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Reference Librarianship and the Bible: Are Researchers Following God's Methods to Understand God's Book?

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Reference Librarianship and the Bible:

Are Researchers Following God's Methods to Understand God's Book?

Imagine a Christian student approaching the library's reference desk at a Christian institution. The student is in search of resources that will expound a Bible passage or a book of the Bible, help write an exegetical paper, and so forth. In this scenario, though it may not be stated explicitly, the student is fundamentally asking what God means in his word, the Bible. Therefore, reference librarians at Christian institutions are confronted with the following question: *What resources will best teach students the Bible's meaning?*

An Answer

The ACRL clearly desires librarians to consult the most authoritative sources when answering questions¹, including questions about the Bible. Most if not all library schools and librarian associations endorse the same standard. This is an intellectually responsible position to take, and one that few librarians (if any) could protest.

However, what if sources *assumed* to be authoritative by a majority of librarians actually contradicted the *truly* authoritative source(s)? More specific to the hypothetical situation stated above, what if it could be demonstrated that resources widely promoted and used as authorities in Bible reference transactions taught faulty information?

Authorities and Authors

In considering such questions, it is necessary to ascertain who/what is the best authority to understand any written work. Surely, scholars in the field have a stake in the matter, but there is a greater authority than even these: the author himself. If a person intends to understand what an author is saying, the author's own words on

1 In their "Guidelines for University Library Services to Undergraduate Students," for instance, the ACRL Undergraduate Librarians Discussion Group writes "The [undergraduate] library should provide varied, authoritative, and up-to-date resources," ("Guidelines for university library services to undergraduate students," 2005, emphasis added).

his text must trump all other opinions. Even more, if the author denounces certain scholars as dubious in understanding him, then those scholars should not be considered trusted authorities on his work.

Following this line of reasoning, and assuming the Bible's words to be the very words of God (as Jesus claims², the Bible claims for itself³, and the church throughout history has proclaimed⁴), it must be concluded that the greatest biblical authority is God, its Author. Therefore, God should be seen as the preeminent commentator on his own book and should be consulted first in understanding it. This means everything written in the Scriptures – God's words – should take primary authority and precedence in helping explain and understand other portions of the Bible. In other words, the Bible is the best interpreter of the Bible⁵. This does not mean scholars and teachers have no place, but it does mean that where they contradict the Bible they contradict God, and should not be trusted. Furthermore, it would be imprudent to seek biblical enlightenment from any source

2 See Matthew 19:5 where Jesus attributes a narrative statement from Genesis 2:24 to God as the speaker, and John 10:34-35 where Jesus calls the Old Testament the "word of God" that "cannot be broken" (ESV translation), for instance.

3 See 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:19-21, for instance.

4 See John Woodbridge's, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal*, 1982, for a survey on church history regarding this topic. In addition, consider ACL's own "Statement of Faith," wherein the Bible is said to be the "only infallible, authoritative Word of God" (Association of Christian Librarians, n.d.).

5 In Matthew 4:3-10, Jesus demonstrates this principle when Satan opposes him, and even twists Scriptures, by responding that, "It is written ..." (Matthew 4:4, ESV; see also Matthew 4:7 and 4:10) is sufficient authority to claim a matter as true and to correct false interpretations. Following these types of Scriptural examples, Christians have historically assumed this same position. For example, the famous Westminster Confession of Faith states, "The infallible rule of interpretation of scripture is the scripture itself ... when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture ... it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly," (*The Westminster confession of faith: With introduction and notes*, 1958, p. 40).

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ABSTRACT

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), Association of Christian Librarians (ACL), and other librarian associations strongly encourage the need to consult expert resources in reference transactions, and consistently rank scholarly publications as the most authoritative.

This article applies and examines these reference principles in the context of biblical studies' librarianship practices, and in light of the Bible's own teachings. It concludes by encouraging Christian librarians to investigate the contents of recommended Bible resources, and challenges them to assess librarianship methodology using Scripture as a starting point.

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that the Bible itself categorizes as spurious (consider 1 Timothy 6:20–21, for instance).

Selecting Biblical References for Review

Keeping these things in mind, when one consults the “Bible Dictionaries” section of various esteemed library reference guides they will find that *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, (*New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*), and *Anchor Bible Dictionary* are almost unanimously considered by librarians and scholars to be authoritative material in understanding Biblical words and topics (for instance, see the recommended Bible dictionaries listed in Best Books, Inc’s, *The Best Books for Academic Libraries: Religion & Philosophy* [2002], Blazek and Aversa’s, *The Humanities: A Selective Guide to Information Sources* [2000], Ellwood’s, *The Reader’s Adviser: The Best in Philosophy and Religion* [1994], and Walsh and Day’s, *Walford’s Guide to Reference Material* [1999]). Though there are clearly other scholarly materials recommended and used in biblical studies, the scope of this paper does not require an exhaustive study of all material to adequately make its arguments, and thus will only treat Bible dictionaries in general, and these three dictionaries in particular.

Some of the reasons for selecting these three sources for review included: (1) their recommendations in various library reference guides⁶, (2) their frequent use at the author’s institution of employment⁷, and (3) their consistent referral and affirmation by Bible scholars⁸. They were also chosen on the

⁶ As seen in the preceding paragraph.

⁷ This was found by comparing in-house use statistics of these dictionaries with other Bible dictionaries stored in the reference section of the author’s place of employment.

⁸ For example, David R. Bauer’s *Annotated Guide to Biblical Resources for Ministry* (a book praised on the back cover by Patrick Miller of Princeton Theological Seminary, Jack Kingsbury of Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, and Mark Powell of Trinity Lutheran Seminary) endorses all three of these references for Biblical studies, and specifically says that *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* is “probably the most ... authoritative single-volume Bible dictionary,” and *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* is “Almost universally considered the standard multivolume Bible dictionary in English.” (Bauer, 2003, pp. 26–27). Similarly, John Evan’s *A Guide to Biblical*

assumption that many libraries subscribing to this publication will have ready access to these resources and have probably seen them used by eager students looking up various biblical terms and concepts. In fact, many librarians, Bible students, and Bible professors have unhesitatingly consulted and recommended these sources when trying to understand or explain Biblical words and concepts.

Questions Asked of Selected Sources

After selecting these resources, the author chose to compare two points of doctrine explicitly stated in the Bible with the three dictionaries. Though far more than two differences exist between these sources and the teachings of the Scriptures, only two comparisons were made under the conviction that God has repeatedly stated that the agreed testimony of two true witnesses is sufficient in establishing and confirming a matter (see Deuteronomy 17:6; Matthew 18:16). Additionally, the discrepancies described below should be enough to cause an initial alarm, and future studies may make further comparisons as necessary.

The two questions asked of all sources were:

1. Was Jesus’ resurrection physical?
2. Was Daniel a real person?

The Doctrine of Resurrection Compared

The Bible unapologetically and forcefully teaches that Jesus’ resurrection was a bodily resurrection, and that the Christian’s faith rests on the testimony of this resurrection.

All four gospel writers show Jesus prophesying that He would rise after three days of death (Matthew 27:63; Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34; Luke 18:31–33; John 2:19–21; etc.). They all testify that He actually died, was buried, and rose on the third day, as He foretold (Matthew

Commentaries & Reference Works: for students and pastors (a resource praised by Bible professors from Wheaton College, Reformed Theological Seminary, and Fuller Theological Seminary) lists *Anchor Bible Dictionary* and *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* first as recommended dictionaries of Biblical Interpretation (Evans, 2010, p. 21).

27:50,59-60; 28:6; Mark 15:45-46; 16:6; Luke 23:46,53; 24:6; John 19:30,39-42; 20:18). They even portray the resurrected Jesus as talking (Matthew 28:9-10,18-20; Luke 24:17,19; etc.), being touched (Matt. 28:9; Luke 24:39), walking (Luke 24:15), breaking bread (Luke 24:30), eating (Luke 24:42-43; Acts 10:41), drinking (Acts 10:41), preparing breakfast (John 21:12-13), and more.

The message of His resurrection is proclaimed throughout the book of Acts (2:31; 10:41; 13:37), and consistently argued in other New Testament writings (see Romans 1:4; 10:9; 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 1 Thessalonians 4:14, for instance). In fact, this doctrine is so important that Paul states: "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain ... you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:14-17, ESV). Undoubtedly, these are among the reasons ACL itself affirms in their "Statement of Faith," that, "We believe ... in His bodily resurrection," (Association of Christian Librarians, n.d.).

In contrast, all three of these Bible dictionaries state that the resurrection descriptions in the gospels were traditions formed over time from varied motivations, but cannot be trusted as accurate retellings of true events. Thus, they cast strong doubt that Jesus actually physically resurrected.

The article on "Resurrection" found in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* was written by Reginald H. Fuller. In his book on the same subject, Fuller repeatedly states that Jesus' bodily resurrection "is not an event within history," (Fuller, 1980, p. 23). He maintains the same conviction in the *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* article, writing that Paul did not believe in a physical, historical resurrection, but only believed Jesus arose spiritually and will rise again at the end of time. Furthermore, Fuller writes that the gospel accounts of Jesus' historical bodily resurrection and ascension are false⁹ stories developed later (Fuller, 1996).

⁹ Though the word "false" does not actually appear, it is clearly indicated in the article and flatly expressed in the same author's book on the subject, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, 1980.

The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible makes similar, though less explicit, points than *HarperCollins*. Written by a Jewish scholar who doubts the authenticity of the gospels (for instance, he writes elsewhere that "virtually all the sayings of Jesus" in John's gospel are "not the actual words of Jesus" [Segal, 2004]), this article depicts the gospel descriptions of Jesus' resurrection as a contrast to Paul's resurrection teachings, just as *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* did. In the article, the gospel accounts are considered reflections of early Christian beliefs and practices inserted into Christ's alleged resurrection stories rather than actual retellings of historic events. An example of this is seen when the author states that the resurrected Jesus' commissioning statement in Matthew 28:19-20 is "clearly a later addition from the liturgical life of the community." (Segal, 2006).

The Anchor Bible Dictionary is perhaps the most explicit in doubting Jesus' resurrection by questioning why the early church ever claimed Jesus was resurrected (thereby inferring that it did not actually happen). It goes on to say that faith in Jesus' resurrection "involves a host of unresolved historical problems," and that the resurrection accounts are contradictory (Nickelsburg, 1992).

Beliefs on Daniel Compared

Though the issue of Daniel's historicity may be less consequential than the issue of Jesus' physical resurrection, if it can be demonstrated that the Bible plainly and categorically teaches one thing and that leading Bible dictionaries plainly and categorically deny the very thing the Bible teaches, it would call into question the authority of the rest of Scriptures on other issues they explain – including salvific and related matters. Therefore, the implications of Daniel's historicity are indirectly related to weightier matters of God's Word.

The Bible teaches in unmistakable language that Daniel was a real person who wrote the book bearing his name. The book itself was written in the same way as other biblical books of history, giving specific and detailed accounts of the life and ministry of this historical figure,

and introducing him as, “Daniel . . . of the tribe of Judah,” (Daniel 1:6, ESV). Multiple passages in the book of Daniel are written in the first person (see Dan. 7:2,28; 8:2; 9:2; 10:2; 12:5, for instance). Furthermore, Jesus says, “When you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel,” (Matthew 24:15, ESV), referring to Daniel 9:27, 11:31, and/or 12:11, thereby showing that He believed Daniel to be a real person as well as the writer of the book bearing his name. Likewise, Ezekiel writes about Daniel¹⁰ (Ezekiel 14:14,20; 28:3), and other Bible passages discuss the events of Daniel as actual history (see Hebrews 11:33-34, for instance).

In contrast, all three of the Bible dictionaries referenced unequivocally state that Daniel was not a real person, and the book bearing his name was written by other authors hundreds of years after the writer claims to have written it. *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* says the Daniel of the Bible is a “fictional hero,” (Collins, 1996), *The New Interpreter Dictionary* states, “Daniel is a composite, fictional character,” (Towner, 2006), and *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* writes, “Daniel is not a historical person but a figure of legend.” (Collins, 1992).

Application For Librarians

As stated earlier, many more comparisons could be made to further elucidate the chasm of differences between the actual teachings of the Bible and those that these popular Bible dictionaries espouse. With these two comparisons in mind, however, it should be seen that plain and fundamental teachings of Jesus and the Bible (including His very resurrection, the lynchpin of Christianity¹¹) are flatly dismissed by the surveyed Bible references. Therefore, two vital questions must be asked: (1) Is it responsible reference librarianship to lead students to teachings that question and deny Jesus’ words as well as His

¹⁰ See Oswald Allis’s, *The Old Testament: Its Claims and Its Critics*, 1972 (pp. 369-370) and Gleason Archer’s “Daniel” commentary within Frank Gaebelin’s (Gen. Ed.), *Expositor’s Bible Commentary Series*, 1985 (pp. 5-6) for confirmation that Ezekiel was referring to the Daniel of the Bible.

¹¹ See Romans 4:25 and 1 Corinthians 15:17, for instance.

resurrection? (2) What does God’s Word say regarding our attitude toward such teachings and those promoting them?

On one hand, these resources are highly recommended by many as quality scholarship in the field of Biblical studies. On the other hand, God states in the Bible:

- The world’s wisdom will not teach people about God (1 Corinthians 1:21)
- Human wisdom did not equip ministers in the early church for God’s ministry (1 Corinthians 2:13)
- People who teach contrary to the Scriptures are wrong and their teachings should be avoided, no matter how “knowledgeable” they seem (Romans 16:17; 1 Timothy 6:20-21; 2 Timothy 3:8; 2 John 1:10-11)
- Avoid people who foster continual “learning” that is never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth (2 Timothy 3:5-7).

As stated earlier, if God is the Author of the Bible, His authoritative words in the entirety of Scripture should be treated first in understanding His text (consider Psalm 119:160, for instance). Furthermore, His recommended methods of learning His Scriptures are *the* methods that must be used. Thus, in light of passages such as those stated above, it seems clear that administering these Bible dictionaries without strong caution or warning is disobedient to God’s words, and therefore unwise.

Alternative Answers

Of course, after making such strong statements, an inevitable and fair follow-up question will be asked: *What can be recommended instead?*

In brief, if someone wants to understand a Biblical word or concept, they can begin by consulting basic concordances such as *Strong’s*, *NIV Concordance*, the popular online Bible study tool, www.blueletterbible.org, or any variety of appropriate word study tools to find other places within Scripture where God has already provided more information on these words or concepts. One could additionally consult any number of topical bibles, such as

Nave's, Zondervan's, or Baker's, and others (see www.studylight.org/con, for instance) to survey the Scriptures' teaching on a subject.

Where situations may demand actual Bible dictionaries to give a satisfactory answer, the following erudite resources seem to respect the teachings and authority of the Scriptures far more than those surveyed above¹²:

- Merrill Tenney and Moises Silva's, *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible* (2009)
- Trent C. Butler's (Ed.), *Holman Bible Dictionary* (1991)
- Merrill Unger (Author) and R. K. Harrison's (Ed.), *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (1988)
- J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney's (Eds.), *New International Bible Dictionary* (1987)
- Charles Pfeiffer, Howard Vos, and John Rea's (Eds.), *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia* (1975)
- John Davis's, *Davis Dictionary of the Bible*, 4th Ed. (1972)
- Patrick Fairbairn's, *Fairbairn's Imperial Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (1957)
- A. R. Fausset's, *Fausset's Bible Dictionary* (1949)

Another category of helpful Bible dictionaries are those that largely teach the Bible as trustworthy, but do this using scholarship as the basis for their conclusions, and sometimes question the authority of the Scriptures on this same basis¹³. In this author's opinion, the following two dictionaries would fall under this category:

- Ronald F. Youngblood's (Ed.), *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (1995)
- Geoffrey W. Bromiley's (Ed.) fully revised, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (1979)

¹² Of course, this does not mean one should stop comparing these resources (or any Bible resources) with the actual words of the Bible (see Acts 17:11, for instance).

¹³ For instance, these dictionaries would question the authenticity of 2nd Peter because of the lack of consensus in arguments espoused by scholars.

Undoubtedly, such sources do offer real help to the Bible student as long as he/she recognizes that the Bible is authoritative because it is God's Word and will ultimately prove itself to be so, and not because current scholarship says it has value.

Certainly other Bible dictionaries could fall under both of these lists, as well as sound Bible commentaries and additional Biblical study tools that are beyond the scope of this paper. These materials are only meant to provide starting points and alternatives to the Bible dictionaries surveyed in this paper, demonstrating that quality scholars who honor the integrity of the Scriptures readily exist. Though some of these sources may not be as up-to-date as *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, *New Interpreter Dictionary*, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, and similar resources, they are more in line with the authority of the Bible (i.e. God's own words), and therefore should be consulted to teach the Bible over the references surveyed in this paper. As a current Bible reference guide has said, "Advertisers have spent trillions to convince us that 'newer' always means improved, and 'older' always means inferior and obsolete ... Wiser seminarians, however, should not buy into such categorizing, when it comes to theological literature." (Evans, 2010, p. 25). Additionally, these dictionaries (whether old or new) are well researched, well written, and help to preserve souls and nourish faith, which is the greatest call of any life or profession.

To clarify, this is not to suggest that researchers completely ignore or become willfully unaware of leading critical Bible scholarship trends, as that would also be a mistake. Instead, just as a parent cannot afford to be ignorant of poisonous materials in their household and thus fail to warn their children, and just as a shepherd cannot afford to be oblivious of wolves threatening his sheep, Christian librarians cannot afford to be unaware of the issues raised in this paper. In the words of C. S. Lewis, "When you turn from the New Testament to modern scholars, remember that you go among them as a sheep among wolves ... In using the books of such people you must

Avoid people who foster continual "learning" that is never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

therefore be continually on guard. You must develop a nose like a blood-hound” (Lewis, 1947, pp. 197–198). A librarian can allow students to compare and contrast these sources with the teaching of Scripture, while still warning and informing that these references do not agree with or esteem the authority of the Bible and should not be recommended as tools to learn God and His Word. Jesus models this very thing when warning his disciples, “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:56, ESV).

Conclusion

Though these actions may seem extreme to some readers, consider the following questions: *Should a Christian feed poisonous food to hungry children? Does the same principle apply when providing intellectual and spiritual food to intellectually and spiritually hungry children?* The majority of the students being served at ACL schools are still children in many senses of the word (including spiritually), and if they are approaching librarians with these sorts of questions, they are looking to them to provide “healthy” intellectual and spiritual food. Furthermore, Jesus’ warning on this subject must be carefully considered by all who claim to follow Him: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6, ESV). †

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