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## THE DEBATE OVER DEFINING INERRANCY

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### SYNOPSIS

A heated debate is occurring today concerning the doctrine of inerrancy. At issue is the question, "To what extent is it appropriate to make use of information from outside of Scripture, in order to interpret Scripture?" While both sides agree that a certain amount of contextualizing information is appropriate to use, one side, with a more traditional approach to interpretation, claims that the other side has denied biblical inerrancy by importing foreign contexts into the text. They believe that application of foreign contexts leads to a denial of the historicity of what are intended to be historical passages.

The other side argues that the contexts they apply to the Bible are not foreign, but derive from the social and literary world of the Bible. They also say that traditional interpreters take valuable insights about the Bible off the table, and make the inerrancy of the Bible harder to defend by holding the text to a modern standard it was never intended to meet. Finally, they say that they are not denying the historicity of biblical texts; rather, they argue that biblical authors never intended certain texts to be understood as historical in a modern sense.

Although these two sides are at odds, both see themselves as defenders of biblical inerrancy. Several heated, high-profile confrontations have occurred, with little in the way of resolution. The results of this debate will have far-reaching effects in terms of how we interpret biblical texts, and what solutions we apply to alleged biblical errors and contradictions.

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A debate is raging concerning the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, with two sides representing distinctive approaches. Both sides agree that context is required to interpret biblical texts.<sup>1</sup> What divides them is disagreement over the *extent* to which external information may be used to interpret the Bible. According to interpreters of a more traditional mold (hereafter, *traditionalists*), certain biblical scholars and apologists are going too far with contextualizing, and are importing foreign ideas into the biblical text, thereby denying its factual accuracy. Contextualizing scholars and apologists (hereafter, *contextualizers*) reply that they are denying not the accuracy of the Bible, but traditionalist interpretations of it. They further reply that traditionalists are denying, without sufficient basis, the relevance of contextualizing information.

Though the two sides are poles apart on this interpretive issue, they agree that the stakes in this debate are high. They also agree that they are both trying to preserve inerrancy. But according to traditionalists, contextualizers are undermining confidence in the accuracy of the Bible; while according to contextualizers, the perception of inerrancy offered by traditionalists requires us, at times, to accept unrealistic explanations for alleged biblical problems.

### INERRANCY DEFINED AND CONTEXTUALIZED

Contextualizers believe that inerrancy, as explained by traditionalists, is made unnecessarily demanding by understanding “error” in modern, precision-literalist terms. The biblical world, they point out, was less concerned with precision and chronological order than the modern world.<sup>2</sup> By way of analogy, a scientist might report the amount of fuel carried by a rocket as “659.654 gallons,” while a news reporter might report the capacity as 660 gallons. The reporter, writing for a popular audience, conveniently rounds off the number for his or her readers, but is not considered in error for doing so.

The terms of the debate are a matter of degrees of application, rather than binary opposition. Traditionalists readily admit many contextualizing solutions for alleged biblical problems. For example, they would hardly deny that when Psalm 98:8 calls for mountains to sing and rivers to clap, the author is employing an *anthropomorphism*—a poetic device in which nonhuman objects are described with human qualities. The debate comes to the fore with texts that have been otherwise understood to be literal,

but which contextualizers suggest are better understood as literary devices in their own right.

**Sample of the Sermon.** An issue exemplary of the debate concerns alleged contradictions between Matthew 5 and Luke 6, in their respective versions of the Sermon on the Mount. Critics note that Matthew's version is longer than Luke's, and that teachings that seem to be the same are reported in different words. For example, while Jesus in Matthew says, "Blessed are the poor" (5:3), Jesus in Luke says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (6:20). Critics assume that Matthew and Luke intended their Gospels to offer exact reports of what Jesus said on this occasion, and ask, How can these differences be explained if the Scriptures are inerrant?

For the contextualizer, the explanation for these differences is found in the world of the Bible as a predominantly oral culture. Although the Gospels are texts, much of what they report, including Jesus' own teachings, was originally transmitted orally. Even the written Gospels are structured to be transmitted orally, since 90 percent of the people in the biblical world were illiterate, and could remember the contents of the Gospels only if they were structured memorably.<sup>3</sup>

The net result is, as Eddy and Boyd put it, that Gospel authors "freely rearrange[d] events and sayings," and did so intentionally to serve their audiences' needs. Because this rearrangement was intentional, "the fact that events and sayings are ordered in markedly different ways...does not constitute a 'contradiction,' and does not, in any relevant way, compromise the genuineness of the historical interest or capabilities" of Matthew and Luke.<sup>4</sup> Nor does it compromise inerrancy, for if the Gospel authors *intentionally* rearranged their material for a purpose, they cannot have meant for what they report to have been taken as a precise account.

Contextualizers further affirm that the difference between Matthew's "blessed are the poor" and Luke's "blessed are the poor in spirit" can be understood in terms of accurately reporting the "voice" of Jesus without reporting His exact words.<sup>5</sup> Of course, even as it stands, we do not have Jesus' exact words, since Jesus spoke Aramaic, not the Greek of the Gospels. But for the contextualizer, the difference in wording is a nonissue; no reader of the period *expected* exact words to be used (although they could be), and would be no more disturbed by different versions of this saying than we would be by different fuel capacity totals reported for a rocket. This sort of solution, to this and similar problems, has been offered by scholars such as Craig Blomberg, Robert Guelich, and Darrell Bock.<sup>6</sup>

Traditionalists reject such solutions as a threat to the historical accuracy of the Bible. Traditionalist Robert Thomas, for example, argues that Blomberg's approach to

such questions diminishes historical accuracy in the Gospels. Thomas asks why, if the contextualist reading is correct, Matthew misled his readers into thinking that Jesus made this full sermon on one occasion. Surely, Thomas argues, the fact that Matthew says that Jesus “opened his mouth and began to teach” (Matt. 5:2) indicates that a continuous discourse followed.

But Thomas’s solution to the second problem—did Jesus say “blessed are the poor” or “blessed are the poor in spirit?”—is inconsistent with the premise of a continuous discourse. According to Thomas, Jesus said *both* “Blessed are the poor” and “Blessed are the poor in spirit” in the same sermon! In his words, “Most probably Jesus repeated this beatitude in at least two different forms when he preached His Sermon on the Mount/Plain, using the third person once and the second person another time and referring to the Kingdom of God by different titles.”<sup>7</sup> But if indeed Matthew’s words indicated that he was reporting a continuous discourse, then surely it is a break in continuity for Matthew to fail to report the second version of Jesus’ sayings, which ended up only reported in Luke (and vice versa). Wouldn’t Matthew be “misleading” his readers by leaving things out? Thomas’s solutions to these two problems cancel each other out.

## PROGRAMMATIC CONFRONTATIONS

Although this debate is currently at a boiling point, it has been simmering for several decades, punctuated by periods of explosive confrontation. One such confrontation occurred in 1983, when evangelical scholar Robert Gundry was charged by apologist Norman Geisler with compromising inerrancy.<sup>8</sup> The source of Geisler’s charge was Gundry’s thesis that portions of Matthew’s Gospel, such as the birth narratives, are not reporting literal history but are *midrash*, a sort of Jewish method of allegory. Thus, for example, Gundry argued that Matthew’s magi were not intended by Matthew to be understood as historical persons, but as a symbolic reworking of Luke’s shepherds.

The most critical point of contention revolved around the question, *Is literal, historical narrative the only way to report history truthfully?* Gundry argued that, from a genre perspective, Matthew fits the model of midrash. He further argued that, given that midrash was Matthew’s intention, whether he erred must be judged according to that intention. If Matthew did not intend for readers to understand that the magi were literal historical figures, then Matthew cannot be charged with error if the magi did not exist as historical figures—just as the author of Psalm 98 cannot be charged with error if mountains fail to sing and rivers fail to clap.

Unlike matters related to oral transmission, Gundry’s thesis has not received much support from other scholars. However, it did engender a debate on how to define

inerrancy properly. Spearheading the opposition, Geisler charged that Gundry's thesis presented Matthew as an inaccurate reporter of history. But at no point did Geisler judge Gundry's case on the merits of literary criticism. Instead, Geisler argued that Gundry was wrong for no other reason than that he rejected the reports of Matthew as literal truth. In short, Geisler started with the assumption that Matthew was intending to report literal history, which was the very question at issue. He also implicitly assumed that the genre of midrash excluded all reportage of factual history, and classified midrash as "purely imaginary." But this is a mischaracterization. Midrash is not "purely imaginary." Rather, it reports the truth in a coded way. As Gundry put it, in a reply to Geisler: "Beneath the opposition to midrashic style seems to lie a suspicion that it is deceitful. But once we get inside it by understanding its nature and purpose...it is no more deceitful than a metaphor, a hyperbole, or any one of a number of Biblical figures—right up to a parable."<sup>9</sup>

In 2011, a similar debate emerged concerning the text of Matthew 27:52–53, a description of Jerusalem saints who rose from the dead prior to Jesus' resurrection. In his book *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Historiographical Approach* (InterVarsity Press, 2010), apologist and scholar Michael Licona suggested that this text might be best understood as a sort of literary device in miniature, rather than literal history. Reprising his role from decades earlier, Geisler termed Licona's interpretation of this text "unorthodox" and "dangerous" because it dehistoricized the text. Licona's reply, in turn, was a thematic mirror image of Gundry's: "The charge that I have 'dehistoricized' the text is also problematic, since it likewise presupposes that Matthew intended the raised saints to be understood as historical. But what if he intended for them to be understood as apocalyptic symbols?"<sup>10</sup>

## THE GENRE QUESTION

According to contextualizing scholars, the cultural values of the biblical world were such that a literary production could act as a sort of coded message, to report an entirely different truth than what one would get if a text were read as literal historical narrative. The most obvious example of this in the New Testament, on which all parties agree, is the Book of Revelation, which falls into a genre called *apocalyptic*. Symbol-pictures used by the apostle John were meant to represent some other-than-literal truth. We therefore understand, for example, that when John sees a beast with seven heads and ten horns rise from the sea (Rev. 13), we should not expect his vision to be fulfilled by way of the physical arrival of a literal creature suited for the role of a villain in a *Godzilla* movie. Instead, we understand that this beast is a symbol of some political reality.

In the current debate, however, the problem is that whereas Revelation seems quite obviously full of symbols, texts such as Matthew 27:52–53, and Matthew’s birth narratives, seem to modern readers to be obviously reporting literal, narrative history. For Matthew to break into a literal, historical narrative with a miniature apocalypse, as Licona suggests, seems, to the modern reader, counterintuitive. To the ancient reader, the contextualizer argues, it was not. Contextualizers present as central to their case typical examples of the literature of the period. Gundry appealed to examples of Jewish midrash, while Licona pointed to models found in ancient biographies, the genre model that is followed by the Gospels. Both argued that genre was a critical context to understanding the intentions of the biblical authors.

**Need-to-Know Basis?** Unfortunately, the chief traditionalist response to such arguments has not been to engage the arguments of contextualizers directly. Rather, the argument has been that the purposes and intentions of an author should not be part of our interpretive approach to a text. Put in more popular terms, it is argued that a reader does not need to know *why* a text was written in order to understand *what* it means. A favorite example used by traditionalists to illustrate this point is Exodus 23:19, which instructs readers, “You are not to boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” Traditionalists note that commentators have offered multiple speculations as to why this command was given: was it to avoid a pagan ceremony in which a kid was boiled in its mother’s milk? Is it a dietetic restriction? Traditionalists affirm that since the text itself does not say why this command was given, its purpose was clearly not essential to understanding it.<sup>11</sup>

This response is misguided for a couple of reasons. One is that the biblical text was written in a high context society, in which the audience is assumed to be privy to the reasons a text was written.<sup>12</sup> People in a high-context society take for granted that those with whom they communicate already have a broad base of shared knowledge. By analogy, it is like sitting at a family Thanksgiving table, where everyone else is making allusive references to past memories that a visitor will not understand: perhaps one year, Uncle George delivered an extended monologue with a memorable punch line. Thereafter, for that family, the punch line invokes memories of the entire monologue. But for the visitor, the punch line, devoid of a defining context, seems like inconsequential nonsense, and there is nothing to help him understand what everyone else thinks is so funny.

A second point is that simply because *we* do not know the purpose and intention of a text, does not mean *the biblical authors* did not know it, either. Even without any explanation being given, it would remain that the law recorded in Exodus 23:19 did have *some* purpose.

Finally, it is also clear that although knowing *why* a text was written is not always essential to understanding its message, it can nevertheless clarify and expand that text's meaning. If a mercenary is handed a note that says, "Take care of Mr. Jones," it is clear that the "why" of that message forms an important part of its meaning. It could mean "take care of" as in "protect the person," or it could mean "take care of" as in "eliminate the problem" (Mr. Jones himself)!

**A Curious Contradiction.** Despite objections to theories such as those by Gundry and Licona, traditionalists have shown inconsistencies with their own professions. A particularly egregious example is apparent in that some traditionalists adhere to an "old earth" interpretation of Genesis 1–2. My friends in the young-earth creation movement say much the same of old-earth traditionalists that traditionalists say of contextualizers: an old-earth interpretation of Genesis dangerously undermines the authority of the Bible. Traditionalists would reply that they are trying to respect the text and what they think its message is. Contextualizing scholars make the same reply to the criticisms of their views offered by traditionalists.

**Generic Genres?** Another aspect of the debate centers on Article 13 of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy statement, the leading doctrinal manifesto on inerrancy: "We deny that generic categories which negate historicity may rightly be imposed on biblical narratives which present themselves as factual." Traditionalists claim that genres such as Greco-Roman biography are "generic" categories, and that the Gospels should be classified in a genre category of their own.

But Greco-Roman "biography" is a very specific category, with known qualities.<sup>13</sup> Contextualizers argue that it is not "imposed on" the biblical narrative, but recognized within it. Traditionalists are left with the rather awkward retort that "no Hebrew or Greco-Roman literature genre should be used to determine what a biblical text means since it is not part of any general revelation from God, and it has no hermeneutical authority."<sup>14</sup> But the Hebrew and Greek languages are also "not part of any general revelation from God." So, by the same reckoning, we cannot use Hebrew and Greek literature from outside the Bible to help us understand the language of the Bible. We are also left with the rather counterintuitive conclusion that the authors of the Gospels created, out of whole cloth, a form of literature that, coincidentally, thoroughly resembles Greco-Roman biography, but in so doing, never actually intended for readers to recognize it as such.

## THE FINE LINE

Traditionalists and contextualists are far from being poles apart on all issues. They would certainly agree on solutions to many standard, so-called “Bible contradictions and problems” produced by critics. It remains, however, that there is a very specific category of problem solving on which they disagree, and the ramifications for the doctrine of inerrancy are far-reaching.

Both sides claim that the other is undermining confidence in Scripture, albeit in different ways. Traditionalists say that contextualizers cause confusion by taking as nonliteral accounts that seem, to them, plainly literal. Contextualizers say that traditionalists refuse to discuss interpretation of the Bible as though it were anything but the product of modern, Western literalism, and produce unsatisfactory and indefensible answers to alleged biblical problems. One thing is certain: this is a debate that must be engaged by our own Christian leaders, because if it is not, popular critics of the faith, such as Bart Ehrman, will frame their own answers to questions of biblical inerrancy in a way that will do a great deal more to undermine confidence in Scripture than if we addressed them ourselves.

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## NOTES

- 1 See for this point my article, “Context Is Everything,” *Christian Research Journal* 34, 3 (2011).
- 2 An excellent discussion of cultural differences with regard to precision can be found in Paul R. Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 431–37.
- 3 For a study of the level of literacy in the biblical world, see W. V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
- 4 *Jesus Legend*, 434–35. Matthew’s Gospel in particular has been recognized as being well organized to serve as a teaching tool. See Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 2.
- 5 For this distinction, see the essay by Darrell Bock, “The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?” in *Jesus under Fire*, ed. Michael Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). This point is also emphasized by Jocelyn Small in *Wax Tablets of the Mind* (London: Routledge, 1997), who states, “Exact wording is rarely crucial in oral societies...it is not the words but the story or the gist that counts” (5, 7).
- 6 See Craig Blomberg, “The Legitimacy and Limits of Harmonization,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 139–74; Robert Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 33–36; and Bock, *Jesus under Fire*.
- 7 Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 370. Thomas does not discuss another common traditional solution, which is that Matthew and Luke are reporting



two different sermons that occurred in two different places at two different times.

- 8 The debate between Gundry and Geisler is recorded in the following articles: Geisler, "Methodological Unorthodoxy," *JETS* 26, 1 (March 1983): 87–94; Gundry, "A Response to 'Methodological Unorthodoxy,'" *JETS* 26, 1 (March 1983): 95–100; Geisler, "Is There Madness in the Method? A Rejoinder to Robert H. Gundry," *JETS* 26, 1 (March 1983): 101–9; Gundry, "A Surrejoinder to Norman L. Geisler," *JETS* 26, 1 (March 1983): 109–15.
- 9 Gundry, "Response," 99.
- 10 Michael Licona, "A Brief Response to Al Mohler on Biblical Inerrancy," *Christian Post*, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/a-brief-response-to-al-mohler-55821/>.
- 11 Geisler, "Madness in the Method," 104.
- 12 Discussion of high-context societies may be found in Edward Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Anchor Books: 1976), 105–16.
- 13 An excellent treatment of the Gospels as ancient biography is found in Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 2004).
- 14 Norman L. Geisler and F. David Farnell, eds. *The Jesus Quest* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2014), Kindle edition, Introduction.