

## Getting all we can from Scripture - Part 2

*What about the Bible passages that seem wrong?*

Jesus showed strong confidence in Scripture, quoting it often, saying that none of it is mistaken (Matt. 5:17-19) or will be broken (John 10:35). Yet we ignore some passages; and some seem to contain errors or lack Gospel character.

### Why do we ignore some biblical commands??

Many commands in the Bible were not intended to apply to us and our culture but for the specific situation the original audience faced. For instance:

- 2 Tim. 4:9 - *Do your best to come to me quickly*

In those cases we discern the (timeless) principle behind the specific (timebound) instruction and how to best express that principle in our culture.

- 2 Cor 13:12 - *Greet one another with a holy kiss* (also Rom. 16:16, 1 Cor. 16:20, 1 Thes. 5:26, 1 Pet. 5:14)  
The intent or principle behind the holy kiss seems to be "show warm affection when you meet each other." In our culture that is perhaps best achieved by a good hug or handshake.

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### Some biblical descriptions seem to be in error

Passages describing God's nature and acts often apparently contradict one another. For instance:

- Some verses appear to teach that God is one; and some appear to teach that God is three.
- Some verses appear to teach that when God saves someone, they are eternally secure—they cannot lose their salvation (eg. John 10:27-30; Phil 1:6). And some appear to teach that persons can lose their salvation (eg. John 15:6; Heb 3:12; 2 Pet 2:20-21).

This is not due to error but due to mystery—God is bigger than our brains. So we let both sets of verses stand (like we let light be both a particle and a wave). If Scripture can use them both, we can too.

Passages describing historical facts and figures are often clearly wrong.

- Exod 9:6 - *All the livestock of the Egyptians died.*  
Compare with vv20-21; 11:5.
- 1 Chron 22:14 - *a hundred thousand talents of gold* (3,400 metric tons)  
That would be equivalent to 70 percent of the gold stored in Fort Knox!

Such apparent errors may be resolved when we read the Bible as its authors expected it to be read. Persons

in the ancient Near East expected narrators to use nonchronological narration, imprecise quotation, glorious hyperbole, etc. (We might compare the biblical standards of precision to our culture's expectations of precision in a historical film. A movie can be considered "historically accurate" even if dialogue or plot lines are changed to be more comprehensible and accessible.)

A biblical text's meaning is not how we today would tend to take those words, but how the original audience would have taken them.

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### Sometimes biblical instructions seem sub-par

Passages giving ethical teaching often fall far below the ultimate, new-heavens-and-new-earth ideal.

- The New Testament shows God calling persons to love and do good to enemies (Matt 5:43-45; Luke 6:27-36; Rom 12:19-21; 1 Pet 3:8-9). Why is the Old Testament so far below this, showing God using war, helping Israel wage it (eg. Exodus 17:8-15; Ps 144:1)?
- Paul gives teachings undercutting the system of slavery (1 Tim 1:10; Gal 3:28//1Cor 12:13//Col 3:11; Philem 1:15-17). Why does he also give instructions for living within the system of slavery (Eph 6:5-9)?

The sub-par instructions are not due to not being inspired by the Spirit of God. These instructions are due to the fact that human partners limit God's options. At each moment in history, God must go with the best doable course of action (i.e., the highest the People of God of that day could reach)—even when it is far below the ultimate ideal.

So for passages that give sub-par instructions, the trajectory matters more than the individual rule. The direction God is wanting to move humanity is what has significance. Individual rules might apply only to specific situations. But the trajectory shows us God's intent. (For instance, my friend has ashtrays in her house—which is clearly sub-par. But is her intent to encourage smoking? Or to relate to neighbors who would stay away if they couldn't smoke, and ultimately to help them stop smoking?)