The Bible: Intentionally Misunderstood

Dissecting the Bible by Focusing on Nits

Recently, New Testament scholar and expert on ancient New Testament documents, Dr. Daniel Wallace, spoke on the work being done to ensure we have the most accurate version of the Greek New Testament. He also mentioned several documents presenting a false view of this level of accuracy. One of these documents, *The Bible: So Misunderstood It's a Sin* by Kurt Eichenwald, appeared in *Newsweek* in December 2014.{1} His article presents arguments intended to undermine the New Testament. Let's evaluate some of these arguments to be better equipped in sharing the truth.

The article contains at least 125 errors and/or half-truths in 14 pages. Of course, I am not the first to respond to this article. Dr. Wallace and Dr. Darrel Bock both wrote responses shortly after the document was published addressing specific areas of interest to them. I commend their posts to you as excellent resources.{2}. I will address some areas that are not addressed or only partially addressed by these seminary professors.

Using Survey Data Without Understanding It

Eichenwald begins his article by parroting the negative stereotypes put forth by those who cannot be bothered with trying to understand the vast majority of evangelicals. Attempting to add some rigor to his rant, he refers to two surveys on religious beliefs. Unfortunately for Eichenwald, rather than adding rigor, his comments showed that he did not take the time to examine the survey results he was spouting.

He first states, "[Evangelicals'] lack of knowledge about the

Bible is well established. A Pew Research poll in 2010{3} found that evangelicals ranked only a smidgen higher than atheists in familiarity with the New Testament and Jesus's teachings."{4} He referred to a table showing the average number of questions out of twelve that each faith group answered correctly. However, only two of the twelve questions had anything to do with the New Testament and none of them related to Jesus's teachings. The remaining questions were divided equally between the Old Testament and on latter day religious figures/beliefs. {5} Two questions are not enough to evaluate someone's knowledge of the New Testament. But, for the record, the questions were "Name the four gospels" and "Where, according to the Bible, was Jesus born?" Fifty three percent of those
professing to be born again answered these correctly versus twenty percent of atheists. Apparently to Eichenwald, a "smidgen higher" must mean almost three times as many. Perhaps, *Newsweek* cannot afford a fact checker?

The second poll he referenced was a 2012 effort by the Barna Group{6}. He said, "[It found] that evangelicals accepted the attitudes and beliefs of the Pharisees . . . more than they accepted the teachings of Jesus." The study actually showed that 63% of evangelicals accepted the attitudes and actions of Jesus at least as much, if not more, than the attitudes and actions the Barna Group associated with the Pharisees.

Accuracy of English Translations Not Effectively Addressed

Eichenwald spends two pages bemoaning the translation problems in the New Testament. But as pointed out by Wallace and Bock, his critique really serves to highlight the excellence of today's translations. The areas he points out as having questionable additions in the text are clearly marked in all of today's popular translations and if removed make no difference in the overall message of the New Testament (i.e. the woman caught in adultery in John and snake handling at the end of Mark).

He goes on to say, “The same is true for other critical portions of the Bible, such as . . .”{7} and then lists three short passages which he claims did not appear in earlier Greek copies. One passage is 1 John 5:7 which was expanded in the original King James Version but (as Eichenwald is apparently unaware of) was removed in modern translations, e.g. NASU, NET, ESV, NIV. Another passage is Luke 22:20 which does appear in almost all modern translations as well as the KJV. As Metzger{8} points out, the longer version with Luke 22:20 appears in “all Greek manuscripts except for D and in most of the ancient versions and Fathers.” So this passage does appear in most earlier Greek copies, contrary to what Eichenwald claims. He finally refers to Luke 24:51 as a passage not found in the earlier Greek versions. Once again, he is wrong. This passage appears in many older manuscripts{9} including the Bodmer Papyrii written in about 200 AD.

When Eichenwald attempts to strengthen his argument, he draws from limited sources that contain questionable data. Even if they were correct, they and all the other areas where ancient manuscripts vary do not change the message of the New Testament in any significant way. As Wallace points out, “The reality is that we are getting closer and closer to the text of the original New Testament as more and more manuscripts are being discovered and catalogued. . . . The New Testament has more manuscripts that are within a century or two of the original than anything else from the Greco-Roman world too. If we must be skeptical about what the original New Testament said, that skepticism, on average, should be multiplied one thousand times for other Greco-Roman literature.”{10}

Supposed Biblical Contradictions

After attacking the accuracy of the New Testaments available to most American Christians, Eichenwald attacks the consistency of the biblical record to undermine our confidence in what we read and the message we take from it. He presents

nine different topics where he sees obvious contradictions in the text. We will examine four of them here, two from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament.

Number One: Creation

First, he claims there are three different creation models in the Bible, one in Genesis chapter 1, one in Genesis chapter 2, and "one referenced in the Books of Isaiah, Psalms and Job"{11} in which "the world is created in the aftermath of a great battle between God and . . . a dragon . . . called Rahab."{12}

Liberal theologians claim that chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis describe different accounts. If they were describing the same events in the same way, that might be so. However, whether Exodus was written by Moses or whether it was put together later, a human author would not contradict himself on the same page. A clear-headed look at the two passages shows that chapter 1 describes the overall creation as observed from earth while chapter 2 talks about what God did on the sixth day in creating Adam and Eve. As pointed out in the NET Bible, "for what follows (verse 2:4) is not another account of creation but a tracing of events from creation through the fall and judgment (the
section extends from 2:4 through 4:26."{13}

Eichenwald adds in the so-called third creation story of God and Rahab stating, "In fact, the Bible has three creation models"{14} as if this were a clear and well-known fact. If you read all the verses in Isaiah, Psalms and Job that reference Rahab, you will scratch your head and wonder how could anyone relate those few verses to a creation story. Rahab is a Hebrew word meaning "strong one and it is not necessarily a name. It is clear in Isaiah and Psalms that Rahab is a reference to Egypt, not some mythical dragon. In Job, it could be referring to the forces of chaos. He probably gets his idea from some articles that suggest that since Job

9:13 says “God does not restrain His anger; under Him the helpers of Rahab lie crushed” that the helpers of Rahab could refer to the helpers of Tiamat from the Babylonian Creation Epic. Even if this were true, rather than a third creation story one would say this verse tells us

1. God destroys all idols and false gods raised up by others, and
2. This is what Job said and Job was forced to retract what he said when he was confronted by Yahweh as seen in Job 42:1-6.

Eichenwald’s claim of three different creation models is an illusion.

Number Two: The Flood

Eichenwald reports another set of clear contradictions in the Genesis story of Noah and the flood. He points to three areas of supposed contradiction.

The first one has to do with how many animals are on the ark. In Genesis 6:19, God tells Noah that he shall “bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you.” Years later after Noah has completed the ark, God tells him in Genesis 7:2 to take seven pairs of every clean animal and two of every unclean animal. Eichenwald claims this is a contradiction that the author/editor was so incompetent as to include only five verses apart. He does not consider the option that after completing the ark, God gave Noah more complete instructions because more
clean animals would be needed to provide for the sacrifices to the Lord in Genesis 8:20. Noah did not need this detail before starting to build the ark.

The second contradiction is that the Bible has Noah and his family boarding the ark and the flood
beginning in two different sections. What Eichenwald sees as a contradiction, most readers take as a common literary

technique, i.e. summarize the situation and then describe it again with more details. This was a seminal event in human history and deserved repeating.

The third contradiction according to Eichenwald is, "The water flooded the earth for 40 days (Genesis 7:17), or 150 days (Genesis 7:24). But Noah and his family stayed on the ark for a year (Genesis 8:13)." Upon reading the account, it is clear that Noah was on the ark for 12 months and 11 days during which it rained for forty days, the earth was totally inundated for 150 days as the waters slowly receded, but Noah waited to leave the ark until the land had become dry. You may choose not to believe in a universal flood, but to say the Bible has contractions in its description is ludicrous.

Number Three: The Trial and Crucifixion

In this claim, he states that John was written "at a time when gentiles in Rome were gaining dramatically more influence over Christianity; that explains why the Romans are largely absolved from responsibility for Jesus's death and blame instead is pointed toward the Jews."{15} Thus, he implies that the other gospels put much of the blame on the Romans. Let us see if this is true.

Luke is very clear that the instigators of the death of Jesus were the Jewish leaders and those who followed them. In Luke 22:2 we read, "The chief priests and the experts in the law were trying to find some way to execute Jesus." When Pilate is brought in to the process, Luke records that Pilate did not find Jesus guilty of anything worthy of death and stated so three different times{16}. At least five times in the book of Acts, Luke records Paul as squarely placing the responsibility for Jesus' death onto the Jewish leaders and nation.{17} We find similar verses in Matthew{18} and Mark.{19}

All of the gospels squarely place the blame on the Jewish leaders and those that followed them. Either Eichenwald has

never read the gospels and just assumed the other gospels blamed the Romans, or he assumes his readers have never read the gospels.

Number Four: Ascension of Jesus

The fourth supposed contradiction deals with the ascension of Jesus. Eichenwald writes, "As told in Matthew, the disciples go to Galilee after the Crucifixion and see Jesus ascend to heaven; in Acts, written by Luke, the disciples stay in Jerusalem and see Jesus ascend from there."{20}

As most of you know, the gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus meeting his disciples in Galilee and giving them the Great Commission. Matthew says **nothing** about Jesus ascending to heaven in Galilee or anywhere else. Because the Gospel of Luke does not discuss the time intervals, one might interpret it as saying that Jesus ascended into heaven on the day He was resurrected. But in Acts, Luke tells us that the resurrected Lord was with His disciples over a 40-day period. During which time, it would have been easy to travel to Galilee, as recorded in Matthew and John, and then travel back to Jerusalem.

Not surprisingly, his other five so-called "contradictions" all fail to hold up when one examines the Scriptures.

Faulty Interpretation of Scripture Passages Passages on Homosexuality

Eichenwald wants to convince us that what we think the Bible teaches about homosexuality is not what God intended.

He begins by pointing out, "The word homosexual didn't even exist until more than 1,800 years after the New Testament was written. . . . The editors of these modern Bibles just made it up."{21} But this could be said of many English words we use today. The ancient Greek word used in the text is a compound

word clearly meaning male-with-male sexual activity. A respected dictionary of New Testament words defines it this way, “a male engaging in same-gender sexual activity, a sodomite.”{22}

He then tells us, “Most biblical scholars agree that Paul did not write 1 Timothy”{23} and, presumably, should not be trusted when addressing behaviors we should avoid, such as homosexuality. The early church fathers from the second century on and many contemporary scholars{24} do not agree it is a forgery. Regardless, the same prohibition appears in other epistles and not just in Timothy.

Eichenwald points out Romans, Corinthians and Timothy discuss other sins in more detail than homosexual behavior. He writes, “So yes, there is one verse in Romans about homosexuality . . . and there are eight verses condemning those who criticize the government.”{25}

Most people understand that explaining our relationship to the government is more complex than forbidding homosexuality which is clearly understood. Romans talks about not resisting government authority. It says nothing about criticizing people in the government. In fact, that expression is protected by the laws of our land. In other words, to obey those laws you should feel free to criticize the government.

He then claims that people engage in other sins such as adultery, greed, drunkenness and lying and are not banished for those behaviors. But if you proclaimed you practice those actions regularly and teach them as truth, your church is going to remove you from any leadership position. They should still encourage you to attend worship services out of a desire to see God change your heart.{26} Mr. Eichenwald would be surprised to learn that most evangelical churches handle issues with homosexuality in the same way.

Then he declares, “Plenty of fundamentalist Christians who

have no idea where references to homosexuality are in the New Testament . . . always fall back on Leviticus."{27} Personally, I have never run into another church member who was unfamiliar with the New Testament, but knew "by memory" the details of Leviticus.

Christianity and the Law

Eichenwald claims homosexuality is not a sin or if it is, it is the same as all the other sins that he believes we ignore so that we can throw all our venom at homosexuals. To strengthen his position, he brings out "a fundamental conflict in the New Testament—arguably the most important one in the Bible."{28} This conflict is whether as Christians we are to obey the Mosaic Law or whether we are to ignore it.

He claims, "The author of Matthew made it clear that Christians must keep Mosaic Law like the most religious Jews, in order to achieve salvation."{29}

Wow, what a mistaken understanding of the message. In Matthew, Jesus explains if we want to enter the kingdom of heaven "our righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees (the most religious Jews)."{30} We must not get angry, call people names, or lust after others in our minds. He caps it off by saying, "You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."{31} He is clearly not teaching them to be like Orthodox Jews and they will be okay. He is teaching they cannot be good enough. It is only through Hissacrifice that we can be made righteous.

In Acts 15, we see that some believers who were Pharisees by background brought this question up to the apostles and elders. Peter responded by telling them, "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our father nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they (the

Gentiles) also are."{32} And the apostles, the elders, and the whole church agreed to send directions to the Gentiles that they were not required to follow the Mosaic Law.

So as Gentiles, we are not required to follow the Law of Moses as laid out in Leviticus. But the New Testament is very careful to identify those actions and attitudes which are sin so that we Gentiles know to avoid them. Which is why sexual sins are specifically mentioned in the New Testament.{33} Even in Acts 15 where the church is Jerusalem is deciding what to tell Gentile Christians about the Law, they decide to tell them to abstain from fornication, a term generally covering all sexual activity outside of marriage.{34}

In summary, Eichenwald believes we should declare homosexuality is not a sin and those who practice it should be honored as leaders within the church. He does not suggest that we treat any other sins that way. He does not present a cogent argument that the New Testament agrees with his position. He is saying that we should ignore biblical teaching. But, we really do love those struggling with homosexual behavior and we want to help them gain freedom from those lusts just as much as someone struggling with opposite sex issues.

Obeying the Law vs. Criticizing the Government

Eichenwald also castigates us for disobeying the New Testament teaching about government. He says Romans has "eight verses condemning those who criticize the government. . . . In other words, all fundamentalist Christians who decry Obama have sinned as much as they believe gay people have."{35} He points to Pat Robertson as sinning when Pat stated, "We need to do something, to pray to be delivered from this president." Does Romans condemn those who criticize the government?

Actually, Romans says, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. . . . the person who resists such authority resists the ordinance of God."{36} It doesn't say

that we are required to say good things about the government, but rather that we should obey the laws of our government. Our Bill
of Rights states that "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech."{37} So, if we do not voice our opinions about those running our government, we are in fact, not availing ourselves of the law established by our governing authorities.

Judging Our Motives for Prayer

Eichenwald casts aspersion on people of faith for gathering together to pray. He begins by castigating a prayer rally in Houston in 2011. He says, "[Then-governor Rick] Perry stepped to a podium, his face projected on a giant screen . . . and boomed out a long prayer asking God to make America a better place . . . babbling on . . . about faith and country and the blessings of America." He further claimed that Perry "heaped up empty phrases as the Gentiles do."

In reality, during the daylong event, Rick Perry spoke about 12 minutes and prayed for slightly more than **two minutes**. In his short prayer, Perry prayed in a cogent manner, praying for among others our president and his family.

Eichenwald explains that Perry is just an example of our misguided ways. The problem is that most Christians in American are disobeying the teaching of Jesus by praying in front of people and praying words other than the Lord's Prayer. As Jesus told us, "Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray . . . so that they may be seen by others."

Yes, Jesus is very clear that we are not to be hypocrites, but it is possible for someone to speak a prayer
in the presence of others without being a hypocrite. Jesus does tell us to make our prayers a personal conversation with our heavenly Father. But Jesus prayed often before synagogue

attenders, in front of his disciples, and before over 5,000 people. But clearly those times, although numerous, were much less than the time He spent communing with His Father alone. That ratio should be true of our lives as well.

Even stranger is Eichenwald's belief that we should only pray the Lord's Prayer just as Jesus stated it. But, the passage in Matthew 6 tells us that Jesus was giving us a model, an example, of how to pray, not giving us a set of words to repeat in a meaningless fashion. In the gospels and the other New Testaments books, we are privy to many of the prayers offered by the apostles. None of them use the words from the Lord's prayer. If only Eichenwald had been there to instruct them, they would not have sinned so grievously.

Eichenwald claims the only reason anyone could be praying in front of a large crowd, or on television, or
by extension in a small congregation is "to be seen." This claim does not make sense. The people he is judging can build themselves up without having to resort to prayer.

Conclusion

In this article, we have seen that critics use an incomplete, shallow examination of Scripture to claim it is not accurate and our application is faulty. In every case, we have seen that these claims leak like a sieve.

Dan Wallace sums up Eichenwald's arguments this way:

"*Time and time again the author presents his arguments as though they were facts. Any serious disagreements with his reasoning are quietly ignored as though they did not exist. The most charitable thing I can say is that Eichenwald is in need of a healthy dose of epistemic humility as well as a good research assistant who can do some fact-checking before the author embarrasses himself further in print. . .. But his numerous factual errors and misleading statements, his lack of*

concern for any semblance of objectivity, his apparent disdain for and lack of interaction with genuine evangelical scholarship, and his uber-confidence about more than a few suspect viewpoints, make me wonder. . . . Eichenwald's grasp of conservative Christianity in America as well as his grasp of genuine biblical scholarship are, at best, subpar. And this article is an embarrassment to Newsweek—or should be!"{38}

If Eichenwald's article represents the best scholarship discrediting the Bible, one rejoices in our firm foundation. On the other hand, realizing how many readers of such pieces don't know their flimsy nature, one is saddened by the potential impact on a society inclined to ignore the Bible.

Notes

1. Eichenwald, Kurt, "The Bible: So Misunderstood It's a Sin," *Newsweek Magazine*, December 2014.
2. Daniel B. Wallace, "Predictable Christmas Fare: *Newsweek*'s Tirade against the Bible," blogpost December 2014 and Bock, Darrell, "Darrell Bock Responds to Kurt Eichenwald's *Newsweek* Article on the Bible," blogpost December 2014.
3. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey, September 2010, pages 17-23.
4. Eichenwald, paragraph 4.
5. The 12 questions are as follows:

    1. What is the first book of the Bible? (Open-ended)
    2. What are the names of the first four books of the New Testament, that is, the four Gospels?
    3. Where, according to the Bible, was Jesus born? Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth or Jericho?
    4. Which of these is NOT in the Ten Commandments? Do unto others . . ., no adultery, no stealing, keep Sabbath?
    5. Which figure is associated with remaining obedient to God despite suffering? Job, Elijah, Moses or Abraham?
    6. Which figure is associated with leading the exodus from Egypt? Moses, Job, Elijah or Abraham?

7. Which figure is associated with willingness to sacrifice his son for God? Abraham, Job, Moses or Elijah?
8. What is Catholic teaching about bread and wine in Communion? They become body and blood, or are symbols?
9. Which group traditionally teaches that salvation is through faith alone? Protestants, Catholics, both or neither?
10. Was Mother Teresa Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu or Mormon?
11. What is the name of the person whose writings and actions inspired the Reformation? Luther, Aquinas or Wesley?
12. Who was a preacher during the First Great Awakening? Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney or Billy Graham?

6. The Barna Group, *Christians: More Like Jesus or Pharisees?*, 2012.
7. Eichenwald, paragraph 19.
8. Metzger, Bruce, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition, German Bible Society, Stuttgart, pages 148-150.
9. Ibid, pages 162-163.
10. Wallace.
11. Eichenwald, paragraph 66.
12. Ibid, paragraph 66.
13. New English Translation, Genesis Chapter 2 Notes 9 and 11.
14. Eichenwald, paragraph 66.
15. Eichenwald, paragraph 51.
16. See Luke 23:4,14,22.
17. See Acts 2:23,23,3:14-15,4:10,5:30.
18. Matthew 26:4,27:23-24.
19. Mark 14:1, 15:14-15.
20. Eichenwald, paragraph 52.
21. Ibid, paragraph 68.
22. William Mounce, *Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Zondervan, 2006.
23. Eichenwald, paragraph 70.

24. Among those disagreeing with Eichenwald's assertion are Daniel Wallace, John MacArthur, Charles Swindoll, John Stott, and Craig Keener.
25. Eichenwald, paragraph 77.
26. See the Watermark Community Church story: www.watermark.org/statement
27. Eichenwald, paragraph 80.
28. Eichenwald, paragraph 81.
29. Eichenwald, paragraph 82.
30. Matthew 5:20.
31. Matthew 5:48.
32. Acts 15:10-11.
33. For example in Mt 5:27-28, Romans 13:13-14, 1 Corinthians 6:9-20, Ephesians 4:19, Col 3:5, 1 Peter 4:3.
34. Acts 15:20,29.
35. Eichenwald, paragraph 77.
36. Romans 13:1,2.
37. Amendment 1 to the Constitution of the United States of America.
38. Wallace.

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