Hard

Sayings

of the

Bible

Walter C. Kaiser Jr.

Peter H. Davids

F.F. Bruce

Manfred T. Brauch

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5:12. Or readers looking up Mark 5:11–13 to find a discussion of the destruction of the pigs will find themselves referred to the parallel passage in Matthew 8:31–32 for an explanation.

In some cases where there are two or more separate comments on similar Bible passages, readers may discover that different points of view are put forward. This is due to the multiple authorship of this book and the fact that the authors do not always agree on the best solution to certain difficulties. The publisher has felt that readers will be best served by knowing that a variety of solutions have been proposed and by being able to think through for themselves which solutions best satisfy their questions.

The Scripture index at the back of the book will help readers find comments on any Bible passage that is mentioned in the book, whether it is listed as a hard saying or not. The subject index will help readers find comments on issues that they might not otherwise be able to locate or which have not been cross-referenced because of concern for space. For example, *the fear of the Lord* is mentioned so often in Scripture that we have not cross-referenced the many verses where the phrase occurs. The page reference for Proverbs 1:7, where the issue is specifically addressed, will be found in the subject index.

General Introduction

In one sense the title of this book is incorrect. Very little of what is included in this work, outside of the Gospels, is a "saying" of anyone. The title, in fact, is taken from John's Gospel, where Jesus' ministry was recorded as a series of sayings. In John 6:60, responding to one such saying, his disciples observe, "This is a hard teaching ['hard saying' KJV [KJV King James Version]]. Who can accept it?" From this verse came the title of the original work in this series, F. F. Bruce's *The Hard Sayings of Jesus.* Even though the literature under consideration in this volume lies mostly outside the Gospels, the title is still applicable.

Hard Sayings of the Old Testament

All too often people tell me (Walter Kaiser) they have tried to read through the Old Testament but find too much of it hard to understand. Despite their good intentions, many have abandoned the project out of sheer frustration, discouragement or puzzlement. It is not surprising that so many people find the Bible difficult, for our culture has lost contact with the Old Testament. Thus the book remains a closed document and often is treated as an artifact of our primitive origins.

Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth! The Old Testament contains some of the most fascinating and dramatic portions of the entire Bible. Furthermore, if we decide its message is irrelevant to our generation, we are misled by our own false assumptions.

Following our Lord's example, we should take up the Old Testament once again, confident that not even one passage will pass away until all have been fulfilled (Mt 5:18). In fact, the Old Testament is so relevant that our Lord warned that anyone who breaks the least Old Testament commandment, or teaches others to do so, will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven! That ought to give us pause!

The discussion here of Old Testament passages is a response to the cries of thousands

of laity (and "tell it not in Gath," clergy as well!). I have tried to answer some of the more difficult sayings which fall into two categories: sayings for which no explanation appears to be given and sayings which seem to contradict other portions of Scripture. Admittedly, the choice of particular hard sayings is somewhat arbitrary and reflects my own experience addressing students' questions for the past thirty years.

Why should we contemplate hard sayings at all? The obvious answer is that scores of serious readers want to understand the difficult issues in Scripture. Besides this, by wrestling with Scripture, we can sharpen our attention to the details in all of our Lord's Word. Thus the more intently and patiently we examine the text, the more handsome the dividends to our spiritual growth.

It was the famous Bishop Whately who commented,

The seeming contradictions in scripture are too numerous not to be the result of design; and doubtless were designed, not as mere difficulties to try our faith and patience, but as furnishing the most suitable mode of introduction that could have been devised by mutually explaining and modifying and limiting or extending one another's meaning. (*On Difficulties in the Writings of St. Paul,* Essay VII, sec. 4)

He continued:

Instructions thus conveyed are evidently more striking and more likely to arouse attention; and thus, from the very circumstance that they call for careful reflection, more likely to make a lasting impression.

Others may debate the deliberate design of the difficulties (for often the problem results from our distance from the idiom of that day), but there can be no debate over the therapeutic effect that they produce through our increased efforts to understand and obey God's Word.

Disagreements within Scripture also supply strong incidental proof that there was no collusion among the sacred writers. The variations, instead, go a long way toward establishing the credibility of both the writers and their texts.

These hard sayings also may be viewed as a test of our commitment to Christ. Difficult passages can be handy excuses for begging off and following the Savior no longer. Our Lord spoke in parables for just this reason: so that some who thought they saw, perceived and heard would actually miss seeing, perceiving and hearing (Mk 4:12). Indeed, the apparent harshness and obscurity of some of our Lord's sayings rid him of followers who were unwilling to be taught or were halfhearted in their search (Jn 6:66). They were not willing to look beyond the surface of the issues.

The matter remains where Butler in his famous *Analogy* left it: These hard sayings afford "opportunity to an unfair mind for explaining away and deceitfully hiding from itself that evidence which it might see" (*Analogy,* Part II, ch. vi). For those who seek an occasion to cavil at difficulties, the opportunity is hereby offered in these hard sayings.

There is nothing wrong or unspiritual, of course, about doubting—so long as one continues to search for a resolution. But there are some who, as John W. Haley put it

so well,

cherish a cavilling spirit, who are bent upon misapprehending the truth, and urging captious and frivolous objections [and who] find in the inspired volume difficulties and disagreements which would seem to have been designed as stumbling-stones for those which "stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed" [1 Pet 2:8]. Upon the wilful votaries of error God sends "strong delusion, that they should believe a lie" [2 Thess 2:11], that they might work out their own condemnation and ruin. (*An Examination of the Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible,* Andover, Mass., 1874, p. 40)

That is strong medicine for our more urbane and tame ways of disagreeing with objectors today; nevertheless, the matters Haley's quote raises are highly relevant to the discussion of hard sayings.

Before we launch into the hard sayings, perhaps it would be helpful to review some of the background studies on the nature, origin and reasons for biblical discrepancies.

Any observant Bible reader who compares statements of the Old Testament with those of the New Testament, statements of different writers within either Testament, or even at times different passages within the same book will notice that there are apparent discrepancies. These statements, taken at face value, seem to contradict one another.

The Christian church has held over the centuries that there is an essential unity of the Holy Scriptures, that they form a divine library that is consistent and unified in its approach and teaching. Alas, however, as the scope of lay readership and the depth of scholarship have increased, an ever-increasing supply of alleged discrepancies and hard sayings has demanded attention.

Why are there so many discrepancies and difficulties? There are a great number of sources to which we can trace them: errors of copyists in the manuscripts that have been handed down to us; the practice of using multiple names for the same person or place; the practice of using different methods for calculating official years, lengths of regencies and events; the special scope and purpose of individual authors, which sometimes led them to arrange their material topically rather than chronologically; and differences in the position from which an event or object was described and employed by the various writers.

All of these factors, and more, have had a profound influence on the material. Of course, to those who participated in the events and times these factors were less of a barrier than they are to us. Our distance from the times and culture exacerbates the difficulty. Specific issues might be mentioned here as illustrations of the wider field of difficulties. For example, the present Hebrew text of 1 Samuel 13:1 is a classic illustration of an early copyist's error that has continued to be unsolved to the present day. Literally, the Hebrew text reads: "Saul was a year old ['son of a year' in Hebrew] when he began to reign and two years he reigned over Israel." It is clear that the writer is following the custom of recording the monarch's age when he took office, along with the total number of years that he reigned. But it is also clear that the numbers have been lost and that this omission is older than the Greek Septuagint translation, made in the third century b.c. So far the Dead Sea Scrolls and all other ancient manuscripts have left us without a clue as to what the text should read.

The selectivity of the writers, in accord with their purposes in writing, can be illustrated from the genealogy that appears in Exodus 6:13–27. Instead of listing all twelve sons of Jacob, the writer is content to treat Reuben (v. 14), Simeon (v. 15) and Levi (vv. 16–25). Here he stops, even though he has listed only the first three sons of Jacob, because the sons of Levi, and particularly his descendants Moses and Aaron, are his special interest. So he does not proceed further.

In treating some of these issues, I have chosen not to focus on points of tension that arise from such factual elements as time, history, culture and science. Instead, I have listened for points of tension in doctrine and ethics within the books or between authors of the Bible. I have included a few illustrations of difficulties having to do with facts, but my main emphasis is on theological and ethical questions.

Hard Sayings of Jesus

Many of those who listened to Jesus during his public ministry found some of his sayings "hard" and said so. Many of those who read his sayings today, or hear them read in church, also find them hard, but do not always think it fitting to say so.

Our Lord's sayings were all of a piece with his actions and with his way of life in general. The fewer preconceptions we bring from outside to the reading of the Gospels, the more clearly shall we see him as he really was. It is all too easy to believe in a Jesus who is largely a construction of our own imagination—an inoffensive person whom no one would really trouble to crucify. But the Jesus whom we meet in the Gospels, far from being an inoffensive person, gave offense right and left. Even his loyal followers found him, at times, thoroughly disconcerting. He upset all established notions of religious propriety. He spoke of God in terms of intimacy which sounded like blasphemy. He seemed to enjoy the most questionable company. He set out with open eyes on a road which, in the view of "sensible" people, was bound to lead to disaster.

But in those who were not put off by him he created a passionate love and allegiance which death could not destroy. They knew that in him they had found the way of acceptance, peace of conscience, life that was life indeed. More than that: in him they came to know God himself in a new way; here was the life of God being lived out in a real human life and communicating itself through him to them. And there are many people today who meet Jesus, not in Galilee and Judaea but in the Gospel record, and become similarly aware of his powerful attractiveness, entering into the same experience as those who made a positive response to him when he was on earth.

One reason for the complaint that Jesus' sayings were hard was that he made his hearers think. For some people, thinking is a difficult and uncomfortable exercise, especially when it involves the critical reappraisal of firmly held prejudices and convictions, or the challenging of the current consensus of opinion. Any utterance, therefore, which invites them to engage in this kind of thinking is a hard saying. Many of Jesus' sayings were hard in this sense. They suggested that it would be good to reconsider things that every reasonable person accepted. In a world where the race was to the swift and the battle to the strong, where the prizes of life went to the pushers and the go-getters, it was preposterous to congratulate the unassertive types and tell them that they would inherit the earth or, better still, possess the kingdom of heaven. Perhaps the Beatitudes were, and are, the hardest of Jesus' sayings.

For the Western world today the hardness of many of Jesus' sayings is all the greater because we live in a different culture from that in which they were uttered and speak a different language from his. He appears to have spoken Aramaic for the most part, but with few exceptions his Aramaic words have not been preserved. His words have come down to us in a translation, and that translation—the Greek of the Gospels—has to be retranslated into our own language. But when the linguistic problems have been resolved as far as possible and we are confronted by his words in what is called a "dynamically equivalent" version—that is, a version which aims at producing the same effect in us as the original words produced in their first hearers—the removal of one sort of difficulty may result in the raising of another.

For to us there are two kinds of hard saying: there are some which are hard to understand, and there are some which are only too easy to understand. When sayings of Jesus which are hard in the former sense are explained in dynamically equivalent terms, then they are likely to become hard in the latter sense. Mark Twain spoke for many when he said that the things in the Bible that bothered him were not those that he did not understand but those that he did understand. This is particularly true of the sayings of Jesus. The better we understand them, the harder they are to take. (Perhaps, similarly, this is why some religious people show such hostility to modern versions of the Bible: these versions make the meaning plain, and the plain meaning is unacceptable.)

If in the following pages I (F. F. Bruce) explain the hard sayings of Jesus in such a way as to make them more acceptable, less challenging, then the probability is that the explanation is wrong. Jesus did not go about mouthing pious platitudes; had he done so, he would not have made as many enemies as he did. "The common people heard him gladly," we are told—more gladly, at any rate, than members of the religious establishment did—but even among the common people many were disillusioned when he turned out not to be the kind of leader they hoped he would be.

The view of the interrelatedness of the Synoptic Gospels taken in this work does not greatly affect the exposition of the hard sayings, but it will be as well to state briefly here what that view is. It is that the Gospel of Mark provided Matthew and Luke with one of their major sources; that Matthew and Luke shared another common source, an arrangement of sayings of Jesus set in a brief narrative framework (not unlike the arrangement of the prophetic books of the Old Testament); and that each of the Synoptic Evangelists had access also to sources of information not used by the others. (The material common to Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark is conventionally labeled Q. The teaching peculiar to Matthew is labeled M; that peculiar to Luke is labeled L.) It helps at times to see how one Evangelist understood his predecessor by recasting or amplifying his wording.

Some of the sayings appear in different contexts in different Gospels. On this it is often said that Jesus must not be thought incapable of repeating himself. This is freely conceded: he may well have used a pithy saying on a variety of occasions. There is no reason to suppose that he said "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" or "Many are called, but few are chosen" once only. But there are occasions when a saying, indicated by comparative study to have been spoken in one particular set of circumstances, is assigned to different contexts by different Evangelists or different sources. There are other principles of arrangement than the purely chronological: one writer may group a number of sayings together because they deal with the same subject matter or have the

same literary form; another, because they have a common keyword (like the sayings about fire and salt in Mark 9:43–50).

Where there is reason to think that an Evangelist has placed a saying in a topical rather than a chronological setting, it can be interesting to try to decide what its chronological setting in the ministry of Jesus probably was. For example, it has been suggested that the saying "You are Peter," which Matthew (alone of the Synoptic Evangelists) includes in the report of Jesus' interchange with the disciples at Caesarea Philippi (see comment on Mt 16:18–19), may have belonged chronologically to another occasion, such as Jesus' appearance to Peter in resurrection. Even more speculative is the interpretation of some of the sayings as words of Jesus spoken not during his public ministry but later, through the mouth of a prophet in the early church. It has been thought best in this work not to engage in such speculation but to treat the sayings primarily in the contexts provided for them by the Evangelists.

Again, this does not seem to be the place for an enquiry into the question whether the sayings examined are authentic sayings of Jesus or not. To help students in answering such a question some scholars have formulated "criteria of authenticity" for application to the sayings recorded in the Gospels. One scholar, who attached great importance to these criteria, told me a few years ago that he had concluded that among all the sayings ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels, only six, or at most eight, could be accepted as undoubtedly his. The reader of this work will realize that it is written from a less skeptical viewpoint than that. Let this be said, however: the fact that a saying is hard is no ground for suspecting that Jesus did not say it. On the contrary, the harder it is, the more likely it is to be genuine.

The second volume of the *Encyclopaedia Biblica,* published in 1901, contained a long and important entry on "Gospels" by a Swiss scholar, P. W. Schmiedel. In the course of this he listed a number of sayings of Jesus and other passages which, to his mind, ran so much counter to the conception of Jesus which quickly became conventional in the church that no one could be thought to have invented them. He therefore regarded their authenticity as beyond dispute and proposed to treat them as "the foundation pillars for a truly scientific life of Jesus." Several of them will come up for inspection in the following pages, for whether in Schmiedel's sense or otherwise, they are certainly hard sayings.

In the interpretation of the sayings quoted I am, of course, indebted to many other interpreters. Some acknowledgment of my indebtedness is made in the following pages. There is one interpreter, however, to whom I am conscious of a special debt: that is the late Professor T. W. Manson, particularly in respect of his two works *The Teaching of Jesus* and *The Sayings of Jesus.* From the latter of these works I take leave to borrow words which will supply a fitting conclusion to my introductory remarks:

It will simplify the discussion if we admit the truth at the outset: that the teaching of Jesus is difficult and unacceptable because it runs counter to those elements in human nature which the twentieth century has in common with the first—such things as laziness, greed, the love of pleasure, the instinct to hit back and the like. The teaching as a whole shows that Jesus was well aware of this and recognized that here and nowhere else lay the obstacle that had to be surmounted.

Hard Sayings of Paul

The theme for my (Manfred Brauch) contribution to this book is contained in 2 Peter 3:15–16. Here we are told that the apostle Paul's writings, which speak everywhere of our Lord's gracious and patient work leading to our salvation, have in them "some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction." Several basic insights emerge from this text which provide an important starting point for my explanations.

First, it is clear that Paul's writings, which come roughly from the period a.d. 50–65, had already begun to circulate rather widely. Second Peter 3:16 refers to "all his letters." Since Paul wrote to churches and individuals across the Greco-Roman empire—from Rome in the West to Galatia in the East—some years must have elapsed for Paul's letters to have become known, distributed and read throughout the churches. Perhaps several decades had elapsed since Paul penned his epistles.

Second, Paul's letters had already attained quite a measure of authority. Though it is doubtful that Paul's writings were at this time already seen on a par with sacred Scriptures (that is, our Old Testament, which was early Christianity's Bible), the reference to "the other Scriptures" certainly indicates that the writings of Christ's apostle to the Gentiles are seen as an extension of the authoritative Word both of the Lord who meets us in the Old Testament and of Christ, the Lord of the church.

Third, Peter's reference to "hard sayings" in Paul's letters shows that, as early as sometime in the second half of the first century, Christians in the churches had a difficult time accepting or understanding or properly applying certain of Paul's sayings. Now if this was true within the first few decades subsequent to the writing of Paul's letters, how much more is that likely the case for us, who are removed from Paul's time not only by the passing of about two thousand years, but also by such important aspects of human experience as history and culture and language. If it was possible back then to misunderstand or even twist the meaning of certain of Paul's sayings, it is very likely that this possibility is even greater for us.

A leading continental scholar of the last century, Adolf von Harnack, once said that the only one who ever really understood Paul was the second-century heretic Marcion, but that even he misunderstood Paul. Harnack's point was that Marcion clearly grasped the radical nature of Paul's gospel—namely, that salvation comes by God's grace, not by obedience to the Law—but that Marcion's rejection of the Old Testament on the basis of Paul's gospel represented a misunderstanding of Paul.

Thus, from the very early years of Christians' use of Paul's letters, the possibility of either understanding or misunderstanding, of either proper or improper use, have been ever-present realities. For us Christians today, this fact ought to give both humility and hope. There may be times when, after careful and thorough study of a text, we should in all humility acknowledge that we simply cannot grasp the meaning or know definitely what the writer intends the reader to grasp. But there is always also the hope that careful study—always under the guidance of the Spirit—will lead us to a hearing of the hard sayings in such a way that God's Word can do its work in our lives.

The selection of hard sayings of Paul emerges from my experience as a Christian, a student and a teacher. In personal study, in work with college and seminary students, and in countless discussions with Christians in churches and non-Christians in the academy, these texts have again and again emerged as "problem texts." Some thoroughly confuse readers or create unresolved tension between the meaning of one

text and another. Others seem obscure or unclear. Still others lead to different misunderstandings. And a few appear to be so out of character with the overall meaning and intention of the gospel that they meet with opposition or outright rejection, even by some who are deeply committed to the authority of the Bible for Christian faith and life.

It is my hope to make a positive contribution in the continuing effort to provide a clearer understanding of some of the hard sayings of the epistle literature.

Understanding and Interpreting Paul's Epistles

The reading and study of any writing, if it is to be faithful to the author's purpose, must take seriously at least three things: (1) the nature of the writing itself, (2) the purpose for which it was written and (3) the situation or context out of which it was written. Failure to observe these matters is more likely than not to lead to misunderstanding or misinterpretation.

In this section I (Manfred Brauch) will discuss the matters of nature, purpose and situation, giving particular attention to principles of biblical interpretation which will assist in the study of Paul's epistles.

But before we begin we must also recognize that every interpreter of Scripture, including me, comes to the text with certain assumptions about the material to be studied. I want you to know before we begin what my assumptions are.

In approaching the hard sayings of Paul, I write self-consciously from within the evangelical tradition of theology, personal faith and commitment. I write from a perspective that cherishes this heritage's deep and central commitment to the Bible as the ultimate criterion for our understanding and application of God's self-revelation, which finds its ultimate expression in the Incarnation. The fundamental affirmation of evangelical faith with regard to the Bible is that we have in this word of God's gracious self-disclosure an authentic, reliable record of God's truth and purposes which, when responded to in faith, leads to restored relationships with God and our fellow human beings. Scripture—including these hard sayings—is our authoritative, infallible guide for faith and life.

Having stated this presupposition, which is at its core an affirmation of faith, I must immediately admit that such a commitment does not in and of itself determine the interpretation of any scriptural text. What it does do is set a tone and provide limits. It means that if you share that assumption with me, we approach the texts, recognizing that they are more than the result of human thought and theological reflection—that they emerge from the ministry and teaching of Christ's commissioned apostles, who were led and inspired by the Spirit of Christ in their ministry of writing.

This assumption about the Bible also means that we cannot simply bypass, ignore or reject texts which may be difficult to reconcile with other aspects of Scripture or whose meaning or instruction we find difficult to accept. Our starting point obligates us to take such sayings with utmost seriousness, seeking to understand what they mean, why they were written, and what implications for our faith and life they have.

Such an obligation brings us directly into the arena of biblical hermeneutics, or interpretation, where persons who are equally committed to the assumptions about the inspiration and authority of the Bible stated above often come to different conclusions.

The extent of such differences can be greatly reduced when we come to the hermeneutical task with equal commitment to take seriously the three items mentioned above: the nature of the writings, the situations out of which they were written, and the purposes for which they were written. To these matters we shall now turn.

The Nature and Purpose of Scripture. When we are concerned with the nature and purpose of the biblical text, we are immediately confronted with the issue of its authority, with its character as the Word of God. How are we to understand this authoritative character in light of the fact that the biblical record consists of the writings of a great variety of persons in different historical periods in response to a host of events and situations and experiences?

To answer this question we need to be faithful to the intention of Scripture and take with utmost seriousness the fact that God's final, ultimate form of self-disclosure is the Incarnation.

In 2 Timothy 3:15–17 Paul speaks clearly about the nature of Scripture and its purpose: "You have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

It is divine inspiration that gives to the Bible its authoritative character. And that inspiration, while clearly enunciated in 2 Timothy, is implicitly affirmed throughout the New and Old Testaments by the use of such formulas as "God has said" or "the Holy Spirit spoke" (2 Cor 6:16; Acts 1:16). God and Scripture were so intimately linked that "what Scripture says" and "what God says" could be equated (Rom 9:17; Gal 3:8). Jesus' use of and attitude toward the Old Testament strongly confirms this sense of Scripture's divine origin and content (see, for example, Mt 5:17–18; Jn 10:35). It is also clear from the New Testament that the words of Jesus and the witness of Jesus' apostles share the same inspiration and authority of the Old Testament (see, for example, Jn 10:25; 12:49; 1 Cor 2:13; 1 Thess 2:13; Heb 3:7).

That the Bible claims inspiration is evident then. But what is its intention? What is God's purpose for it? To make us wise for salvation, says Paul, and for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:15–16).

The biblical writings were written "to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom 15:4). This redemptive purpose of inspired Scripture is also the point of John 20:31: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

The Acts 8 story of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian is also instructive here. The understanding and interpretation of the Isaiah passage have one purpose: "Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus" (v. 35). That is the "what for," the purpose. Jesus did not recommend the Bible as a book of divinely given facts about things in general (science, history, anthropology, cosmology). Rather, he pointed to the Old Testament and said: "These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (Jn 5:39). If our study of Scripture is isolated from these explicit purposes, our attempts to understand the hard sayings may prove futile.

The fact that the writers of our biblical documents were inspired does not mean that