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## PRESUMED INNOCENT UNTIL PROVEN GUILTY

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The Bible's contact with history is one of its greatest strengths. Its accounts are unlike the folklore and myth of the sacred writings of many other religions, which being mystical or esoteric in nature do not stand up to historical scrutiny. This strength, however, often has subjected the Bible to vicious attacks regarding its veracity. Critics are never at a loss for biblical texts that they hold to be suspect, or outright fallacious, since the Bible is replete with events, persons, chronology, and other incidents of history that are reported as fact. Critics scrutinize each of these purported facts of Scripture, not as the believer who seeks understanding, but as one who hopes to disprove the truthfulness of Scripture, and in turn the truthfulness of Christian claims about God and Christ. It is also worth noting that they do not subject other ancient writings, which evidence an inferior caliber, to the same degree of critical examination to which they subject Scripture.

Numerous claims have been made against the accuracy of the Bible only to be proved wrong.<sup>1</sup> The last several centuries of biblical scholarship have uncovered a great deal of evidence that has challenged or refuted critics' claims.<sup>2</sup>

The critics' tendency has been to presume the Bible to be false or historically inaccurate instead of giving the biblical text the benefit of the doubt as is practiced in other Near Eastern disciplines and with Classical writings. Such a presumption of guilt does not arise from the Bible's track record, for, as we shall see below, the biblical record has been vindicated numerous times, despite the critics' claims.

Vindicated by Archaeology. Late archaeologist and president of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Nelson Glueck, spoke of the trustworthiness of the Bible (Hebrew Scripture) and the findings of archaeology: "It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a Biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or in exact detail historical statements in the Bible.... Proper evaluation of Biblical descriptions has often led to amazing discoveries."<sup>3</sup> He added that the findings form "tesserae" for the "vast mosaic" of the Bible's nearly incredible historic accuracy.<sup>4</sup>

Archaeological discoveries have disproved many presumptions that the biblical accounts are untrustworthy. Critics once viewed the Hittites, for example, as a mythical nation invented by the authors of the Old Testament. Their reasoning was that if such a nation existed, modern scholars certainly already would know about them; since there was no known evidence of their existence outside the Bible, the biblical account must be wrong. In 1906, however, Hugh Winckler found the Hittite capitol, with a massive library of clay tablets. There is presently so much information about the Hittites that one can write a doctoral dissertation about them and devote one's life to Hittitology.

Other scholars once claimed that writing had not advanced to a sufficient degree for Moses to have written the Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy) in the fifteenth century BC as the biblical dating indicates.<sup>5</sup> Since then scholars have found that such literary skill was present a millennium earlier than previously thought.<sup>6</sup> If Moses indeed was a prince of Egypt, he would have possessed all the skill needed.

Naysayers of biblical accuracy also have attempted to find mistakes in Luke's account in Acts. Those who have spent considerable time in the analysis of that book in the light of ancient history and archaeology, however, have found it to be very accurate.<sup>7</sup>

Many other reasons for skepticism about the Bible's historical accuracy have been eliminated also as more information is discovered about the language, culture, and geography of the ancient world.<sup>8</sup> Scholars have not yet discovered solutions for all difficulties in Scripture, but archaeology is relatively young and little of the ancient world has been studied thus far. In response to these findings, which are now known to vindicate Scripture, however, the tendency of the problem-seeking critics has been to drop the subject on which Scripture has been vindicated and to move on to the next "problem" they perceive.

**Vindicated by Reason.** Scholars may disprove presumptions that the biblical accounts are inaccurate simply by examining the presumptions themselves. For example, many skeptics presume that differences between accounts in the Gospels indicate conflict and inaccuracy. The birth narratives of Jesus in Matthew 1:18–2:23 and Luke 2:1–20, for instance, have been the subject of criticism in recent years, particularly from members of the Jesus Seminar, such as Marcus Borg.<sup>9</sup> Let's examine some of Borg's particular concerns to illustrate how this presumption is unnecessary.

Borg argues that Matthew and Luke disagree regarding the location of Jesus' birth: "In Luke, Mary and Joseph live in Nazareth, but because of the census they travel to Bethlehem, where the birth occurs in a stable. They go back home to Nazareth after the birth. In Matthew, Mary and Joseph live in Bethlehem and the birth occurs at home (not in a stable). The family then moves to Nazareth after spending time in Egypt. Matthew mentions no trip to Bethlehem."<sup>10</sup>

Matthew's text, however, does *not* indicate that Jesus was *born* in His house or home. A perfectly reasonable explanation for the fact that Matthew mentions the house and not the stable (as in Luke) is that he was looking back not to the precise time of Jesus' birth in the stable but rather to a period several months after His birth. It is reasonable to expect that Joseph and Mary would not want to travel immediately with their newborn; therefore, we would expect Joseph, as a skilled artisan in stone, metal, and wood, to find work in the town of Bethlehem, and to seek a house for his wife and newborn baby there. There is no conflict in the text, only one in the mind of the critic.

Borg also says that Matthew and Luke are in conflict regarding what Joseph and Mary did after Jesus' birth. Matthew records that they fled with Jesus into Egypt, whereas Luke says they took Jesus to Jerusalem to be circumcised then returned afterward to Nazareth.

Again, there is no reason to assume that the accounts are contradictory. Matthew, in contrast to Luke, was concerned with the narrative of Jesus as it related to the fulfillment of prophecy. It is reasonable, therefore, to expect that he would focus on their flight to Egypt as a fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy (Hos. 11:1) rather than on the purification of Mary and circumcision of Jesus (Luke 2:21–38), before the trip to Nazareth that Luke mentions (possibly to see family and for preparation before leaving for Egypt for a long period). The chronology of the two accounts can be harmonized without appealing to any unreasonable or contrived explanations.

Borg also questions the credibility of the accounts because both mention details that the other omits. "In Matthew, 'wise men from the East' follow a special star to the place of Jesus' birth. Luke has neither wise men nor star, but angels singing in the night sky to shepherds who then come to the manger."<sup>11</sup> Borg is apparently paying more attention to contemporary nativity sets than to the biblical writers, since the former often depict the shepherds and wise men together at the stable, while the latter do not. A careful reading easily reconciles the apparent conflict concerning the details of location: the nearby shepherds went quickly to the stable, and the wise men arrived months later at a house.

Borg continues, "In Matthew, Herod the Great orders the killing of all male infants under the age of two in Bethlehem. The family of Jesus escapes by fleeing to Egypt. Luke's story has neither Herod's plot nor a trip to Egypt."<sup>12</sup>

The presumption at work here, and in the minds of many critics, is that if an author does not mention something that another author mentions, he either does not know of the event or is disinterested in the event, signifying its unimportance. On the other hand, if both authors had included the same event, then

critics would argue that one author is merely copying the other, not that the event occurred and was known and noted by both authors. It is a no-win situation for the Gospel writers!

Better and more reasonable is the view that Matthew and Luke, as noted above, had different purposes in their gospels, including or not including material according to those purposes. *Different* is not the same as *contradictory* or *inaccurate*.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the extensive portions of the Gospel writers' statements, and their sources, that *are* widely credited as accurate by critical scholars lend credence to the assumption that lesser-recognized portions—such as these—are accurate as well.

Perceived “problems” in the biblical text are always with us, and though I would not argue for blind faith (faith without, or contrary to, facts), we are in a finite world with limited access to the past. In all records of historical events there are difficulties, and one must determine how well one can trust those sources. The Bible has been proved correct again and again, and so it should receive the benefit of the doubt when one comes upon such a problem.

— H. Wayne House

## NOTES

1. See, for example, C. Dennis McKinsey, *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995). The “evidence” of errors McKinsey amasses in his encyclopedia generally is based on misunderstanding of the original languages or on faulty transmission, and is explained by textual critical considerations or other rational responses.
2. See Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982); Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992).
3. Nelson Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert: A History of the Negev* (1959; repr., New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1968), 31.
4. *Ibid.* *Tesserae* are small pieces of colored stone or other material used in making mosaic patterns.
5. For an older but still excellent discussion of the challenge to Mosaic authorship and answers to this challenge, see Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 96–109; for recent interaction with higher critical methodology, see Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 1–372.
6. See Sir Frederic Kenyon, *The Story of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967).
7. See Sir William Ramsay, *The Cities of St. Paul: Their Influence on His Life and Thought* (1907; rev. ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979); *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (1896; rev. ed., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001); Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990).
8. The famous *documentary theory*, for instance, which says that the Pentateuch was written by several different authors, is now under serious attack from both liberal and conservative biblical circles. Among the many scholars who have disagreed with the documentary theory are R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969); K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1966); Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Translation of the Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961); and R. N. Whybray, “The Making of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 53 (1987).
9. See Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, eds, *The Five Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).
10. Marcus Borg, in documentary by Peter Jennings, *The Search for Jesus*, ABC News Special, June 26, 2000.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. See the various explanations of differing accounts in the Gospels in Geisler and Howe, 325–425.