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## HOW DO I HANDLE BIBLE DIFFICULTIES?

BY ROBERT VELARDE 📅 JANUARY 1, 2009



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*Theologically liberal approaches to the Bible often simply accept contradictions as part of a flawed record. But if the Bible is God's Word, and if God is all knowing and all powerful, it stands to reason we should be able to trust the Bible.*

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What's a Bible difficulty? A Bible difficulty is an apparent problem posed by the biblical record. It might be called an error, a mistake, a difficulty, a challenge, a contradiction, or any number of other terms. Critics of the Bible are sometimes hostile in their claims that the Bible is "full of contradictions" or "difficulties," but these apparent problems are also brought up by committed Christians wanting to make sense of God's Word. Rather than get into a number of specific examples, it will be more beneficial to learn some key tips for handling Bible difficulties. That way, whenever you encounter a seeming problem in the Bible, you will be able to use these tips as a starting point for resolving the difficulty. Essentially, handling Bible difficulties is a matter of hermeneutics or interpretation (specifically, biblical interpretation). But other factors also come into play when interpreting, such as looking for a reasonable explanation, carefully making comparisons to other passages when necessary, and in general puzzling through possible answers and satisfactory resolutions to apparent problems. Theologically liberal approaches to the Bible, on the other hand, often simply accept contradictions as part of a flawed record. But if the Bible is God's Word, and if God is all knowing and all powerful, it stands to reason we should be able to trust the Bible.

## Tips from a Bible Scholar

What are some helpful general tips for handling Bible difficulties? Fortunately, a number of Bible scholars have offered their insights. Here are some tips gleaned from the late Gleason Archer's fine book *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*

- *"Be fully persuaded in your own mind that an adequate explanation exists, even though you have not found it yet."* In other words, Archer is accepting the Bible as an accurate, authoritative collection of documents – God's inspired Word. Once a case has been made for this fact, then it stands to reason that the Bible should not contain any serious discrepancies in the manuscript copies. If you come across a Bible difficulty, there should be one or more reasonable explanations for it.
- *"Carefully study the context and framework of the verse in which the problem arises until you gain some idea of what the verse is intended to mean within its own setting."* This is a key point of biblical hermeneutics – the science and art of interpreting the Bible. Context matters significantly. Keep in mind the context of a particular verse in a book, as well as the context given the broader teachings on the subject throughout the entire Bible.
- *"In the case of parallel passages, the only method that can be justified is harmonization."* This helpful tip applies more to the four New Testament Gospels than anywhere else, though there certainly are parallel accounts of historical events in the Old Testament as well. There's no doubt that the Gospels contain various accounts from different perspectives, but these accounts should be able to be reconciled. Critics would not be happy if the four Gospels were identical in their reports of certain events, accusing the authors of collusion. Ironically, however, they aren't happy with the differences either. The best approach is to study the passages and find a way to harmonize them without compromising the essence of the text.
- *"Consult the best commentaries available, especially those written by Evangelical scholars who believe in the integrity of Scripture."* A good commentary is a valuable resource. Many alleged Bible difficulties are addressed in such books. One helpful series is the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Zondervan). With the rise of Bible software, many commentaries are now included in these packages as well.
- *"Many Bible difficulties result from a minor error on the part of a copyist in the transmission of the text."* This is an important point, especially when it comes to apparent numerical discrepancies. While Christians who adhere to inerrancy believe the original Bible manuscripts contained no errors whatsoever, they do grant that copies may contain a small number of errors. These errors or variants, however, do not change any key Christian doctrines.

- “Whenever historical accounts of the Bible are called in question on the basis of alleged disagreement with the findings of archaeology or the testimony of ancient non-Hebrew documents, always remember that the Bible is itself an archaeological document of the highest caliber.” Again and again throughout history, the archaeological evidence has supported the biblical record, not contradicted it. The evidence is clearly on the side of the Bible. Be wary of the latest news story claiming to debunk some key aspect of Christianity on the basis of recent findings that have yet to be studied in detail by qualified scholars. For more on the archeological evidence for the Bible see *The Archaeological Study Bible* (Zondervan).

## More Advice (from two Bible scholars)

In addition to Archer’s helpful tips for handling Bible difficulties, *When Critics Ask* also offers its share of useful insights. Here’s a selection of the advice:

- “Mistake 1: Assuming that the Unexplained Is Not Explainable.” This ties into Archer’s advice “that an adequate explanation exists.” Be confident that if you encounter a Bible difficulty, there is a reasonable explanation.
- “Mistake 2: Presuming the Bible Guilty Until Proven Innocent.” This is not treating the biblical text fairly. As with other historical documents, let’s grant it the benefit of the doubt unless clear evidence says otherwise.
- “Mistake 3: Confusing Our Fallible Interpretations with God’s Infallible Revelation.” Usually the problem with alleged Bible contradictions and difficulties is with our interpretation, theology, or approach to the text, not with the actual text itself. We make mistakes, but God doesn’t.
- “Mistake 4: Failing to Understand the Context of the Passage.” Again, context is supremely important when handling Bible difficulties. In most cases, a careful reading of the passage(s) in question, in their proper contexts, will resolve apparent difficulties.
- “Mistake 5: Neglecting to Interpret Difficult Passages in the Light of Clear Ones.” This is a key concept to keep in mind when approaching Bible difficulties that fall into the category of an obscure or particularly challenging passage. We may not be able to completely understand or explain the isolated passage in question, but given the broader context of the Bible and clear teachings on the subject elsewhere, we should be able to come to a good consensus on the matter at hand. A concept known as the *perspicuity* of Scripture is relevant in such cases. This means that the Bible is clear in essential matters.<span class=

## Bible Difficulties?

Does the Bible contain some difficult passages? Yes. Are they unresolvable? No. Whenever a critic or sincere believer comes across an alleged Bible difficulty, it has always been answered. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness ...” (2 Timothy 3:16, NIV) Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Zondervan, 1982), pp. 15-17. Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask* (Victor Books, 1992), pp. 15-26. Geisler and Howe cover twelve additional “mistakes” in reference to biblical interpretation and handling Bible difficulties. Other helpful resources in addition to *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* and *When Critics Ask* include *Knowing Scripture* by R.C. Sproul (IVP, 1977), *Exegetical Fallacies* by D.A. Carson (Baker, 1984), *Scripture Twisting* by James Sire (IVP, 1980), and *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* by William Klein, Craig Blomberg, et. al. (Thomas Nelson, 2004).

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Robert Velarde is author of "Conversations with C.S. Lewis" (InterVarsity Press), "The Heart of Narnia" (NavPress), and "Inside The Screwtape Letters" (Baker Books). He studied philosophy of religion and apologetics at Denver Seminary and is pursuing graduate studies in philosophy at Southern Evangelical Seminary.

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