

Alleged Bible Contradictions by Charlie Brackett

On Tuesday evening, September 21st, 2010, I hosted BibleTalk, the Internet Bible discussion aired weekly by the North Terrace church of Christ in Chattanooga, TN. The subject was Handling Bible Contradictions. You can find a recording of the session as well as other BibleTalk sessions at http://ntchurch.com/bibletalk/bt_schedule.htm.

During Tuesday nights discussion, we had four emails sent in citing several alleged Bible contradictions, which we did not have time to research and answer on air. The purpose of this article is to try to provide possible and reasonable answers.

First, let's remember that the one who claims inaccuracies is obligated to prove them. It is not for Bible believers to prove a negative. Still, we must be prepared to give answer for the faith we have. (1 Peter 3:15) Our intent in this work, is to provide a possible answer to each of the problems submitted. That is not to say the answer given is necessarily the right one. Only possible, and if possible, then the alleged contradiction cannot reasonably stand.

A. Email #1 sent in by an anonymous listener:

"God does not show partiality according to Acts 10:34-35 (NRSV) "Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

"Why then could he choose to select Saul, when Saul was trying to stop the spread of Christ's message (Acts 9)?

"Doesn't this prove that God can and has respected one man over others in conflict with Peter's message of Acts 10?"

My answer to email #1:

The question is a fair one. Not only did God choose Saul, He chose Abraham, Jacob, Moses and many others for special work in bringing about His plans both in the Old and New Testaments.

Peter spoke regarding salvation. God has not provided a special dispensation for one person or group over another. As Peter declared, "...whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him." (NKJV) God did not save Saul any differently than He did the Gentiles in Acts 10 or anyone else. When Saul learned that Jesus is the Christ and repented, as recorded in Acts 9:4-9, and was baptized (Acts 22:16). It is how all in Christ have been saved.

Being no respecter of persons does not prevent God from using certain individuals according to their heart and willingness to serve. God recognized that Saul was a man of integrity, one who always acted according to his conscience (Acts 23:1) and

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would diligently devote Himself to the task God assigned. I believe God operates no differently today.

B. Email #2 sent in by Jim:

“The Bible is riddled with repetitions and contradictions, things that the Bible bangers would be quick to point out in anything that they want to criticize. For instance, Genesis 1 and 2 disagree about the order in which things are created, and how satisfied God is about the results of his labors. The flood story is really two interwoven stories that contradict each other on how many of each kind of animal are to be brought into the Ark--is it one pair each or seven pairs each of the "clean" ones? The Gospel of John disagrees with the other three Gospels on the activities of Jesus Christ (how long had he stayed in Jerusalem--a couple of days or a whole year?) and all four Gospels contradict each other on the details of Jesus Christ's last moments and resurrection. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke contradict each other on the genealogy of Jesus Christ's father; though both agree that Joseph was not his real father. Repetitions and contradictions are understandable for a hodgepodge collection of documents, but not for some carefully constructed treatise, reflecting a well-thought-out plan.”

My answers to email #2:

My first response is, “Whew!!” This is a barrage of charges. Unfortunately, some of them are very general. Though I asked Jim on air if he would send in some specifics, he did not. I will do what I can to respond though I would normally want more detail about the claim before attempting an answer.

1. Creation account. The charge is made that “Genesis 1 and 2 disagree about the order in which things are created, and how satisfied God is about the results of his labors.” The order of creation is stated in chapter one. Chapter two is not intended to be chronological. It is rather, in some ways, explaining in more detail the creation in chapter one (ex: vss. 7, 21-22, creation of man and woman), and in other cases explaining things that took place after the creation of things recorded in chapter one (ex: vs. 8 “The Lord planted a garden eastward in Eden”).
2. Flood story. The question is raised, “...how many of each kind of animal are to be brought into the Ark--is it one pair each or seven pairs each of the "clean" ones?” Actually, we answered this during the broadcast on last Tuesday evening. That question and answer are repeated and expanded below:

Was Noah supposed to bring two pairs of all living creatures (Genesis 6:19-20), or was he to bring seven pairs of 'clean' animals (Genesis 7:2; see also Gen. 7:8,9)?

Answer: Genesis 6 does not speak of two pairs, only that two of every sort should be brought. Genesis 6 is stating the main purpose of having two, male and female, in order to perpetuate the species, while the 7th chapter provides

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more detailed instruction delineating between the clean and unclean animals. Genesis 7:2 says Noah was to bring in 7 pairs of 'clean' animals and one pair of every kind of 'unclean' animal. The problem is the question itself.

Verses 8 and 9 of chapter 7 say nothing about two pairs entering the ark. They simply say that it was pairs of clean and unclean animals, birds and creeping creatures which entered the ark. The reason for including seven of the clean species should be perfectly evident: they were to be used for sacrificial worship after the flood had receded (as indeed they were, according to Genesis 8:20). Obviously, if there had not been more than two of each of these clean species, they would have been rendered extinct by their being sacrificed on the altar. But in the case of the unclean animals and birds, a single pair would suffice, since they would not be needed for blood sacrifice.

3. Activities of Jesus. The claim is that “the Gospel of John disagrees with the other three Gospels on the activities of Jesus Christ (how long had he stayed in Jerusalem--a couple of days or a whole year?).”

Answer: Jesus was in Jerusalem on three occasions that I know of: one early in His public ministry, one at the end when He was tried and crucified, and finally after His resurrection and just before His ascension. Since I do not know the specific charge being made about the time He was in Jerusalem, I will try to present what information we have on these three visits.

At the beginning of the Lord's public ministry, John 2:13 tells us that Jesus went up to Jerusalem where He cleansed the temple and had the discourse with Nicodemus about being born into the kingdom of God. After that He left for Judea (John 3:22). Chapter 2 verse 23 says He was there at the Passover. In Old Testament times, there were two feasts. The Passover was celebrated in the evening and the Feast of Unleavened Bread was celebrated for the following seven days. By Jesus' time, they were celebrated together and called the Passover. So, according to John, Jesus was probably in Jerusalem for at least eight days on this occasion. The other Gospel writers do not mention this visit.

Let us always remember, that the four Gospels, though inspired, are the different viewpoints of four writers. Each does not tell all the facts, so we must put them together to get the fullest possible picture. The fact that only John mentions this does not make it less true.

Jesus did not return to Jerusalem until at the end of His ministry. All four writers tell of His triumphal entry, riding on a donkey (Matt. 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:29-44; and John 12:12-19). That was on Sunday. All four report that during that ensuing week He was tried, abused, ridiculed, beaten, crucified and buried. All four record His resurrection on following Sunday morning. Acts 1:3, written by Luke, reports that He was “seen by them for forty days...” referring to the time He was with the apostles after His resurrection.

During the forty days, we can conclude that He was in Jerusalem for the first week after His resurrection since John 20:26-29 tells us He appeared to all of the apostles in that city on the following Sunday. John 21:1f says He then appeared

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to seven disciples by the Sea of Galilee. This was when He discoursed with Peter about tending His sheep.

Next, He went to a mountain in Galilee. Matthew 28:16-20 and Mark 16:15-18 tell of His appearance there to eleven, but John and Luke do not mention it.

His final appearance was back in Jerusalem according to Luke 24:44-53. From there, He led his apostles out toward Bethany from where He ascended. Mark also mentions the ascension, but not where it took place (Mark 16:19-20). Acts 1:12 says they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives after the ascension of Christ into heaven.

I find nothing contradictory in the four accounts of these events. Of course, not having the details, I could have missed the point of the complaint. I am ready and willing to consider any other evidence that “the Gospel of John disagrees with the other three Gospels on the activities of Jesus Christ (how long had he stayed in Jerusalem--a couple of days or a whole year?).” The evidence clearly shows He was there more than a couple of days on at least the first two occasions and certainly not a year on any of them.

4. Christ's death and resurrection. Is it true that “...all four Gospels contradict each other on the details of Jesus Christ's last moments and resurrection”?

Answer: My question is what details are contradictory? Since the one who sent the email did not specify what was in contractions, I will comment on a criticism that the Gospels disagree on what was written on Christ's crucifixion cross. Here are inscriptions as given in the New King James version of the accounts:

Matt. 27:37 This is Jesus the King of the Jews

Mark 15:26 The King of the Jews

Luke 23:38 This is the King of the Jews

John 19:19 Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews

On the surface, it looks as though the four writers could not get their facts straight, but the context reveals other important information. Luke 23:38 tells us that the inscription was written in Greek, Latin and Hebrew. So, three inscriptions, one in each language. John 19:19 adds that Pilate, who was the Roman governor in charge, wrote the inscription we have recorded in the book of John. We are not told who wrote the two translated versions. Perhaps they were translated from what Pilate wrote.

Our present question is, which of the three inscriptions did each of the Gospel writers use? We are not told, but it seems logical since John mentioned that Pilate, a Roman, wrote the inscription, what John reports is the Latin version. It is equally logical that Matthew quoted the Hebrew version since he wrote to the Jews. Luke wrote to the Greeks, therefore, he would have used the Greek inscription. That leaves Mark. What did he quote?

The Gospel of Mark is the most abbreviated of the four. His abbreviated version of all of the events in the life of Jesus emphasize His power and actions over His

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words. It seems reasonable that Mark quote only the essence of the inscription, that part that all of the translations had in common. "The King of the Jews" are the only words found in all three translations, and that is what we find in Mark's account.

This seems to be a reasonable explanation of the differences in what is recorded as written on the cross of Jesus. Other differences in what each writer recorded about the death and resurrection of Jesus can be explained similarly. We do well to remember that the four Gospels, though inspired by the One Author, are the individual accounts of four men, each seeing those events from a different perspective and writing for a different purpose.

5. Genealogy of Jesus. This claim is that "the Gospels of Matthew and Luke contradict each other on the genealogy of Jesus Christ's father; though both agree that Joseph was not his real father."

Answer: The evidence, though scanty, points to Luke's account as having traced the lineage of Jesus through Mary rather than Joseph as in Matthew's account. For more on this point, please refer to the comments answering the first complaint in email #3 below.

6. The Bible: a hodgepodge collection of documents. Finally, Jim's email says, "Repetitions and contradictions are understandable for a hodgepodge collection of documents, but not for some carefully constructed treatise, reflecting a well-thought-out plan."

Answer: The Bible is sixty-six books, written by about forty men over a period of approximately 1,500 years. It is a book with many interwoven facts unveiling one theme that has changed the course of people and nations down through the ages since first written. While there have been many alleged contradictions cited by unbelievers, none pertain to the essentials of salvation and most are answerable by a careful consideration of the historical context and other interpretations than those most apparent. Those few, remaining errors made by copyists or translators do not indict credibility of the original revelation. In view of that, it seems a considerable stretch to suggest it is "a hodgepodge collection of documents."

Facts of history, geography, science, medicine and psychology were reported by biblical writers long before discovery by humanity. Further, empires, cities, events and persons were named in the Bible long before archaeology proved them real. No other books in history have done this. And, no other books of antiquity have survived the scrutiny of historical scholarship of historiography as has the Bible.

C. Email #3 sent in by Jim:

First difficulty cited in email #3

Who is the father of Joseph?

MAT 1:16 And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.

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LUK 3:23 And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph, which was the son of Heli.

Answer to email #3's first difficulty:

It is distinctly possible that Luke's account traces Jesus' lineage through Mary, and not Joseph as Matthew does. Some of the circumstantial evidence to support this is as follows:

1. Luke's birth narrative is through the eyes of Mary, while Matthew's is through the eyes of Joseph. Luke could have received his material through Mary (or someone close), thus it is quite possible that he received her genealogy.
2. Luke 3:23 reads, "Jesus...being supposedly the son of Joseph, the son of Heli, etc." Luke certainly draws attention to the fact that Jesus was not truly Joseph's son, so why would he then go to all the trouble in listing Joseph's genealogy?
3. After considering the Greek of Luke 3:23, Robert Gromacki believes it should be translated as follows:

"...being the son (as was supposed of Joseph) of Heli, of Matthat, etc."

Gromacki states: "Since women did not appear in direct genealogical listings, Joseph stood in Mary's place, but Luke was careful to note that there was no physical connection between Joseph and either Jesus or Heli."

4. Luke's genealogy also lists Adam as "the son of God." This would indicate that one would have no grounds for insisting that the term "son" meant only the direct, biological offspring. Thus, one could think of Jesus as the "son of Heli."
5. The writings of Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 100 AD) indicate that the early church thought that Mary was a Davidic descent. For example, he writes:

"Under the Divine dispensation, Jesus Christ our God was conceived by Mary of the seed of David and of the spirit of God; He was born, and He submitted to baptism, so that by His Passion He might sanctify water." -- Ignatius to the Ephesians

"Christ was of David's line. He was the son of Mary; He was verily and indeed born.." -- Ignatius to the Trallians

Since Ignatius believed in the virgin birth, it clearly follows that he would believe that she was "of the seed of David." Other apocryphal gospels and Justin Martyr (ca. 150 AD) also believed Mary to have been a descendent of David.

Objections to these claims are basically of two types:

1. The Jews did not typically trace genealogies through women.

Reply: This is true, but a virgin birth is not a typical birth. Thus standard practices would not be expected to hold.

2. There is no explicit mention that the genealogy is Mary's.

Reply: This is also true, but the reason for this is probably due to point 1. The genealogy would lose all appeal if it was explicitly cited as Mary's. However, it

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does seem to be implied. Thus, one could discern this truth after they had converted and studied the text. This would account for the early church's belief about Mary's Davidic descent.

Whatever one makes of such reasoning, it is certainly possible that the above explanation might be true, thus a contradiction has not been proved.

Second difficulty cited in email #3

Who was at the Empty Tomb? Is it:

MAT 28:1 In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre.

MAR 16:1 And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him.

JOH 20:1 The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre.

Answer to email #3's second difficulty:

The question, "Who was at the empty tomb," is easy to answer. All of them. It is possible that all four authors focused on Mary Magdalene as the main character in the story. She had been mentioned in the gospels before; Luke describes her as the woman "from whom seven demons had come out." (Luke 8:2) Those hearing the resurrection story in that time would be familiar with her name. In that case, the names of the other women with her would not have been as important. Thus, some mentioned one or more of the others, and John ignored them all but Mary Magdalene. It is also possible that Salome and Joanna were the same person, merely called by different names.

D. Email #4 sent in by an anonymous listener:

The Bible states in Joshua 10:13 that the sun stood still in the sky during a battle. But for this to happen, the earth would have had to stop rotating. The deceleration forces and stopping the rotation even for the short time referenced would have torn the earth to pieces. So how could this have happened?

Answer to email #4:

A number of websites postulate what might happen if the earth slowed or stood still, and all that I looked at presented a very scary picture of things on the surface of the earth spinning off into space, the oceans shifting, seasons being disrupted, and other catastrophic results. If interested in more detail on what might happen, go to <http://curious.astro.cornell.edu/question.php?number=16>.

Having acknowledged that it would be disastrous, some have attempted to answer, from a physical perspective, how it could have happened. One such explanation is located at <http://sunnyokanagan.com/joshua/index.html?gclid=COuz5vT0oKQCFYIY2godJUhT6A>. I do not have the knowledge to verify such an answer. It may be true. I know some of what is reported on that website is

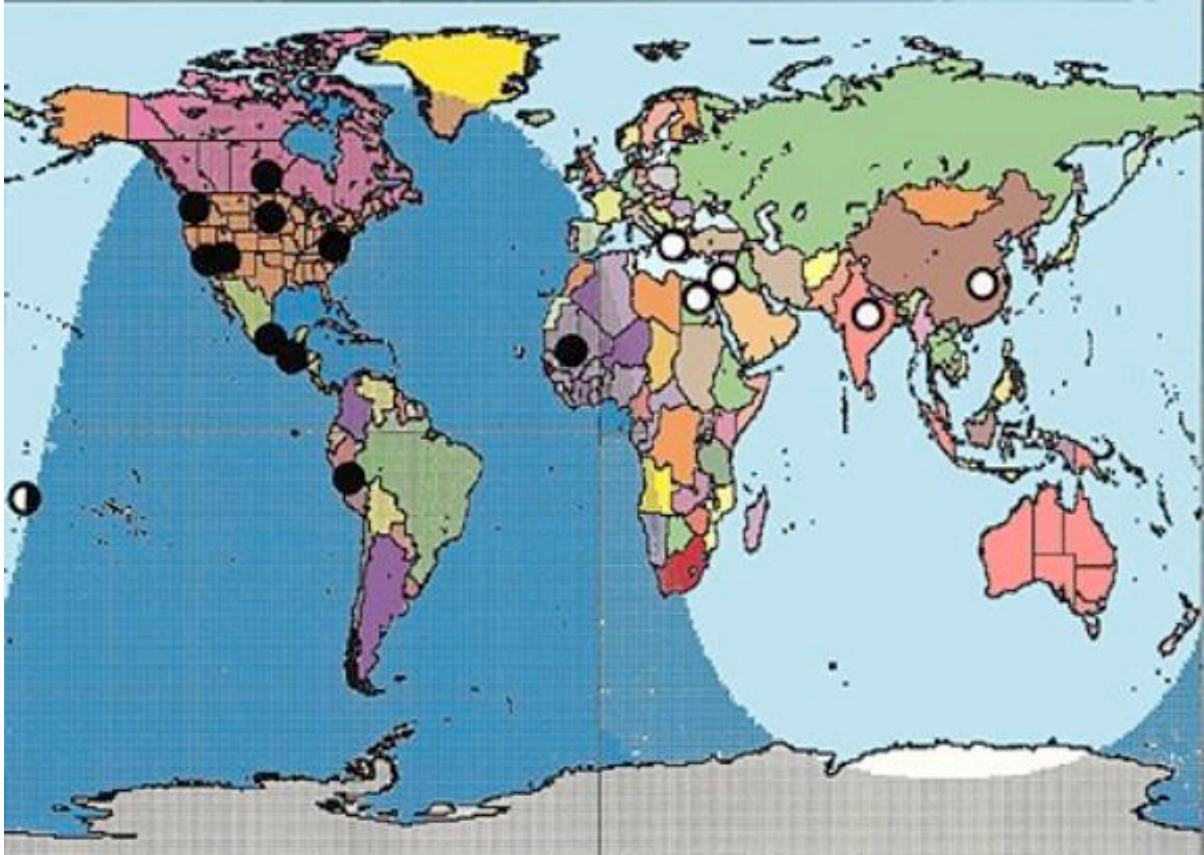
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probably not true. It repeats a story that has circulated for several years that NASA, while using its computers to calculate the future position of the sun, moon and planets, came up with an approximate day missing in time. As the story goes, they found that Joshua's approximate day and Hezekiah's request for the sun to go backwards ten degrees (2 Kings 20:8-11) accounted to the minute for the lost day. Snopes.com reports that they checked with NASA who said the story is not true.

There are actually several other explanations that have been offered, many of them presented at http://www.geocentricity.com/astronomy_of_bible/jld/index.html. For me, the answer is really very simple. Surely, the Creator of the Universe (there being overwhelming evidence that it was the God of the Bible) is capable of stopping the earth's rotation and restarting it without disastrous repercussions to other heavenly bodies within the earth's gravitational field or to those creatures and systems upon the earth. Having said that, I would like to end this discussion with the following quote from the website listed earlier in this paragraph:

"The upshot is that there appears to be solid evidence from the Bible and from folklore around the world that there was one day which, depending upon geographical location, presented the inhabitants of the earth with an unusually long span of daylight or night. Attempts to explain this phenomenon by naturalistic means have all failed because no mechanism known to physics can absorb the earth's spin energy and momentum (or the universe's from a geocentric point of view) in such a short period of time without causing great upheavals such as the oceans spilling over the continents. Agnostic or atheistic scholars choose not to deal with the ancient witnesses. Such a phenomenon as Joshua's long day can only happen with divine intervention. But then science does not claim to have all the answers: its authority is found wanting. Is the Bible, then, the final authority after all? Not if God said that the sun stopped when it was actually the earth which ceased to rotate. And that brings us to the heart of the matter.

"Attempts to phenomenalyze Joshua's long day or to make it allegorical thus fail. Christians and Jewish people are presented with a real historical event in Joshua 10:12-14. The central issue from their perspective is that of inerrancy of the Bible. God wrote in verse 13 that the "sun stood still and the moon stayed." God either meant what he wrote, or he did not. There is no excuse for God because he is the God of truth; therefore all things he says and does must reflect that fact. So God cannot utter an untruth and we must conclude that the Bible teaches, in Joshua 10:13 and else where, that the universe rotates around the earth once per day, carrying the sun, moon and stars with it, regardless of what introductory astronomy texts may say. We shall see later that the advanced texts belie the introductory texts on the matter of the rotation of the earth. For the time being, the choice is either the Bible or the introductory astronomy texts: which do you believe?



“Joshua’s long day around the world: The solid black circles show locations with tales of a long night; open circles plot tales of a long day, and the half-white half-black circle in the Pacific shows the location of a long sunrise tale. Recently, after this figure was made, another long sunrise tale was reported in Hawaii.”

E. What should our attitude be toward what appear to be biblical contradictions?

1. First, let’s remember that the one who claims inaccuracies is obligated to prove it. It is not for Bible believers to prove a negative. Still, we must be prepared to give answer for the faith we have. (1 Peter 3:15)
2. Also, we must remember that our belief that the Bible is inerrant is not based on there being no difficulties in the Word, or places where claims can be made that there are contradictions or discrepancies.
 - a. It is based on overwhelming evidence of three essential and fundamental facts:
 - 1) God exists and created all things. There is too much evidence in nature, even scientific evidence, that an All-Powerful Intelligent God created all that we see.
 - 2) The Bible came from God. Evidence both inside (cohesiveness beginning to end; fulfilled prophecies; recorded places, people, events and scientific facts long before man’s discovering of these things) and outside

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(archaeology; bibliography) prove the Bible could not have originated with man.

- 3) Christ, the divine Son of God, was resurrected from the grave. Prophecies, events surrounding His death and resurrection, historical reaction of the Jews, and mathematical odds all prove Christ was who He claimed to be and was raised.
 - b. If faith is not grounded in the above three facts, it is on a footing that may give way in the storms of life and the onslaught of challenges from unbelievers.
 - c. In fact, my belief that the Bible was given by God would not be shaken because someone was able to prove a contradiction. I, for one, will not claim there are no errors in the translations we have, and I must admit that our best translations are only the work of men. Still, since God created us for His purpose, He then had to reveal to us that purpose, which He did in the Bible, and He necessarily obligated Himself to protect that message from consequential error down to our time.
4. With the foregoing as a backdrop, let us strive diligently to follow these guidelines in understanding Scripture.
 - a. Compare reliable translations before arriving at an interpretation.
 - b. Don't take things out of context. Consider not only the immediate context but the broader context of all Bible teaching.
 - c. Don't assume a negative connotation when other explanations are possible.
 - d. Look for a meaning that harmonizes with all other Scriptures.
 - e. Look for the necessary conclusion to a verse's meaning. Don't be satisfied with an assumption that is not required.
 - f. Consider the possibility that the solution to an apparent contradiction might be in the historical context of the time of writing, which may be very different from our own.
 - g. Remember, an infinite God is communicating to finite humans. Sometimes, God may appear to be limited or eternal matters may be stated in historical, time-bound terms. This is reasonable to aid our understanding.
 - h. Recognize that figurative language or style of writing and speaking may explain the difficulty. Despite what many fundamental Bible believers think, a great deal of the Bible cannot be taken literally.
 - i. Remember that what we have in our hands are translations from the oldest copies of the original and there is room in both the copying and translating for errors to be made. These are not significant enough to distort the plan of salvation nor to negate God's authorship.
 - j. Love the truth, which means not only to value it but to be honest with it when determining its meaning.