

TRUTH ON TOUGH TEXTS

EXPOSITIONS OF CHALLENGING SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

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READER QUESTIONS (8)

SELECTED TEXTS

THIS MONTH WE REACH ANOTHER MILESTONE FOR our little letter. Not only did Issue 96 (“Are Genesis 1–3 Really Important?”) mark our 10th anniversary, but we celebrate again this month with our 100th issue. It is appropriate that this issue is another installment of reader questions since it is only because of our readers that this publication exists. We, therefore, address six questions from those beloved readers.

Was Mary Magdalene a Prostitute?

Question: I recently saw the movie *Risen*, which very clearly depicted Mary Magdalene as a being a prostitute. I have also heard some Bible teachers portray her as such. Is this true? (DW)

Answer: While the movie *Risen* is among the more accurate movies concerning biblical events, it does get some things wrong, and this is most definitely one of them. Mary Magdalene is mentioned in all four of the Gospels. She was from Magdala, a town about three miles north of Tiberias on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is Luke’s mention of her, however, that has led to the assumption that she was a prostitute. Luke 7:37–50 records the story of “a woman in the city, which was a sinner,” a euphemism used for the vilest of people. Because this was a woman, the obvious assumption is that she was, in fact, a prostitute, even though the text does not explicitly state that. In a staggering example of sacrificial worship, she washed Jesus’ feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, and then anointed them with expensive perfume. As one writer well says, “When God cannot get religious leaders to appreciate Christ, He will get harlots to do so.”¹

It is then because Mary Magdalene is mentioned immediately after this incident (8:2) that careless interpreters have linked the two. Jesus cast demons out of Mary Magdalene, but there is no implication whatsoever that she was the same woman as in chapter 7. If this would have been the case, Jesus would surely have cleared up any ambiguity.

The Spirit That Lusts to Envy

Question: I’m currently studying the Epistle of James and am wondering about 4:5: “Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, ‘The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously?’”

(NKJV). Is this referring to the indwelling Holy Spirit? If not, what? (PW)

Answer: This verse is actually a “two for one” tough text. It is also the most puzzling in the entire epistle of James and ranks right up there with the tougher texts of the NT.

The first challenge is actually the phrase “the scripture saith.” The oddity here is that there is no corresponding OT source for this citation. There are actually other examples of this in the NT (Matt. 2:23; Jn. 7:38; 1 Cor. 2:9). Two other examples appear in Clement of Rome’s historically significant *Letter of the Romans to the Corinthians*, which is probably the earliest Christian document outside the NT that still exists (1 Clement 23:3; 46:2).

Various solutions have been offered to this problem in our present text, but only one seems to explain it adequately. While it does not quote a specific OT *text*, it does express a specific OT *principle* that James here states in his own Holy Spirit inspired words. The fact that man is prone to “jealously” (or “envy,” KJV) is repeatedly and graphically expressed in the OT (Job 5:2; Prov. 14:30; 27:4; Ecc. 4:4; cf. Gen. 26:14; 30:1; 37:11; Pss. 106:16; 73:3). As we will see, this solution, in fact, answers other issues with this verse.

The second challenge of the verse, then, is what “Spirit” is referred to. Much of the confusion that arises here actually comes from some modern translations (e.g., NKJV and NASB) that arbitrarily capitalize “Spirit”; Greek manuscripts did not capitalize in this way. In addition to the NKJV and NASB, other translations indicate the Holy Spirit (ESV; NIV; CEV).

There is nothing in the text or the context, however, that warrants a reference to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is, in fact, not mentioned anywhere in James’ epistle. Further, I respectfully submit that this cannot possibly be referring to the indwelling Holy Spirit. The primary reason is the meaning of the Greek word behind “envy.” This is *phthonos*, which appears only nine times in the NT and always in a very negative, fleshly sense. As one Greek authority indicates, this word means “envy, jealousy, pain felt and malignity conceived at the sight of excellence or happiness.”² Are we to think such a meaning refers to the Holy Spirit? This is confirmed all the more by the other instances of this word. Their deep seated jealousy of Jesus, for example, drove the Jewish leaders to hand Him over to the Roman courts (Matt. 27:18; Mk. 15:10).

Further, such “envy” appears in five lists of serious vices and sins (Rom. 1:29; Gal. 5:21; 1 Tim. 6:4; Titus 3:3; 1 Pet. 2:1). Finally, some people even preach Christ out of “envy,” rivalry, and personal ambition (Phil. 1:15).

We submit, therefore, that the KJV rendering—“The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy”—exactly expresses James’ point. The entire context speaks of man’s lust and friendship with the world (vv. 1–4). Friendship with the world does, indeed, breed envy (v. 5). After the summary statement in verse 5, James then declares the remedy in verse 6: “But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.”

Calendar Conundrum

Question: I am confused about the dating of Jesus’ birth and death. Can you explain this? (PH)

Answer: Well, don’t think that you are the only one who has ever been befuddled about this. The best way I have found to explain this is by understanding three things.

First, there was the Roman Calendar. Briefly, the original Roman Calendar is believed to have been a *lunar* calendar, which might have been based on one of the Greek lunar calendars. As the time between new moons averages 29.5 days, its months were constructed to be either hollow (29 days) or full (30 days). Roman writers attributed the original Roman calendar to Romulus, the founder of Rome around **753 BC**, a date which we will come to in a moment. That’s all we really need to know about the Roman Calendar.

Second, there was the Julian Calendar. Julius Caesar, as Pontifex Maximus, reformed the calendar in 46 BC, which became known as the Julian Calendar. The calendar reforms were completed during the reign of his successor Augustus, who renamed the month of Quintilis as Iulius (July) in honour of Julius Caesar in 44 BC and Sextilis as Augustus (August) in honour of Augustus in 8 BC. Again, that’s all we really need to know. That brings us to a key person in all this.

Third, we come to Dionysius Exiguus. He was a 6th-century monk born in Scythia Minor, modern Dobruja, shared by Romania and Bulgaria. At the request of Emperor Justinian, he invented a calendar in A.D. 526 that reckoned time from the Birth of Christ. This was called the *Anno Domini* era (“in the year of our Lord”). This system was then used to number the years in the later Gregorian Calendar—also called the Western Calendar and the Christian Calendar—which is a solar calendar that came about in 1582.

But, while Dionysius was a very smart fellow, he made an error at the foundation of his system. Instead of reckoning **753 BC** as the founding of the Roman Empire, he reckoned it a few years earlier, **748** or **749**. That shifted the entire system back 4 or 5 years. That is why the birth of Christ is now reckoned at 5 or 4 BC. So, this dates the death and resurrection of Christ at about AD 30.

“The Word of His Power”

Question: I certainly understand what is meant when I read about the power of God’s Word, but what does the phrase “the word of his power” mean in Hebrews 1:3? (JA)

Answer: Here we have a wonderful Hebrew idiom. It’s important to first note the Greek phrase: *tō rhēmati tēs dunam-*

eōs (τῷ ῥηματι τῆς δυναμειως). The NIV renders this terribly with “his powerful word,” completely ignoring the definite article in the Greek. The KJV, NASB, and ESV all get it right with “the word of his power.” *Young’s Literal Translation* is also good with “the saying of his might.”

Significantly, “word” is not the usual Greek *logos* but rather *rhēma*. While the former refers to a proclamation as a whole, that is, an entire discourse or speech, the latter usually relates to individual words and utterances.³ Among its some 70 occurrences, *rhēma* appears in John 3:34 to refer to Jesus coming to “[speak] the words of God.” In 8:47 Jesus Himself declares to the religious leaders, “He that is of God heareth God’s words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God.” Oh yes, the religious leaders knew much about the *Word* of God, that is, the OT, but knew nothing of the *words* of God. Paul uses *rhēma* in Romans 10:17, “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” He uses it three times in Ephesians: first, in reference to the truth of salvation; second, in reference to the Christian husband sanctifying his wife by the Word (5:26); and third, in 6:17, where part of the Christian’s spiritual armor is “the word[s] of God.”

What, then, is the meaning here in Hebrews 1:3? Not only did the “Word” (*logos*) create all things (v. 2; cf. Jn. 1:1–3), but the “Word” (*rhēma*) then upholds all things. Contrary to popular opinion, the individual *words* of God are critical.

“Smoking Furnace” and “Burning Lamp”

Question: I’m studying Galatians for an upcoming Sunday School class. I’m into chapter 3 now and I came to verses 15–18. Paul exegetes the meaning of “Seed” as used in Genesis 15 with the confirmation of the promise to Abraham. That is a thrilling study in and of itself. As I dug back into Genesis 15, I was reminded again that the promise confirmed was done with the custom of splitting animals in half and passing through the midst. Scripture says that a Smoking Furnace and a Burning Lamp passed through. I had previously studied that section in a class on Hebrews and I wondered what the furnace and lamp could be. No commentaries seemed to give me an answer, yet I had to conclude in my heart that they must represent God the Father and Jesus Christ confirming the oath together.

So now in Galatians I came to 3:17 where it says that the covenant that was confirmed before “of God IN CHRIST . . .” This seems to confirm to me my thoughts on Genesis 15. Then I read one expositor who wrote the familiar, “The best manuscripts leave out ‘in Christ.’” It’s so frustrating that a man who is generally of sound doctrine, would fall down in such an important area. I’m sure the “best manuscripts” refers to the so-called “oldest,” Vaticanus and Sinaiticus.

I’m curious to hear your thoughts on Galatians 3:17 and the furnace and lamp of Genesis 15. Thanks! (RS)

Answer: I view *both* the “smoking furnace” and the “burning lamp” (Gen. 15:17) as the presence of Yahweh. He alone “cut the covenant,” having put Abram to sleep. As we know, Yahweh is God’s covenant name and the name He used in making promises to His people. “LORD” (Yahweh), in fact, appears five times in the surrounding context. The imagery of “a smoking furnace” pictures God as “a consuming fire” (Deut. 4:24 and 9:23, where Yahweh again appears), and “a burning

lamp (or torch)” graphically pictures the Shechinah glory God, just as He manifested Himself to the people of Israel centuries later in the pillar of cloud and fire.

Turning to Galatians 3:17, it most certainly looks back to that event. God’s promise was made *before* the Law, and that promise looked *ahead* for fulfillment “in [that is, *eis*, ‘unto’] Christ.” Nothing could invalidate God’s covenant with Abraham.

Indeed, to omit “in Christ” does great violence to the text and seriously detracts from what Paul is emphasizing. The omission is actually based not only upon Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, but also three others: P46, Alexandrinus, and Ephraemi Rescriptus. This, of course, flies in the face of the overwhelming majority of manuscripts that include these critical words.

Follow-up Question: Another related question would be this: Which one of the Godhead is Yahweh? I’ve always thought of Him as the Covenantal name of the Father, yet Moses used LORD in Genesis with regards to creation and Hebrews tells us Christ created. Also in John 8, Jesus identifies himself clearly with the name I AM. So is Yahweh Jesus, the Father, both?

Answer: Ah, now you want to plumb the mysteries of the Trinity. “So is Yahweh Jesus, the Father, both?” Yes. But you left out the Holy Spirit, who “moved [hovered, *rāhap*] upon the face of the waters” at Creation.

What About Competition?

Question: Does the Bible address the issue of competition? Sports, for example, are a large part of our culture. Does the Bible have anything to say about this? (MH)

Answer: The moment I received this question, I immediately thought back to an article I read in 2006 by a pastor titled “Sports and the Christian.” Most of the article was truly excellent. It was clear that he was concerned about the god that sports have become and desired to weigh the issue in light of Scripture.

There were, however, a few troubling statements that are all too common in our culture. One was, “Participation in sports can be a good primer in the development of moral character.” But if we may respectfully ask, where does Scripture even imply such a notion? Interestingly, later in the article the author states, “Someone once said that ‘athletics do not necessarily teach character—they reveal it,’” but he actually seems to dismiss that idea when he adds: “that may be inherently true.” We must insist, however, that that is not *inherently* true but *absolutely* true. There is only one thing that builds character: the Word of God. Competitive sports do nothing for moral character. If they did, we would not see the drug and plethora of other problems the author discerningly discusses. After all, *life in general*, not just competitive sports, reveals exactly what people are by nature; “for out of [the heart] are the issues of life” (Prov. 4:23), as we will see in a moment.

Another common idea the author reflected was, “Sports can aid in unifying a school, a community, a state and even a nation.” But again, that is not a Christian idea. True unity is

not created by any of that. Also, to say that “sports provide jobs and pour significant amounts of money into the economy” is to defend incalculable waste on something that means very little and is actually destructive in some ways.

A particularly distressing statement, however, is one that is really at the core of the issue. Near the end of the article the author wrote: “while it is true that God is sovereign over all things, winning and losing is [sic] man’s way of measuring success.” But is this not a humanistic philosophy? Do we not, in fact, see such pragmatism even in Christian ministry today?

We, therefore, submit that this question, like so many others, is a *heart issue*. While we can agree with the author that “there is nothing intrinsically sinful about competing,” it is absolutely essential that we qualify that. No, there is nothing sinful in a friendly game of table tennis where we desire to do our best, but when winning is the only goal in mind, we have arrived at the core of the heart problem: *pride*. Let’s be honest, pride is often (not always, but often) the driving force of competition, and pride is one of the three categories of sin (1 Jn. 2:16). Many (again, not all, but many) who compete make statements that demonstrate this attitude beyond question. One vivid illustration is the famous statement by football coach Red Sanders, in 1953: “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.”⁴ And who can forget Mohammad Ali’s, “I am the greatest”? To overlook that cardinal principle is to miss the key to the whole issue.

So, is it okay if we play that softball game, basketball game, or tennis match? Certainly. “Bodily exercise” does “[profit a] little” (1 Tim. 4:8). My own passion actually is golf. Is it even okay if we keep score? Sure. All these can be opportunities for exercise, Christian fellowship, relaxation, and just plain fun. But at the same time, we must be extremely careful because *friendly competition* can easily turn to *fierce combat* when pride, lust, and ego come boiling out of the flesh, things that are of the world, not of God. If we may further encourage, we must also be on guard that such things never become a priority, such as coming before church attendance, an occurrence that is all too common with school and community athletics.

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NOTES

- ¹ Dr. H. C. Woodring, cited by William Macdonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary* (Thomas Nelson, 1989), electronic edition, comment on Lk. 7:36.
- ² Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* (AMG Publishers, 1992), electronic edition, entry #G5355.
- ³ Colin Brown, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan), Vol. 3, p. 1121.
- ⁴ This is often attributed to coach Vince Lombardi, but that’s not so. The actual saying by Lombardi in a 1962 interview was, “Winning isn’t everything, but wanting to win is.” Both are cited in *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations*, 16th Edition, p. 783.

DEVOTIONAL

This devotional is from the author's third daily devotional book, *Seek Him Early Daily Devotional Studies on Knowing, Loving, and Serving Our Lord Jesus Christ*, which is being prepared for publication.

DECEMBER 6

WHOM WILL YOU SERVE?

... choose you this day whom ye will serve ... (Josh. 24:14-15)

THE text before us today demonstrates that every one of us will choose who we intend to serve. Contrary to popular belief, there is no such thing as "non-committal." We will choose one or we will choose another.

Serve is *ʿabad* (5647H), a verb that appears almost 300 times in the OT and speaks of labor either on one's own behalf (Gen. 2:5; 4:2; Isa. 19:9) or for another person (Gen. 29:15; Exod. 1:14). It appears seven times in these two verses and a total of 18 times in the chapter. Joshua makes clear that the people must choose who they will serve. There were four choices then and four choices now.

First, there was the *cultic* choice of the Mesopotamian gods (**the gods which your fathers served**). Nimrod, the grandson of Ham and great-grandson of Noah, founded the cities of Babel (Babylon, Gen. 10:10-11). Semiramis, Nimrod's wife, became the first high priestess of idolatry, and Babylon became the mother of all pagan religion (Rev. 17:5). Throughout history such religions have practiced every imaginable and unspeakable perversion known to man. Israel repeatedly fell into such idolatry, but there is little difference in our own day. There are cults that are religious, social, and economic, and every person chooses a god to serve.

Second, there was the *comfortable* choice of **Egypt**. We are immediately reminded here of the Israelites' complaint to Moses: "Is not this the word that we did tell thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness" (Ex. 14:12). Forgetting they were slaves in Egypt, they actually preferred the illusion of comfort they thought it afforded. We live in a culture of comfort in our day. While there is nothing wrong with a nice house, modern conveniences, and entertainment, we must never become slaves to them.

Third, there was the *contemporary* choice of the **Amorites in whose land they** currently lived. The gods of the Amorites, such as Molech, where horrific—worship involved temple prostitution and infant sacrifice. But the Israelites chose to be a part of it all, to be relevant to the culture, to blend in with everyone else. We see the same thing today. In the name of "cultural relevance," some Christians compromise truth and morality. We even have our own version of "Molech," as we sacrifice millions of babies through abortion.

Fourth, there was the *Christian* choice of the true God (**LORD**). Of course, they were not "Christians" in that day, but they worshipped the same **LORD** nonetheless. **LORD** is once again *Yāhweh* (Jan. 21), God's covenant name. All His covenants pointed to the coming Messiah. So, **choose you this day whom ye will serve**. It's all or nothing. Let us "put away . . . the strange gods which are among [us] and incline [our] heart unto the LORD God" (v. 23).

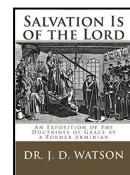
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This bi-monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God's people to carefully examine and discern Truth. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so we might address it either in a full length article or in a "Reader Questions" issue. Other comments are also warmly welcomed, and letters to the editor will be published.

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