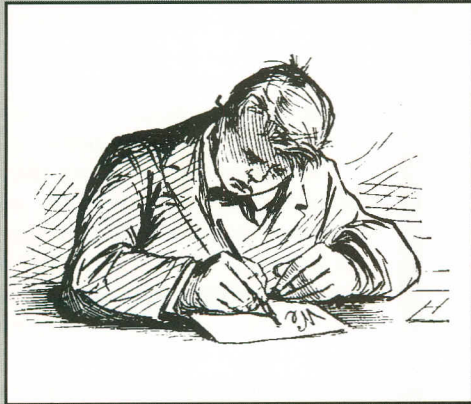
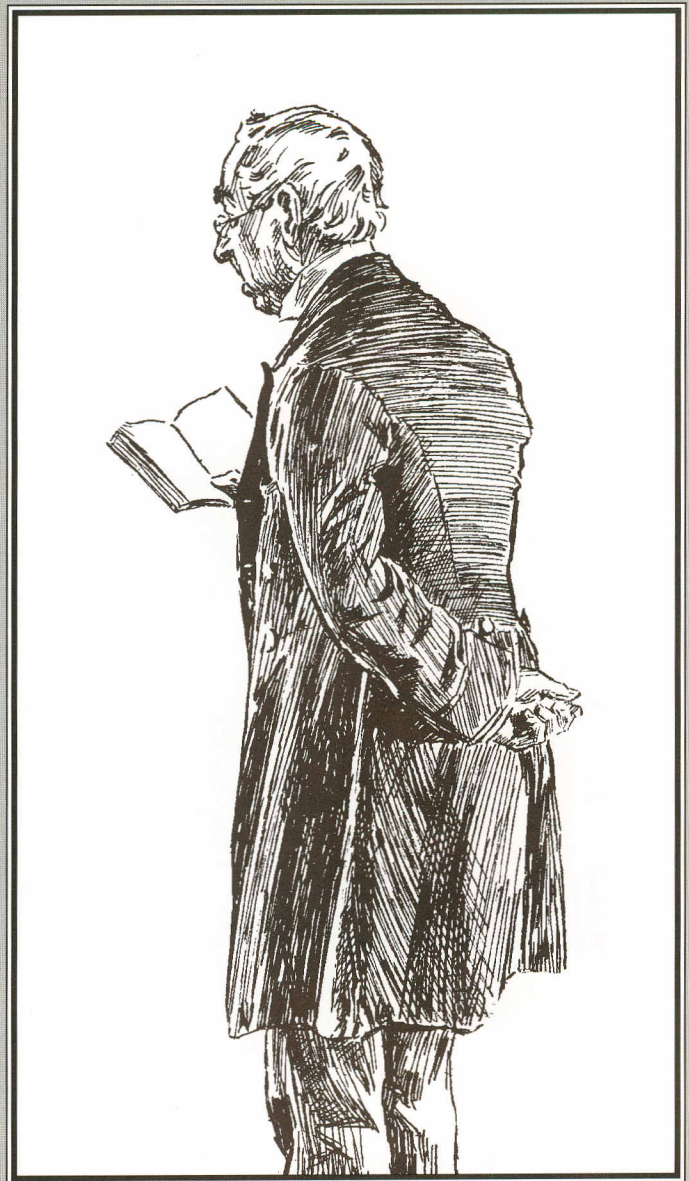


A Letter to a Pastor



by Desmond Ford

*A letter to a pastor caught up in the
"problems of the Bible"
reminds us that biblical criticism
goes through fads and fancies.
Jesus, salvation, and 'It Works!'
are the greatest evidences
that we can trust
the living faith of the Bible.*



Dear Fellow Worker,

Thank you for your courteous and frank letter.

You "rebuke" me for being ultra-conservative. You think I fail to educate my readers and listeners as to all the problems of the Bible: its contradictions, errors, and inadequacies.

You assure me that if God played a role in the production of the Bible, it must have been from within history. That is, God worked within the human processes rather than by supernatural inspiration.

You remind me that "it is the many glaring contradictions, etc., in the Bible" that are responsible for the unbelief of many scholars. Among

these contradictions you point out the one between the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) and Ezekiel 18. The error supposedly inscribed on the tables of the Decalogue is, "punishing the children for the sins of the fathers" (Exodus 20:5 NIV). Ezekiel (you say) takes care to correct this error by insisting:

The word of the Lord came to me: "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel:

"The fathers eat sour grapes,
and the children's teeth are
set on edge?"

"As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, you will no

longer quote this proverb in Israel. For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son—both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die."

(Ezekiel 18:104 NIV)

I Accept Your Challenge

I am grateful for your friendly and good-natured challenge.

Not only is it true that none of us knows much about **external** reality, we also know little of the reality **within** us. Who can separate their prejudices from the facts without leaving most of the task undone?

"Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man



sharpeneth the countenance of his friend" (Proverbs 27:17 KJV). Anything like an adequate answer to your comments would take a book. I will, in this letter, at least try to indicate the direction such a book would take.

Fingertip Faith

First, it's no news to you as a pastor that the average person who professes belief is hanging on by the fingertips. Poised over a drop into an infinite abyss!

Life isn't easy for anyone. Trouble presses upon trouble. Physical weariness and illness often compound our problems. All are subject to uninterrupted temptations appealing to the flesh. And all these difficulties are in the context of

family trials that seem so unique (though they rarely are unique).

A single wrong decision can wreck a person for a lifetime (and eternity, if you'll grant such a thing). That single decision can also—to some degree—wreck the lives of loved ones and the experience of friends. If moral responsibility is a reality and not a chimera, life is very solemn. All ideas, then, that either weaken or strengthen the moral ability to resist evil, are of primary importance.

No wonder James warned his readers, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1 NIV).

Anyway, I think we can agree that

the human situation is tremulous and perilous. I would therefore want very good evidence, indeed, before I weakened people's confidence in the Bible. This one Book has done more than all others combined to help men and women.

The Bible has helped millions over the centuries resist selfishness and all forms of evil.

Bible Accurate Enough for Task

You are correct when you write that if people are taught to view the Bible in a superstitious way, then they are in for a shock. One such superstition is teaching people that the Bible writers are God's pens, rather than God's penmen!

It's dangerous to ignore the cultural limitations and finitude of the writers of the Bible, and the influence this has on the written product. I agree 100 percent. If we do ignore such influence, then when better information comes along, we get a real shock. People can swing like a pendulum and end up as atheists rather than better-informed Christians.

However, while acknowledging the Bible's cultural limitations, I assure you it is accurate enough for its task. Imagine a friend giving you a map showing the way to his house. I'm sure you'll admit there's all the difference in the world between saying the map is a **forgery**, and saying it's a **genuine document accurate enough** to show the way to his house!

Bible's Claim Is Practical

I believe what the Bible claims for itself:

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17 NIV)

This is a reasonable claim that the Bible is for practical, religious purposes. It claims to come from God and is a sufficient guide to eternal life.

It's not a claim to be a technical expression of science or historiography. It is not even a claim to be perfect literature. And it is certainly not a claim that the early Bible writers knew as much truth as later Bible writers (see Ephesians 3:5).

Bible Like Its Lord

I consider the word of Scripture to be like the Lord it offers. Christ is as fully

human as though not at all divine **and** as fully divine as though not at all human. Bishop Joseph Butler showed centuries ago that the Bible is the only book that teaches a morality that perfectly reflects the constitution and course of nature. That is, what the Bible teaches about behavior matches the best we know about reality as reflected in nature and history.

You suggest that my faith is resting on “rickety props.” Let me explain the basis for my personal confidence in Scripture, my “strong props.”

Strong Prop 1: Jesus

I believe the Bible is a supernatural revelation (though made through human instruments and culture) primarily because of the phenomenon of Jesus, called the Christ.

Consider just one sentence from Jesus: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33 KJV).

I challenge you, or anyone, to find me a similar sentence in all literature. Who ever forecast so accurately the inviolability of his message?

The John Rylands papyri prove that the Gospels were circulating widely by the early second century. Yet even if the statement had been written as late as that, it would remain just as remarkable and compelling for the thoughtful reader.

I could quote a dozen such statements: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14). How on earth did Jesus know that?

Jesus said about the woman who anointed him, “I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her” (Matthew 26:13; Mark 14:9). This prophecy is not only remarkable for its prescience but also for its depth of compassion. Jesus is not ashamed to be associated through all time with a prostitute.

Christ’s Morality

Christ’s teachings on morality and religion are similarly profound and unique.

For example, think of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Can you think of any other person’s words—

after nineteen centuries—that are still like a piercing sword to the mind and conscience?

And how is it that the whole of the previous economy was full of pictures that match so beautifully the person, claims, teachings, and work of Christ? I’m referring, of course, to the economy of ancient Israel that lasted more than a millennium. Its institutions of sacrifice, and temple, and prophets, priests and kings.

Think of Adam and Eve’s coats of skins, Abel’s lamb, Isaac’s offering on Mount Moriah, Noah’s preparation of an ark to save the world. Think of Jacob wrestling with God in the dark night. Think of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt by the blood of the lamb, the manna (bread) from heaven, the water from the rock, the uplifted serpent on the cross (bannerstaff), the cities of refuge, the Day of Atonement—and more.

Think of Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22. Think of Daniel 9:24-27.

The issue is not whether these Scriptures are understood as having a historical meaning before Christ. The issue is whether they are most fully filled out by the phenomenon of Christ. I submit that they are. Undeniably.

There is just no human explanation for Jesus. The most natural way to account for him is the supernatural.

Strong Prop 2: Salvation

Second, I wish to speak also of the marvel of the Christian plan of salvation.

Think of the miracle of its teachings. We are lost in our first representative, Adam. We are saved in our second representative, Jesus.

Think of the simplicity of faith and the glorious fruitage of works.

Think of the beautiful completeness of justification, sanctification, and glorification.

The comprehensiveness of God **over** us (the Father), God **for** us (the Son), and God **in** us (the Spirit).

The wisdom in drawing on the past (history), enlarging upon duty in the present (doctrine), and inspiring to hope by sketching the future (prophecy).

As someone who has spent more time with books than the majority of people (which is my excuse for being ineffective in many other areas), I can presume to make some claims. I claim that the evidence is conclusive that the

Bible is as unique among books as Jesus is among human beings.

And for the same reason!

There is supernatural power at work in both!

Strong Prop 3: It Works!

Third, we have time for only one more evidence. This is the evidence of the pragmatic test. It works!

Millions of people, of all classes and countries, have proved the Bible. It works! It has for twenty centuries.

Misplaced Trust in Humans

Now, nothing of what I have said is to deny the reality of the problems with Scripture that you wrote to me about. Problems exist in the Bible.

Of course, problems exist in nature also. But that fact does not cause me to doubt that nature has a divine origin.

Problems also exist in the life of every good man and woman. That does not cause me to question the goodness of such people.

What I do question is the confidence you place in human solutions to the problems in the Bible.

For example, you indicate (though with great courtesy) that if I had even the intelligence of a moron I could see that Ezekiel 18:2-4 is correcting and denying Exodus 20:5. You quote Bible commentaries supporting your understanding of the passage.

Bible Commentaries

Let me say a word about those commentaries. Here is one of the wisest statements in all literature, about literature:

No matter how original a scholar’s imagination, no matter how penetrating and critical his judgment, society does far more of the writing of any book that lives than the author himself.

This statement by the scholar McCown (*The Search for the Real Jesus*, page 18) is warning us that we all inherit from our society prejudices that pervert (yes, pervert) whatever page we write. (Including this one!)

That wise man, C.S. Lewis, had his eye on the same phenomenon, when he wrote:

The cool intellect must work not only against cool intellect on the other side, but against the muddy heathen mysticisms which deny intellect altogether. Most of



all, perhaps, we need intimate knowledge of the past ... [because we] need something to set against the present, to remind us that the basic assumptions have been quite different in different periods and that much which seems certain to the uneducated is merely temporary fashion. A man who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village; the scholar has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and microphone of his own age. (*The Weight of Glory*, p. 51)

Theologians Fallible Too

You are fond of quoting eminent theologians. Some of them I have known personally.

I do not concede to them the omniscience and infallibility they seem to possess in your eyes. The research demanded of me for three postgraduate degrees demonstrated how very fallible such men are, even at their best.

Rudolf Bultmann, for example, was sure that the Gospel of John was the product of gnostic influence. His position has been demonstrated as quite false in our own day.

C.H. Dodd refused to believe that the New Testament taught that Christ would return a second time. (At the end of his life, Dodd confessed his error.)

Dodd, in the twentieth century, was like almost all the leading theologians and exegetes of the nineteenth-century. He rejected the plain statements of the

New Testament where Jesus clearly speaks of the end of the world being caused by his return in glory.

But nineteenth-century scholars thought of Jesus as a cultured Victorian Londoner who wouldn't dare allude to such fairy stories in good society. Then Albert Schweitzer shocked and convinced the world that all these scholars were wrong! Jesus really and truly did believe he was going to return in the clouds of heaven, just as the Bible said!

There is a list of similar well-accepted errors by Bible scholars in Stephen Neill's *Interpretation of the New Testament*.

A personal experience. I am the author of the only full-length treatment of Mark 13:14. My book is about "the abomination of desolation." [*The Abomination of Desolation in Biblical Eschatology*, University Press of America: 1979.] My work in researching and writing the book taught me how every century has its traditional interpretations of the passage. These interpretations are alien to the facts.

Solution to Ezekiel and Decalogue

The very contradiction you cite is another example of traditional interpretation being alien to the facts.

For learned scholars to say that Ezekiel was correcting that which was written on the tables of stone is obvious nonsense. To begin with, there is no such claim made by Ezekiel!

One of the best of the classic commentators on Ezekiel wrote:

... neither our Lord in later, nor the prophets in earlier, times, seem to have had the least suspicion of any contrariety existing

between the principle which thus connected the child with the parent in visitations of evil, and the direct and proper responsibility of each person for the actions merely of his own life. (Patrick Fairbairn, *Ezekiel*, p. 191)

Fairbairn is alluding to Matthew 23:34-36; Jeremiah 15:4; and Lamentations 5:7. These passages assert the same as Exodus 20:5. However, they were written both **before** and **after** Ezekiel!

Ezekiel's assertion is that the self-righteous, unspiritual Jews of the captivity had no right to blame their fathers. They were to blame for their own wrongdoing. They were not to think themselves innocent.

The assertion of Exodus 20:5 is that the sins of the fathers are visited on later generations **of those who hate God**. This does not contradict Ezekiel's statement in any way.

Exodus 20:5 is not saying that the sins of the fathers fall automatically upon **innocent** descendants. It says those sins fall upon those who hate the Deity.

Living Faith of the Bible

W.F. Albright was correct when he spoke of "the utter absurdity of much so-called 'critical' work in the biblical field" ("The Bible After Twenty Years of Archeology," *Religion in Life*, Vol. XXI, No. 4, p. 544).

Albright also referred to "the impossibility of the views of Wellhausen on the evolution of Israelite religious culture" (*Ibid.*, p. 545). He commented on, "the total breakdown of Wellhausenism under the impact of our new knowledge of antiquity" (*Ibid.*, p. 545).

It's not surprising that Albright concluded his review:

It becomes clearer each day that this rediscovery of the Bible often leads to a new evaluation of biblical faith, which strikingly resembles the orthodoxy of an earlier day. Neither an academic scholasticism nor an irresponsible neo-orthodoxy must be allowed to divert our eyes from the living faith of the Bible." (*Ibid.*, p. 550)

To which I can only add: Amen!

Trust the Bible!

Yours in Him,

Des Ford