

**Digging for Gold – a Bible Study Course**  
***Inerrancy: can we trust the Bible?***

Introduction

Critics have always been quick to find so-called ‘mistakes’ in the Bible. Infallibility and inerrancy are not themselves biblical terms, and some would prefer words such as reliability; it is important not to exaggerate the Bible’s claim about itself or to lose sight of its main purpose (the revelation of God and the way of salvation): see 2 Tim. 3:15, Rom. 15:4, John 10:35.

**Defining terms**

*‘The Bible in its entirety is God’s written Word to man, free of error in its original AUTOGRAPHS, wholly reliable in history and doctrine. Its divine inspiration has rendered the Book INFALLIBLE (incapable of teaching deception) and INERRANT (not liable to prove false or mistaken). Its inspiration is PLENARY (extending to all parts alike), VERBAL (including the actual language form) and CONFLUENT (product of two free agents, human and divine). Inspiration involves infallibility as an essential property, and infallibility in turn implies inerrancy. This threefold designation of Scripture is implicit in the basic thesis of Biblical authority.’ (Clark Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle*)*

**Different approaches to infallibility**

**1. Obscurantism.** This simplistic approach will not consider the possibility of mistakes or problems, or even allow questions: ‘God says it, I believe it, that’s it!’ It is, in fact, a form of (intellectual) dishonesty and can destroy faith rather than encourage it.

**2. Liberalism.** Modernistic teaching has dominated many theological colleges and churches in the last 100 years. It doubts the historicity of the biblical record, and usually follows one of these lines: ‘It’s faith that matters, not facts’ or ‘The Bible is so full of holes that it cannot be used as a final authority for doctrine’.

**3. A ‘faithful’ approach.** This begins with faith in God and His Word, yet also handles the difficulties in Scripture with honesty, integrity and humility: *‘I believe so that I may understand’* (Anslem). It is not characterised by scepticism and doubt, and is able to ‘hold’ problems even when there is no ready solution.

\* It recognises that theology does depend on history (e.g. the facts of the resurrection are foundational to belief, 1 Cor. 15: esp. v17).

\* It recognises that a God who cannot lie cannot speak in words and events that are untrue (inspiration implies infallibility). The Bible is true both in what it *teaches* (doctrine) and in what it *touches* (history, geography, etc).

**Issues to be faced**

**1. Autographs** (‘Scripture as originally given’)

No original manuscripts are extant, though there are 5,000 copies of Scripture (not all complete) dating from antiquity. The earliest NT fragment (John 18, five verses) may date

from around 130AD; the Codex Sinaiticus (complete NT) and Codex Vaticanus (part of NT)

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are *circa* 350AD. No two manuscripts are identical, but it is estimated that only 1,000th of the NT is doubtful, and no doctrine is dependent on such passages.

Scribes were trained to copy accurately, but some errors do occur: 2 Sam. 10:18 *cf* 1 Chron. 19:18. There are no written vowels in Hebrew so scribes had to judge some words by the context, which may explain some of the very large numbers in the OT. There are some possible scribal additions in the NT, such as in Luke 15:21 where the NIV omits (correctly) one sentence. Scholars question whether the following were part of the original autographs: John 7:53-8:11, Mark 16:9-20, Acts 8:37, 1 John 5:7. Note that the oldest mss available to the AV translators were dated around 900AD.

## **2. Literary form and culture**

A rigid literalist approach fails to recognise the variety of literary forms, and the nature of symbolism. For example, Jas 1:1 cannot be a reference to the literal 12 tribes of Israel; more significantly, the apocalyptic literature (especially Revelation) is essentially symbolic. Are there symbolic elements in the creation account? (e.g. the tree of the knowledge of good and evil). References to pagan mythology (e.g. Isa. 27:1, about Leviathan) are in no way intended to present them as factual. Poetry expresses truth non-literally (Ps. 75:3), and narrative passages contain metaphor (Gen. 7:11). The parables of Jesus were (mainly and probably) fictional, and He used hyperbole (deliberate exaggeration, as in Matt. 5:19-30). There were also some traditional formats (such as the genealogies of the NT) that are foreign to, and therefore judged inaccurate by, the western mind.

A surprising element in NT quotations from the OT is that they are sometimes adapted or apparently misquoted (Eph. 4:8 *cf* Ps. 68:18); it seems that a degree of flexibility was acceptable, which raises some interesting questions!

## **3. Historicity**

There are a number of historical 'inaccuracies': some are explainable; some do not detract from the main message of the account in any way; others remain problematic.

*Chronology:* The temptations of Jesus are given in different orders (Matt. 4 - bread, mountain, temple; Luke 4 - bread, temple, mountain). When did Jairus' daughter die? (Matt 9:18 *cf* Luke 8:49). Matthew arranged his material thematically (groups of seven miracles/sayings) so it is clear he was not attempting a strict chronological account.

*Discrepancies:* How many of Jacob's family went to Egypt? (Gen. 46: 27 *cf* Acts 7:14).

*Selectivity:* None of the Gospels give the complete inscription that was on the cross.

*Non-confirmation:* Some biblical narratives are not paralleled in secular history - it is often claimed that there is no extra-biblical evidence for the Israelite captivity in Egypt, or for Moses and the exodus. It was once held that writing had not been invented in Moses' time, but in 1974-5 archaeologists found examples that predated Moses by 800 years. *Nothing but the Truth* (Brian Edwards) contains numerous examples of how Scripture has been confirmed by historical research and discovery.

*'When total precision of a particular kind was not expected or aimed at, it is no error not to have achieved it. Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed.'* From *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978)

#### 4. Science

Rooted in their culture and understanding of the world, biblical writers used the language of *phenomena* (what they saw), not the technical language of the modern scientist; Paul was neither a physician nor a physicist! The story about the sun standing still (Josh. 10:12-14)

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may describe what was seen, not what actually happened. The three decker (flat earth) universe was how it appeared to people in biblical times; it was not a scientific theorem. The creation account has long been a ground for debate, but it is worth asking whether it is essential to interpret it as a literal scientific record and also, of course, whether the theory of evolution is proven. The Bible contains so many miracle stories, that it is an essential element of faith to believe the unexplainable. Scripture does not teach science, but neither does it contradict it.

*'The right course... is to recognise that biblical references to nature and history, so far from being 'scientific' in the modern technical sense, are simply declarations, naive, phenomenal, and nontechnical, about God in relation to the world of our direct experience; and further to recognise that they are expressed in such concepts of nature as contemporary culture provided... without in any way affirming or absolutizing those concepts, but simply using them as the apparatus and means for affirming something else - something about God's relation to his creatures, and theirs to him.'* (J.I. Packer)

#### 5. Morality

If the Bible is infallible, then is its view of God's character also beyond question? Many OT Scriptures in particular raise problems: e.g. the 'herem' (holy wars against the Canaanites, Josh. 6:17); the imprecatory psalms (such as 55, 69, 109, 137); God's approval of deception and murder (e.g. Judg. 5:24-27). However, these are not examples of moral crudity, but highlight God's righteous judgement of sin. In the NT this judgement is related to eternity (e.g. Rom. 3:5,19, 2 Thess. 1:6-10); and God's punishment is meted out on Christ. Difficult moral passages always represent part of the truth or point to fuller revelation, and need to be set alongside other texts that give a rounded view of God's character.

### **We need to affirm...**

1. THAT, in spite of all the strong academic attacks upon it, the *reliability* of the Bible has been confirmed many times. There are 'reasonable' grounds for accepting its inspiration.
2. THAT the Bible is not a confusing book, full of problems. The doctrine of *perspicuity* emphasises that its message is plain and open to everyone. God's Word is light.
3. THAT there is a *consistency* and *unity* in the biblical message that is remarkable in view of the differences of time, language and personality involved in its composition.
4. THAT human reasoning and examination of biblical problems may be faulty (1 Cor. 1:17ff). There is a need for *humility* - humanism deifies the human mind (which is corrupt).
5. THAT the main issue is one of *authority* and *submission* to what God says, not scholarship.
6. THAT we will maintain and proclaim a high view of Scripture, recognising it as God's Word that will never pass away.

