously watching over His people and will not allow the civil rulers to hinder His church again. God so works in their hearts that they listen carefully to the defense of the Israelites and follow their suggestion that they search the archives so that they might find the edict of Cyrus and thereby have the protection of the empire.

[5:4] The people of Israel promptly gave them the "names of the men who were constructing this building" (v. 4), not trying to hide their identity and not being disrespectful in any fashion. They don't retort with hostility or with deception, or tell the governor to butt out. The interesting thing about their response is the kind of reaction that it got from the governor. When the governor sends his letter to Darius, he doesn't give the king a long list of names, but he describes them as having said, "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth" (v. 11).

[5:8] Judah is now a part of the Persian Empire, a province in the region called Trans-Euphrates, or the land beyond the river. As a province of Persia, they have no independent status and must conform to the laws of the empire.

[5:9] The letter from Tattenai and his associates (vv. 7–17) seems to be an honest, straightforward appeal for confirmation of the Jews' claims. They do not twist and distort the facts as did the others, but they recognize the work is limited to the rebuilding of the temple and is being blessed with success. The contents of the letter are such that the reputation of the Israelites is being enhanced and not denigrated.

[5:11] Without any apparent prodding from the prophets or from the Samaritans, the people of Israel readily confess their guilt and take full responsibility for the destruction of the temple. It was, they say, for our sins that we were punished and because of our own fathers' sin that we were sent into captivity in Babylon. God used Nebuchadnezzar to destroy this temple as part of our punishment. They don't blame God; they don't blame Nebuchadnezzar, and they don't give any credit to the idol gods of the peoples around them. The only ones responsible for the destruction of the temple were themselves. What a wonderful, necessary confession. What a picture of humble obedience!

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The Log of Tribalism

Rev. Michael J. Schout

Introduction

Now that we've reached the halfway point in this series of articles, let's review where we've been and where we're going.

Fueled by a desire to be helpful to our confessional and conservative churches, I've been identifying some of our most prevalent weak spots with the hope that we will corporately turn in humble repentance to the God who shows mercy to the weak.

Much of these articles, therefore, has been diagnostic. Until a need is acknowledged, God's storehouse of resources will remain hidden. We will remain at the status quo, never making progress.

But God wants us to move forward, not stand stagnant in the little comforts of the familiar. Yes, there is much to celebrate and praise God for as we take the baton of our Reformed forefathers into the twenty-first century. My desire is that our churches would be unashamedly Reformed in a day of increasing ecclesiastical confusion, silliness, and decay.

Yet if we think our main responsibility is to protect and preserve, without examining how we as a community have failed and continue to fail, then we are guilty of ignoring the logs that obstruct our vision even as we spend much energy in pointing out the specks in other groups.

Ethnic Tribalism

This month our deadly sin is what socialists have termed tribalism. A quick Google search defines it this way: the behavior and attitudes that stem from strong loyalty to one's own tribe or social group. The first form of tribalism alive in our circles is what I'd call ethnic tribalism.

Many reading this article come from a tradition that is steeped in Dutch Reformed history. I myself am one of them. My great-great-grandparents immigrated to West Michigan, and I'm 100 percent Dutch, as are my children. I grew up on ham buns and Dutch peppermints. I don't have blond hair or blue eyes, but I did grow up in Zeeland, Michigan, a small Dutch community where there is a church on almost every corner. The only question is: Which Reformed variety is it?

I grew up in the Reformed Church in America (RCA). My family then joined a Presbyterian Church (PCA) when I was in high school. What's a Presbyterian, I thought? I married a girl born and raised in Northwest Iowa with Christian Reformed roots. I currently serve as a pastor of in the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA).

I've heard old ladies play Dutch bingo hundreds of times. I've even played along. I've worn (it's been a while) a short-sleeve dress shirt with a tie and didn't flinch. And I know what it's like to have a last name that starts with "S" and be in the first half of the directory.

All that to say: I'm an insider and a grateful son of the Dutch Reformed tradition.

But we are guilty of tribalism.

You ain't Dutch, you ain't much might make for a clever bumper sticker one can find at Tulip Time, but it has no place in the church. When our first (and sometimes only) question to visitors is What's your last name? (i.e., are we related?), we have succumbed to a poisonous and insidious tribalism rooted in cultural pride that Christ came to abolish when He shed His blood.

I have witnessed, first hand, the effect our so-called innocent games of Dutch bingo can play on someone who has no place on the board. It shouts *outsider,* not fellow traveler. It breeds division, not unity. It creates second-class citizens, not a culture of togetherness.

I have heard church members who are confused, belittled, and isolated because they have felt the sting of tribalism.

I even heard stories of "good church-going folks" who ostracize family members who look different from them, and who seem embarrassed that they don't fit the cultural mold.

This, perhaps, is not unique to our tradition. But that doesn't excuse it. Jesus didn't spill His blood so that our

churches could be divided into those who are truly Dutch and those who aren't.

I'm not suggesting that we need to apologize for our heritage. Or that we should ignore our tradition. The fact of the matter is that many of our churches come from Dutch Reformed backgrounds, just like most Presbyterians have a big percentage of Scots-Irish blood.

But that's not our identity. Our identity is the Christ of the cross.

This is precisely what the apostle Paul was dealing with in his letter to the Ephesians. Jews and Gentiles in one church. How about that? But it wasn't enough that they just co-existed. They were one in the gospel. And therefore, they needed to act as one:

> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Eph. 2:13–18)

Most of you reading this were Gentiles. Outsiders. But God, who is rich in mercy, called you into fellowship with His Son. The church is the gathering place of God's people, the family of God, where people from every tribe, tongue, nation, and people are brought together under the heading of "it is finished."

The mission and outreach of our churches are stifled when we refuse to let go of our precious ethnic roots for the sake of the gospel.

Ecclesiastical Tribalism

But there is one other way we fall prey to tribalism, and that is when we act as if our local churches are in competition with others, even like-minded bodies. We might call this ecclesiastical tribalism.

Here in West Michigan, often the first question I get asked when I meet another Christian at a coffee shop is "What denomination are you in?" I'll often ask the same. Of course, the motivation behind this question might be perfectly legit. We simply want to get an idea of where this person stands in relation to us.

But what we often really mean is, "What tribe are you from?" In other words, we've got our assumptions. If you're from tribe A, then I'll put you in this category. If you're from tribe B, then I'll put you over here.

We even do this within our own denominations. Instead of leaning on one another for encouragement and looking to one another as examples, we're content to be isolated. Part of this, no doubt, stems from prideful snobbery—which often manifests itself in the form of suspicion.

Within the classis I serve, although we are the closest geographically, we are perhaps the furthest apart relationally. Perhaps this is because we don't think we need each other as other churches in other regions do. But that is precisely the problem: we're convinced we *don't* need each other.

It often leaves me wondering: what would our brothers and sisters from persecuted lands think of our tribalism? I'm sure no one is immune to this, but I can't help but think we're particularly prone to this sort of classification.

I can assure you that if you met a Christian while serving in the military or while working overseas somewhere in the Middle East, you're first question wouldn't be, "Now is that name Dutch?" My guess is that you'd celebrate what you have in common, not what makes you different. Why? Because you need one another. Because there aren't many of you around. And because all that ultimately matters is your unity in Christ.

Conclusion

If you've ever been an outsider, a visitor to a group unlike your own, and experienced the sort of things our churches are often guilty of, you'll quickly learn how inconsistent tribalism is to the gospel.

The gospel is the great announcement that Jesus saves sinners through His obedient life, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection. The message is for anyone who calls upon the name of the Lord in repentance and faith.

Christ came to break these walls down. He died so that we might be reconciled to God and to each other. God's grace is meant to spill over; it's not meant to create holy huddles of comfortable traditionalism.

Family reunions are great places to play bingo. But the church is a family that is to have no ethnic boundaries. May we repent of our tribalism and open our doors to anyone and everyone who thirsts. And let us celebrate our unity in Christ, learning to lean instead push, to the glory of God:

> I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph. 4:1–6)

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Archaeology: Friend or Foe of Biblical History?
Out of Egypt and Into the Wilderness

Rev. R. Andrew Compton

In previous articles, we have looked at how archaeology can be utilized by Christians who affirm the historicity of the Old Testament events. Though many in our day claim that archaeology causes problems for believers, we have asked whether this is truly the case. Indeed, as we have seen thus far, archaeology creates problems only for those who presuppose that the biblical texts contain historical errors and that archaeology is a hard science that speaks more truthfully than the Bible. Christians who believe that God's Word is true appropriate the observations of archaeology very differently and study it with an eagerness and excitement because of the wonderful role it can play in contextualizing and illustrating many aspects of the biblical text. Before we consider what archaeology can tell us about the exodus and wilderness wanderings of the Israelites, we should consider a brief methodological point.

Shall We Then Harmonize?

The word harmonization is often used in biblical studies to describe how believing scholars reconcile apparent discrepancies and inconsistencies in the Bible. It is often claimed that attempts to harmonize these seemingly discrepant passages are an artificial and contrived practice. Not only do critics scoff at harmonizing seemingly disparate textual claims, they do the same with attempts to harmonize the claims of Scripture and science and, as in our case, the claims of Scripture and archaeology. Critics say we need to admit that these two sources stand in true contradiction to one another and then side with the "more objective" conclusions of science. From there, we are asked to accept the Bible as a religious, though not historical, document. It hardly needs stating that such a proposal stands in stark contrast with what the Bible itself claims to be (i.e., the divinely inspired, infallible, and thus authoritative Word of God), but our interest is in why critics would be so quick to dismiss harmonization when harmonization is a regular part of human experience.

In reality, skeptics are unable to live according to their own professed beliefs about harmonization. The late Raymond Dillard of Westminster Theological Seminary points out that "The question is not 'should we harmonize or not,' for harmonization is a virtually universal and inevitable feature of daily life. At home parents confront sharply different versions of a recent squabble between children . . . and [try] to create a scenario . . . closer to what a more detached observer would have reported or what would have been recorded on videotape."[1] While there are times one child is lying, other times both children are speaking the truth, only each is emphasizing one aspect more than others. Dillard insists: "Encounters like these are regular features of daily life. . . . One cannot a priori or simplistically repudiate harmonization of biblical data without contradicting what would be a routine and natural response to data in other areas of life."[2] Indeed, even ancient historians routinely work to harmonize different sets of data. As an example, Matt Waters, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, practices this very thing in his recently published history of the Persian Empire.[3] As they say, "What's good for the goose is good for the gander"; Christians should feel no embarrassment for doing the hard work of seeking to harmonize the difficult data that archaeology presents with the historical narrative that Scripture provides.

The Location of Egypt's Capital

Following the final plague, Pharaoh relented and let the Israelites leave Egypt. Exodus 12:37 says that they

Egyptian war chariots

traveled from Rameses to Succoth. Exodus 13:20 then notes their travel from Succoth to Etham at the edge of the wilderness. Exodus 14:2 records that Israel then turned back and camped "in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon." We often skim past these names since most of us are not well versed in ancient topography. But historians have not been so quick to pass over these, and some have even claimed that these place names are proof that Exodus does not record true history. One example will illustrate.

In the early 1900s, archaeologists were divided on the location of biblical Rameses (called Pi-Ramesses in Egyptian sources). The site of San el-Hagar (ca. 75 miles northeast of Cairo), also known as Tanis, was believed to be the location of Rameses because stonework and bricks inscribed with the name Rameses were present at the site. The problem, however, is that Tanis was not built until the eleventh century B.C., which not only was later than the Ramesside period but also was too late to accommodate either of the main dates proposed by conservative scholars for the exodus.[4] Archaeological excavations about 10 miles southwest of Tanis at the adjacent sites of Qantir and Tell el-Dab'a, however, yielded royal palaces with more inscribed Ramesside inscriptions. Tell el-Dab'a was identified as the former Hyksos capital, Avarris, and nearby Qantir has been identified as Rameses. While adherents to a fifteenth-century B.C. exodus date recognize that Qantir itself did not flourish until the thirteenth century B.C., they note that the remains are of a huge city that encompassed also the site of Tell el-Dab'a, which was present already in the fifteenth century B.C.[5] Thus both positions can rightly claim this site as support.

Though there is nearly universal agreement by scholars about the location of Rameses at Qantir/Tell el-Dab'a, some critical writers have claimed that the exodus stories were written late in Israel's history and are merely a retrojection of places and names that bear little resemblance with real history. When critical Egyptologist Donald Redford insisted that linguistics did not allow for an identification of the biblical name Rameses with the Egyptian name Pi-Ramesses, minimalist scholars capitalized on this. Lester Grabbe, for example, argued that Rameses (as opposed to Pi-Ramesses) was a widespread topographical name in the first millennium B.C. and thus the stories of the exodus do not describe Pi-Ramesses of ancient Egypt, but realities from a much later period.[6] Another linguist, Wolfgang Heck, however, wrote a thorough critique of Redford's work forcing critical scholars either to sheepishly admit Redford's errors or ignore Heck's critique.[7] Indeed, the only way the biblical texts could speak as they do about the geography of the exodus and its beginnings at Rameses is if they truly reflect the historical reality of the Late Bronze Age in Egypt. The only other option for critical scholars is to posit that the supposed "late inventors" of the exodus story wholly by accident gave the precise name for the Egyptian capital at the time when the exodus was said to have happened! Such naïve and blind faith is ironic. After all, critical scholars claim that faith should not inform one's study of ancient history.

The Location of the Re(e)d Sea

When I was young, I distinctly remember seeing a map of the Middle East and feeling excited when I saw the Red Sea bordering the west coast of Saudi Arabia. I thought for sure that modern-day maps had accurately pinpointed the body of water made famous by Exodus 14–15. Students of Hebrew, however, have sought in vain for a literal reference to a "red" sea in the Bible. Instead, the body of water through which the Israelites passed on dry ground is literally named *yam suf,* the Sea of Reeds. It is the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, which has given us the name Red Sea by translating the phrase *yam suf* as *eruthra thalassa* (Exod. 15:4). It is true that there are salt-water reeds that grow along sections of the Red Sea, but reeds are most often thought of as growing in fresh water. As Egypt has several substantial freshwater

Mount Sinai

Panorama of the Wilderness of Zin

lakes within a reasonable distance of Rameses, how can we narrow down our investigation into the location *yam suf*?

While media claims to have found chariot wheels covered in coral and strewn across the bottom of the Gulf of Aqaba are tantalizing, in reality archaeology has not found evidence for the location of *yam suf* in such a sensational manner. It has, however, drawn attention to an ancient man-made feature that would have affected the Israelites' journey to *yam suf* and narrows the range of options. This is the eastern border canal that quarantined off large sections of Egypt between the Great Bitter Lake, Lake Timsah, and many of the other lakes from antiquity that have disappeared since the drying up of the Pelusiac branch of the Nile River and (more recently) the digging of the Suez Canal. This eastern border canal was discovered by Israeli geologists in the 1970s and would have been in operation during the time of the exodus.[8] While this man-made water barrier was noted by classical writers like Herodotus, the discovery of its remains helped scholars to better understand one of the most significant obstacles faced by the Israelites in the exodus.

Though many routes for the exodus have been proposed, several seem unlikely due to severe limitations.[9] As an example, a northern route following the main road out of Egypt, the Way of Horus, would have been a much shorter and more direct journey but was funneled through a heavily guarded path peppered with Egyptian military outposts. The coast was "heavily militarized" and would have been, according to Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen, a jump "out of the frying pan and into the fire."[10] This seems to be the concern of Exodus 13:17: "When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, 'Lest the people change their minds when they see fighting and return to Egypt.'"

Instead of northward, God initially sent Israel in a southerly direction. Though going "up" from the land of Egypt (Exod. 13:18) sounds like traveling north, Egypt was conceived in reverse in ancient times. "Lower Egypt" was the portion of the country closest to the Mediterranean Sea (north on a map) whereas "Upper Egypt" was further south, following the Nile River upstream. When traveling in a southeasterly direction, however, the Israelites would inevitably bump up against the eastern border canal, preventing them from traveling southeast indefinitely or of even turning east at will. This seems to be reflected in Exodus 14:2, where God tells them to "turn back" (i.e., head northward) and encamp facing "the sea" (presumably *yam suf,* although it simply says *the* sea *[hayam]* and could refer to one of the many Ballah or Bitter lakes of antiquity and not specifically *yam suf*). Pharaoh himself would have seen the people as boxed in by the wilderness (Exod. 14:3).

Where then does this put our quest for the location of the Red/Reed Sea? The Bible records that after turning back, the Israelites encamped in a specific location: in front of Pi-hahiroth between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-Zephon (Exod. 14:2). As it turns out, ancient Egyptian texts mention these same places as all located in proximity. And what is more fascinating is that Egyptian texts locate them near a large body of water named *pa-chuf* in Egyptian. The name *pa-chuf* is linguistically related to *yam suf* and seems quite likely to be the same body of water.[11] What is more, the name Pi-hariroth in Exodus 14:2 is related to an Egyptian term*, pa-char,* derived from a Semitic word meaning "canal." In light of all this, the Red/Reed Sea seems most likely to have been located as part of the Ballah lake system, east of Rameses and east of the Nile delta. It is quite likely that the texts—biblical and ancient Egyptian—even envision the Red/Reed Sea as connected to the eastern border canal and thus a key feature of this ancient Egyptian defense system. Imagine how Pharaoh must have felt watching the Lord easily lead his people through a defense system designed to stop even the more formidable military foe!

Archaeology of the eastern border canal, combined with an understanding of ancient geography gathered from ancient Egyptian texts, encourage us to view *yam suf* as one of the large lakes in the Ballah lakes system. As water features east of the Nile delta have had a volatile existence, historically speaking, it is likely that the Red/Reed Sea is no longer even in existence. Over the course of the first millennium B.C., the Pelusiac branch of the Nile slowly migrated northward some 10 to 12 miles, leaving even the largest lakes to dry up and fill with sand down into the present. Indeed, since that time, the Pelusiac branch has disappeared and the digging of the Suez Canal has further changed the topography of the eastern delta. Nevertheless, we know from archaeology that a significant canal system utilized a series of large lakes in an area not far from Rameses. This helps us to contextualize the story of the exodus and reconstruct the travel itinerary of the Israelites. But speaking of travel, what do travel speeds help us understand about the locations of the exodus?

Narrowing Down Candidates for Mt. Sinai

As alluded to above, some have claimed to have found the remains of Pharaoh's army some 200 miles southeast of Rameses in the modern-day Gulf of Aqaba. As studies of ancient travel times have shown, one day's journey in the ancient world would cover a distance of 17 to 23 miles. How does this square with a 200-mile trip to the Gulf of Aqaba? Numbers 33 recounts the travel itinerary of the Israelites in a more systematic fashion and even includes a technical term, "stage" (or "stages," ESV), which refers to distance one could cover in a single

day. We read that the first day was a journey from Rameses to Succoth (v. 5). The second day was a journey from Succoth to Etham (v. 6). The third day was their journey back northward (the "turning back" of Exod. 14:2) to Pi-hariroth. On the fourth day, they passed through the sea. If the Gulf of Aqaba truly was the Red Sea of the Bible and really did contain Pharaoh's chariots, the host of the Israelites, including women and children, traveled an astonishing 66 miles per day! It is hard to imagine that the Gulf of Aqaba is a reasonable location for the Red Sea.

We mention this because some in recent years have suggested that Mt. Sinai is located not in the Sinai Peninsula, where it has been traditionally located, but in Saudi Arabia at a site called Jebel al-Lawz.[12] Others have posited other sites in Arabia, or sites in the northern Sinai. The work of Emmanuel Anati at Har Karkom, about 55 miles north of modern-day Eilat, has become another alternative suggestion in recent years. While the approximately 150 miles from Rameses to Har Karkom would fit within the eight-to-eleven-day time period allowed by Numbers 33:8–15, problems emerge when the journey from Mt. Sinai to Kadesh-Barnea is said to take eleven days to cover only 32 miles. One could propose that the entire assembly of Israel suddenly took on a snail's pace, traveling just under 3 miles per day for this last leg of the journey; however, such an approach seems a bit forced.

Ancient tradition has suggested the site of Gebel Musa in the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula is the location of Mt. Sinai. St. Catherine's Monastery is a famous site purporting to mark the location of the burning bush (Exod. 3). While Byzantine traditions are not the most reliable for determining biblical locations, and while Gebel Musa has some limitations (e.g., it lacks room for the Israelites to camp at its base), its location seems to jibe better with consistent travel speeds and the itinerary of Numbers 33. It should be noted that Gebel Musa is located close to other mountains that have been proposed for Mt. Sinai: Gebel Serbal and Gebel Katherina. Unfortunately nothing more can be proven with the current state of archaeological knowledge. Nevertheless, archaeology has helped us to understand the beginning of the Israelites' journey out of Egypt, and thereby provides us with some options for considering the remainder of their travels.

Conclusion

Two major conclusions can be drawn from this article. First, archaeology can help us to identify ancient cities that correspond with biblical names and thereby provide a context for the events in Scripture. This is certainly the case with the location of Rameses at Qantir/Tell el-Dab'a, and seems likely the case with the location of the Red Sea east of Rameses in the ancient Ballah lake system. But second, archaeology cannot always be used to illustrate with the detail we might wish. This seems to be the case with the location of Mt. Sinai. Nevertheless, archaeology provides us with a useful tool for taking what might otherwise be a boring list of old cities and campsites in Exodus and Numbers and viewing them as a real itinerary with stopping points that seem viable based on known travel speeds and ancient topography. In the next installment of this series, we move into the time of Israel's settlement in the land of Canaan. This is where archaeology begins to yield more information about the biblical text than ever before.

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1. Raymond B. Dillard, "Harmonization: A Help and a Hindrance," in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 153.

2. Dillard, "Harmonization."

3. Matt Waters, *Ancient Persia: A Concise History of the Achaemenid Empire 550–330 BCE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 39, 73.

4. Note that 1 Kings 6:1 posits 480 years between the exodus and the commencement of the temple construction. Those who interpret this time frame as an exact time marker view the exodus as taking place in the fifteenth century B.C., whereas those who view it as a figurative number representing twelve generations of forty years each place the exodus in the thirteenth century. We will consider this question more in a future article.

5. Bryant Wood, "From Ramesses to Shiloh," in *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts,* ed. David M. Howard and Michael A. Grisanti (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2003), 262; idem, "The Royal Precinct at Rameses," Associates for Biblical Research, April 3, 2008, http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2008/04/The-Royal-Precinct-at-Rameses.aspx.

6. Lester Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 86.

7. For this debate and citation of Hecks's work, see James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 117–18.

8. For the background of this canal and its implications for the exodus, see Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 164–75.

9. For pros and cons of the various options, see Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 266–72.

10. Kitchen, *Reliability of the Old Testament*, 267.

11. For a full discussion, see James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 105–8.

12. This has been pushed by a group called BASE Institute, led by a former police investigator and S.W.A.T. team member, Bob Cornuke (see www.baseinstitute.org). Hoffmeier expertly points out the flaws in the BASE arguments for Gebel el-Lawz. See *Israel in Sinai*, 133–36.

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The Inconsistency of the Tongue

Rev. Brian G. Najapfour

> With it [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. (James 3:9–12)

According to one Japanese proverb, "The tongue is but three inches long, yet it can kill a man six feet high."[1] How true it is that words have great potential to change our lives forever! One reason that this is so is because we use our words to accomplish so many different things. With the same mouth, we pronounce both words of blessing and words of cursing. God's Word, however, exhorts us to be consistent in our speech. Just as we seek to honor God consistently with our thinking and feelings, we must also seek to honor God with our speaking. As in every other area of Christian growth, though, to be consistent with our tongues takes some work! So, let's look more closely at this passage and consider how we might be able to submit this area of our lives to God more fully.

Our tongues are inconsistent (v. 9)

Our text begins by saying, "With it we bless our Lord and Father . . ." Here the tongue is depicted as an instrument through which we bless our God. Of course, other parts of our bodies should also be used for blessing the Lord. Our eyes, ears, hands, and feet—in fact, our entire bodies should be utilized as instruments through which we bless God! Yet, in this passage James is specifically reminding us to employ our tongues as instruments of blessing God.

Isn't it interesting that, in verse 9, it is we who are said to do the blessing? After all, we should all recognize the fact that God is the greatest source of blessing, and that it is usually God whom the Bible describes as blessing others. That's why we pray on a daily basis, "Lord, please bless me and my family." However, in this verse, we see James telling us that we can actually use our tongues to bless our Lord! It's rather humbling to think that we can bless the God who created us, but what exactly does this mean?

The Bible uses the word "bless" in three distinct ways. First, it is used to bestow grace. Ephesians 1:3 demonstrates this usage with the pronouncement, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." In this context, "bless" means to bestow grace, and only God can do that.

Second, the word "bless" may also be used to ask God to bestow his grace on others. For example, in Luke 6:23, Jesus instructs his disciples to "bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." In this case, the disciples of Jesus are told to bless their persecutors, and to do so primarily by praying and asking God to bestow his blessings upon the persecutors. Even when we are despised by others, we should pray for them as Jesus taught us to do.

Third, the term "bless" may also be used to describe our praise of God. We praise him when we acknowledge who he is and what he has done for us in Christ. It is in this context that James is using the word "bless." Psalm 103:1–3 uses the word "bless" in the same way: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity . . ." In what way does David want his soul to "bless the Lord"? He is exhorting his soul to bless the Lord with worship, praise and adoration as a fitting response to all that God has done for him in the gospel.

As James reminds us, we are able to bless the Lord in this way—as an act of worship–with our tongues. When we worship God as a church family, that's exactly what we do! We speak our prayers to God; we sing songs of praise; we respond to His Word; we edify one another, and in all of these ways, we are blessing God with our words!

Nevertheless, James explains that there is a great irony in our behavior which is in desperate need of correction, for with that very same tongue that we use to bless God, we also use it to curse people. The word "curse"—like the word "bless"—can be used in different ways. First, it can mean to *make something useless.* Though humans are certainly capable of destroying things, the word "curse" is used in this way to describe an ability which only God has. For example, in Mark 11, Jesus curses a fig tree, saying "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." Jesus declares the tree to be cursed and it is.

James, however, uses the word "curse" in another way—to mean wishing evil to happen to others. This is a sad truth—that with the same tongue with which we bless God, we also speak hateful things to (or about) other people. We may not have the ability to cause terrible things to happen to others, but sadly, that doesn't prevent us from using our tongues to wish it were so! What a terrible sin this is—and how frequently it's committed by those who claim to follow Christ!

Notice, though, that James includes himself in this sinful confession, by saying, "we bless our Lord and Father . . ." and "we curse people . . ." Why does James include himself like this? James could be speaking "as the representative of his people in the name of his guilty people."[2] This is very similar to when I am preaching a sermon and say something like, "Unbelievers—we must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ or else we will remain under God's wrath!" Obviously, by God's grace I am already a believer in Christ, but I will still sometimes speak to you as a representative of those within our congregation, or those present in a worship service, who don't yet trust in Christ.

Again, verse 9 shows us the great inconsistency in how we use our tongues, and verse 10 states it even more plainly: "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing." In Psalm 62:4, David describes the enemies of God in a similar way: "They take pleasure in falsehood. They bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse." In other words, they are hypocrites. When those outside of the church complain about hypocrites, who speak lovingly about God but hatefully about other people, could it possibly be you or I whom they're thinking of? Let's hope not! In any case, this passage goes on to offer us God-honoring instruction about how we may change this behavior in our lives.

God commands us to be consistent with our tongues (v. 10b)

The passage continues, "My brothers, these things ought not to be so." This passionate appeal is addressed to "brothers"—those who

profess to follow Christ. There is urgency in these words, and they're intended to convey the idea that this sinful behavior of cursing is not necessary, beneficial, or edifying to anyone. James is saying, "Stop doing this—it is disobedience to God!"

The previous verse offers an extremely compelling reason why this is so—because the curses are directed toward "people who are made in the likeness of God." Do you know why we should not curse even unbelievers—even radical Muslims who despise us? Because they, too, were created in the image of God. That's why James uses the generic term for "people" (*anthropos* in the original Greek), which means men, women, boys and girls of every race and nationality. *All of us* were created in God's image (Gen. 1:26). This is why James exhorts us to not curse others with our speech—because to curse the image-bearer of God is to also curse the God whose image they bear!

Paul exhorts us in Romans 12:14, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." We are told not to say evil words about our persecutors—but, oh, how easy it is to sin in this way . . . especially when we read news reports about the worldwide persecution of our brothers and sisters in Christ!

In one news report, al-Qaeda-linked rebels seized control of a Christian village in Syria. One resident of that village who was a Christian man said that the militants were forcing his fellow Christians to convert to Islam. In his own words, "I saw the militants grabbing five villagers Wednesday and threatening them (saying): 'Either you convert to Islam, or you will be beheaded,'"[3] By reports like this, we almost can't help but become very angry and pronounce a curse on these persecutors, because the injustice of the situation grieves our hearts terribly.

Still another troubling report tells of a Christian mother who was fined a month's average salary because of her nine-year-old son's "illegal religious activity" at school. Her son, David, had given audio CD's to his two teachers as gifts. When the school's head teacher saw the label "God loves you too" on one of the CDs, she immediately contacted the police. An investigator asked the boy who permitted him to bring these CDs to school. The boy replied, "My mother," and his mother was then fined for having allowed her son to do this.[4]

How fascinating it is that, in this case, the CD title "God loves you, too" was instantly understood to be a reference to the God of the Bible! Isn't it encouraging for us to know that our God—the only true God—is the God of love, and that even non-believers recognize that? Shouldn't "Allah" also be acknowledged to be a god who loves his people? Yet, in this case, the CD was not identified in such a way. This, too, tends to anger us because of the terrible injustice shown toward followers of Christ. Yet, we must remember to conform ourselves to the teaching of God's Word, which tells us not to speak evil against others—even those who wish to do evil to us—because they, too, were created in the image of God.

James illustrates the need for us to be consistent with our tongues (v. 11).

Again, our text reads: "Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?" Or, more literally, does the fountain out of the same opening pour forth both the sweet (blessing) and the bitter (cursing) water? The obvious answer, of course, is "No, of course not. This is impossible!"

As you likely know, Israel has many fountains of water, which—when they are full—will burst forth with water and provide a source of fresh flowing water for the streams and brooks. In effect, James is reminding his readers to not expect to have two different kinds of water flowing from the same source, since that would be contrary to God's design in nature. In a similar way, it is morally contrary to God's law for us to use our tongues to both bless God and curse other people. We can't do this!

James may also be echoing the words of his half-brother, the Lord Jesus Christ, who in Luke 6:45 said, "The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks." Here, the human heart is shown to be very similar to the fountains of Israel, for when the heart is full, it produces words which flow out of the mouth.

In other words, the speech that we produce is an excellent indicator of what's in our hearts. That being the case, our biggest problem isn't actually our tongue at all—but the condition of our hearts, from which our speech truly comes. J. C. Ryle explains, "Our words are the evidence of the state of our hearts, as surely as the taste of the water is an evidence of the state of the spring."[5]

Lately, my wife and I have been reading Tedd Tripp's book, *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, and he makes this same biblical observation there. When a child says something bad, the real problem isn't the child's tongue, but his heart which is "deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (Jer. 17:9).[6] We know that only God can cure and change a heart like this.

I suspect that when the original readers of the book of James first received this book and came upon verse 11, describing the different kinds of water that might pour forth from a spring, that they likely reflected back on one particular event that had taken place many

years prior to that time. Here's the account of the event, as recorded in Exodus 15:22–25:

Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" And he cried to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

Some commentators understand the wooden log to symbolically represent the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, because it made the bitter waters sweet. We recognize that only the cross of Christ can make our bitter tongues sweet again—and only the cross can make our sinful hearts pure. In fact, without the cross of Christ, there would be nothing that we could do to sufficiently address the sin problem in our lives. However, we can give thanks to God, for the gospel of Jesus Christ is absolutely true—and through him our hearts may be eternally changed!

So, I urge you to consider the cross of Christ every day as you seek to honor God with your life. When we wake up in the morning, we should remember that we have this awful tendency to be inconsistent in how we use our tongues and acknowledge that before God. We should all pray, "Lord, help me to resist sin," and remind ourselves of our desperate need for the gospel. Without the gospel of Jesus Christ, we would simply continue to use our tongues for evil purposes, but because of our relationship with Christ, we can both honor God and bless others with our words.

Some may try to argue, "I was born this way, and I can't really control the things I say." In regard to your own abilities, you're absolutely right! We can't make ourselves resist sin on our own. The solution, though, is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

James uses two more illustrations to express these profound truths to us, writing in 3:12, "Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water." The point, again, is simply that we should be consistent in the ways that we use our tongues.

Obviously, the issue of hypocrisy is closely connected to the problem that James is addressing in this text. The same call to consistent, righteous living is also issued to us by our Lord, who taught the following to his disciples in Matthew 6:24: "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."

We cannot truthfully say "I love Jesus" if our lives don't reflect that—and we're not entitled to sing "I love to tell the story . . ." if we aren't actually doing what the song says! It's one thing to say these things, but another thing to actually do them. Nonetheless, if we want to avoid being appropriately labeled as "hypocrites," our words and our actions must be in obvious alignment. May the Lord help us to use our tongues wisely and consistently, so that, through our speech, he may be truly exalted in our lives!

Questions

How does James use the word "bless" in our passage?

In what way can we bless the Lord with our tongues?

How can the same tongue that blesses God also engage in cursing? Have you been guilty of this inconsistency? If so, how?

What compelling reason does James give to stop cursing others?

How does the use of your tongue indicate what is in your heart?

How and why is the gospel of Christ the solution to the problem we have with our tongues?

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Rev. Brian G. Najapfour

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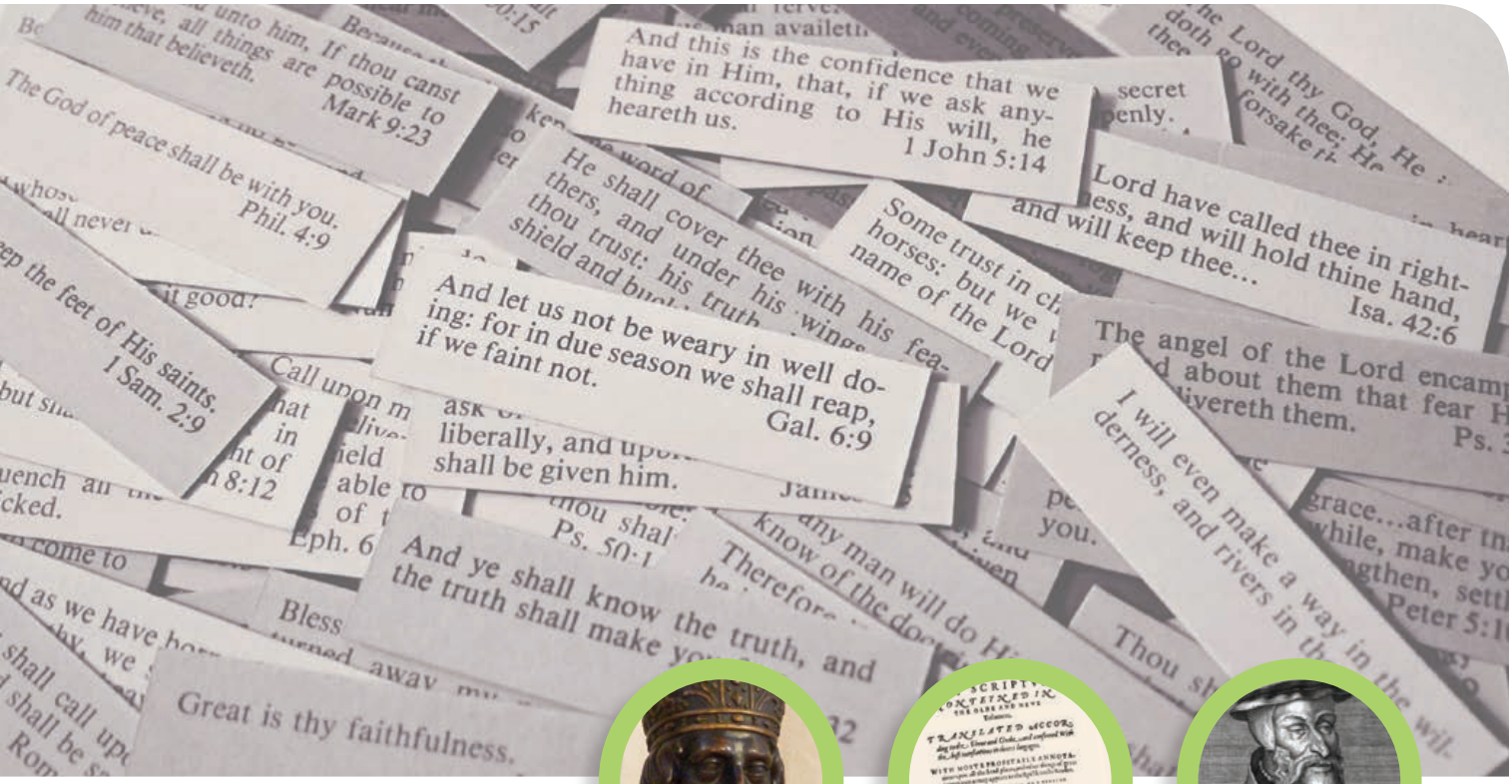
Chapter and Verse Divisions in the Bible

Rev. John Samson



Stephen Langton

Geneva Bible of 1560

Robert Estienne

Where did the chapter and verse divisions in our Bibles come from?

When Scripture was originally written, there were no chapter and verse divisions. These man-made additions to our Bibles came much later. It was Stephen Langton, an Archbishop of Canterbury in England, who added chapter divisions into the Latin Vulgate around A.D. 1227. A Jewish rabbi by the name of Nathan divided the Hebrew Bible (what we as Christians call the Old Testament) into verses in 1448. Then, Robert Estienne (also known as Stephanus) divided the chapters into verses in his Greek New Testament in 1551. The first English translation to make use of his verse divisions was the Geneva Bible of 1560.

That is something of the history behind the chapter and verse divisions. The question becomes "Was this development a good thing?"

My answer would be yes and no. It is fair to say there are pros and cons in this matter.

The designations are helpful in that they allow us to find a verse or passage in a short time. We can find a verse easily without the need to read an entire book of the Bible. The numbering system allows us to go straight to a verse or passage we wish to locate. This is a wonderful, practical benefit. Imagine if there were no chapter/verse divisions and a preacher asked the congregation to find the section of Isaiah dealing with the Suffering Servant of the Lord. How many people would find the passage? Not many, and certainly, not very many in a swift manner. However, if the preacher says, "Let's turn to Isaiah chapter 53," anyone in the audience with a Bible in hand can find the passage in just a few seconds. In this way, then, chapter and verse divisions are helpful and convenient when it comes to finding references and quotations.

But there is a downside—a major downside. These divisions make it especially easy for us to look at a verse in isolation, with no reference to its context. Many pages could be filled

with examples. Just one is Philippians 4:13, where we read, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." This verse, in isolation, could be interpreted (falsely) to mean that Christ strengthens us to achieve any human endeavor, the "all things" referring to any conceivable task. An athlete might apply this by thinking the verse means Christ will strengthen him to win every race he enters—that this in fact is God's promise to him. An author might use the verse as a promise that whatever he writes will be a best seller, and the Christian salesman might believe that he will be number 1 in company sales because of his relationship with Christ. Christ strengthens us to accomplish anything we set out to do.

But here's the problem. The verse teaches nothing of the kind. The "all things" Christ does strengthen us to do refers to the things Paul wrote about in the previous sentences (vv. 10–12):

> I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.

Verse 13, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me," has a context which, if ignored, leads to a false interpretation. The correct one is this: Whatever the situation, whatever the circumstance, whether in hardship or in much provision and abundance, whether there is plenty or whether we experience hunger and great need, God's grace is more than abundant for us in Christ. He will strengthen us to endure whatever it is we have to face. That was true for Paul, and it is also true for all who trust in Christ. We can go through any event in life, whether it is a very good or a very hard thing, because the Lord Jesus Christ will strengthen us to do so. That is the meaning of Philippians 4:13.

The word *arbitrary* refers to something based on a random choice or personal whim, rather than reason or a sound logical system. Some of the chapter divisions in our Bibles are especially arbitrary. And this is another downside.

Just above, I mentioned Isaiah 53 and its reference to God's Suffering Servant. Yet if we look at the words in their context, the passage starts speaking of this Servant in Isaiah 52:13, not Isaiah 53:1. Rather than Isaiah 53 starting where it does, a much better place for the insertion of a new chapter would have been at Isaiah 52, between verses 12 and 13. This would then allow us to see the entire passage in one section in our Bibles, rather than this unnecessary breaking up of the passage in a way that defies all logic and reason. And it is more than all right to say this, because in doing so, I am not being critical of God's Word in any way. God's Word is flawless, inerrant, and inspired. I am critical here only of what man has added to God's inspired text in our Bibles. The chapter division here in Isaiah 53 is not helpful at all. Quite the opposite!

In summary, I think it is a good thing for us to have chapter and verse divisions in our Bibles, for the sake of convenience. However, it is important that we never forget that context is a key factor in forming a correct understanding of Scripture. When we forget context, misinterpretation is inevitable, and this is something we should always be vigilant to avoid.

Rev. John Samson

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Book Review
J. A. Myhre's *A Bird, a Girl, and a Rescue*

Rev. William Boekestein

Mark Twain wrote, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime." While we might agree with Twain, the salaries many of us earn do not. Few of us will be able to replicate his transcontinental stagecoach journeys or his overseas adventures in Africa, Europe, and the Holy Land.

But we can read.

Through reading we can enter cultures vastly different from ours. We can feel the plight of people who might long to walk in our shoes even on our worst days. We can cheer for protagonists who live on the wrong sides of the tracks, or the globe.

Through reading we learn, often unexpectedly, that characters who seem worlds apart from us share our struggles and fears—even our virtues. They, like us, lay their heads on their pillows (or bamboo mats) at night wondering if they have made a difference in the world. As we try to answer that question with them—sometimes agreeing, sometimes disagreeing—Twain's ugly threesome of prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness starts to suffocate.

And if reading books can make us better traveled, reading fiction can often take us into the deepest jungles of unfamiliarity better than any other type of literature. Fiction encourages us to savor truth without choking on facts. In an unexpected way, fiction can, in turn, help us grapple with facts by fortifying our hearts and awakening the creative parts of our minds. Through fiction our thoughts and feelings embark on the kinds of travels Dr. Twain prescribed.

J. A. Myhre's *A Bird, a Girl, and a Rescue* (New Growth Press, 2016) is a traveling book. It brings us to a part of the world few of us will ever visit in the flesh. And, in a way that no news soundbite can, we are confronted with the unfamiliar realities of African boarding schools, rebel attacks, juvenile abduction, predatory animals, and illegal deforestation. The book's illustrations are starkly inelegant; in other words, the perfect style for the story. They feel like they could have been borrowed from a wall display at the rural boarding school that provides one of the settings of the story. As the author and illustrator firmly plant our own feet in the rich African soil, these problems become ours. We cannot face these issues like we would if we were reading a newspaper; we are part of the story!

If the book sometimes feels rushed, the brisk pace only adds to the gritty tension of the plot. Our inability to understand fully the heavenly messengers who help the protagonist through her challenges reflects the mystery of God's "ministering spirits" (Heb. 1:14). Even as we (might) disagree with the decision of the main character—an early adolescent girl named Kiisa—to embark on a perilous journey alone, we are struck by how our respective contexts help interpret virtues like fear and valor. As with most well-written juvenile literature, this story is meant for young adults, but adults traveling with them will be thankful for the ride.

A Bird, a Girl, and a Rescue can't replace a trip to rural Africa. But for one percent of the cost of an airline ticket it is a highly recommended stand-in.

Rev. William Boekestein

is the pastor of Immanuel Fellowship Church in Kalamazoo, MI. His most recent book, for young readers, is *Shepherd Warrior,* a dramatized retelling of the life of Reformer Ulrich Zwingli.

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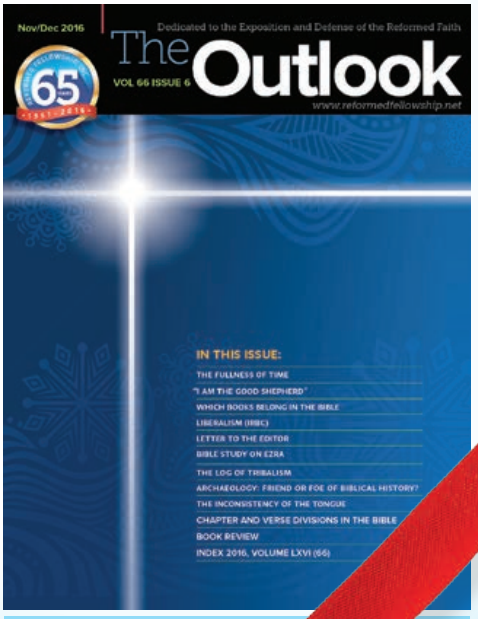

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