

Analysing and Resolving Perceived Bible Difficulties

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Introduction

The Bible is far more complex than many realise. It is a library, yea, a collection of independent writings produced over a period of over 1,500 years, and yet amazingly, speak the same thing. However, some difficulties arise in interpreting Scripture as people raise objections, questions or highlight apparent contradictions. In this paper, we focus the classes of difficulties rather than individual problems as these would range into thousands (Johnson 2009; O'Brien 1990). Several have written on this grand subject, some of whom we summon in this work, but our primary reference point is Philip Johnson, whose structure we largely here adopt. Further, to do justice to our subject matter, we need to establish why these difficulties in interpretation arise.

Difficulties and Why They Arise

These difficulties arise because the Bible seems to have them scattered across its landscape unless one carefully analyses them with a view to dissolve such spiritual bones. Second, some people have a weak or incorrect hermeneutic that does not help them that much (Klein, Blomberg & Hubbard 2004). A faulty interpretation method is bound to be trouble ridden through-out. It certainly be a bumpy ride! Thirdly, some approach scripture with an already made up mind wishing to implant their subjectively hatched idea on the Bible. If it (i.e. Bible) does not yield to their attempts, then they declare scripture as not being coherent or simply impossible to handle! Fourth, some have an incomplete panoramic view of scripture and thus fail to realise that some other parts of scripture do in fact explain or are clearer on that subject matter. Scripture interpret Scripture, so the ancient adage rightly asserts. Still others intentionally wish to twist scripture to their own advantage. This latter cohort does not care about the context, authorial intent, genre or the overall message of a given piece of writing. All these people's view is blighted by one form of exegetical fallacy or other (Carson 2007). That said, there are some passages that genuinely trigger difficult for all of us; difficult to unlock or decipher even for the seasoned saint! This paper partly sheds some light on such passages, although touches on other related or connected aspects. Let us begin then to briskly tackle these categories:

- a. Difficulties arising from original text: The original text helps matters in many instances but at other times, the original text itself (if it is available) may fuel problems and speculations as it is copied, especially by hand (Klein et al 2004). In the case of the Bible, the original autographs are lost to history but the extant copies have unintentionally had some typographical errors, repetition etc. introduced into them by the most diligent and painstakingly meticulous scribes, which typos were originally absent in the original autographs. The original is inerrant and infallible. At times, some meanings in the original text may be unclear leaving people to *construct the best meaning from the context*. This may introduce inaccuracies and problems later in due course.
- b. Difficulties arising from translation problems: Translating from one language to another inevitably introduces problems no matter how careful or accurate someone may be (Downing 2020). The problem may not be introduced intentionally, by craft or deceit but words used in another language may not have the equivalent of what is actually meant to be communicated in the original. One language may have masculine and feminine words or have precise compound words which the language translated from or to may not have (Carson 2007). The best interpretation is therefore from the original. Always remember that language is dynamic and thus problems are inevitable. This often leads to the dynamic equivalence sort of translation style, giving meaning as close to what it may mean today.
- c. Difficulties arising from false interpretation of the Bible: Interpretation has to do with understanding and explaining or expressing something in other words, maintaining the original author's intended meaning and sense of subject content. In this regard, we refer to the Bible. Many interpretations have been imposed on the Bible, some false while others correct and representative of the sacred page (Carson 2007; Klein et al 2004). When a false interpretation is forwarded and adopted by many people, the result may be disastrous gravitating into wrong ethical practice.
- d. Difficulties arising from a wrong conception about the Bible: Some people do not understand the Bible correctly because of the concept they have had about it before ever reading it. For instance, before I read about the grace of God, I thought God was a ruthless terrible, random vengeful God that did not brook any non-sense. In a sense I was correct that he does not tolerate impurity and sin, but what I did not appreciate was that he is also a compassionate and graciously just God who loves His people. For a long time, I approached God from that perspective which actually distorted my thinking. When I discovered the grace of God (after a thunderous sermon on Justification by faith), I was amazed and failed to reconcile the two attributes (i.e. Justice & Mercy) for a time. Only diligent consistent reading of the whole Bible spectrum progressively made things clearer. The other means of grace

helped cement my new found liberties in Christ. In a similar fashion, someone may sincerely be deceived or lost because of wrong concepts or even perceptions of God's word.

- e. Difficulties arising from the type of language in which the Bible was written: The Bible was primarily written in Hebrew (OT) and Koine Greek (NT). The words in the respective languages have their own peculiar challenges to the English reader because they may not fully understand or appreciate the hidden cues, nuances, ideas or intentions of the passage. While they may understand the basic meaning, the deeper implications or even intonations may not be appreciated or picked. The Hebrew language for instance is poetic in some places, hence the reason why some people allege that Genesis 1-6 are mere poetry and not actual! Greek also was of different types and kinds used in New Testament times. At translation times, many problems thus crop up. The Bible language is classic, meaning that it remains fresh and relevant throughout the generations. It is timeless (Downing 2020; Klein et al 2004).
- f. Difficulties arising out of incomplete knowledge about the background, customs, values, History, Geography and society in which the Bible was written: Back ground, social setting and location play a part in why certain things are expressed in the way they were put in the Bible. If one is ignorant of these they soon run into difficulties (Hale 2007; 2012; Breisch 2016; Dever 2005). For instance, Abram kneeling before the men who visit his tent even before he knows who they are may confuse a Bible scholar reading Genesis or Daniel. In one passage, Abram kneels while in the other, the three young men flatly refuse to do so. It is critical to have background notes while interpreting scripture.
- g. Difficulties arising out of our ignorance of the conditions in which a certain book was written or a commandment was given: In interpreting a verse or passage, it is critical to understand the background context in order to arrive at the most accurate interpretation (Cheung 2014). If you ignore the conditions or context, you run the risk of misleading yourself and getting confused when there is really no issue to lose sleep over!
- h. Difficulties arising out of the many-sidedness of the Bible: The Bible is a Library containing 66 books written differently and at different times to express one truth about God. The variation and diversity of writers many times poses challenges to readers. The Bible is sufficient for life and living and deals with issues from different perspectives. As mentioned elsewhere, truth is scattered everywhere across the Bible and only the spiritually alert, well trained and with a wide campus of scripture can discern.
- i. The infiniteness of God and finiteness of man's understanding: God is omniscient while man is not. God's attributes are in their perfect sense while

man is limited (Pink 1918). If that be true (which actually is), then humans and God may not always be at the same level in terms of comprehension and understanding.

- j. Difficulties arising from the fallacies of logic: Logic is good but, like anything, if taken to another extreme may mislead. It may take you into the bush!!! The Lord's parables are a good example. If you read too much into them and deduce the ultimate meaning (or logical conclusion), you may misjudge (Carson 2007). In such cases, know what you are handling and take the simple meaning as God intended. The difficulty of course is how to arrive at this decision!
- k. Difficulties which arise when the precise nature of a statement is not understood: Bible scholars at times 'shed blood' over unclear statements or words. In the quest to have a right understanding, they attribute meaning to the said statements which may not sit well with the rest of scripture or what other equally godly people have held. The best recourse is to revert to the original tongues but even there some uncertainty may still exist. The need to discover the root meaning is ongoing because the original statement may suggest multiple meanings which the translator has to discern and put across.
- l. Difficulties of numbers: The numbers in the Bible sometimes do not make sense! In some passages, one number is given while another number is given in another passages relating to the same event. This may appear to be a variance but when rightly understood and with due care may reveal something else, no contradiction at all (O'Brien 1990)!
- m. Problems related to the dullness of our spiritual perception: The Hebrews were once said to be dull of understanding, despite having been in the faith for some time (Hebrews 5: 11-14). In all probability, they may have repeatedly been exposed to sound preaching, albeit in persecution times, but remained stuck to their nappies! This "dullness" sometimes happens when Christians are not alert, prayer less or declined in their faith. Other Christians get infected with the world view of things and do not think Biblically. It is worse for unbelievers seeking to interpret the Bible. Sadly, this latter group has invaded our Bible Colleges and Seminaries in these degenerate days.

Reading the Bible

The reading of the Bible is sometimes a difficult work, especially if one approaches it with the carnal mind. The Bible can appear harsh, illogical or difficult if one approaches it from a worldly view. At times, even genuine saints also struggle with some parts of scripture. In this section, we high light some of thoughts on how to make sense out of those apparently "difficult verses" or passages. We proceed to handle this in point form with some level of

explanation. These problems bug many of us so it is hoped this consideration will shed some light on your peculiar set of challenges.

Making sense of the Bible: Points to note as we excavate the Scriptures

- a. When the finite mind tries to understand, interpret the infinite God and His actions, difficulties are bound to arise: Gods ways and thoughts are not equivalent or the same as Man's. This truth must be seriously embedded in our thought pattern. While we should be responsible and do our part, God remains transcendent and supreme. What we see as logical and good may not always tie in with Gods will although ours should tie into his will to please Him. Logically thinking, some of God's actions are confusing but that is what makes Him unique and sovereign. The killing of that man who tried to save the ark from following when the cattle stumbled has always puzzled me (2 Samuel 6:1-7). From the face of it, he was trying to do a good thing but it cost him!
- b. The presence of difficulties or objections do not in any way prove the Bible is untrue: The fact that some things are hard to comprehend or understand does not in any way prove that the Bible is inconsistent or false. In my view, those apparent difficulties actually prove that the book is of divine origin and needs the mind of God to fully interpret! Were it a human book only, it should be straight forward and explainable using conventional means. That said, these challenges also entail more work for all.
- c. All outlooks on Origins have problems and difficulties: The question of where humans and the world originated from remains unresolved. Many theories have been spawned but none of them makes as much sense as the creationist view. Although many have imbibed the theory of evolution, they often do so in order to avoid any thought of God. Interestingly, even evolution needs faith to believe in!
- d. Ones' inability to solve a problem does not imply that the problem is unsolvable: One may have insight into some difficult passage while another may stumble over. God is the one who gives the insight. No matter how difficult a passage, there is an answer somewhere which God will make clear in due course. All we have to do is pray, seek light from above and wait for his revelation while we apply our faculties to diligently search for the answer akin to the merchant looking for the pearl of great price. The fact that he takes long to locate the pearl does not imply it does not exist or cannot be found.
- e. The apparent problems in the Bible become negligible when they are honestly compared with the incomparable excellences of the Bible: The Bible is one unit from Genesis to Revelation. It does not set out to prove any Scientific facts or even the very existence of God! It just states that God is and explains his being and what He does (e.g. Genesis 1:1; Hebrews 11:1-3;6). All His

dealings, no matter how amazing or confusing to the human mind, are all set out for our learning. Viewed as one whole unit, and given that it was written over 1,500 years by different authors, it is amazing that there is remarkable unity and consistency throughout the thread of the sacred page.

- f. History is our witness, an ally in our quest to prove the case for God or His works. Unlike what superficial readers are wont to hold. Usually, critics of the Bible are superficial readers. They have a skin deep acquaintance with the Bible and jump at every supposed problem to highlight it with much attendant glee! Genuine serious readers of the Bible, whether converted or not have a deep reverence and respect for the Bible and will not easily jump to attacking the Holy Writ.
- g. Many problems are created by propagandists and interestingly, these do not have their origin in the scriptures. Many times, those opposing the Bible read into the Bible what it was not meant to say. They make so much noise about this little or set of issues so that the Bible may be perceived unreliable and not trust worthy. This is a deliberate ploy to discredit God's sweet word using human machinations. For instance, they make the Bible appear seriously male chauvinistic and having contributed to women discrimination! What could be further from the truth!
- h. Careful and prayerful study will certainly resolve a myriad interpretive challenges. Diligently reading and studying the Bible is good and the first part but rightly understanding (internalising) as well as applying it is the other part. In order to successfully understand the Bible in its right context and get proper insight, the reader must approach it in a posture of prayer and careful observation. Always remember that the Bible is not like any other writings of men, it is God's word and therefore inspired & unique.

As can be seen, many apparent difficulties exist in the Bible and only a careful, prayerful, systematic study of the word will resolve most of these perceived problems. It may be that not ALL problems will be sorted out but will certainly clear most of them.

Conclusion

God's word is a wonderful cohesive piece of writing, a majestic library with lofty eternal truths. Although it is written in anthropomorphic language, some parts of it are difficult to easily decipher unless one employs the right Hermeneutic. Many things we shall eventually resolve, with diligent study and self-application though not all. In such instances, we shall wait to see more clearly once the veil is removed in eternity. For now, we continue to search as far as we can go!

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