

CHAPTER II

DIFFICULTIES OF THE BIBLE

We have considered ten satisfactory proofs that the Bible is of divine origin and authority. Any one of these taken alone is sufficient to establish the point, but taken together they constitute an argument that must be of overwhelming force to any one unless he is determined that he will not believe.

But when we come to the candid and thoughtful study of the Bible itself we are soon confronted by grave difficulties. We find that in the Bible "are some things hard to be understood, which the ignorant and unsteady wrest unto their own destruction." (II. Pet. iii. 16, R. V.) We find other things which it is very hard to believe—indeed, some things which at first it appears impossible to believe. We find some things which it seems impossible to reconcile with other things in the Bible. We find some things that seem

incompatible with the thought that the whole Bible is of divine origin and inerrant. We have no desire to conceal the fact that these difficulties exist. We rather desire to frankly face and consider them. What shall we say concerning these difficulties that every thoughtful student will sooner or later encounter?

I.—GENERAL SUGGESTIONS

I. *The first thing we have to say about these difficulties in the Bible is, that from the very nature of the case difficulties are to be expected.* Some people are surprised and staggered because there are difficulties in the Bible. I would be more surprised and more staggered if there were not. What is the Bible? We have seen that it is a revelation of the mind and will and character and being of the infinitely great, perfectly wise, and absolutely holy God. But to whom is this revelation made? To men, to finite beings. To men who are imperfect in intellectual development and consequently in knowledge, and in character, and consequently in spiritual discernment. There must, from the very necessities of the case be difficulties in such a

revelation made to such persons. When the finite tries to understand the infinite there is bound to be difficulty. When the ignorant contemplate the utterances of one perfect in knowledge there must be many things hard to be understood and some things which to their immature and inaccurate minds appear absurd. When sinful beings listen to the demands of an absolutely holy being they are bound to be staggered at some of His demands, and when they consider His dealings they are bound to be staggered at some of His dealings. These dealings will appear too severe, stern, harsh, terrific. It is plain that there must be difficulties for us in such a revelation as the Bible is proven to be. If some one should hand me a book that was as simple as the multiplication table, and say, This is the Word of God, in which He has revealed His whole will and wisdom, I would shake my head and say, "I can't believe it. That is too easy to be a perfect revelation of infinite wisdom." There must be in any complete revelation of God's mind and will and character and being, things hard for a beginner to understand, and the wisest and best of us are but beginners.

2. *The second thing to be said about these difficulties is, that a difficulty in a doctrine, or a grave objection to a doctrine, does not in any wise prove the doctrine to be untrue.* Many thoughtless people fancy that it does. If they come across some difficulty in the way of believing in the divine origin and absolute inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible they at once conclude that the doctrine is exploded. That is very illogical. Stop a moment and think and learn to be reasonable and fair. There is scarcely a doctrine in science commonly believed to-day that has not had some great difficulty in the way of its acceptance. When the Copernican theory, now so universally accepted, was first proclaimed, it encountered a very grave difficulty. If this theory were true the planet Venus should have phases as the moon has. But no phases could be discovered by the best glass then in existence. But the positive argument for the theory was so strong that it was accepted in spite of this apparently unanswerable objection. When a more powerful glass was made, it was discovered that Venus had phases after all. The whole difficulty arose, as all those in the Bible

arise, from man's ignorance of some of the facts in the case. The nebular hypothesis is commonly accepted in the scientific world to-day, but when this theory was first announced, and long afterward, the movements of the planet Uranus could not be reconciled with the theory. Uranus seemed to move in just the opposite direction from what it was thought it ought to move according to the demands of the theory. But the positive arguments for the theory was so strong that it was accepted, in spite of the inexplicable movements of Uranus. So we see that according to the common-sense logic recognized in every department of science (with the exception of Biblical criticism, if that be a science), if the positive proof of a theory is conclusive it is believed by rational men, in spite of any number of difficulties in minor details. He is a shallow thinker who gives up a well-attested truth because of some facts which he cannot reconcile with that truth. And he is a very shallow Bible scholar who gives up the divine origin and inerrancy of the Bible because there are some supposed facts that he cannot reconcile with that doctrine. Unfortunately we have

many shallow thinkers of that kind, even in our pulpits.

3. *The third thing to be said about the difficulties in the Bible is that there are many more and much greater difficulties in the way of a doctrine that holds the Bible to be of human origin, and hence fallible, than are in the way of the doctrine that holds the Bible to be of divine origin, and hence infallible.* A man will bring you some difficulty, and say, "How do you explain that, if the Bible is the word of God?" and perhaps you may not be able to answer him satisfactorily. Then he thinks he has you. But not at all. Turn on him and ask him, "How do you account for the fulfilled prophecies of the Bible if it is of human origin? How do you account for the marvelous unity of the book? How do you account for its inexhaustible depth? How do you account for its unique power in lifting men up to God?" etc., etc., etc. For every insignificant objection he can bring to your view, you can bring many deeply significant objections to his view, and no candid man will have any difficulty in deciding between the two

views. Not long since a bright young man, who was unusually well read in skeptical, critical, and agnostic literature, told me that he had given the matter a great deal of candid and careful thought, and he could not believe the Bible was of divine origin. I asked him why not. He pointed to a teaching of the Bible that he could not and would not believe true. I replied, "Supposing, for the moment, that I could not answer your specific difficulty, that would not prove the Bible was not of divine origin. I can bring you many things far more difficult to account for if the Bible is not of divine origin than there is to account for if the Bible is of divine origin. You cannot deny the fact of fulfilled prophecy. How do you account for it, if the Bible is not God's word? You cannot shut your eyes to the marvelous unity that pervades the sixty-six books of the Bible, written under such divergent circumstances and at periods of time so remote from one another. How do you account for it if God is not the real author back of the human authors? You cannot deny that the Bible has a power to save men from sin, to bring men peace and hope and

joy, to lift men up to God, that all other books, taken together, do not possess. How do you account for it if the Bible is not the word of God in a sense that other books are not the word of God?" The objector had no answer. The difficulties that confront one who denies that the Bible is of divine origin and authority are far more numerous and weighty than those that confront one who believes it is of divine origin and authority.

4. *The fourth thing to be said about the difficulties in the Bible is, the fact that you cannot solve a difficulty does not prove that it cannot be solved, and the fact that you cannot answer an objection does not prove at all that it cannot be answered.* It is passing strange how often we overlook this very evident fact. There are many who, when they meet a difficulty in the Bible and give it a little thought and can see no possible solution, at once jump at the conclusion that a solution is impossible by any one, and so throw up their faith in the inerrancy of the Bible and in its divine origin. A little more of that modesty that is becoming

in beings so limited in knowledge as we all are would have led them to say, "Though I see no possible solution to this difficulty, some one a little wiser than I might easily find one." Oh! if we would only bear in mind that we do not know everything, and that there are a great many things that we cannot solve now that we could easily solve if we only knew a little more. Above all, we ought never to forget that there may be a very easy solution to infinite wisdom of that which to our finite wisdom—or ignorance—appears absolutely insoluble. What would we think of a beginner in algebra who, having tried in vain for half an hour to solve a difficult problem, declared that there was no possible solution to the problem because he could find none? Not long ago a man of much experience and ability left his work and came a long distance to see me in great perturbation of spirit because he had discovered what seemed to him a flat contradiction in the Bible. It had defied all his attempts at reconciliation. But in a few moments he was shown a very simple and satisfactory solution of the difficulty.

5. *The fifth thing to be said about the difficulties in the Bible is that the seeming defects in the book are exceedingly insignificant when put in comparison with its many and marvelous excellencies.* It certainly reveals great perversity of both mind and heart that men spend so much time expatiating on the insignificant points that they consider defects in the Bible, and pass by absolutely unnoticed the incomparable beauties and wonders that adorn and glorify almost every page. What would we think of any man who, in studying some great masterpiece of art, concentrated his entire attention upon what looked to him like a fly-speck in the corner. A large proportion of the much vaunted "critical study of the Bible" is a laborious and scholarly investigation of supposed fly-specks. The man who is not willing to squander the major portion of his time in this investigation of fly-specks, but prefers to devote it to a study of the unrivaled beauties and majestic splendors of the book, is not counted "scholarly" and up-to-date

6. *The sixth thing to be said about the difficulties in the Bible is that the difficulties in the*

Bible have far more weight with superficial readers of it than with profound students. Take a man like Colonel Ingersoll, who was totally ignorant of the real contents and meaning of the Bible, or that class of modern preachers who read the Bible for the most part for the sole purpose of finding texts to serve as pegs to hang their own ideas upon, to such superficial readers of the Bible its difficulties seem of immense importance; but to the one who has learned to meditate on the word of God day and night they have scarce any weight at all. George Müller, who had carefully studied the Bible from beginning to end more than one hundred times, was not disturbed by any difficulties he encountered. But to the one who is reading it through for the first or second time there are many things that perplex and stagger.

7. *The seventh thing to be said about the difficulties in the Bible is that they rapidly disappear upon careful and prayerful study.* How many things there are in the Bible that once puzzled us and staggered us that have been perfectly cleared up, and no longer pre-

sent any difficulty at all! Is it not reasonable to suppose that the difficulties that still remain will also disappear upon further study?

II.—CLASSES OF DIFFICULTIES

The various difficulties can be included under ten general classes.

1. *The first class of difficulties are those that arise from errors in the text from which our English Bible was translated.* We do not possess the original manuscripts of the Bible. These original manuscripts were copied many times with great care and exactness, but naturally some errors crept into the copies that were made. We now possess so many good copies that by comparing one with another we can tell with great precision just what the original text was. Indeed, for all practical purposes the original text is now settled. There is not one important doctrine that hangs upon any doubtful reading of the text. But when the authorized version was made, some of the best manuscripts were not in reach of the translators, and the science of textual criticism was not so well understood as it is to-

day, and so the translation was made from an imperfect text. Many of the difficulties in the Bible arise from this source. For example, we are told in John v. 4, that "An angel went down at a certain season and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in, was made whole of whatsoever disease he had." This statement, for many reasons, seems exceedingly improbable and difficult of belief. But upon investigation, we find that it is all a mistake of a copyist. Some early copyist, reading John's account, added in the margin his explanation of the healing properties of this intermittent medicinal spring. A later copyist embodied this marginal comment in the body of the text, and so it came to be handed down and got into our Bibles. Very properly, it has been omitted from the Revised Version.

The discrepancies in figures in different accounts of the same events—as, *e. g.*, the differences in the ages of certain kings as given in the Books of Kings and Chronicles—doubtless arise from the same cause, errors of copyists.

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2. *The second class of difficulties are those that arise from incorrect translations.* For example, in Matthew xii. 40, Jonah is spoken of as being "in the *whale's* belly." Many a skeptic has made merry over the thought of a whale with the peculiar construction of its mouth and throat swallowing a man. But if the skeptic had only taken the trouble to look the matter up he would have found that the word translated "whale" really means "sea-monster." Probably in this case it was a dog-shark. So the whole difficulty arose from the translator's mistake and the skeptic's ignorance. There are many skeptics who are so densely ignorant of matters now understood by many Sunday-school children that they are still harping in the name of "scholarship" on this supposed error in the Bible.

3. *The third class of difficulties are those that arise from false interpretations of the Bible.* What the Bible says is one thing, what men interpret it to mean is often something widely different. Many difficulties that we have with the Bible arise not from what the Bible actually says, but from what men

interpret it to mean. Take, for example, the first chapter of Genesis. This entire chapter has often been taken as giving a detailed account of the successive steps of creation, and each of the days has been interpreted as meaning a period of twenty-four hours. Hence the first chapter of Genesis is said to contradict the established conclusions of modern science. But any one who has studied his Bible with thoroughness and care knows that the word "day" is frequently used in the Bible for extended periods. In fact, as long ago as the time of St. Augustine, centuries before the discoveries of modern science were dreamed of, the "days" of Genesis i. were interpreted on exegetical grounds to mean long periods of time. But further than this, there are very grave exegetical reasons for doubting whether anything after verse 1 is a description of creation at all. An interpretation of Genesis i. that has very much in the Bible in its favor would make verse 2 read "and the earth became waste and desolate." This form of expression, "waste and desolate," is used elsewhere in Scripture to describe judgments for sin. (See, *e. g.*, Jer. iv. 23, R. V.; same

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Hebrew as in Gen. i. 2.) Genesis i. 2 is therefore taken to hint at a judgment of God upon the earth for the sin of some one, perhaps of a pre-Adamite race, and the remainder of the chapter to verse 25 would then describe not the original creation of the earth, but its rehabilitation, to be the abode of the Adamic race that God was about to create.* If we accept this interpretation, no discoveries of ancient forms of life in the strata of the rock that ever have been made, or ever can be made, can conflict with Genesis i., for the geologic periods lie back of it. But it is sufficient for our present purpose to show that all the assaults that have been made on Genesis i. from the standpoint of physical science are assaults not upon what the Bible says, but upon man's interpretation of what it means. Another difficulty of the same character is that with Jesus' statement that He should be "three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." It is said that He died Friday afternoon, and rose early Sunday morning, and the time between is far from three days

* This view is worked out with great force in Pember's "Earth's Earliest Ages." (Revell, \$1.50.)

and three nights. But it is wholly a matter of interpretation that He died *Friday* afternoon. A careful reading and comparison of the accounts has led many to believe that it was on "the preparation of the Passover" yearly Sabbath (John xix. 14), and not the preparation of the weekly Sabbath (Friday) when Jesus was crucified—*i. e.*, He was crucified Wednesday. Then followed the Passover (Thursday), then the preparation of the weekly Sabbath (Friday), then the weekly Sabbath (Saturday); then Jesus rose, having been in the grave just seventy-two hours, exactly three days and three nights. So the difficulty is wholly with an interpretation, and not with what the Bible says.

4. *The fourth class of difficulties are those that arise from a wrong conception of the Bible.* Many treat the Bible as if the fact of its divine origin and authority made God the speaker in every utterance it contains. But oftentimes God simply records what others said, good men and bad men, inspired men and uninspired men, angels, demons, and the devil himself. The record is from God, and

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absolutely true, but persons are often truly reported to have said what is not true. In other words, it is true that men and the devil said these things, but what they said was not true. For example, the devil is recorded as saying to Eve, "Ye shall not surely die." It is true that the devil said it—that the devil said it is God's word—but what the devil said is not true, but an infamous lie that shipwrecked our race—what the devil said is the devil's word. Now, very many careless readers of the Bible do not notice who is talking—God, good men, bad men, inspired men or uninspired men, angels or devil—but tear a verse right out of its context, regardless of the speaker, and say, "There God said that," when perhaps God Himself in the context says a bad man or the devil said it. It is very common to hear men quote what Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar said to Job as if it were God's word, in spite of the fact that God expressly disavows their teaching, and says to them, "Ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right" (Job xlii. 7). It is true that these men said the things God records them as saying, but oftentimes they gave the truth a

twist and said what is not right. Many of our difficulties arise from not noticing who is speaking. The Bible always tells us, and we should always note. In the Psalms we have sometimes what God said to men, and that is always true, but on the other hand, we often have what man said to God, and that may or may not be true. Sometimes, far oftener than most of us see, it is the voice of prophecy; sometimes, it is the voice of vengeance or despair. This vengeance may be and often is prophetic, but it may be the wronged man committing his cause to Him to whom vengeance belongeth (Rom. xii. 19), and we are not obliged to defend all that is said. In the Psalms we have even a record of what the fool said—viz., “There is no God.” (Ps. xiv. 1.) Now it is true that the fool said it, but the fool lied when he said it. So in studying our Bible, if God is the speaker, we must believe it. If an inspired man, we must believe. If it is an uninspired man, it is perhaps true, perhaps not. If it is the devil who is speaking, we do well to remember that he was a liar from the beginning.

5. *A fifth class of difficulties are those that arise from the language in which the Bible was written.* The Bible is a book for all ages and for all kinds of people, and therefore it was written in the language that continues the same and is understood by all, the language of the common people and of appearances. It is not written in the terminology of science. Thus, for example, what occurred at the battle of Gibeon (Josh. x. 12-14) is described in the way that it *appeared* to all those who saw it, and the way in which it would be understood by all those who read about it. There is no talk about the refraction of the sun's rays, etc., but the sun is said to have "*stood still* in the midst of heaven." It is one of the perfections of the Bible that it was not written in the terminology of modern science. If it had been, it would never have been understood until the present day, and even now only by a few. Furthermore, as science and its terminology are constantly changing, the Bible, if written in the terminology of the science of to-day, would be out of date in a few years, but being written in just the language chosen, it has proved the book of all ages, all

lands, and all conditions of men. Other difficulties from the language in which the Bible is written arise from the fact that large portions of the Bible are poetical, and are written in the language of poetry, the language of feeling, passion, imagination, and figure. Now, if a man is hopelessly prosaic, he will find difficulties with these portions of the inspired word. For example, in Psalms xviii., we have a marvelous description of a thunder-storm. But let a prosaic fellow get hold of that (*e. g.*, vs. 8), and he will be head over heels in difficulty at once. But the trouble is not with the Bible, but with his own stupid prosaicness.

6. *The sixth class of difficulties are those that arise from our defective knowledge of the history, geography, and usages of Bible times.* For example, in Acts xiii. 7, Luke speaks of "the deputy," or more accurately, "the proconsul" (see R. V.) of Cyprus. Roman provinces were of two classes, imperial and senatorial. The ruler of an imperial province was called a "proprætor," of a senatorial province a "proconsul." Up to quite a recent

date, according to the best information we had, Cyprus was an imperial province, and therefore its ruler would be a "proprætor"; but Luke called him a "proconsul." This certainly seemed like a clear case of error on Luke's part, and even conservative commentators felt forced to admit that Luke was in slight error, and the destructive critics were delighted to find this "mistake." But further and more thorough investigation has brought to light the fact that just at the time of which Luke wrote, the senate had made an exchange with the emperor, whereby Cyprus had become a senatorial province, and therefore its ruler a proconsul; and Luke was right after all, and the literary critics were themselves in error. Time and time again further researches and discoveries, geographical, historical, and archæological, have vindicated the Bible and put to shame its critics. For example, the Book of Daniel has naturally been one of the books that infidels and higher critics have most hated. One of their strongest arguments against its authenticity and veracity was that such a person as Belshazzar was unknown to history, and that all historians agreed that

Nabonidus was the last king of Babylon, and that he was absent from the city when it was captured; and so Belshazzar must be a purely mythical character. Their argument seemed very strong; in fact, unanswerable. But Sir H. Rawlinson discovered at Mugheir and other Chaldean sites clay cylinders, on which Belshazzar (Belsaruzur) is named by Nabonidus as his eldest son. Doubtless he reigned as regent in the city during his father's absence, an indication of which we have in his proposal to make Daniel third ruler in the kingdom (Dan.v. 16), he himself being second. So the Bible was vindicated, and the critics put to shame. It is not long since the higher critics asserted most positively that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch, because writing was unknown in his day. But recent discoveries have proven beyond a question that writing far antedates the time of Moses. So the higher critics have had to give up their argument thought they have had the bad grace to hold on stubbornly to their conclusion.

7. The seventh class of difficulties are those that arise from our ignorance of the conditions

under which books were written and commands given. For example, God's commands to Israel as to the extermination of the Canaanites, to one ignorant of the conditions, seem cruel and horrible. But when one understands the moral condition to which those nations had sunken, and the utter hopelessness of reclaiming them, and the weakness of the Israelites themselves, their extermination is seen to be an act of mercy to all succeeding generations and to themselves.

8. *The eighth class of difficulties are those that arise from the many-sidedness of the Bible.* The broadest-minded man is one-sided, but the truth is many-sided, and the Bible is all-sided.

So to our narrow thought one part of the Bible seems to contradict another. Men, as a rule, are either Calvinistic or Arminian, but some portions of the Bible are decidedly Calvinistic, and present great difficulties to the Arminian type of mind, and other portions of the Bible are Arminian, and present difficulties to the Calvinistic type of mind. So, too, Paul seems to contradict James, and James Paul, and what Paul says in one place seems

to contradict what he says in another place. But the whole trouble is that our narrow minds cannot take in God's large truth.

9. *The ninth class of difficulties are those that arise from the fact that the Bible has to do with the infinite, and our minds are finite.* It is necessarily difficult to put the facts of infinite being into the limited capacity of our finite intelligence, just as it is difficult to put the ocean into a pint-cup. To this class of difficulties belong those connected with the Bible doctrine of the Trinity, and the divine-human nature of Christ. To those who forget that God is infinite the doctrine of the Trinity seems like the mathematical monstrosity of making one equal three. But when one bears in mind that the doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to put into forms of finite thought the facts of infinite being, and into material forms of expression the facts of the Spirit, the difficulties vanish. The simplicity of the Unitarian conception of God arises from its shallowness.

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10. *The tenth class of difficulties are those that arise from the dullness of our spiritual perceptions.* The man who is farthest advanced spiritually is still so immature that he cannot expect to see everything yet as an absolutely holy God sees it, unless he takes it upon simple faith in Him. To this class of difficulties belong those connected with the Bible doctrine of eternal punishment. It oftentimes seems to us as if this doctrine cannot be true, must not be true. But the difficulty arises from the fact that we are still so blind spiritually that we have no adequate conception of the awfulness of sin, and especially of the awfulness of the sin of rejecting the infinitely glorious Son of God. But when we have become so holy, so like God, that we see the enormity of sin as He sees it, we shall have no difficulty with the doctrine of eternal punishment.

As we look over the ten classes of difficulties we see that they all arise from our imperfection, and not from the imperfection of the Bible. The Bible is perfect, but we being imperfect, have difficulty with it. But as we grow more and more into the perfection of

God, our difficulties grow less and less, and so we naturally conclude that when we become as perfect as God is, we shall have no difficulties with the Bible whatever.

III.—HOW TO DEAL WITH THE DIFFICULTIES OF THE BIBLE

How shall we deal with the difficulties of the Bible?

1. First of all, *honestly*. Whenever you find a difficulty in the Bible frankly acknowledge it. If you cannot give a good, square, honest explanation, do not attempt any as yet.

2. Second, *humbly*. Recognize the limitations of your own mind and knowledge, and do not imagine that there is no solution just because you have found none. There is, in all probability, a very simple solution, even when you can find no solution at all.

3. Third, *determinedly*. Make up your mind that you will find the solution if you can by any amount of study and hard thinking. The difficulties in the Bible are our Heavenly Father's challenge to us to set our brains to work.

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4. Fourth, *fearlessly*. Do not be frightened when you find a difficulty, no matter how unanswerable and insurmountable it appears upon first acquaintance. Thousands of men have found such before you. They were seen hundreds of years ago, and still the old book stands. The Bible that has stood eighteen centuries of rigid examination and incessant and awful assault is not going under before your discoveries or before the discharges of modern critical popguns. These destructive critics always remind one of a man firing at a modern man-of-war with a bean-shooter, and wondering why it doesn't sink.

5. Fifth, *patiently*. Do not be discouraged because you do not solve every problem in a day. If some difficulty defies your best effort, lay it aside for a while. Very likely when you come back to it, it will have disappeared, and you will wonder how you were ever perplexed by it.

6. Sixth, *Scripturally*. If you find a difficulty in one part of the Bible, look for other Scripture to throw light upon it and dissolve it. Nothing explains Scripture like Scripture.

7. Seventh, *prayerfully*. It is simply

wonderful how difficulties dissolve when one looks at them on his knees. One great reason why many modern Bible scholars have learned to be destructive critics is because they have forgotten how to pray.