

A Spontaneous Post About “The Bible Days”

Hi, folks, it's been several months since I have written any new content for this site. I have monitored the comments and have re-written and tweaked several articles, but it's been too long since I have written anything new.

I have had many friends and acquaintances ask me to write an article about hair, so that's what I've been working on lately. I have also been working on a couple of other projects related to this Web site that I am not ready to share just yet :)

Anyway, tonight I was reading a thread on an apostolic forum about the hair issue. In one of the posts someone talked about what they did “in the Bible days.” It suddenly struck me that I don't think I've written anything about “the Bible days” yet on this Web site! So, let me get out my soapbox and I'll tell all of you, my dear readers, about something that was one of my pet peeves when I was in the UPC.

Growing up in the Apostolic movement I often heard talk about what people did “in Bible times.” I've always loved history, so I loved to hear about what people did back then. It was not until I got older and started studying biblical history that I realized a fact that many seem to forget: “Bible times” covers approximately 4,000 years of history. Furthermore, it isn't just Jewish history that is covered. In the Bible you have Canaanites, Mideonites, Romans, Assyrians, Babylonians, and a host of others. Jewish history alone covers about 1,600 years (if you start counting at Moses and stop at Revelation) or more if you start counting at Abraham.

Also, the ancient world was a very dynamic place. Cultures changed back then just like they do today. Allow me (since

it's my soapbox) to give you a brief history lesson, written off the top of my head, to illustrate how dynamic the ancient world was just for the Jews (not to mention everyone else).

Abraham's descendants went to Egypt and lived there for 400 or so years. Then Moses—a man raised in Egypt but who lived for 40 years in Midian—led them into the wilderness. They lived in the wilderness for 40 years, and came into contact with many other cultures. Then they conquered Canaan and came into contact with the various Canaanite city-states and their cultures. Then the Philistines invaded, and they spent a bit of time interacting with them. Then a few years later their kingdom split into Israel and Judah. Israel interacted heavily with the Assyrians and was eventually conquered by them. Judah was spared, but they in turn were conquered by the Babylonians and most of them spent 70 years or so in Babylon. Then the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians, and the Persians allowed the Jews to return to their homeland. Some of them did, but many of them did not. Of the ones that did, many of them would have been 2nd generation exiled Jews—Jews who's parents had been born and raised in Babylon.

Many of the Jews decided to stay in Persia. They built synagogues and kept their system of worship and their national identity, but they were in constant contact with the Persian culture—a culture that included many conquered kingdoms along with all of their customs. A few years later Persia was conquered by Greece under the leadership of Alexander the Great (yes, I know that Alexander the Great was technically Macedonian, but his culture was Greek). Even after Alexander the Great's death, the Jews were caught up in the conflicts between the four generals who split his kingdom. During the 400 year intertestamental period the Jews came into contact with every known culture except those in the far east. To be honest, they probably came into contact with some of them too. We know Alexander the Great went as far as India, and it's pretty reasonable to assume that he brought some people back

with him.

Then the Romans came along and conquered Greece. They loved Greek culture and so they kept a lot of it around, but they mixed their own culture with it. They used Israel as a sort of frontier outpost—a garrison, if you will. The Jews in Jesus' Day would have mixed with pretty much every race that the Romans came into contact with. That means that they mixed with everyone in the known world.

Speaking of the Romans, they allowed their conquered subjects to keep their sense of identity and worship intact. It was one way that they maintained order in the empire. That's important to know, because it means that one Roman city might have a completely different culture than one just 60 or 70 miles from it. Remember, this was in the days before photographs, magazines, TVs, Internet, and mechanized transportation. Even now in the U.S. there is a wide culture gap between, say, New York and New Orleans. How much wider would that gap be if you had to walk or ride a horse between those two cities, and, unless you traveled there, the only knowledge you had of them was what was told to you by travelers?

My point here is simple: Bible times changed. A lot. To say that something happened "in Bible times" is *tremendously* misleading. Whenever anyone says it to me I respond by asking, "Which Bible time?" Something that was a Jewish cultural norm in 1,500 B.C. might be anathema to them in 50 A.D.

Here's a classic example of how the "Bible times" thing can lead to a misleading sense of history. In the forum that I was reading tonight one person wrote that "in the Bible days" if a woman sinned then the city officials publicly shaved her head. I have no idea if that was ever a custom in any ancient city (odds are that someone, somewhere tried it as a sin deterrent...it sounds pretty effective). However, I really doubt that it was ever a custom in Corinth. I've researched Corinth customs pretty extensively and I've never heard of it. (One

reason that it seems unlikely for Corinth to have a custom like that is because the people of Corinth were generally pretty proud of their sin; they were one of the most sinful cities in the Roman empire.)

I've read and heard plenty of variations of this theme. I've heard that prostitutes shaved their head, and so Paul was telling women in Corinth that if they cut their hair they might as well just shave it. I've heard that it was a shame for a woman to go outside without a veil, and so what Paul was really saying was that women should wear veils to church, and that if they didn't then they should just shave their head. (That last theory doesn't explain why women would stop wearing veils in the first place—especially to church—or why shaving their head would be such a bad punishment.) I've heard that Corinth had a feminist movement that was cutting their hair out of rebellion, and Paul was telling them that if they were going to do that then they might as well shave it (this theory is usually combined with the “prostitutes shaved their head theory”). There are many more, but you get the picture.

In reality, though, it's pretty hard to know exactly what was customary in Corinth and what was not. Corinth was an incredibly dynamic city. It sat on the Isthmus of Corinth—a very narrow strip of land dividing two gulfs. The strip of land was very narrow, and the way around the peninsula very long, so sailors needing to get from one gulf to the next would just pull their ships across. It was sort of like an ancient Panama Canal. These sailors were from every port, and had visited every port, so you can imagine how fast the city changed. It was constantly in flux. It's very, very hard to go back 2,000 years and get an archaeological snapshot of what the customs were and what the city was like when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. (That is why you will find that many commentaries have conflicting information on the customs of Corinth; many of them have a real custom but they have placed it in the wrong time. Generally speaking, the more recent the commentary

is the more accurate it will be—at least about the culture of the city.)

Well, it's late now, but I think you get the gist of what I am saying. Biblical times changed. A lot. One city might undergo tremendous change within a year. Something that they did in the "Bible times" of 10th century B.C. Jerusalem might not have ever been thought of, or even heard of, in 1st century Rome.

So, the next time that you hear someone say that someone did something "in Bible times" don't take their word for it. Research it for yourself :). Oh, and speaking of research, here's one great tool that you can use: [Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Manners and Customs: How the People of the Bible Really Lived](#). Check it out, it's awesome.

OK, I'm going to go put up my soapbox now. Good night, and thanks for reading!