



# Doctrines of REVELATION

## VI. INERRANCY

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Previously we have learned that God has revealed Himself to us generally and specifically – through creation, conscience, Word, and Christ. We have also learned that the process through which He revealed Himself to us specifically, via the Bible, was by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the biblical authors. This means that the Spirit of God worked within the psychologies, social upbringing, and historical particularities of the authors of scripture to bring forth what He intended to reveal about His being and purposes.

Now we come to another central component of a DOCTRINE OF REVELATION, the topic of inerrancy.

### 1. BROADLY DEFINING INERRANCY

Very broadly inerrancy is about affirming that the Bible is truthful or without error. Generally stated it is as one writer has said,

“[W]henver the Bible speaks to us about the content of our beliefs (doctrine) or the pattern of our living (ethics) or records events (history) it speaks the truth.”<sup>1</sup>

The term “inerrancy” is usually coupled with another theological term “infallibility.” While they may seem synonymous to our ears, they really have subtle differences with overlap. While inerrancy has to do with “having no error” infallibility has to do with “never being in or able to error.” Sound the same? Consider an illustration to understand the difference:

“A student can take a test made up of twenty questions and get twenty correct answers, giving him an inerrant test. However, the student’s inerrancy in this restricted arena does not make him infallible, as mistakes on subsequent tests would verify.”<sup>2</sup>

It therefore goes without saying that infallibility and inerrancy flow out of inspiration. As has been said,

“What is *inspired* is *infallible*, since inspired means to be breathed out by God, and what is God-breathed cannot be in error. Likewise, what is *infallible*, since it has divine authority, must also be *inerrant*—as divinely authoritative error is a contradiction in terms.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, pg. 51

<sup>2</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Everyone’s a Theologian*, pg. 31

<sup>3</sup> Geisler, Norman. *Systematic Theology*. Volume 1. pg 494

## 1. BIBLICAL DATA ON INERRANCY

For any accurate theological reflection there must be a consideration and synthesis of the biblical data. Consider the following:

- The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times  
**PSALM 12:6 (ESV)**
- This God—his way is perfect; the word of the Lord proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.  
**PSALM 18:30 (ESV)**
- Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar.  
**PROVERBS 30:5-6 (ESV)**
- <sup>16</sup>All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.  
**TIMOTHY 3:16-17 (ESV)**
- <sup>18</sup>For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup>Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.... Scripture cannot be broken<sup>35</sup>.... Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth<sup>17</sup>.  
**MATTHEW 5:18-19 and JOHN 10:35 and JOHN 17:17**

So, we have the biblical data. It is clear the biblical authors and Jesus Himself affirmed that the Bible was truthful and as a result it was sufficient for teaching, correcting, and leading a person to salvation. But this still needs to be fleshed out in a more systematic way.

What exactly does "THE BIBLE IS TRUTH" mean? In what way is it truth? To what extent is it truthful?

What these questions bring up is various theological views or theories on the nature of biblical inerrancy that I would like to briefly highlight.

## 2. VARIOUS VIEWS OF INNERANCY

Let me briefly give a general overview of some of the key views of inerrancy that have existed in Christian theological thought. Again, as with inspiration, consider what is less orthodox and what is more orthodox in comparison to the data of scripture.<sup>4</sup>

- **ABSOLUTE INERRANCY** – This view sees inerrancy as encompassing the idea that every tidbit of the Bible is accurate and to be understood in a strict fundamentalist manner. This means to say that the Bible gives exact or precise descriptions of phenomena whether it be scientific or historical or theological.
- **FULL INERRANCY** – Is similar to absolute inerrancy but takes into account a key word: CONTEXT. On this view something can only be classified as “TRUE” when the historical, cultural, linguistic, and literary CONTEXT of the statement or teaching is considered in its fullness. In other words, this requires sensitivity to the plethora of literary and linguistic variations and socio-historical peculiarities of the time of the original writers in order to understand what was actually being said.
- **LIMITED INERRANCY** – This view focuses primarily upon the didactic or doctrinal parts of scripture by saying that inerrancy is a product of “what is taught” or “what is prescriptive” not necessarily what is “shown” or “what is descriptive.” In other words, by example, Genesis 1-2 may be teaching us “theological truth” of Creation as made to reveal God and that humans are made in His image, but it is not giving us “historical or scientific truth” of God creating the world in six twenty-four hour days.
- **PRAGMATIC INERRANCY** – This view focuses upon the purpose for which Scripture was written. In other words, inerrancy is not a product of the TEXT but is rather a product of the PURPOSE of the text. Scripture exists to bring people into relationship with the living God – thus it is that process or purpose that is errorless, but not necessarily the particulars of the text itself. So on such a view Moses could be in error, or Isaiah, or Mark, or Paul could be in error factually about a particular historical or scientific point but the overall “functional usefulness” of their words, to drive a person toward relationship with God, is what is truly “errorless.” On such a position inerrancy is not a product of propositions (statements about reality) but a product of persons (existential).
- **ACCOMODATION** – This view does not believe in the idea of an “errorless” book. It holds to the idea that God worked through errored humans (accommodated to their level) who gave us an errored book or set of books. It is said that there are a plurality of perspectives within the Bible with a plurality of contradictions which reveals the human nature of the text. On such a view the Bible is still a fundamentally important historical religious text, and it can even be respected or revered or taught, but it should not be held to the level of timeless divine truth imposing its sometimes archaic pre-enlightened standards to our present conditions or concerns.

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<sup>4</sup> Consider reading Millard Erickson's section on this, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 248-250 for a general overview OR read the book *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy (Counterpoints: Bible and Theology)*, 2013, ed. J. Merrick, in which five major biblical scholars give their views on the role and nature of biblical inerrancy OR if you don't have the time then consider reading this article that summarizes the five major views of inerrancy <https://gavinortlund.com/2013/12/25/a-review-of-five-views-on-biblical-inerrancy/>. Also consider theologian and apologist Norman Geisler's response to the Five Views book here <https://www.tms.edu/m/msj25e.pdf>

### 3. REFINING THE DEFINITION OF INERRANCY

In the famous Chicago Conference on Biblical Inerrancy in 1978, in which over 300 of the most prominent evangelical theologians, biblical scholars, and church leaders formalized the statement of inerrancy by saying the following,

Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises. . . . Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives. . . . Inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original. <sup>5</sup>

I mention this simply to affirm the mass affirmation of orthodox evangelical Christians on the issue of inerrancy and how it has been defined and understood classically. But for a more succinct statement consider the definition of theologian Paul Feinberg:

"[W]hen all the facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything that they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences."<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps, however, the most concise, and my favorite, definitions of inerrancy would be from theologian Millard Erickson:

"Inerrancy maintains merely that whatever statements the Bible affirms are fully truthful when they are correctly interpreted in terms of their meaning in their cultural setting and the purpose for which they were written."<sup>7</sup>

Now it is important to notice several elements of consideration in these definitional understandings of inerrancy. Consider:

- **Inerrancy involves considering ALL CONTEXTUAL FACTS** – This means all the historical, linguistic, social, literary environments that shape a particular piece of writing.
- **Inerrancy involves considering PURPOSE/INTENT** – This means considering why an author wrote what they wrote when they wrote it in the style they wrote it. It means considering audience which in turns means considering context! It's all linked!
- **Inerrancy involves considering ORIGINAL AUTOGRAPHS** – This means considering transmission across time to understand if what we have today is what really was given thousands of years ago.
- **Inerrancy involves PROPER/CORRECT INTERPRETATION** – This means a systematic methodology of interpretive tools and skills to make sure we AS OBJECTIVELY AS POSSIBLE get the ACTUAL MEANING of a text. In other words, letting the text speak for itself!

These understandings are not special pleading for understanding the Bible. These are things we must do in order to understand ANYTHING from the past! You cannot just make up what you want about the past. Although the past is gone it was objectively real. It had real people, real languages, real cultures, real ways of life, and if we have any hope of understanding the past we have to consider the context, consider why people did what they did, consider the actual documents and artifacts from that time, consider how we are coming to our conclusions, and such and so forth.

By way of example consider what is involved in us being able to understand the lyrics of songs. There are two I will briefly mention:

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<sup>5</sup> Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, found at [http://www.danielakin.com/wp-content/uploads/old/Resource\\_545/Book%20-%20Sec%202023.pdf](http://www.danielakin.com/wp-content/uploads/old/Resource_545/Book%20-%20Sec%202023.pdf), pg. 2 and 4

<sup>6</sup> Paul D. Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), pg. 294.

<sup>7</sup> Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pg. 263

In 2011 Tim Hawkins, the Christian comedian made a parody video to the tune of Willy-Wonka's "The Candy Man Can" song entitled "The Government Can." It was hilarious. But I want you to consider the lyrics and why they are funny,

Who can take your money? (Who can take your money?)

With a twinkle in their eye? (With a twinkle in their  
Eye?)

Take it all away and  
Give it to some other guy

...

The Government takes  
Everything we make  
To pay for all of their "solutions"  
Healthcare, Climate Change, Pollution  
(Throw away the Constitution)

Who can give a bailout? (Who can give a bailout?)

Tell us to behave? (Tell us to behave?)

Make the Founding Fathers  
Roll over in their graves

Consider what is involved in you being able to UNDERSTAND the lyrics. Granted the lyrics are in our modern times and we get it. But what if we looked back at these lyrics 50 years from now. How would we KNOW what is being said? Consider first how we know now. You must understand historical socio-cultural context, the purpose of the song, the intended audience, and the original wording all for you to correctly interpret what is going on.

Or consider another example. Consider "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," lyrics and their meaning.<sup>8</sup>

Have yourself a merry little Christmas  
Let your heart be light  
From now on, our troubles will be out of sight  
Have yourself a merry little Christmas  
Make the Yuletide gay  
From now on, our troubles will be miles away  
Here we are as in olden days  
Happy golden days of yore  
Faithful friends who are dear to us  
Gather near to us once more  
Through the years we all will be together  
If the fates allow  
So hang a shining star upon the highest bough  
And have yourself a merry little Christmas now

Have yourself a merry little Christmas  
Let your heart be light

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<sup>8</sup> <https://blogs.transparent.com/english/have-yourself-a-merry-little-christmas/>; <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/12/have-yourself-a-merry-little-christmas-an-ode-to-seasonal-melancholy/421374/>; <https://ew.com/article/2007/01/08/history-popular-holiday-song/>

From now on, our troubles will be out of sight  
Have yourself a merry little Christmas  
Make the Yuletide gay

From now on, our troubles will be miles away  
Here we are as in olden days  
Happy golden days of yore  
Faithful friends who are dear to us  
Gather near to us once more  
Through the years we all will be together  
If the fates allow  
So hang a shining star upon the highest bough  
And have yourself a merry little Christmas now

**Now, what we want to do is consider what all this DOESN'T MEAN and what it DOES MEAN regarding inerrancy.**

#### 4. WHAT INERRANCY MEANS AND WHAT IT DOESN'T MEAN

##### A. WHAT INERRANCY MEANS...

- i. **"Inerrancy means the original text is errorless."** It is important to understand this point clearly. When theologians say, "The Bible is the inerrant Word of God," what is technically being said is that the original biblical writings are the inerrant Word of God, not the copies of the copies of the copies of the original biblical writings, and not the translations of the translations, of the translations. Sounds weird and maybe a little scary. Let's work this out.

This raises a conundrum for the biblical inerrantist. How can we say the ORIGINAL TEXT was inerrant when we don't have the original text but only copies of copies of copies of copies of the original? Self-proclaimed skeptic and New Testament textual critic, Bart Ehrman, makes this jarring point very clear in his book Misquoting Jesus,

**How does it help us to say that the Bible is the inerrant word of God if in fact we don't have the words that God inerrantly inspired, but only the words copied by the scribes—sometimes correctly but sometimes (many times!) incorrectly? What good is it to say that the autographs (i.e., the originals) were inspired? We don't have the originals! We have only error-ridden copies...."**<sup>9</sup>

This objection cannot go left unanswered. It is a profound objection that can undermine our confidence and trust in Scripture by undermining the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. So, what do we say to the Bart Ehrman's of the world?

Well, I believe it will be helpful to consider a distinction commonly made by metaphysicians between WORD TOKENS and WORD TYPES.<sup>10</sup> Stick with me. This will get a little philosophical for a moment, but the point is extremely important. Start by considering the following words:

TWO                      DUO                      ZWEI                      2                      II

Now ask yourself, "How many words are there?" Are there five or are there one? The answer to the question can gain some clarity by considering philosophically TOKENS and TYPES in linguistics.

A token is an individual particular kind of thing that can exist in only one place at one time. Types on the other hand are universals that are repeatable and can be in more than one place at one time

So, if we were again asking how many "WORD TOKENS" are there in the above example the answer would be FIVE: each word is its own particularity or individual entity in a different form: English, Latin, German, Western Numeral, and Roman Numeral. They simply are not the same constructed word visually. But how many "WORD TYPES" are there present? The answer would be ONE: each of the tokens, although linguistically structured differently, all represent the same universal meaning which is "TWO." **So even though all five words above are different they hold the same meaning.**

You may say, "What does this have to do with autographs and manuscripts of the Bible?" Everything.

You see when the critic claims, "Biblical inerrancy is irrelevant because we do not possess the original autographs," they are really failing to distinguish between the text tokens and the text types of the biblical writings. Possessing the original text (say for example the original text of the Book of Romans) would be a TOKEN and copies from that original would

<sup>9</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why (New York: HarperOne, 2007), pg. 7

<sup>10</sup> This does not originate with me but comes from: Aaron Brake's article from [https://www.str.org/blog/does-lack-original-autographs-make-biblical-inerrancy-irrelevant#\\_ftnref3](https://www.str.org/blog/does-lack-original-autographs-make-biblical-inerrancy-irrelevant#_ftnref3); and also from more meaty readings from J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig in Philosophical Foundations of a Christian Worldview (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), chapter 12; and the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy article on types and tokens, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/types-tokens/>

be TOKENS but the words within both, although different, contain the same TYPES or meanings. It is because of this that transmission or translation across ethnic and linguistic barriers is even possible.

So, it is important to understand that when we think of the “TOKENS” of scripture (or any other historical manuscripts) we are thinking of a material object (i.e., literal ink scribbled on papyrus or parchment) and when we think of the “TYPES”, we are thinking of a bearer of meaning applicable across the various material objects. Because of this although scholars do not possess the original autographs (original tokens) it doesn’t mean that from the copies (other tokens) they cannot with high degrees of consistency reconstruct backward to the original type (meaning within the tokens).

In short having the original TOKENS is inconsequential, the key is the preservation of the TYPES, which IS PRESERVED across the myriad of manuscripts (tokens).

But a question then surfaces: How do we know the “meaning” of token copies is the “meaning” of the original token? This is where textual criticism comes in.

“Textual criticism” is the science of determining the wording and meaning of a document whose original is lost – a process used by ALL MODERN HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION about the past. To do textual criticism one needs to consider some of the following steps (this is in no way exhaustive):

- You have to consider how many copies of an original you have
- You have to consider the distance of the copies’ origin dates from the date of the original writing
- You have to consider the variants that exist between the copies across time
- You have to consider the linguistic and socio-cultural changes across the time of transmission
- You have to consider the styles, methods, and degrees of transmission from various traditions

When you do this kind of investigation, which is a lifestyle of devoted study, you can see that to not have the original text is inconsequential because it is not the particular TOKENS (material texts) that are at issue but really the overall TYPES (meaning being conveyed).

Now without going into a full-length treatment on the topic of textual criticism, Daniel B. Wallace, Executive Director of The Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts and one of the most prominent biblical textual critics today, notes the following concerning the New Testament text specifically:<sup>11</sup>

- There are nearly 6,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament text today
- There are nearly at least 20,000 manuscripts in other languages of the New Testament – this would include Latin, Coptic, Syrian, Georgian, Gothic, Ethiopic and others
- There are more than 1,000,000 quotations of the New Testament text found within the writings of the Early Church Fathers (c. 100-700 A.D.)
- The earliest manuscripts, about a dozen or so, date from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Over a period of 1400 years, the New Testament text grew by only 2%.
- While there are as many as 400,000 textual variants among the manuscripts. About 70% of those are misspelled words, 29% of them relate to a difference of word ordering of phrasing, and only about 1% of the variants are classified as meaningful (to some degree) and viable by textual critics today. However

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<sup>11</sup> Consider reading Wallace’s chapter “Has the New Testament Text Been Hopelessly Corrupted,” found in *In Defense of the Bible: A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture*, ed. Steven Cowan and Terry Wilder, (Nashville, Broadman & Holman, 2013), pg. 139-164



- none of the variants changes the meaning of any essential teaching of the nature or work of God of Christ or the nature or ethical prescriptive to His people.
- Not one textual variant in this category (meaningful and viable) affects any essential Christian doctrine or teaching.

When we consider this kind of data from the work of textual critics, we can clearly state that we have good reason to believe that today we have the ORIGINAL TEXT TYPE of the Bible even though we do not possess the ORIGINAL TEXT TOKENS.

So, the issue really isn't, "Do we have the original text?" rather it is an issue of, "What did the original text mean?"

The original writing of the Bible (or any other ancient work) is present today because of the work of textual criticism; the only concern then is the essential need to identify its meaning. That is an epistemological and interpretive question not a problem of historical textual reliability. This brings me to the second point about inerrancy.

- ii. "Inerrancy means taking seriously biblical interpretive considerations." As has been said, although we do not have the original biblical text it doesn't mean we don't have the original meaning of that text. It took a while to build that point, but it was a crucial one that needed to be broken down and understood because upon it hangs the understanding that biblical inerrancy is a product of the ORIGINAL TEXT and not a product of the copies. So, then the central issue becomes one of understanding what the original text said. We thus move to the issue of interpretation.

The scriptural text is inspired, the text is objective, but your feelings or beliefs about it are not. It is not enough for you to say, "I just feel the text says this or that..." It is far more important to understand what the ACTUAL CONTEXTUAL OBJECTIVE MEANING is otherwise it isn't God's Word, it's just your words masquerading as God's.

So, understanding "what God said" requires understanding "how God said it" and that involves you having to take seriously biblical history, language, and literature. It means taking seriously biblical interpretive methodology otherwise known as **biblical hermeneutics**. Without extensive detail consider some of these fundamental hermeneutical rules of interpretation when coming to understanding the original meaning of any historical text, biblical or secular:<sup>12</sup>

- Consider the original author and their intentions
- Consider the original readers and their mindsets
- Consider the historical and socio-cultural contexts
- Consider the literary genre and linguistic particulars
- Consider the text in light of other biblical texts
- Consider the text in the light of extra-biblical texts

When you do these steps along the interpretive journey you move yourself closer and closer to understanding the original meaning of the writings of scripture rather than imbedding your own subjective meanings. For a little more specificity on this point consider these following points that you need to consider in hermeneutical endeavors toward the Bible:

- **THE TYPES OF LITERATURE:** The Bible is a collection of 66 different books by at least 40 different authors, writing across a span of 1,400 years, in a variety of literary genres. Some wrote historical narrative, some wrote poetry, some write biography, some wrote apocalyptically, some wrote prophetically, and so on and

<sup>12</sup> Some general resources for understanding biblical interpretational rules: <http://www.apologeticsindex.org/5846-biblical-interpretation-rules>; [http://www.reformationtheology.com/2012/11/16\\_rules\\_of\\_biblical\\_interpret.php](http://www.reformationtheology.com/2012/11/16_rules_of_biblical_interpret.php); <https://www.monergism.com/practical-guidelines-biblical-interpretation>

so forth. This means when you come to the Bible you cannot use a one size fits all approach to interpretation. It has never been seen to be such. In the history of Christian theological thought, it has been understood that to understand what God has said requires understanding the historical and literary context in which the human authors wrote. This brings up a second related point.

- **LINGUISTIC SOCIO-HISTORICAL PECULIARITIES:** If you want to be a truly deep student of the Bible then you need to take seriously the human ways in which people talk and write in the particular socio-historical times in which they live, move, and have their being. This is a basic hermeneutical principle: let the author speak, don't try and put your preconceived views on them! Consider these few peculiarities that need to be looked at with ancient writings like the Bible:<sup>13</sup>

- a. **Phenomenological Language** – How do you describe seeing the sun in the morning? Do you say, "The sun rises in the east and sets in the west?" Well, you are right and wrong. On a hyper technical scientific level the sun doesn't move, the earth is moving. But no one lives like that and thinks like that on a regular basis, except probably Sheldon Cooper from The Big Bang Theory. Naturally, organically, you say, "The sun rises." Why? Because you are describing linguistically what you see from YOUR vantage point! So, it isn't wrong to say because experientially that is correct.

My point is, if you are not so scientifically literalistic then why expect such from the Bible? The Bible is a communication of everyday people describing events from the perspectives they have. I love what one theologian has said to this point. A.H. Strong (1836-1921), early 20<sup>th</sup> Century theologian, asked,

"Would it be preferable, in the Old Testament, if we should read: 'When the revolution of the earth upon its axis caused the rays of the solar luminary to imping horizontally upon the retina, Isaac went out to meditate' (Gen 24:63)?"

- b. **Anthropomorphism** – This is where the author used a form of personification that ascribes human characteristics (such as human actions, emotions, or physical attributes) to God. This is language of appearance to make God relatable to the narrative within the scripture. Consider:

And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.  
**Genesis 6:6 (ESV)**

- c. **Hyperbole** – This is a use of exaggeration for emphasis or rhetorical effect. It is not to be pressed for a literal meaning but rather an exaggerated meaning to make a point. Examples of this would be,

And the king made silver and gold as common in Jerusalem as stone, and he made cedar as plentiful as the sycamore of the Shephelah.  
**II Chronicles 1:15 (ESV)**

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<sup>13</sup> Go to these places to read more about particular literary techniques used: <https://carm.org/bible-literary-techniques>

And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell,[a] to the unquenchable fire.

Mark 9:43 (ESV)

So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him."

John 12:19 (ESV)

- d. **Chronology, Imprecision, & Displacement** — Ancient texts are not laid out in the same fashion as modern texts. This is especially true if we look at ancient histories or biographies. Such writings tend to be laid out in accordance with getting across a particular theme or idea rather than trying to give the reader a detailed chronological account of the life and times of the person or events being discussed. This means their texts can at times be imprecise in details or all together displace certain details based upon the narrative structure. This is not to be taken as deliberately being false but as rather acceptable historiographical standards of the day.

For example, when you read the Four Gospels about Jesus' life and ministry you come to find that there seem to be inconsistencies among them. By way of consideration look at the **temptation narratives of Jesus in Luke 4 and Matthew 4**.<sup>14</sup> The temptations are the same in both gospels but with variations. In Matthew the final temptation of Jesus occurs when Satan offers the kingdoms of the world to Him on a high mountain. By contrast in Luke the temptations end with Jesus being tempted to jump off the pinnacle of the temple.

To "enlightened moderns" it may seem as if the Gospels are not giving an accurate portrayal of what occurred — that there is error present. But this is foolish when considering the methodologies of ancient writers comparably to modern ones. Ancient authors, as stated, were concerned with presenting motifs and themes or the character and teachings of a particular figure within a narrative frame.<sup>15</sup> This meant that many times narrative was more important than chronology or particularity to ancient authors — although this was not a set rule. What it did mean is that although they may be recording an actual historical event, they would shape the details of that event around the greater presentation of a theme, symbol, or teaching. Sounds odd to us who are used to a historical survey or detailed account of the lives of famous people, but that is a modern understanding of biography.

Now let's be clear: This isn't special pleading for the New Testament. This kind of historical narrative construction existed in almost all major accounts of Greco-Roman histories — such as Plato's (428-347 B.C.) writings of his teacher Socrates, or Isocrates' (436-338 B.C.) biography of King Evagoras of Cyprus, or Xenophon's (427-354 B.C.) biography of the Spartan leader Agesilaus, or in Suetonius' (69-122 A.D.) Lives of the Caesars, and many many others.

So back to the temptation narratives in Luke and Matthew in light of all this...

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<sup>14</sup> Consider reading the Gospel Coalition article by Robert Plummer, *Do Inconsistencies in the Gospels Undermine Scripture's Inerrancy?*, published Aug. 27, 2018 <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/tgc-asks-inconsistencies-gospels-undermine-scriptures-authority/> to get a better sense of the seeming inconsistencies within the New Testament gospels

<sup>15</sup> Highly recommend reading this long but interesting article on understanding New Testament gospels as ancient biography and how that compares to our understanding of a modern biography: <http://www.tektonics.org/ntdocdef/gospelbioi.php>

By choosing two different presentations of Jesus' temptations, Luke and Matthew are not being untruthful or contradictory. Rather they are emphasizing different facts of the event discussed within the frame of a deeper symbolism of their intended narration. For example Matthew employs mountains as a prominent motif in his gospel all throughout; his Gospel recounts the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5–7 and ends on a mountaintop with Jesus saying, "Go make disciples of all nations" and this is with a backdrop of considering how mountaintop revelation plays a significant role in the history of Israel. Thus, Matthew focuses the event of Jesus' temptations upon His final temptation on a mountain.

On the other hand, because Luke's Gospel is concerned with the temple's relevance in light of its new-covenant fulfillment in Jesus he makes Christ's temple temptation the final temptation.

Another good example of seeming inconsistencies within the Gospel narratives would be **accounts of the death of Judas Iscariot**. In Matthew 27:3-5 we read what happens to Judas after he had betrayed Jesus:

<sup>3</sup>Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, <sup>4</sup>saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." <sup>5</sup>And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself.

So, based on Matthew Judas committed suicide by hanging himself. But when you turn over to Acts 1 you find a seemingly different account of his death. In Acts 1:15-19 Luke quotes Peter speaking before the disciples after the Ascension about selecting a new apostle to replace Judas. Luke adds background with a parenthetical comment:

<sup>15</sup>In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, <sup>16</sup>"Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. <sup>17</sup>For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." <sup>18</sup>(Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. <sup>19</sup>And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)

So, in this narrative Judas seems to have fallen over and his entrails fell out. So, what is going on with these narratives? Are they strictly inconsistent? No. These two narratives are not two separate contradictory accounts. To be a logical contradiction a statement A would have to be true at the same time and in the same way statement non-A is true. For example it would have to be true that "I went to Kroger at 2:30 PM on Tuesday to pick up some milk AND I didn't go to Kroger at 2:30 PM on Tuesday to pick up some milk." That scenario is logically contradictory and literally impossible. THAT is an example of a blatant error.

Now consider this scenario: I am talking to some people about how I went to the grocery store earlier in the week to pick up some things. To the first person I say, "My wife and I went to the

store earlier this week to pick up some drinks,” and then speaking to another person say, “While I was in Kroger earlier this week I picked up some Cheerios,” and still then to another I say, “On Tuesday around 2:20ish my wife went to the store and got her car hit by a young teenage driver!” Collectively these statements ARE NOT logically contradictory. Why? Because a clear-thinking person could consider the entirety of the data and construct, beyond all reasonable doubt, what really happened was . . .

I and my wife went to Kroger on Tuesday around 2:00-2:30 to get some milk, eggs, and Cheerios. When we got out of the store and started up the car, we pulled out of our parking spot, and a young teenage driver hit us in the side

Differences may denote difficulties, but they do not denote contradictions.

So, regarding the Judas example . . . That is not a contradiction, it can simply be met with the plausibility of the authors imprecision or displacement which can be mitigated if your consider certain kinds of harmonization’s, as in the example of I, my wife, and the Kroger incident.

- **DIDACTIC VS. NARRATIVE SCRIPTURE:** Didactic is simply the portions of the Bible that directly and explicitly teach a spiritual or theological idea or principle about life, God, the Church, salvation, Christ . . . ect. Narrative is, as it implies, portions of text that are teaching indirectly and implicitly a spiritual lesson or idea or theme.

As theologian Michael Horton (1964-present), Professor of Theology and Apologetics at Westminster Seminary California, has rightly said,

“[The] Bible was generated in the context of a covenantal drama. The script includes the speaking parts of [faithful and] unfaithful covenant servants, whose speech is . . . judged and corrected by the covenant Lord within the unfolding dialogue . . . . Therefore it is impossible to treat every word [in the Bible] as normative, much less as the direct utterance of God. Yet the Bible as a whole is God’s inspired script for the drama of redemption.”<sup>16</sup>

As way of an example consider Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed (Mark 4),

<sup>30</sup>And he said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? <sup>31</sup>It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth,<sup>32</sup>yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

<sup>33</sup>With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. <sup>34</sup>He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.  
**MARK 4:30-34 (ESV)**

Some detractors of biblical inerrancy say, “SEE, SEE! JESUS TAUGHT A FALSEHOOD! HE SAID THE MUSTARD SEED IS THE SMALLEST SEED! BUT IT ISNT!” This kind of petty criticism just goes to show how ridiculous skeptical thought can be in our modern times. The point is Jesus is NOT teaching botany here. He is

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith*, pg. 161-162

teaching a deeper truth about the nature of Kingdom of God and its growth in the world. Jesus is teaching the kingdom not science. Thus, the focus is not upon 21<sup>st</sup> Century standards of botanical precision regarding the mustard seed. This is missing the forest for the trees.

In the example Jesus is using hyperbole within a teaching setting to get across a deep spiritual truth. But instead foolish skeptics would like to use this as an example that Jesus was a backward and ignorant 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestinian Jew. It shows a lack of distinguishing between what is taught (prescribed) versus what is part of the narrative (described).

- **THE PROGRESSIVENESS OF REVELATION:** This cannot go understated! Christian theological thought from the beginning has understood that the scriptures are progressive in revealing fuller and fuller vision of who God is and what His plan is. This is not some made-up idea from theologians but comes directly from Scripture about the nature of revelation itself. Consider the words of the author of Hebrews,

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

**HEBREWS 1:1-2 (ESV)**

Also consider Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (**Matthew 5-7**) where He repeatedly would say the phrase, "You have heard it said...but I say to you." This was His way of realigning the true intention of the Old Testament, revealing a fuller, not a contradictory, understanding of the breadth of God's revelation. Jesus even went on to say,

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished."

**Matthew 5:17-18 (ESV)**

To bring this point to a close consider the words of one author who said of progressive revelation,

"In the witness of biblical history, one finds a developing manifestation of God, his will, and his truth in the Old and New Testaments. The development is not contradictory...[but] complementary and supplementary to what has been previously revealed. [This progression is] not from untruth to truth but from a lesser to a fuller revelation... Thus we can say that God's particular revelation has been unfolded to us throughout redemptive history."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> David Dockery, "Special Revelation" article in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, pg. 104-105

## B. WHAT INERRANCY DOESN'T MEAN...

- i. **"Whatever the Bible says is true."** This may be shocking but think about it. The Bible catalogues the words of Satan, demons, false-teachers, and rebellious sinners. The things they SAY within the context of the scriptural passage are not true. The falsehoods are truthfully catalogued, but that doesn't mean the falsehoods become truthful!
- ii. **"The Bible doesn't progressively reveal truth."** In other words, inerrancy doesn't mean that TRUTH cannot be revealed in a fuller and fuller measure across time. What this would imply is that you cannot judge the biblical authors "lack of fullness" because of their limited historical, theological, or socio-cultural context. Again remember the words from **HEBREWS 1:1-2** which has a progressive revelatory nature to it.
- iii. **"Our translations are errorless."** Why? Because translations rely upon the autographs, that is the copies of the copies of the original texts. Therefore, translations are adapted and updated as new and better manuscripts come available. This is one of the problems with people who get hung up on a particular bible translation as the be all end all Bible version as coming directly from the throne of God. For example, the King-James-Only crowd believes that the KJV is the only fundamental, inerrant, infallible, translation of God's Word. But since the days of the King James Bible there have been old more accurate manuscripts found that have changed the wording and understanding of particular passages.
- iv. **"The Bible is the only source of objective truth."** What do I mean here? I mean the Bible is a particular book with a particular function thus it is limited in the scope of its content. In other words the Bible is not to be pressed to be a science book or a history book or a psychology book. It is centrally theological. While science, history, and psychology are within it and are touched by it, its central message is theological. This means you cannot ask the Bible to tell you what it was not intended to tell you. This brings us back to the whole discussion about GENERAL REVELATION vs. SPECIAL REVELATION. God reveals truth in Word as well as Nature.