

Avoiding Common Mistakes in Biblical Interpretation

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Rather than address specific alleged Old Testament difficulties, Joseph M. Holden and Norman Geisler use Chapter 5 of their book *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible* to present general guidelines to approaching biblical passages that will assist in guarding against misinterpretations.¹ The first mistake the authors warn against is “[a]ssuming that extrabiblical literature determines the historicity of a biblical passage.”² This occurs when someone first correlates the genre of a scriptural book with a genre of non-biblical texts of the time, then assumes that just as non-biblical authors fabricated aspects of their stories in that genre, the biblical authors must have done the same. This does not mean the literary genre is completely ignored. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson explain that “in order to pick up the fine nuances conveyed by the biblical text, we must learn the ‘rules’ that guide the interpretation of that particular biblical genre.”³ But as Holden and Geisler state, “the best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture.”⁴

Another mistake Holden and Geisler warn against is “[a]ssuming that no additional information will clarify a text.”⁵ This is illustrated by one of the archeological discoveries discussed in the latter part of their chapter. Daniel 5:1 states, “King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them.”⁶ However, as Holden and

¹ Joseph M. Holden and Norman Geisler, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2013), 77.

² Ibid.

³ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2011), 238.

⁴ Holden and Geisler, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible*, 77.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Dan. 5:1 (NIV).

Geisler observe, scholars used to believe the Bible was in error when it referred to Belshazzar as “King” because “no extrabiblical sources recorded him on the Babylonian kings list.”⁷ However, the Cylinder of Nabonidus, discovered in 1854 by J.E. Taylor, identified Belshazzar as Nabonidus’ son and coregent.⁸

This was further clarified by the Babylonian Chronicle. James K. Hoffmeier records that shortly after World War II, Assyriologist Donald J. Wiseman was looking through the holdings of the British Museum when he came across the first tablet of the Chronicle.⁹ Hoffmeier explains that once the Chaldeans seized control of Babylon in 626 BC, they recorded the major events of each year up until 539 BC on clay tablets which came to be known as the Babylonian Chronicle.¹⁰ Wiseman (the discoverer of the tablets), in his book co-authored with Edwin Yamauchi, explained that the tablets tell “of the disappearance of the Babylonian king Nabonidus, whose son Belshazzar, named in a Babylonian royal inscription as coregent, had acted as king for ten years while his father was absent in Tema’ in central Arabia at a Babylonian-Jewish colony centered in Yathrib (Medina).”¹¹ Thus, the Babylonian Chronicle establishes a ten year period when Belshazzar acted as king in his father’s absence. Not only did these discoveries show that scholars were incorrect to doubt the accuracy of Daniel 5:1, but

⁷ Holden and Geisler, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible*, 82.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ James K. Hoffmeier, *The Archaeology of the Bible* (Oxford: Lion, 2008), 112.

¹⁰ Ibid, 111.

¹¹ Donald J. Wiseman and Edwin Yamauchi, *Archaeology and the Bible: An Introductory Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 54.

Holden and Geisler point out that they also explain “why Daniel could rise no higher than ‘third ruler’ in the kingdom (Daniel 5:29).”¹²

Many skeptical theories about the Old Testament seem to start from a desire to see the Scriptures disproven rather than from an objective analysis of the evidence, applying consistently the same standards to the Old Testament books that are applied to other documents of antiquity. The various precautions listed by Holden and Geisler demonstrate why these criticisms are unsupported and how we can avoid making the same mistakes.

¹² Holden and Geisler, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible*, 82.