

# *A Rather Tattered Bible!*

**some thoughts on the inerrancy of scripture by**

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There are three Bibles floating around the country –

- the one some people claim that we have – *an infallible Bible, inerrant, free of any imperfection.*
- the one that other people wish that we had – *the same as the above*
- the one we actually do have! – *a Bible that contains many blemishes, omissions, and faults.*

The following thoughts are based on the presumption that you have noticed these things, and perhaps have felt guilty about the questions that sprang into your mind, or were puzzled by the problem, and have wanted an explanation.

Arnold Jago wrote in a letter to *On Being* –

*Unless we can shake ourselves free of the "inerrancy" idea, we are stuck with a "flat Bible", equally authoritative from start to finish. This has disastrous effects. The supreme authority of the teaching of Jesus is lost.*

*Some Christians have felt, for example, that they can justify participation in war by pointing to alleged commands of God to kill in his name (like Je 48:10 and 1 Sa 15:1-3). A flat "inerrant" Bible is a device which*

*conveniently allows the way of Jesus to be set aside – often by people who use his name the most. . . . What Jesus taught (surely) has unique authority for disciples. The rest of the Bible (especially where it reflects sub-Christian thinking) has to occupy a lower place in our lives. For Jesus to have rightful lordship in our lives, the "inerrant Bible" superstition just has to be scrapped.*

**"Inerrancy!"** What a lot of futile heat has been generated by that comparatively modern term! So let me dispose of it before we go any further –

### **a better definition of inerrancy**

I believe emphatically that the Bible *is* "inerrant"– but only in one special way: **it is infallible in all that lies within the Father's intention.** That is, the Bible is absolutely trustworthy in

- all that it **ultimately** affirms, and in
- all that it actually **teaches** concerning God, us, and our salvation.

I do not mean that equal weight can be given to every pronouncement in scripture, but only that when the ***entire*** testimony of the Bible is taken into account, certain doctrines emerge that comprise a divinely given and wholly reliable pathway to eternal life. In the meantime, along the way, the Bible, **as we now have it**, contains among its details an abundance of perplexing omissions, contradictions, gaps, deletions, historical discrepancies, ambiguities, and other literary faults too numerous to list in these notes.

### **evasions of the problem**

Several methods have been adopted by inerrantists to overcome the problems caused by a seemingly blemished Bible. They take refuge in two main solutions –

#### **(a) "The original autographs were free from any error"**

- therefore (they say), the mistakes in our existing biblical text must have been accrued during its transmission across many centuries –

No doubt mistakes *were* made by the various copyists; but (for example) when

- *Chronicles* in more than half a dozen places increases the figures found in *Kings* by a factor of 10, and when

- the various genealogies often show irreconcilable differences, and when
- the sequence given in different places for the same event often varies markedly, we cannot deny that such discrepancies are too severe to be mere copyist's errors.

Further, since none of the original writings have survived, and we are altogether dependent upon fault-laden copies, the claim of a faultless original seems rather pointless, if not a piece of naïve sophistry. We may well ask, "*If the Holy Spirit so carefully inspired unblemished originals, why did he not take equal care to hand on to us perfect copies?*"

In any case, the claim of primitive inerrancy cannot be **proved**. Rather, we can demonstrate only that the copies in our possession, including the most ancient, contain many flaws. Those defects can be smoothed out (if at all) only by the most assiduous study.

Indeed, even attempts by scholars to arrive at a "standard" text by collating all the available ancient manuscripts and copies of scripture have failed. Despite the most strenuous efforts, there is still no scholarly text of either Testament that commands universal acceptance. Nor is there even agreement on the number of books that comprise the canon of scripture –

- Protestants (at least, most of them) hold to the 66 books that were set as the canon by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers
- Roman Catholics add another twelve books, from the Old Testament *Apocrypha*
- Greek Bibles add fifteen books to the Protestant canon, and Slavonic Bibles add sixteen books
- and there are still other variations among different groups of Christians.

It would seem unwarrantedly arrogant for any one of these bodies to claim that **their** Bible is the only truly accurate version, and that all other biblical compilations are erroneous.

**(b) "More knowledge would solve the problem"**

The claim here is that if we could only gain sufficient knowledge of the past, whatever disorder may exist in the biblical texts would be happily resolved. But we lack such knowledge; nor is it conceivable that it could now become available; nor would such a situation be fair to millions of Christians who have had to work with a defective Bible.

Plainly, then, I do not accept the fundamentalist definition of "verbal inerrancy" – that is, that there is no error or contradiction anywhere in scripture, and that every single statement in the Bible must be taken as factually and wholly true, either in itself, or as a record of an event.

Yet there are many who *do* maintain the pious fiction (as it seems to me) of a primitive and faultless text which has become sadly corrupted over the centuries. Even worse, some pretend that our *present* Bible is free of blemishes, as in the following quote –

*The perfect agreement with each other displayed by the biblical writers is one proof that they were all guided by a single Author . . . Even though the Bible was written by many writers over many years, there are no contradictions. The writing of one author does not contradict any of the others. . . . The writers of the Bible spoke on hundreds of controversial subjects with harmony from the first chapter of Genesis through the last chapter of Revelation . . . In the past, when apparent conflicts between the Bible and history or science arose, later investigations always proved the Bible to be correct . . . On every matter the Bible speaks only the truth, and it is free from any error of fact or doctrine.*

Surely no serious reader of the Bible can fail to notice its many textual defects? If such a person encounters these faults, while still trying to hold to a concept of "verbal inerrancy", the result must be a deeply troubled spirit. Any attempt at that moment to fly back to a non-existent original document, which is presumed to have had no imperfection, seems to me to be, not an explanation but an evasion.

## **an affirmation of principle**

### **a basic premise**

All my biblical research is built on the premise that although the Bible (in the form in which we now have it) **contains** errors, it **teaches** none. Against that background I once gathered a random collection of biblical ambiguities, anomalies, gaps, contradictions, probable errors, and the like.

Now, I know that clever scholars offer explanations for a great many, if not all, of these problems, and any good evangelical commentary will provide you with examples of their ingenious solutions. However, since it is impossible to validate such theories, we still face a dilemma – all the theories may be right; equally, they may all be wrong – and in the meantime, we are left holding a fault-laden text.

### **Christ and the Apostles**

Questions about biblical blemishes harass only those who expect a sterile conformity in scripture, which the evidence available to us suggests that it has never had. We must deal with the Bible as it actually is, not as some people wish it were, and, whatever we may think about it, the Book has come to us replete with discrepancies. But this is the very Bible that is "*inbreathed by the Holy Spirit*" (2 Ti 3:16), not some fanciful construct of fundamentalist dreams.

Remember also that the apostle ascribed divine inspiration to a copy of the Hebrew scriptures that was approximately the same as our present *Old Testament*. In other words, the Bible used by Jesus and the apostles contained most of the discrepancies that still trouble inerrantists. Indeed their Bible was in a worse state, because the *Old Testament* canon was not fixed by the rabbis until about the year 100 A.D, and the *New Testament* canon not less than 200 years later.

Further, biblical citations in the *New Testament* show that the apostles were familiar with, and often used, the Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures (the *LXX*), which in many places differs markedly from the Hebrew text, and includes the dozen or more books that Protestants call the *Old Testament Apocrypha*.

None of those things bothered the apostles. Whether Paul (say) turned to the then unfinalised Hebrew version of the Jewish scriptures, or picked up the Greek version, he would have noticed that both of them contained abundant anomalies, discrepancies, and textual faults (omitted words, garbled sentences, and the like). Yet he still said, "*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for instruction, rebuke, discipline, and training in righteousness!*"

I love the Word of God. I unhesitatingly accept the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible. The scriptures are my main rule of life. I turn to it alone for ultimate truth about myself, God, and the destiny appointed for me by the Father. But I am not blind to the state in which it now stands, and therefore accept the necessity for careful, wise, responsible, and truthful handling of this Book of books.