M12A1 Bible Difficulties

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Chapter 1 - The Categories Of Difficulties In The Bible

Critics of the Bible have long claimed thousands of difficulties and contradictions can be found. Actually, these fall into categories, two dozen or fewer. This lecture sets out to inform us of the twelve most serious categories of accusations.

1--Difficulties Arising From The Original Text

The Bible is infallible and inerrant. But we don’t have the originals of any of the 66 books. Until the 15th century all books were hand written. Ancient books of secular history are found to contain considerable differences between the earliest and most recent copies found. It may be human nature to inflate the story on the retelling.

The Christian books of scripture remain remarkably consistent over various copies spanning maybe hundreds, even thousands, of years. The scribes copying the passages of scripture realized the burden they faced to keep accurate the hand copied pages of the books they recognized even then as the canon of God’s word. The errors over hundreds of years of copying are minimal.

We have discovered and collected tens of thousands of the copies. Bible scholars have compared and restored the text with a high degree of certainty. We have resolved instances of omission and repetition and spelling by detailed studies of works found from different periods of history.

The painstaking effort by scholars has been compounded by the strangeness of ancient Hebrew compared to modern writing. Ancient Hebrew used only all CAPS, what we in electronic social media and email characterize as SHOUTING. They used no vowels. My last name, Wade, with no vowels might be interpreted to sound like WOOD, WIDE, WID, WUD, or WAD as in wad of paper. Even worse, ancient Hebrew did not separate words with spaces. It simply jammed all words into a constant stream of consonants in all CAPS.

So Genesis 1 would be seen as NTHBGGNNNGGDCRTD… (If it had been written in English instead of Hebrew.) The CRT might today be recognized by biased politicians as standing for Critical Race Theory. To understand ancient Hebrew the scholars had to scrupulously set aside biases. Note that modern Hebrew is written more conventionally except that it retains a right to left orientation with ancient Hebrew.

Modern scholars separated the words and inserted vowels. This required a meticulous study since a wrong vowel inserted could change the meaning. I find at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_Hebrew#:~:text=Vowel%20and%20cantillation%20marks%20were,were%20known%20as%20the%20Masoretes> that the Jewish Masoretes added the vowels in the period between the 7th and 11th centuries.

I also read in <https://www.hebrew4christians.com/Grammar/Unit_Two/Introduction/introduction.html> that these Masoretes added these vowels using diacritical marks attached to the actual consonants so as not to actually change the traditional wording. That, I’m sure left a lot of work for more modern scholars. I do wonder how significant the Septuagint may be in understanding the intended vowels. Greek I believe contains vowels.

The lecturer points out that numbers were expressed using alphabets, creating the case where names and numbers were sometimes unclear. I fail to understand this.

Copyist errors have not been found to affect doctrines. Most of the errors in copied scripture are spelling and number differences. Some of the ages shown in chronologies may be affected, a small thing so many years later.

Many of the actual errors in bibles come from the King James Version. The KJV was translated in 1611, 500 years ago. Many fragments of scripture have been discovered in the years since, many of these older that the sources available to the KJV committee. Modern English bibles such as the NKJV incorporate the corrections found and analyzed from these older scrolls.

No other ancient book is comparably sourced from such an extensive collection of artifacts.

Even though relatively minor errors crept into the manuscripts found from which the KJV was based, thousands of yet older documents have been found and analyzed. Newer translations of the Bible benefit from these manuscripts.

No copyist's error has affected the essential message of the Bible; the remaining non-significant errors are now being corrected by scholars involved in Textual Criticism.

2--Difficulties Arising Out Of Translation Problems

Idioms aren’t easily translated. An idiom in one language doesn’t necessarily have an equivalent in another language. The idiom ‘I see the light’ can be translated to ‘I understand’ if we recognize the expression’s intended meaning. But if not we wonder what light source is meant, we find the expression confusing. We ask the speaker to explain.

When translating from an ancient language we have no one to explain. If we read the idiom in numerous places we might *glean* the meaning from context clues. Or not.

Sometimes we can translate using any of a number of synonyms. Each synonym carries the baggage of somewhat different connotations. Translators must use caution to use the most accurate choice of words. And yet they don’t necessarily know the ancient word’s full connotation.

The lecturer has pointed out that only the original autograph was inspired by God and inerent. All translations have some degree of bias. I’ve personally seen in my studies on biblegateway when reading texts from 15 different versions that on very infrequent times a few versions seem to say something different. My bias shows when I prefer some expressions over others.

We also, in some translations, see archaic usages of words or phrases that conveyed reasonable meaning when translated but are understood by modern readers completely differently. The oldest version commonly read today is the KJV. I find when I teach from newer versions that people welcome a meaning that I point out from another version that they’ve missed from the KJV until then. I imagine that what enlightens us in some contemporary translations will someday be largely misunderstood.

Sometimes the Hebrew or Greek phrases will have no direct equivalent in the translated to language. The lecturer points to 1 Thess. 4:4 about possessing one's "vessel". In Greek this may refer to “an actual vessel, but also a ship, the human body, and also one's wife.” He states that all these meanings are important to understand the message. I fail to see the word ship as necessary. Most translations I noticed seem to focus on sanctified sexual purity within the meaning of traditional marriage. Of course this primary focus largely comes from the English context. I don’t know how I would see it if I knew Greek and Greek culture.

I read the following comment from the lecturer.

The Scriptures have many sex-related words that sounded perfectly normal to the Hebrews, but that might be offensive to others if translated literally. Thus the translators are forced to substitute euphemisms, or even symbolic words instead of making an accurate translation.

I wonder how we know these sex related words used by the Hebrew writers were *clean* language to them and why they would be *unclean* words for a Christian to say today. Does biblical purity truly reject these words? Or is it our society that calls them ‘gutter words’?

3--Difficulties Arising Out Of False Interpretation Of The Bible

People sometimes disagree on the understandings found in the Bible. None of us, no matter intelligence, can fully understand everything in the universe. Why would we want to spend eternity having already understood all there to know during our finite years on earth! Only God understands everything. (And I think God himself finds it difficult to understand how it is possible for people to prefer wallowing in this life of sin, hate and hurt.)

Because we can’t understand all truths we will by nature invent differing understandings. We have different backgrounds, educations, church experiences and affiliations. The lecturer attributes these differences to biases. I tend to perceive biases as something negative and the lecturer does go on to discuss flat earth vs. spherical earth.

Googling biases confirms that biases are unfounded, supposed truths not based on complete truth. The lecturer says

God does not deal in ambiguities. However, this does not imply that every person will necessarily understand everything found in the Bible. No human being can understand all human truth, and therefore it naturally follows that NO human can understand the whole of the divine truth.

I would translate that to suggest that when Christians disagree about biblical understandings that it’s possible that each party’s understanding is at least influenced by biases. And that perhaps each party may indeed be at least partially wrong compared to God’s full understanding.

This seems true to me. It also, it seems to me, to play into our unbelieving critic’s hand. I failed to find in the lecture how our inability to fully know truth advantages us in dialogue, to say nothing about debate.

However, the lecturer’s No human being can understand all human truth, and therefore it naturally follows that NO human can understand the whole of the divine truth. For example where the critic faults the Bible in regard to a flat earth oversimplification. In such a dialogue I think we can reasonably say God didn’t choose to startle the ancients with an incomprehensible truth of science.

At <https://www.openbible.info/topics/the_earth_is_a_sphere> we find many texts that possibly support a spherical earth. Ecclesiastes 1:6 ESV “The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.” God told the ancients in Job 38:4 ESV “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.” He did not attempt to explain all science.

4--Difficulties Arising Out Of A Wrong Conception Of The Bible

The Bible was written by imperfect people about imperfect people in the invisible presence of our perfectGod. Nehemiah’s act of beating church members up and pulling their hair, possibly while cursing, is not a good example of church discipline. (Nehemiah 13:25 NIV) Their act of marrying a pagan wife and letting her raise their children as pagans was worthy of church discipline. The method should not be copied however.

Solomon’s profligate mid years of life does not *excuse* the same for us. His return to God, on the other hand, shows us the way when we have walked away from God, Whenever the atheist quotes the scripture “there is no God” we can legitimately connect the text to the words of a fool. We shouldn’t let the Hindu quote Daniel 11:2 to support multiple gods when the expression comes from the unbelieving Babylonian king. The Bible does not condone polytheism. So many Christians fail to read scripture or carry bibles to church and this makes it easier for the critic to confuse their minds.

5--Difficulties Arising Out Of The Type Of Language In Which The Bible Was Written

Thankfully, the Bible was written for everyday people. I began but did not complete a non-credit course in Greek ten years ago. I learned that biblical Greek so differed from the Classical Greek of the philosophers that for some time it was thought another language. Then it was found to be the language shop keepers used In business. I was taught there are little more than 300 root words in the entire New Testament. God meant for the Bible to be understood by ordinary church goers, not just seminary educated theologians.

The Bible is devoid of technical jargon. Christians believe in the Trinity. But even that word is absent in the Bible although the word Godhead is used in the KJV. The Bible is meant to be understood by people throughout earth’s ages. Truth is expressed by prose, poetry, and prophecy. Rhyme of thought should not double counts. Metaphor should not be confused with science.

6--Difficulties Arising Out Of Our Incomplete Knowledge Of The Customs, History, Geography And The Society Of Bible Times

Today’s culture interprets wine in the Bible as teaching the correctness of alcoholic wine. We call non-alcoholic wine grape juice. In his book *Wine in the Bible,*

Samuele Bacchiocchi(1-2), theology professor at Andrews University Theological Seminary, says that without refrigeration, fresh grape juice fermented into alcoholic wine. God told Sampson’s parents to teach him to never drink anything alcoholic. Bacchoicchi says that the Hebrews diluted wine with ***at leas*t** eight parts water to minimize the effect of fermentation. Even with refrigeration, my dad diluted the fresh grape juice he grew and pressed to only half strength.

God would disapprove of the health and safety derelictions that alcohol brings. He knows we need to think clearly to live moral lives. The words in translations and the conflicting understandings of these words by different cultures sometimes feed our modern biases.

7--Difficulties Arising Out Of Our Ignorance Of The Conditions Under Which A Certain Book Was Written Or A Certain Commandment Was Given

Books like Song of Solomon sometimes puriently excite casual readers, mostly because it unexpectedly appears in the Bible. It is only purient to those who seek impure sexual excitement. My roommate my freshman year at Southern Adventist University liked this one book of the Bible. He was rebelling as a Christian but was a good friend who respected my conscientiousness. The book, as I understand it, is a metaphor of God’s love for and seeking after his people, his church.

As an aside, my roommate showered three to seven times a day to stay free from the smell of tobacco. It was a smoke free campus, or intended to be.

The lecturer also points out the unexpected instruction from God to kill off whole nations because they had resisted the call of God through Abraham and became so degenerated that they no longer heard the voice of God. I’ve always known the theology regarding the unpardonable sin. I understand this theologically. But it will take time in heaven with Jesus to understand how killing would not excite the desire to kill and dull the conscience. I see so much love of God in both the new and old testaments that I have faith in him despite my lack of sufficient understanding in this matter.

Many things in the Bible conflict with our culture. God lifted women beyond ancient standings. He *permitted* second wives for possibly cultural and economic reasons, perhaps even because so many men died in wars and women relied on male patronage. Jesus taught a greater equality that blinds our understandings of a more primitive society. And for that matter it’s only been in the last 100+ years women could legally own property and vote.

8--Difficulties Arising Out Of The Many-Sidedness Of The Bible

On twitter today I responded to someone’s tweet

There is only ONE correct meaning of any Biblical text.

I replied

Maybe only one meaning. But there may be many nuances.

“God's truth is many-sided, and none of us can comprehend it all in our lifetimes.” - Lecturer The Adventist church counters the popular teaching in many Christian churches that God’s love outweighs his judgment. Adventists teach that both love and judgment characterize God. His grace enables a path to life, bypassing the wages of sin. At the same time we spit in his face when we make no effort to let him mold our character to more resemble his character. God grants freedom but we must avail ourselves of his enabling power to live changed lives after the born again experience.

9--The Infiniteness Of God And The Finiteness Of Man's Understanding

God’s wisdom exceeds our ability to understand, at least sometimes. When a loved one dies from a drunk driver accident, we challenge the paradox that a loving God would tolerate pain and evil. The two seem incompatible to our finite minds.

Our words cannot express the complexity of God. He says he will harden pharaoh's heart. But Pharaoh’s heart hardens each time God ***relaxes*** the plague and shows mercy. Pharaoh regains his equilibrium and reverts again to a refusal. God intended his mercy to soften Pharaoh’s heart. Yet we focus on our understanding of the word harden and attribute a human hardness God intentionally meant to cause Pharaoh to resist.

10--Difficulties Arising Out Of Fallacies Of Logic

We’ve discussed logic in previous courses and will again in M17A1 Logic & Errors.

11--Difficulties Which Arise When The Precise Nature Of A Statement Is Not Understood

Words often can be perceived mistakenly. Words have nuances of meaning and can best be understood in the context of the text and acquaintance with the speaker. The lecturer gives the example of the word ***can***. It suggests possibility and alternately permission. Using this word in the context of sin the word can translated, still within English to “We may possibly sin even if we try not to.” And it translates, if we prefer easy grace, to “We may willfully choose to sin.” These are very different meanings and lead to very different lifestyle choices for Christians.

I see strenuous efforts to promote the permissive translation of sin on twitter. There’s no such text, but these permissive tweets misconstrue the text in Matthew 5:17 “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.” They translate Grace as free permission to sin. Humans can’t help but sin so the law no longer condemns sin, or so they say.

12--Difficulties Of Numbers

Critics denounce the wisdom of God over even supposed mathematical mistakes. I Kings 7:23-26 is oversimplified by critics to show pi at 3.0. However according to the lecturer and the calculation shown at <https://www.nature.com/articles/21064#:~:text=In%20the%20News%20story%20about,cubits%20to%20measure%20around%20it%E2%80%9D>, the accuracy is much closer.

The lecturer does also show the example of only Joshua and Caleb entering Canaan, but instead many more Israelites entered. My reading doesn’t find a conflict so either I’m missing something or the Bible correctly identifies Caleb and Joshua as the only adults from the first months of the journey to enter after the 40 years of trial in the wilderness by God ends.

Even Moses dies without entering Canaan, as does his brother and high priest Aaron. Numbers 14:31 clarifies that “Your children, the very ones that you said would be taken for plunder, I’ll bring in to enjoy the land you rejected.” Many entered Canaan but adults “twenty years and older who were counted in the census” all died in the wilderness except Caleb and Joshua. Women weren’t counted so maybe some adult women entered Canaan… Maybe?

I suppose if the critic reads only verse 30 he’s appealing to very nominal Christians. Very likely the lecturer points out that the critic only reads one verse. In my church children learn this distinction.

13--Problems Related To The Dullness Of Our Spiritual Perception

“Concerning doctrinal issues, they cannot be understood by unregenerate people.” -lecturer. Jesus frequently says “He that hath an ear”, that is who wants to understand, “let him hear.” The critics of John the Baptist did not hear the voice of God declaring Jesus his beloved Son.

If we refuse to recognize the conflict between good and evil, between God and Satan we will feel justified in blaming God instead of Satan for evil and pain. Satan in the western world has nearly cloaked himself with invisibility. Only a Christian who at least begins to recognize the awfulness of sin believes in the reality of Satan and the forces of evil.

None of us is fully mature in Christ. One reason for group Bible study is to benefit from insights learned from other participants. And to share insight we have.

It is normal for people to expect perfection from God. So when Bible difficulties show up, they expect better. Often the difficulties come from little familiarity with God or his word. People often fail to understand poetry, but they seldom come in contact with someone who cares; who cares whether they understand poetry or not. Most people don’t care to understand poetry themselves.

But western people occasionally do rub shoulders with believing Christians; with Christians who care about the word of God and want others to also care. If people respond to the Holy Spirit’s call they will over time welcome resolutions to things they previously thought were difficulties with the Bible.

Chapter 2 - Common Sense About Difficulties In The Bible

When finite human beings try to understand our infinite God we should expect to face difficulties. Job asks why and God basically says Job doesn’t have the ability to understand even all that’s on earth, never mind the immensity of the entire universe that God in his infinite wisdom manages. Nevertheless, God made us capable of understanding how to live a richly rewarding life as his disciples.

Our lack of understanding doesn’t prove the Bible to be wrong. There’s much in our world that we don’t know. We won’t all learn to be nuclear scientists. We need physicians, farmers, and welders. We’ll never know all that we can know as humans. Why should we need to know all that God knows to simply be a believing Christian?

We as moderns may have alternate theories to put up against the Bible’s propositions as set by God. But these human theories don’t conclusively negate the revelation found in the Bible. “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15:6) Human theories and God’s revelation each require faith.

One’s inability to solve a problem doesn’t prove insolvability. Continued research, whether our own or someone else’s, may yet solve. In a previous course on models of science we learn they can span decades, even centuries of refinement. Over the last 200 years, archeological studies have overridden many biblical problems of the past.

The difficulties found in the Bible don’t significantly weigh against the transformative advantages the Bible produces in people. I just this Sabbath heard a sermon by a man once sentenced to 25 years to life. Interestingly after original sentencing and entering prison, the judge put aside the original class b felony sentence to only a class e felony and just under 3 years in prison. This speaker has directed a prison ministry since then.

My son-in-law spent more than 10 years angry at God. Then he says he got tired of being angry, listened to the Bible because he doesn’t like to read, and asked to be rebaptised. He is now a head deacon in a church of over 600 members.

Superficial study of the Bible magnifies the perception of problems with the Bible. Often, when critics seriously study the Bible they see the problems resolved and they embrace the Bible. I’ve previously mentioned a once atheistic friend who studied the Bible, went to the seminary and is now a pastor.

Propaganda focuses on emotion, playing upon human needs, interests, curiosities, loves, hates, prejudices, fears, lusts, cupidities, and amusements. Propaganda bypasses what matters, truth and facts, analysis and rationality. If we fail to recognize this appeal to emotion, we miss the lack of foundation in the attack.

Prayerful study will resolve many difficulties. Our humanness and culture may interfere in fully understanding, but with prayer we can confidently trust the Bible.

1. Bacchiocchi earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in theology from Newbold College in England, which was followed by a Master of Arts and Bachelor of Divinity at Andrews University in Michigan, United States; finishing in 1964.
2. In 1969 they returned to Rome where Bacchiocchi studied at the Pontifical Gregorian University. He was the first non-Catholic to be admitted since its establishment in the 16th century.[4] He completed a Doctoratus in Church History in 1974 on the subject of the decline of Sabbath observance in the Early Christian church, based on his research in the Vatican libraries.

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1. How this module helped your studies

I must realize when talking with Christians who understand the Bible differently from me that we all carry baggage containing our biases. Bible truth is difficult to know. High education and church leadership do not guarantee possession of complete Bible truth. Education does equip us with weapons to convince, for good or bad. Jesus chose disciples primarily from the working class. See what I write under chapter 1, section 3 Difficulties arising out of false interpretations. And also that there are biblical answers to the non-believing critic should he throw such arguments my way.

2. What new lessons you learned

I wonder how significant the Septuagint may be in understanding the intended vowels. Greek I believe contains vowels. Jesus quotes from the Septuagint so he seems to confirm at least the passages he quotes as authoritative translations into Greek.

I may have learned that we trust the preceding and following texts in English to understand a delicate, possibly confusing translated phrase. The lecturer points to 1 Thess. 4:4 about possessing one's "vessel". In Greek this may refer to “an actual vessel, but also a ship, the human body, and also one's wife.” He states that all these meanings are important to understand the message. I fail to see “ship” as necessary. Most translations I noticed seem to focus on sanctified sexual purity within the meaning of traditional marriage. Of course this primary focus largely comes from the English context. I don’t know how I would see in if I knew Greek and Greek culture.

I’ve learned that while I share much with conservative fundamentalists that I also sometimes may share occasionally with more liberal Christians. For example, I’m opposed to the death penalty. I realize the Bible does not condemn the death penalty. The Bible even called for executing adulterers, not just murderers. God did provide cities of refuge to escape vigilante justice, common in those days and even in some places today. Vigilante justice sometimes occurs in democratic countries today.

God permitted actions such as second wives then but condemned even lustfully looking on a woman in his sermon. He did not condemn the adulteress brought before him. I point out these contrasts to show Jesus may expect more from us today. He demonstrated mercy. We should express mercy in ways the ancients may not have been able to understand.

I believe that executions should be ended because (1) Sometimes crooked, ambitious prosecutors convict innocent persons charged with the crime. And (2) because the executioners are psychologically damaged by the act of judicially killing convicts. I’ve read such stories. I think that it can be morally acceptable to promote a morality that protects lives that the Bible may assent to permit.

I believe God permits evils that man cannot understand alternatives to. But we should seek alternatives. Execution satisfies those seeking revenge. But the Christian doesn’t seek revenge; he seeks justice. Justice doesn’t require an eye for an eye. In Matthew 5:38, 39 Jesus says “Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

It is good to show mercy for the convicted criminal and for the executioner.

3. Your critical evaluation on the topic. We mean what is the shortcoming you see in the text, your suggestions for improvement.

In section 1: The lecturer points out that numbers were expressed using alphabets, creating the case where names and numbers were sometimes unclear. I fail to understand this.

Re: Copiest’s errors. I would have appreciated seeing examples of the copiest’s errors commonly thrown at apologists and perhaps the lecturer's responses. I’d also liked to have seen examples of the KJV errors corrected in newer translations because of discoveries from older manuscripts. (Note: I’ve seen a few that a minister condemned.)

The lecturer has pointed out that only the original autograph was inspired by God and inerent. But I wonder how this might change the dynamic when talking with Muslims. This is exactly what they charge against the Bible.

“The Scriptures have many sex-related words …” Examples? Otherwise, how do we know these supposedly gutter words are biblically impure to say? Or are they simply defined by our society as improper? Does God condemn the world today for using words the lecturer implies we’re acceptable words used by the biblical writers?

And if a critic knew Hebrew and threw these words at us, how should we respond? ***I’m confused***!

In the section about difficulties with numbers, I’m also confused.

The lecturer shows the example of only Joshua and Caleb entering Canaan, say many more Israelites entered. My reading doesn’t find a conflict so either I’m missing something or the Bible correctly identifies Caleb and Joshua as the only adults from the first months of the journey to enter after the 40 years of trial by God ends.

Even Moses dies without entering Canaan, as does his brother and high priest Aaron. Numbers 14:31 clarifies that “Your children, the very ones that you said would be taken for plunder, I’ll bring in to enjoy the land you rejected.” These children would experience the 40 years of punishment along with their parents but escape the final punishment of dying in the wilderness. Many entered Canaan but adults “twenty years and older who was counted in the census” all died in the wilderness except Caleb and Joshua. Women weren’t counted so maybe some adult women entered Canaan… Maybe?

I suppose if the critic reads only verse 30 he’s appealing to very nominal Christians. And this may well be what the lecturer meant to say. If so, I didn’t see clarity on this distinction. In my church children learn this distinction

4. How does this lesson help you?

A Christian lives by faith, not always by understanding. (Said after section 2.)

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