

John Wesley and the Idea of Errors in Scripture

On July 24, 1776, when members of his majesty's government in the colonies found themselves annoyed at the writings of some men in Philadelphia three weeks before, John Wesley also read something that annoyed him. Here is his journal entry for that day:

I read Mr. Jenyns's admired tract, on the "Internal Evidence of the Christian Religion." He is undoubtedly a fine writer; but whether he is a Christian, Deist, or Atheist, I cannot tell. If he is a Christian, he betrays his own cause by averring, that "all Scripture is not given by inspiration of God; but the writers of it were sometimes left to themselves, and consequently made some mistakes." Nay, if there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth.¹

From Wesley's reaction to Jenyns's book, it is clear he would subscribe to the idea that the Scripture is truthful in all it affirms, but find other statements which assert the Bible's validity only in salvific matters or only in areas of faith and practice inadequate.

Soame Jenyns is an English writer who presents himself as a skeptic who was reasoned into Christianity. His book, *A View of the Internal Evidence of the Christian Religion*² presents the arguments which convinced him in the professed hope that they will similarly convince others. Wesley does not fully trust this man. Wesley is undoubtedly unflattered when Jenyns writes that his book is not the work of "some enthusiast or Methodist, some beggar, or some madman."³ A more serious reason to doubt Jenyns's intentions comes from the restrictions of censorship. Wesley knows that because 17th and 18th century Europeans have no right to free speech or right to a free press, people often attack the church or state under the guise of supporting it. Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* is a well-known example of this kind of covert attack. The strategy is to argue in favor of Christianity with absurd arguments or to say that some ideas are part of Christian doctrine when those very doctrines undermine the faith. Wesley wonders whether Jenyns is using this strategy. He is not sure whether to consider Jenyns a clever enemy (a Deist or an Atheist), or a confused brother.

The section in Jenyns that makes Wesley suspicious comes when Jenyns answers the charge that the Scriptures cannot be the revelation of God "because in them are to be found errors and inconsistencies, fabulous stories, false facts, and false philosophy."⁴ Interestingly Jenyns answers this attack with three defenses of Scriptural errancy which are still current today: he first offers the liberal idea that the Bible is not the word of God but that the Bible contains the word of God. Then he argues like some denominations that the Bible is authoritative only in matters of salvation, and finally he adopts the Roman Catholic idea of limiting authority to matters of faith and morals.

Jenyns's first line of defense is to claim that the Bible is not the word of God but that it contains the word of God. He says, "... the Scriptures are not revelations from God, but the history of them."⁵ Jenyns goes on to say "The revelation itself is derived from God," but the recording of the revelation "is the production

¹John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley*, 8 volumes, Nehemiah Curnock, ed. (London: The Epworth Press, 1938) 6:117.

²Jenyns, Soame, "A View of the Internal Evidence of the Christian Religion" in *The Works of Soame Jenyns, Esq.*, 4 volumes (London: T. Cadwell 1790), 4:3-121.

³*Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵*Ibid.*

of men.”⁶ Thus he concludes no defects “found in them can disprove the divine origin of this religion.”⁷ Jenyns thinks he has an iron-clad answer for alleged mistakes in the Bible: They are no problem because God’s ideas are expressed in human words. If there are any problems, they come from the words of fallible people, and do not detract from the excellence of God’s truth. Jenyns thinks that Christianity should in no wise be “answerable for the fables of which it may have been the innocent occasion.”⁸ Like Bultmann, Jenyns thinks the Bible must be demythologized (he would say “defableized”) and then we can hear the word of God.

Jenyns’s second line of defense is to argue that we can depend on the Bible’s truthfulness only in matters pertaining to salvation. He asks if the authors of Scripture assert infallibility for “every part of the voluminous collection of historical, poetical, prophetic, theological, and moral writings which we call the Bible”?⁹ Some would say that Jesus makes exactly this point when he argues, “The Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35), but Jenyns ignores this statement. He says the Bible’s human authors do not claim infallibility,¹⁰ and goes on, somewhat irrelevantly, to say that all Jesus requires for salvation is that one believe in him (John 6:47).¹¹ Whether one can “believe in Jesus” and reject what Jesus says about Scripture is an issue Jenyns does not address, but everyone would agree with his idea that no one’s salvation is premised on perfect theology. The problem with Jenyns’ limitation of the Bible’s infallibility to salvific matters is that his reasoning depends on a *non sequitor*. Jenyns constructs his argument this way: 1) The Bible contains some ideas that are necessary for salvation and some that are not; 2) The ideas that are necessary for salvation are true; 3) No one can be saved who rejects the ideas that are necessary for salvation; 4) One can reject the non-salvific matters and still be saved; 5) Therefore the non-salvific matters might be false. Point five simply does not follow. Yes, all salvific matters are true, but this does not imply that non-salvific matters could be errant. An accurate roadmap will give people truthful information about how to get from point A to point B, but that does not imply that some of the other information on the map is false. As with maps, so it is with the way of salvation: just because not all the information is relevant, does not mean some of it might be misleading. Truth and relevance are different categories, but Jenyns confuses them.

Jenyns’s third line of defense is to argue that the Bible is inerrant only when it teaches about faith and morals. Much like the Roman Catholic Church which limits the pope’s infallibility to these areas, Jenyns says the writers of Scripture “were undoubtedly directed by supernatural influence in all things necessary to the great work which they were appointed to perform ... but in the sciences of history, astronomy, and philosophy ... they were ... liable to ... errors.”¹² Jenyns does not specifically limit the Bible’s authority to faith and morals, but he does explicitly exclude from infallibility other matters on which the Bible teaches. How he reconciles his second defense which protects a smaller area of the Bible’s teaching with this third defense, covering a larger area, is not clear. Another problem with this third defense is deciding which matters of history, for instance, are matters of faith and which are not. The exodus of Israel and the resurrection of Christ are historical matters which are central to the faith of the Old and New Testaments, and could not be denied without vitiating Christianity. But what about the fall of Jericho or the resurrection of Lazarus? Are the floating axehead and the coin in the fish’s mouth matters of faith which must be retained or matters of history which may be discarded? Jenyns says that putting a diamond in the mud

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp 81-82.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 82.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 83.

does not diminish the diamond's value,¹³ but he gives us no instrument for separating the diamond of faith from the mud of history.

In responding to Jenyns's book, John Wesley obviously could not discredit Jenyns's first defense of scriptural errancy by linking it with Bultmann. He did not point out the logical fallacy in the second defense, nor did he indicate the problem with the indeterminable boundary between faith and history predicated by the third. Instead, Wesley simply rejected the idea that the Bible could be a mixture of truth and error. This rejection is based on the source of the Bible: the God of truth cannot be the source of falsehood. For Wesley it is an all-or-nothing matter. Either we accept all that the Bible affirms, or, like Jenyns, we betray the cause we are commissioned to defend.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.