



True?

Good Exegesis

Building faith through accurate teaching.

Every story needs a bad guy, you understand — someone to oppose the hero and make life miserable until, finally, the hero outsmarts him in the end. Without a villain, there's no intrigue. From Cornwallis to Chief Sitting Bull to Darth Vader, our passions have raged against scoundrels both real and imagined.

The "bad guy" in the Christmas story is, of course, the hard-hearted Bethlehem innkeeper. The young couple from Nazareth arrives at his establishment, dusty and exhausted, at

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sunset. Mary is soon to give birth. Joseph pleads with the surly hotelier for a room, any kind of a room, and receives only insults in reply. Finally, with a jerk of his thumb, the wretch mutters something about a stable out back, to which Joseph and his wife retreat in desperation.

But by morning, a wondrous thing has happened. The Son of God has arrived, and so has a delegation of shepherds to adore Him. The innkeeper is struck by the irony of the moment and humbly apologizes.

The only trouble is, Luke 2 says nothing — nothing at all — about an innkeeper. Neither does any other New Testament passage.

"While they were there [in Bethlehem], the time came for the baby to

be born, and she gave birth to her first-born, a son. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (vss. 6-7 NIV).

It doesn't say what time of day they arrived. Nor does it say that Jesus was born within hours of their arrival. In fact, the words "while they were there" might lead us to guess that the birth occurred a day or more into their stay. As for how they ended up near a manger, we simply don't know.

Scholars have, in fact, described first-century inns as little more than courtyards with stalls around the edge and a gate to lock out wild animals and thieves. Travelers camped overnight with their animals, and the fireside conversations were not always



False?

for Kids, Too

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genteel. A woman in the throes of labor would have had precious little privacy. Perhaps Mary was better off away from such a truck-stop atmosphere. Perhaps a *kind* innkeeper even suggested the stable. We don't know.

While many might argue that such an embellishing of the Christmas story is harmless, a deeper question arises: Does the Word of God need embellishment? From the days of Cecil B. de Mille up to the present, Christians have criticized Hollywood and New York producers for adding to the Scripture, spicing their films, plays and TV specials with non-biblical characters and episodes that supposedly appeal to a wider audience. Are we qualified to cast stones? Does our teaching faithfully convey the Bible,

the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible?

We who believe that God's written Word is totally adequate are concerned about letting the two-edged sword do its work without any hindrance. We want children to confront the people and precepts of the Bible in all their richness. We want young people to grow up to read and understand the Bible for themselves, and to do so accurately; this is a cornerstone of our Protestant belief. Francis Schaeffer, when asked once to name the source of final authority in the church, replied thoughtfully, "It is the individual Christian on his knees before an open Bible." Somewhere in Heaven, Martin Luther must have applauded.

Should not we, then, be the most

concerned of all to reexamine our traditions and make sure the Word of God is being taught completely, accurately and without adulteration? Every time we open our mouths, we are modeling hermeneutics. We are saying, "This is how you handle the Scripture. This is the way to rightly divide the Word of truth. Watch how I interpret this story, this passage, this event, and do likewise when you grow up."

If a poll was taken to determine children's all-time favorite Bible story, I have a suspicion Noah's ark would be a strong contender for first place, if not a clear winner. Its "draw," of course, is the animals, parading two by two into the mammoth boat. Breathes there a

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child who doesn't like going to the zoo? All the colorful visual images of Genesis 6 through 9 are tailor-made for kids.

But how often do they catch the grimness of the story? Here is a devastating display of God's judgment on sin. Millions of people die by drowning. The Noah episode is actually a survival story. We were gripped in 1974 by the horrors of *Alive*, Piers Paul Read's book about 16 young Uruguayans who spent 70 days in the Andes after a plane crash. They were eventually rescued, but not before resorting to cannibalism. Noah and his family spent 375 days in a harrowing vigil, knowing that no rescuers were on the way; they were alone on the planet. Only God's promise stood between them and starvation. No, boys and girls, it was not a jolly adventure.

WHY SO IMPORTANT?

It is true that young people below the age of junior high will not often challenge our exegesis — our attempt to explain accurately a portion of Scripture. They are not apt to say, "But that's not what that means." Thus we can fall into an assumption that the end justifies the means; so long as good and worthy conclusions are taught, what difference does it make how we get there?

Several objections need to be raised:

1. *Children should not learn things they have to unlearn in later life.* Some of the boys and girls we teach will be called by God someday to enter the pastorate; many more of them, we hope, will become lay leaders as well as teachers themselves. Why give them things that have to be corrected in later education?

2. *When they do unlearn them, they will question our credibility.* They will think back to their childhood experiences and wonder why we cut corners to make our favorite points. Or they will come upon chapters and sections of the Bible that we always seemed to skip, and wonder why we didn't follow the example of Paul, who said, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27 NIV).

3. *If they don't unlearn them, they will carry bad habits of interpretation into adulthood.* They will assume that it's okay to play loose with the historical record, or to grab bits and pieces of the Bible to make a point. Instead of viewing the Bible as a marvelous tapestry woven by the master craftsman to give a vivid panorama of His plan for humanity, they will treat it as a bag of scraps and remnants from which they may pull whatever color and texture strikes their fancy at the moment.

How many pastors have despaired over the ease with which their adult members seem to be "tossed back and forth by the waves, blown here and there by every wind of teaching" (Ephesians 4:14). Where did they pick up such vulnerability to heresy? We must insure that in the formative years we demonstrate a proper handling of the Word with integrity.

"Children need to have adequate models by which to understand Scripture," William L. Hendricks writes in his book *A Theology for Children* (Broadman, 1980). "The way in which the parent, children's worker, or teacher regards the Bible often becomes the model a child adopts in looking at the Bible."

WHAT TO DO

1. First of all, *we must realize that our familiarity with the Bible is not the child's familiarity.* Teachers are sometimes prone to pick up their lesson material for a given week, take one glance and cry, "Oh, no — Zaccheus again?" They assume that because they have heard, read and taught the story a hundred times over in their adult years, a six year old has faced it as frequently. That is not true; the child may never have heard it, or may have forgotten it from preschool days, or may have garbled some of the details. Even if he or she remembers it well, repetition is a good thing to a young child, not an irritation — especially when the story matches his experience as well as Luke 19:1-10 does. He too is short and often made to feel on the outside of the taller crowd. For Jesus to stop and take special notice of such people is a thrilling affirmation.

Public schoolteachers are not allowed to skip 2+2=4 just because they

personally happen to be bored with it. They teach the same thing year after year, in virtually the same way, because they know it is foundational to a lifetime of reliable calculations. The old, old stories of the Bible are just as essential.

2. *We must go back to the biblical text.* Much of our slipping and sliding occurs because we teach from our memories rather than from the Bible. If you teach children, ask yourself how often in the last three months you have gone into the classroom without actually reading the scriptural passage upon which your lesson was based. It is all too easy, in preparation time, to skip the eternal words and go directly to the learning strategies, the gathering of materials, and so on. After all, we all know how Elijah overcame the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, don't we?

Perhaps we do, but perhaps we don't. To actually get out our Bibles and read 1 Kings 18 unhurriedly will remind us of all the colorful details of the story and will also put us back in touch with its dynamism. We will once again feel the tension crackling in the air as the day wears on, and hear the outburst of the people as God's fire plunges toward Elijah's altar: "The Lord, he is God!"

Then we will have a sure foundation upon which to build our lesson.

Not long ago I was reviewing plans for twos-and-threes Sunday school curriculum. The rough draft before me called for a lesson on how Isaac was thankful for the bountiful harvest God gave him in Genesis 26:1-26, 12-13. It sounded fine. If I had not opened my Bible, I would never have noticed that the text says nothing about Isaac returning thanks. He may well have done so, but we have no proof. I rewrote the summary sentence to say, "Isaac receives an abundant harvest," and the lesson aim to read, "That the children will learn where food comes from and will see how well God planned for people."

3. *We must take the curriculum seriously.* Publishers of Christian education materials go to considerable lengths to guarantee the accuracy of their biblical materials and the logic of their lesson truths and aims. Many publishers review every lesson extensively, utilizing educa-

tional and theological experts. What a shame for a teacher to skim over or ignore the care and scholarship that have gone into the materials provided.

Granted, curricula are not perfect or all-knowing, and even the best still needs adaptation to particular classes and situations. But the core — what the Word says and what it means — is almost always reliable. It is in the application that adjustments are most often desirable.

4. *We must stay in touch with the main point.* We must keep asking, "Why did God include this story or this passage in the Bible? What was the Holy Spirit wanting me to comprehend through this?" Again, many materials provide the teacher with a summary sentence at the beginning of each lesson, a focus statement of the main truth. We must not let the details and distractions of teaching pull us aside; we must not major on minors.

The Bible has a power all its own. And it is *real*; it is not a book of fantasy. These things really happened, and God caused them to be recorded for the awesome purpose of guiding our lives. They do not need enhancement, dilution or modernization.

A recent book for children tells the story of Jonah in an amazing way. The text is strictly Scripture, but the pictures (quite beautifully executed) are all animals. Jonah is a mouse who is afraid to go to the city of Nineveh, inhabited by cats. The sailors who throw him overboard are frogs, while the great fish looks something like a bluegill, only he's orange.

As I gazed at its pages, I kept wondering, "What was the matter with the original version?" If some Bible episodes seem dull to today's children, the story of Jonah is hardly one of them; it had plenty of verve and power in the first place. I could imagine my three children taking in this new rendition in the same way they watch *The Tom 'n Jerry Show* cartoon on Saturday morning — another cat/mouse escapade.

"The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life," Jesus declared in John 6:63 (NIV). Therefore, let us build faith in God's Word through accurate teaching, taking nothing away, adding nothing to it — and watch young lives be forever changed by its power. **cef**