



"When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?"
—John Maynard Keynes

18-Sep-20

Devil in the Details?

In [II Timothy 3:16](#), Paul tells the young pastor that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of [God](#), and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." In writing this, he was not telling Timothy something he did not already know. As the previous verse says, Timothy had known the Holy Scriptures from childhood. Paul fully believed that both Timothy's mother and grandmother had genuine [faith](#) ([II Timothy 1:5](#)), so the true way of life and the central place of Scripture within it were no strangers to Timothy.

Why, then, does Paul mention this? His words are a needed reminder because of the religious and cultural chaos of the day. Throughout his epistles to Timothy, Paul warns of false doctrine and giving heed to fables, deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, and profane and old wives' fables ([I Timothy 1:3-4](#); [4:1](#), 7). He admonishes Timothy to "give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine . . . Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine" ([I Timothy 4:13](#), 16), and "[avoid] the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge" ([I Timothy 6:20](#)). He later warns of those who "will turn their ears away from the truth, and be

turned aside to fables" ([II Timothy 4:4](#)). To Titus, Paul gives a similar warning about "not giving heed to Jewish fables and commandments of men who turn from the truth" ([Titus 1:14](#)).

In the first century, many ideas conflicted with the truth of God's Word, just as today. If we are not careful, we can absorb various concepts without examining each one to see if it accords with Scripture. Through Paul, God warns that many current notions can spiritually trip us up, so we have an ever-present duty and challenge to "test all things; hold fast what is good" ([I Thessalonians 5:21](#)). Even apostles can have incomplete understanding; Paul had to correct Peter for failing to understand the equality of Jews and Gentiles. Paul himself apparently believed Christ would return in his lifetime. Simply put, all men are fallible. A radio preacher of decades past emphatically implored, "Don't believe me! Believe your own Bible!"

Today, countless commentaries and other study aids help us understand the Bible, yet we must put these to the test, too, rather than accept them uncritically. If they are not grounded in God's Word, all interpretations are vanity and grasping for the wind.

As a case in point, the booklet *Pagan Holidays—or God's Holy Days—Which?*, published by the [Worldwide Church of God](#) (WCG), uses this in its explanation of the Day of Atonement:

The key to the whole explanation lies in a correct understanding of the meaning of [Azazel](#). This word does not occur elsewhere in the Old Testament. The *Comprehensive Commentary* has: "Spencer, after the oldest opinions of the Hebrews and Christians, thinks Azazel is the name of the Devil, and so Rosen. . . . The word scapegoat signifies the goat *which went away*." (p. 36)

This paragraph forms the foundation of the booklet's instruction on the unique Day of Atonement ritual involving the [two goats](#). The authority the booklet appeals to is a commentary whose quotation gives the viewpoint of scholars rather than an explanation from Scripture. This mysterious commentary has been repeatedly re-quoted as a starting point for

understanding the Hebrew *azazel* to represent [Satan](#). Several churches that formed after WCG's breakup continue to use this same excerpt as support for a core belief, so it warrants closer inspection.

No other WCG literature mentions the *Comprehensive Commentary*; the WCG's writers do not appear to have had it as a ready reference work. In fact, the *Comprehensive Commentary* is hardly mentioned anywhere at all! It does, however, make a couple of noteworthy appearances: in nineteenth-century Seventh-day Adventist writings.

The earliest appearance of the above *Comprehensive Commentary* quotation is in an article by O.R.L. Crosier, "The Law of [Moses](#)," published in *The Day-Star Extra*, February 7, 1846. Crosier, unknown to most of us, is noteworthy because [he largely shaped](#) the Adventist understanding of Satan as the scapegoat.

Its second appearance is in [*The Judgment, Its Events and Their Order*](#), written by another Adventist scholar, J. N. Andrews (1829-1883). His book quotes liberally from "Redeemer and Redeemed" (1864) by Charles Beecher. Besides the above note from the *Comprehensive Commentary*, Beecher also leans on the very "Jewish fables" Paul warned about: Rabbinical writers, the apocryphal *Book of Enoch*, and *Zohar*, the foundational work of Jewish mysticism known as "Kabbalah." These sources are the evidence that Beecher—and thus Andrews—marshaled to claim *azazel* represents Satan.

It turns out that the source in question is titled *The Comprehensive Commentary on the Holy Bible* (© 1837) by William Jenks. It is long out of print, but [the University of Michigan website](#) provides scans of the original. The quotation appears in its comment on [Leviticus 16:8](#) (p. 410).

The digital scans reveal something that Messrs. Crosier and Beecher neglect to mention, which all subsequent quoters are likely ignorant. Reading all the notes for Leviticus 16 reveals that Jenks is merely providing a sampling of diverse viewpoints, not giving his own. What the quotation omits is that in subsequent comments, he argues zealously that the *azazel* prefigures [Jesus Christ](#)!

We cannot here reproduce the notes in their entirety, but we encourage the reader to examine the notes on pages [412](#) (under "What was there of Gospel in all this?") and [413](#) (under "Practical Observations"). To paraphrase, Jenks writes that the two goats together, both of which made one offering, prefigure Christ (see [Leviticus 16:5](#)); that God laid on Jesus—the substance of these shadows—the iniquity of us all (see [Isaiah 53:6](#)); and that He bore our sins and their punishment in His body on the tree (see [Isaiah 53:11-12](#); [Hebrews 9:28](#); [I Peter 2:24](#)), suffering outside the camp (see [Hebrews 13:12](#)). He was made [sin](#) for us (see [II Corinthians 5:21](#)). Even as the *azazel* carried all the iniquities of Israel into a land of forgetfulness, so also Christ takes away the sin of [the world](#) (see [John 1:29](#)) by taking it upon Himself.

Which note has spiritual substance:

- the note on page 410 that lists only the opinions of other men?
- or the notes on pages 412-413 that, while perhaps not a complete explanation, at least draw an interpretation from clear scriptures?

Messrs. Crosier and Beecher are long dead, so we cannot ask them about their selective quotation of *The Comprehensive Commentary on the Holy Bible*—whether it was an honest mistake or whether they used it to prop up what they already believed. Yet we can see in this example why Paul's seemingly obvious words to Timothy are as needed now as they were in the first century. Scripture *must* be the basis for doctrine, for it alone is "like silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times" ([Psalm 12:6](#)). We must rigorously test all other explanations and discard them if we find them wanting, always prioritizing Scripture over human interpretations.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Who Fulfills the Azazel Goat—Satan or Christ? \(Part One\)](#)

by David C. Grabbe

For years, the church of God has taught that the azazel goat, found in the instructions for the Atonement (Yom Kippur) offering in Leviticus 16, represented Satan taking man's sins on his own head and being led into outer darkness, taking sin with him. However, Scripture does not support this interpretation. David Grabbe focuses on the inappropriateness of Satan as a sacrifice for sin, as well as what the Bible shows that the azazel goat actually accomplishes.

If you would like to subscribe to the C.G.G. Weekly newsletter, please visit our [Email Subscriptions page](#).
