

The Biblical Heritage Center's
DISCOVERING THE BIBLE

Learning what the words of our Bibles meant to their ancient authors and audiences, and their historical journey through the centuries.

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Error, Evolution or Different Revelations?

By Jim Myers

I grew up in a religious environment in which we were taught that every word in our Bible came directly from God. The Bible was the final authority in our religion and it was used to prove the validity of all our doctrines. Pastors would routinely declare that the answers to all of the questions of life could be found in the Bible if we looked hard enough to find them. The way many arguments were settled was by quoting chapter and verse. Anyone daring to question the person quoting Bible verses was treated as if he was challenging God Himself.

Even though I attended a fundamentalist Bible College that held the same beliefs, it was a different environment because in many debates both sides supported their positions by quoting scriptures. Sometimes it would almost seem that God was arguing with Himself since we all believed that God was an all-knowing entity and our Bible was His inerrant infallible revelation. How could anyone quoting the Bible be wrong? Did an all-knowing God write one thing in one place and then write just the opposite in another place? None of our teachers ever suggested that maybe God wasn't responsible for the differing biblical positions behind the debates.

After graduating from the Bible College I continued to investigate these biblical issues. We were never taught anything about the thousands of ancient manuscripts from which our modern translations were made. The fact that there were more differences found in them than there are words in the Bible was a shocking discovery. How could anyone know which ancient words were the original words of the original author of any book? What shocked me almost as much was that most of my pastor friends who had attended other seminaries learned this before they graduated. Later I learned that others textual problems happened because translators failed to consider differences between how biblical words are understood and what they meant in the cultures in which the ancient texts originated.

After years of study it was very clear that there were still other issues that translation and manuscript variation did not explain. They centered on verses that were clearly contradictions and could affect the way an entire book of the Bible was understood. They could be very troubling challenges because no matter how creative many of the commentaries could be, in the end the problems were still there. I am very grateful that many scholars continued to dig, because their work ultimately provided important clues that help us understand more accurately how our biblical heritages developed. One thing that has become very clear is that immediately after Jesus was executed by the Romans his group began to split into multiple sects with very different beliefs, teachings and traditions.

Grab your Bible and follow along as we take a look at some of the former issues that revealed scriptural treasures. Be sure to read the footnotes in your Bible and see if they attempt to explain away the obvious problems in the biblical text. Let's begin with a very familiar one.

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Should Christians Keep the Law?

Let me begin with an example that has dominated Christianity ever since around the mid first century when Paul wrote his book. Jesus had been crucified almost 30 years earlier, the Jerusalem Temple was still operating and the vast majority of Christians were Jews. Many of the original apostles were still alive, none of the books now found in the New Testament had been written and no official Christian theology existed. Paul was taking his revelation to places outside of Israel and teaching it to Jewish and Gentile audiences. Since Gentiles were not the focus of the Jesus Movement, they presented a new challenge and raised a ton of questions. Many of these questions were the result of Paul's words such as the verses below:

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness. (Romans 10:4-5)

The way the opening verse is understood by many Christians is that when Christ came the obligation to follow the law ended for all believers. You couldn't have found anyone in my church that would have thought otherwise. As a matter of fact, we all believed that the law had not only ended, it was bad! One reason it was bad was because it was the law of the Jews and they not only rejected Jesus, but they played a major role in his crucifixion. We were also taught that Jews believe that a person can only be saved by keeping their law. The bottom line was that a choice had to be made between believing in Jesus or keeping the law. You couldn't do both.

I wish I could share all of the memories that flood into my mind as I remember those long-past days. After being in the ministry for several years I decided to enroll in the University of Texas at Arlington to take courses that could provide me with the knowledge I needed to better understand the cultures, histories and languages linked to the words of my Bible. My goal was to provide my members with more accurate Bible studies. It didn't take long to realize that some of my professors enjoyed blowing up my Religious Belief System. There were no personal attacks like in religious circles; they just suggested that maybe I should examine how new scholarly information related to my beliefs. I quickly realized that there was a whole lot that I had never considered during my religious journey. It was during this time that I fortunately enrolled in a Greek class taught by **Dr. Ike Tennison**. He understood where I was coming from and helped me survive this challenging period.

A few years later I enrolled in courses offered at the Dallas Jewish Community Center for the same reason. Since Jesus was a Jew and the Tanakh was the Jewish Bible, I figured that it only made sense to find out what the Jews thought about all of this. By that point in time I was in my late-30's, and until then, I can't remember ever having actually known a Jew. Interestingly, one of the first Jews I encountered informed me that not only did he not keep the law, he was an atheist! You talk about a shock -- an atheist Jew just didn't compute in my brain. He told me he had never met a Christian fundamentalist before, and after my earlier encounters with my UTA professors, and began to understand just how much of a fundamentalist I was!

After taking several very interesting classes at the Jewish Community Center I found myself in a class taught by a teacher who didn't know exactly what to do with this Christian guy who always came to his class with a stack of Hebrew and Greek Bibles. His name was **Rabbi Jeffery Leynor** and I quickly discovered that he was not only an excellent teacher, but he wasn't afraid to examining his own beliefs. While we were talking one day I realized he viewed Christianity as if we were all

Catholics. We laughed about the fact that I thought all Jews followed the law and he thought all Christians were like Catholics. We vowed to avoid such broad generalities in the future.

Now let's return to Paul's words. Another thirty years would pass after Paul wrote that "Christ is the end of the law," before another author wrote the book that we now call the Gospel of Matthew. It is important to remember that both authors were Christians who were writing to Christians. We do not know the name of the person who wrote Matthew, but scholars agree that it wasn't the apostle known by that name. They do agree that the author's target audience were Christians who lived close to the end of the first century. Chances are that at least some in that audience were familiar with Paul's writings. Note that the verses below are attributed directly to Jesus.

"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. Amen! I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or a decorative stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:17-19):

Clearly Jesus and Paul disagree about the Law. Matthew's Christ said Christians were to teach and keep the Law, while Paul's Christ was the end of the Law. I can't remember hearing any sermons in my church or at Bible College that encouraged us to do what Jesus said -- teach and keep the Law. Did you? There is clearly a problem here. No matter which book I decided to obey, that choice would mean that I would disobey the other book.

When we go back to Paul's verse we find that he quotes Moses as the source of his position.

"For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness."

Being a diligent student I checked out the footnotes in my translation and was directed me to Leviticus 18:5 –

"So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am Yahweh."

The above verse indicates that Moses' position was that his people were to keep the Law. As a matter of fact, according to the above verse, this wasn't just Moses' position, it came directly from Yahweh. It doesn't look like Moses would support Paul's position.

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Was Jesus the son of Joseph, son of God, born of a virgin and /or the Word of God made flesh?

Boy - was that a mouth full! All of the authors of the Gospels agree that Jesus was the "Son of God," however, something that no one ever asked at my church was -- What did it mean to the people living in Israel at the time of Jesus? Outsiders automatically assume that it means that Jesus was "a male offspring of God." Sounds logical and this interpretation played a significant role in the development of Gentile Christian theology. The only problem is that is completely wrong!

Beginning with David, every king of Israel had the title of "Son of God." There had been many "Sons of God" before the birth of Jesus. He was not the first person in Israel to be known by that title nor was he the first "Christ," as we shall see later. There are many good sources for more information about this, including The Encyclopedia Judaica. The king of Israel became the adopted "Son of God" at his inauguration. Since "Son of God" was a title and not taken literally, then the obvious question becomes – Who was Jesus' father? Matthew and John have different answers to that question.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.
(Matthew 1:18)

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and *also* the Prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." (John 1:45)

Clearly, witnesses could testify as to the identity of a child's mother because they could see the birth. But, determining who the child's father was clearly another matter. How could anyone, who was not involved in the act of procreation, even have a clue as to the identity of the father? It was only a few years ago that the scientists discovered DNA, which makes it now possible to answer paternity questions.

Matthew's agenda was to make sure his readers knew that Mary was already pregnant with a child before she married Joseph, therefore Joseph could not have been the father of Jesus. But, the author of the Gospel of John indicates that Joseph was Jesus' father, at least as far as Philip was concerned. Matthew says that the Holy Spirit was the father and the one doctrine that has received more press than any other doctrine is probably the virgin birth. Matthew and Luke contain the only accounts of the virgin birth. Mark, John and Paul do not seem to know anything about it. Doesn't it seem that a belief that is so central to Christian theology would have been well-known to them too? Surely, if they had known anything about it we would see it in their writings.

Interestingly, Matthew, Mark and Luke also never say anything about Jesus being the Logos, the incarnate "Word of God," as John declares in his Gospel. Once again, wouldn't you think that if the other authors had known anything about Jesus being present with God at the creation of the universe, they too would have at least mentioned it? Of course, if Jesus coexisted with God before Mary bore him, wouldn't this have serious implications about the need for a virgin birth?

Is Jesus Coming Soon or Suddenly?

As we have seen above, there are clear differences between some of Paul's writings and those of the Gospels. Things get more interesting when we discover that Paul's writings also contain some

interesting disagreements within them. Professor Bart Ehrman addresses this issue in his recent book Jesus, Interrupted. He specifically deals with verses found in 1st and 2nd Thessalonians (p. 125):

“. . . the author indicates that there is a sequence of events that must transpire before the end will come. First there will be some kind of general rebellion against God, and then an anti-Christ figure will appear who will take his seat in the Jewish Temple, declaring himself to be God. This lawless one will do all kinds of deceptive miracles and wonders to lead people astray (2:1-12). Only after these things have taken place will the end finally come. The end is not yet here and is not coming right away; it will be preceded by clear and obvious signs, so that the Christians in the know will not be caught unawares.

“The problem is that it doesn’t coincide well with what Paul himself said in 1 Thessalonians. The letter was also written to address the question of what would happen at the end, when Jesus returns from heaven in glory (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). The reason Paul wrote the letter was that the members of the Thessalonian congregation had been taught by Paul that the end was imminent. They were puzzled and distraught because some of the members of their church had already died before Jesus returned. Had these lost out on the reward to be brought with Jesus at his second coming?

“Paul goes on to reiterate what he had told them when he was among them (1 Thessalonians 5:1-2), that Jesus’ coming would be sudden and unexpected, “like a thief in the night.” It would bring “sudden destruction” (5:3), and so the Thessalonians had to be constantly prepared so that it would not overtake them unexpectedly.

“If Paul meant what he said in 1 Thessalonians, that Jesus’ return would be sudden and unexpected, it is hard to believe that he could have written what is said in 2 Thessalonians – that the end is not coming right away and that there will be clear-cut signs to indicate that the end is near, signs that had not yet appeared.”

Early Pauline communities expected Jesus to return during their lifetimes; therefore no thought was given to building a long-term religious organization that could reach well beyond the lives of generations of their descendants. Later, as members began to pass away, questions were raised about when Jesus would actually return. This produced a new group of writings that were attributed to Paul, but were not written by him. He had been dead for many years. One of those books was 2nd Thessalonians, which clearly disagrees with 1st Thessalonians.

Is resurrection a past or future event?

Professor Ehrman discusses another difference between the writing of the original Paul and later writing written by someone else in his name (p. 127).

“In the early church, baptism was not performed on infants, only on adults after they had come to faith in Christ. For Paul, baptism was an important ceremonial event, not merely a symbolic act. Something actually *happened* when a person was baptized. The person was mystically united with Christ in his death.

“Paul works out this idea most carefully in his letter to the Romans. The basic idea is an apocalyptic one. There are powers of evil in the world that have enslaved people and

alienated them from God, including the power of sin. Sin is a demonic force, not simply something you do wrong. Everyone is enslaved to this force, which means that everyone is hopelessly alienated from God. The only way to escape the power of sin is to die. That is why Christ died, to release people from this power of sin. To escape the power of sin, then, requires a person to die with Christ. That happens when a person is baptized. By being placed under the water (Paul's churches practiced full immersion), a believer is united with Christ in his death, as he was put in the grave, and so also has died to the powers in control of this world. People who have been baptized are no longer enslaved by the power of sin but have "died with Christ" (Romans 6:1-6).

"Paul was quite insistent, however, that even though people had died with Christ, they had not yet been "raised with him." Followers of Jesus would be raised with Christ only when Christ returned from heaven in glory. Then there would be a physical resurrection. Those who had already died in Christ would be raised and those who were still living at the time would experience a glorious transformation of their bodies in which this mortal shell would become immortal, not subject to the pains of life or the possibility of death.

"Whenever Paul talked about being raised with Christ, it was always as a future event (see, for example, Romans 6 and 1 Corinthians 15). . . Both Colossians and especially Ephesians disagree. Here is what the author of Colossians says about the very same point:

"When you were buried with him in baptism you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:13)

"Ephesians is even more emphatic than Colossians. In speaking about the past spiritual resurrection, the author says, in contrast to Paul. "God . . . made us alive together with Christ . . . and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places with Christ Jesus" (2:5-6). All this has already happened."

Obviously the fact that Jesus did not return within the lifetimes of the initial members created significant problems and raised many questions. This was probably the most important issue facing the first two generations of Christians.

Back to the return of Jesus.

Once again I am going to return to Dr. Ehrman's book (pp. 156-162) and his discussion about Jesus the Apocalyptic Prophet. The underlines are mine.

Like other apocalypticists of his day, Jesus saw the world in dualistic terms, filled with the forces of good and evil. The current age was controlled by the forces of evil – the Devil, demons, disease, disasters, and death; but God was soon to intervene in this wicked age to overthrow the forces of evil and bring in his good kingdom, the Kingdom of God, in which there would be no more pain, misery, or suffering. Jesus' followers could expect this kingdom to arrive soon – in fact, in their lifetimes. It would be brought by a cosmic judge of the earth, whom Jesus called the Son of Man. When the Son of Man arrived there would be a judgment of the earth, in which the wicked would be destroyed but the righteous rewarded. Those who were suffering pain and oppression now would be exalted then; those who had sided with evil and as a result were prospering now would be abased

then. People needed to repent of their evil ways and prepare for the coming of the Son of Man and the Kingdom of God that would appear in his wake, for it was to happen very soon. . . .

It is in the Synoptic Gospels that Jesus preaches the coming Kingdom of God (Kingdom of Heaven). The Kingdom of God is not “heaven” – the place you go to when you die (as in later Christian tradition). It is a real kingdom, here on earth, which will be ruled by God through his Messiah, a utopian kingdom where the first will be last and the last first. Only in the last Gospel, John, does Jesus no longer preach that this kingdom is arriving soon. And why is this teaching not in the last of our Gospels? No doubt because the kingdom never did arrive, and the later Gospel writer was forced to reinterpret Jesus’ message for his own day. The earliest Gospel traditions, though, portray Jesus’ message as about the coming kingdom. . . .

Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of that one will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels . . . Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the Kingdom of God has come in power. (Mark 8:38-9:1)

And in those days, after that affliction, the sun will grow dark and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the sky will be shaken; and then they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send forth his angels and he will gather his elect from the four winds, from the end of earth to the end of heaven . . . Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place. (Mark 13:24-27, 30)

Jesus’ ethical teachings need to be placed in that apocalyptic context. Many people understand Jesus as a great moral teacher, and of course he was that. But it is important to recognize *why* he thought people should behave properly. In our day, ethicists typically argue that people should behave in ethical ways so that we can all get along for the long haul, in happy and prosperous societies. For Jesus, there wasn’t going to be a long haul. The end was coming soon, the Son of Man was to appear from heaven, imminently, in judgment on the earth, the Kingdom of God was right around the corner. The reason to change your behavior was to gain entrance to the kingdom when it came. It was not in order to make society a happy place for the foreseeable future. The future was bleak – unless you sided with Jesus and did what he urged, in which case you could expect a reward when God intervened in history to overthrow the forces of evil and set up his good kingdom on earth, which would happen very soon.

Discovering the different traditions instead of attempting to harmonize contradictions.

I like to compare our Bibles to mounds (tells) that are found in Israel, which archaeologists carefully dig in hopes of finding ancient artifacts. They work hard to determine the time period of each layer and record their findings of what took place at that point in time. Being able to follow that timeline makes it possible to understand how people and events relate. It would be impossible for an archaeologist to do his or her work without that knowledge.

Our Bibles also contain layers of texts that were written by different people who lived in different time periods and at different geographical locations. It didn't come from a single source at one point in time. The authors belong to a wide variety of communities which held overlapping as well as opposing beliefs and traditions. It is impossible to accurately understand the information contained in our Bibles without knowing how those people and communities relate to one another.

As seen above, when certain expectations did not come to pass, such as the immediate return of Jesus, different communities revised their beliefs accordingly. Learning about these heritages reveals a steady stream of revised expectations followed by additional revisions. In the first four centuries of Christian history there was no central Christian authority. Instead, there were hundreds of independent Christian groups, each which had to deal with the challenges which arose. By becoming aware of the existence of those communities and investigating the wide range of biblical heritages which have made their way to us, we have the opportunity to understand so much more than any generation that has ever lived before.

What were previously declared as errors in the biblical texts are in many cases, important clues that reveal how our spiritual ancestors evolved and the variety of competing religious revelations they held. Let's dig into our Bibles and see what historical treasures we are able to uncover. **BHC**

BIBLICAL HERITAGE CENTER'S September Memorials

In Loving Memory

**KAREN
LEYNOR**

March 31, 1966
September 9, 2004

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

*May the memories of our loved ones
inspire us to seek in our lives
those qualities of mind and heart
which we recall with special gratitude.*

*May we help to bring closer to
fulfillment*

*Their highest ideals and noblest
strivings.*

*May the memories of our loved ones
deepen our loyalty
to that which cannot die --*

*Our faith, our love, and
devotion to our heritage.*

*(Yitzhor Reflections – The New Mahzor – The
Prayer Book Press)*

In Loving Memory

**JAMES
EDGAR
MYERS, SR.**

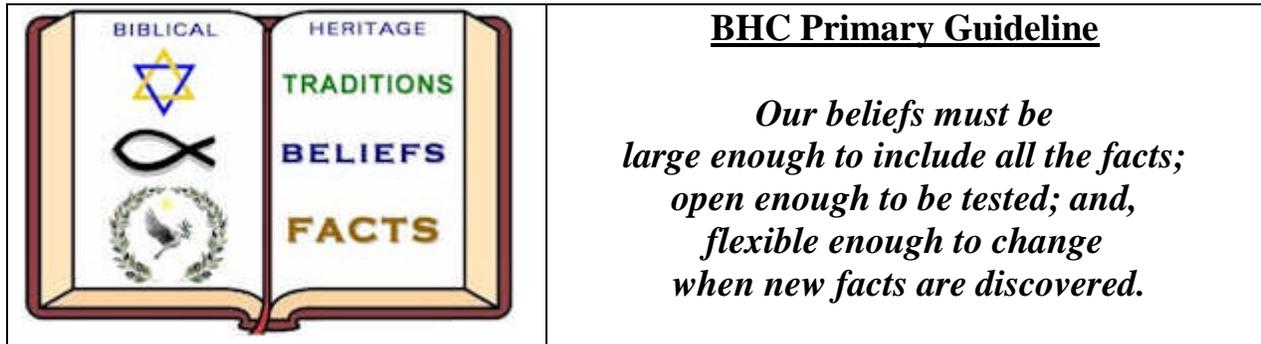
September 13, 1913
September 19, 1999

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

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Matters of faith are playing an increasingly greater role of importance in the political and social environments today. Our mission is to provide solid factual information about the book and the heritages from which those matters of faith originated.

Even though millions rely on their Bible regularly, many know nothing about its history or the heritages that shaped it and were shaped by it in return. We believe that people understand the value of accurate information and will be willing to support the Biblical Heritage Center for providing it.

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