

# CAN WE TRUST THE BIBLE? IS IT WITHOUT ERROR?

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**By Randy Alcorn**

*with assistance from Karen Coleman*

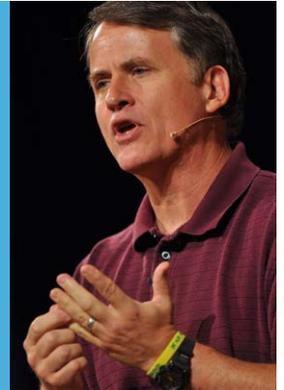


eternal perspective ministries  
with author Randy Alcorn

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

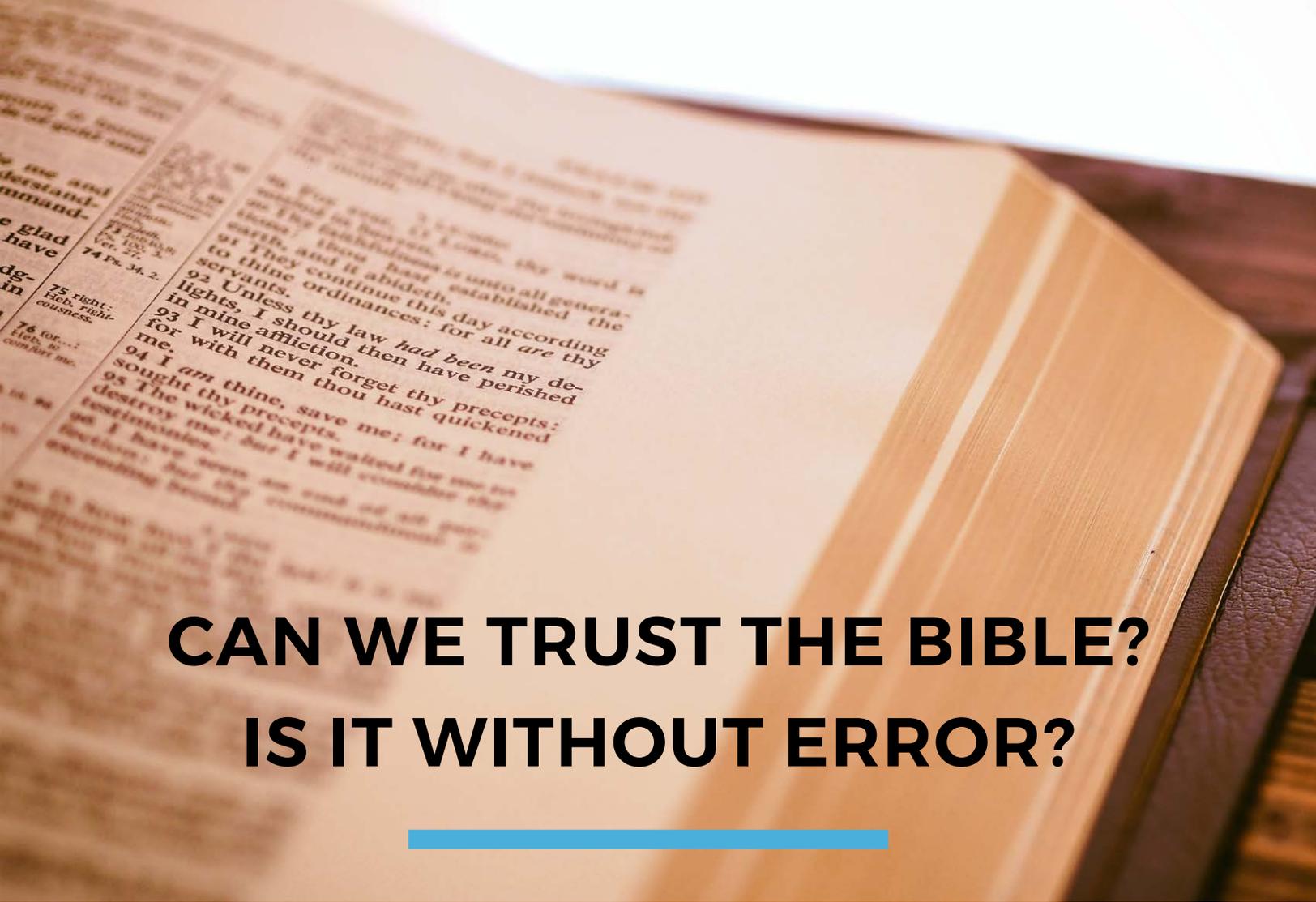
## RANDY ALCORN

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# CAN WE TRUST THE BIBLE? IS IT WITHOUT ERROR?

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I received a letter asking some important questions:

*I believe in the inspiration and authority of Scripture, but I don't think this means I have to believe in inerrancy. The Bible isn't meant to be a textbook, and we don't need to believe in the details of the creation account, the first man and woman in the garden, or about Jonah being swallowed by a whale. The Bible contains parables and metaphors. Why should we have to take it all literally? Why can't we believe it was written by imperfect human beings? And that a lot of scribes and copyists worked their own ideas into the manuscripts? Do I really have to believe the Bible has to be correct in all the little details to be God's Word?*

This isn't just one little question—it's multiple big questions that relate to whether or not the Bible is accurate and dependable, and is really God's eternal truth that's fully trustworthy. This letter is also representative of dozens of others I've received over the years. There are few subjects as important, and with such huge implications for our worldview.

What follows is obviously more than an answer to one question. It's a response to a large number of interrelated ones. Hence it is not blog-length or article-length, but booklet length. Those not wishing to read all of it can skim the table of contents to see what headings they are interested in, then selectively read those parts.

## SHOULD WE ALWAYS INTERPRET THE BIBLE LITERALLY?

First, the question about parables and metaphors. Naturally, the parts of the Bible that should be taken literally are those that were *intended* by the authors to be understood literally. Context normally makes clear when something is to be taken literally and when it is a figure of speech.

The Bible says, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalm 19:1). Everyone knows the heavens aren’t making a verbal declaration or the skies an audible proclamation. The author isn’t claiming stars have vocal cords. The use of poetry, and figures of speech such as metaphor and simile, are helpful and often beautiful communicative techniques. They do not obscure the actual (what some call the “literal”) meaning of the text—in this case, that we should look at the night sky and see it as clear evidence that the Creator God exists in all His wondrous glory. Figurative language delivers truth that speaks both to our hearts and to our minds.

On the other hand, the Bible tells us in Genesis 12 that Abraham (then called Abram), at age 75, set out from Harran to the land of Canaan. We’re told “Abram traveled through the land as far as the site

of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem” (v. 6), where God made promises to him. The passage says, “From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord...Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev” (v. 8-9).

Genesis 12 also tells us there was a famine which caused Abraham to go to Egypt for food. The immediate context includes other stories with details that make it clear this is a straightforward historical account. Therefore, we should know not to take it figuratively. We shouldn’t wonder if Abraham was really 50 or 90, or whether Abraham’s age of 75 is a symbolic number, or whether the tree of Moreh really means the cross of Jesus, or whether the famine that caused him to go to Egypt was a figurative reference to spiritual famine in Abraham’s life. Neither are we to wonder if there really were places called Harran and Bethel, or doubt whether there was a landmark tree of Moreh, or ponder whether it means Abraham slept in a physical tent or under some metaphorical tent of God’s protection.

Obviously these were real places, and of course he slept in an actual tent. This is not parable or allegory; it is history and should be taken literally. It’s as clearly literal as Isaiah 55:12 is clearly figurative: “The mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.” (These beautiful expressions suggest God’s redemptive plan extends not only to people but also to the Earth itself.)

There’s an old saying, “If the literal sense makes sense, seek no other sense.” That’s what people who say they take the Bible literally really mean. We all operate by that rule. If the store is five miles away and someone says, “I’m running to the store,” we know they are driving. Without thinking, we take “running” figuratively and “going to the store” literally. But if they say “I’m riding my bike to the store,” we take it literally.



**The parts of the Bible that should be taken literally are those that were intended by the authors to be understood literally.**



If we read a news report, as I did recently, that a meteorite crashed through the roof of a house in Wolcott, Connecticut at 10:30 a.m. on April 20, we don't look for figurative meanings (e.g. Satan, the prince and power of the air, launched a spiritual attack against New England).

We know exactly what someone means who says, "I'm older than dirt," or "Everybody knows that," or "I could do this forever." None of those are literally true, but in each case the figure of speech has a real (and clear) meaning. No one scratches their head in confusion and says, "Wait a minute—I think dirt might actually be older than you."

Parables are stories meant to convey a central idea, and we should look for that idea and understand it in context. In hermeneutics (biblical interpretation) class, one of my professors warned us, "Never make

a parable walk on all fours." In other words, don't try to make it say more than it really intends to say, which normally relates to its primary point, not its supporting details. So in Matthew 18:24, where Jesus speaks of a man owing another man 10,000 talents, an amount unthinkable large (equivalent to 375 tons of silver), we are not to suppose any person literally owed another this much. Rather, we should see it as a powerful expression of every sinner's infinite indebtedness to God.

The same applies to metaphors. Obviously when Jesus said "I am the door" (John 10:7), He wasn't saying He's made of wood and swings on hinges; He was saying He's the way of access to the Father and to Heaven. When John the Baptist said Jesus was "the Lamb of God" (John 1:29) he wasn't saying Christ was woolly and had four legs; he was saying



many who use their common sense with everything else they read don't do so when they read the Bible.

## **“WE SHOULD INTERPRET THE BIBLE LITERALLY” USUALLY SIMPLY MEANS “WE SHOULD BELIEVE WHAT THE BIBLE ACTUALLY SAYS.”**

People who say we should interpret the Bible literally usually mean that when we read a passage that's obviously historical, such as Jesus feeding the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish that God miraculously multiplied (John 6:1-14), we should believe it actually happened. We shouldn't treat it as a made-up story intended to convey a moral of some sort (e.g., “God can perform a miracle in your heart when everybody shares their lunch”).

Many people take the Bible figuratively in contexts and genres that are intended to be taken literally. Some feel free to “make the Bible mean” whatever comes to their minds. “*Literal* interpretation” stands in contrast to that, but it does not mean the Bible should always be taken literally. Because “literal interpretation” might imply there are no figures of speech in the Bible, in my opinion we would do better to speak of “plain” or “normal” interpretation, which recognizes both literal and figurative language for what they are.

Daniel Webster said,

I believe that the Bible is to be understood and received in the plain and obvious meaning of its passages; for I cannot persuade myself that a book intended for the instruction and conversion of the whole world should cover its true meaning in any such mystery and doubt that none but critics and philosophers can discover it.

Our first question should not be “What does the

Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system which pointed forward to Christ's redemptive work on our behalf.

God is called our rock and fortress (Psalm 18:2), and is said to have everlasting arms to hold and support us (Deuteronomy 33:27). We are told He takes us under His wings (Psalm 91:4). But the Bible also tells us that God is by nature a spirit (John 4:24). This means that in His essence He has no physical body.

Is this a contradiction which indicates some of the biblical passages must be wrong? Of course not. People didn't read “everlasting arms” and believe God was a giant man, any more than they read about God taking His children under His wings and conclude God is a giant chicken. Figurative language was very common in biblical times, and it wasn't any more confusing to people back then than it is to us today (once we understand it as such, which is normally intuitive and easy). Usually, our common sense guides our understanding. Unfortunately,

Bible mean to me?” It should simply be, “*What does the Bible mean?*” That is, “What did it mean to the writer?”

Our second question should be, “What would the original readers, in their historical context, have naturally understood the writer to mean?”

A parable is normally a made-up story, and should be viewed as such, with emphasis on the central lesson. But when the Bible recounts history, it should be viewed as history, not fable or myth. So we should view poetry as poetry, parable as parable, and history as history.

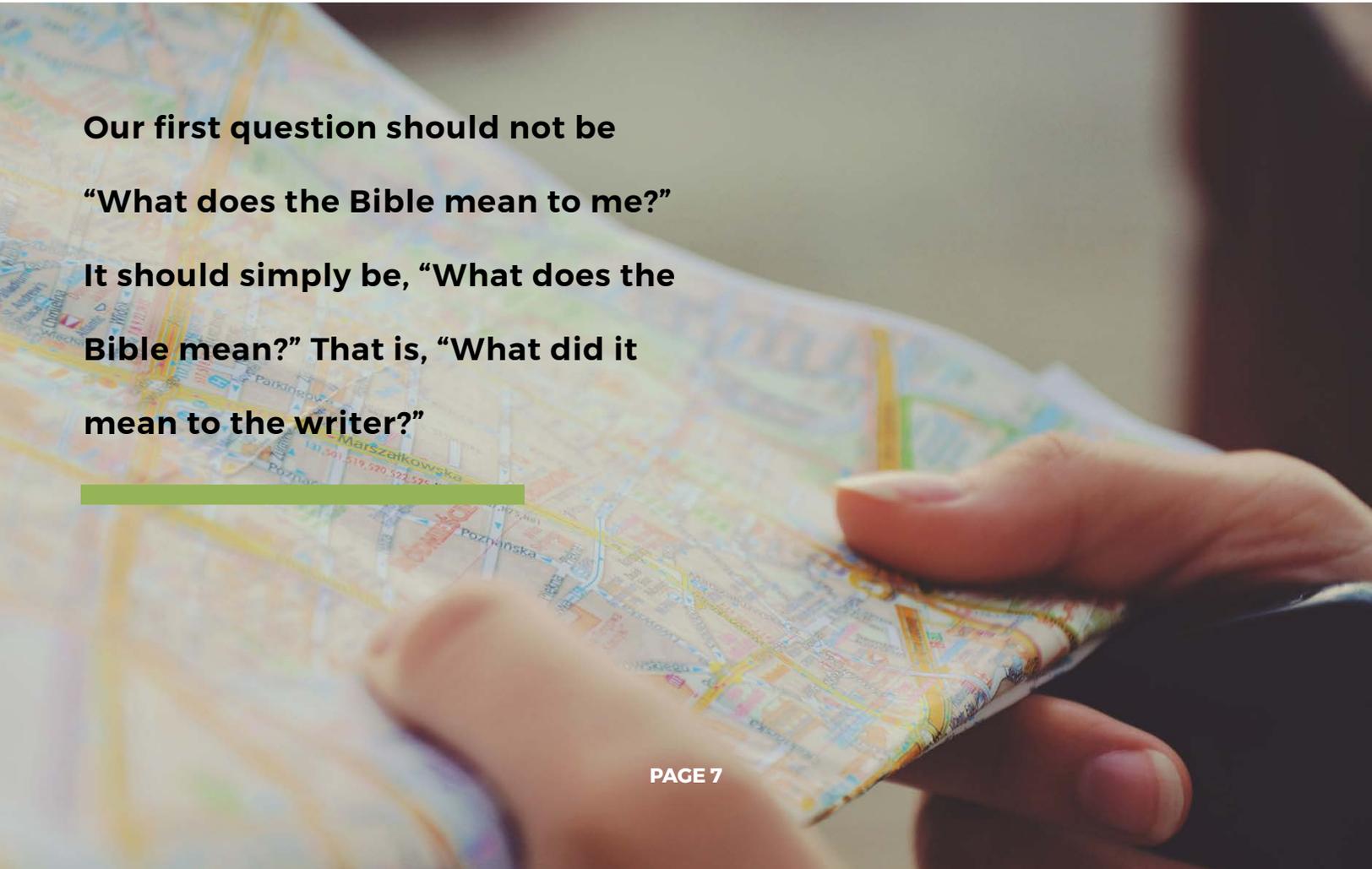
The biblical accounts of the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve and Noah and the flood are written like the historical portions of Exodus, Joshua, 1 Kings, the Gospels, and Acts. So it seems reasonable to conclude God expects us to believe there was an actual Garden of Eden and an actual Adam and Eve. The fact that Adam is listed in genealogies with people we know to be real also makes this clear.

The biblical account of the flood in Genesis 6-9 is obviously not parable, metaphor, simile, or allegory.

So when someone encourages people to take such passages literally, they are not saying, “There is no figurative language in the Bible.” Rather, they are saying, “Don’t treat as figurative passages which by literary style and context were intended to be understood as actual history.”

This becomes clear if we simply look at what we read and hear people say every day. Do we take people literally or figuratively? Both. When they are telling us things that happened and using straightforward language, we take them literally. If someone says, “It’s raining hard” we take them literally. If they say “It’s raining cats and dogs” we know they’re speaking figuratively. But their meaning is plain.

“So do we take the Bible literally? A simple “Yes” or “No” is an inadequate answer. It depends on the context, and most natural way of understanding the author’s intent.



**Our first question should not be**  
**“What does the Bible mean to me?”**  
**It should simply be, “What does the**  
**Bible mean?” That is, “What did it**  
**mean to the writer?”**



I have seen people try to disprove the claim, for instance, that Jesus literally raised Lazarus from the dead by saying, “Well, if you’re going to take the Bible literally here, you have to take it literally everywhere; so why haven’t you cut off your hands and gouged out your eyes?”

This is a reference to these words of Jesus:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.” (Matthew 5:27-30)

First, it should be self-evident Jesus was speaking figuratively. He used the literary device known as hyperbole, a type of exaggeration (which doesn’t mislead since everyone knows it’s exaggeration) that gets attention and makes an emphatic point by overstatement. Obviously the apostles understood it that way, since they didn’t gouge out their eyes and cut off their hands.

In fact, as the Bible makes clear, the hand and

eye are not the sources or causes of sin (Jeremiah 17:9 connects sin to the “heart,” a figurative reference to the inner person). A blind man can still lust and someone without a hand can still steal. But the eye is a means of access for both godly and ungodly input. The hand is a means of performing righteous or sinful acts. We must therefore govern what the eye looks at and the hand does. So why does Jesus paint this graphic picture? Taken in context I believe He was commanding His followers to take radical steps, to do whatever is necessary in thoughts and actions, to avoid and deal decisively with sexual temptation.

In contrast, John 11, which recounts the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the grave, is unmistakably an historical account of a miracle, intended to be taken literally, not figuratively. The fact that I take Lazarus’s resurrection literally while taking the cutting off of a hand figuratively isn’t inconsistency; it’s simply recognizing that 1) there are different types of language and 2) proper interpretation requires us to discern the author’s intention when choosing the words they did.

That there are figures of speech in the Bible in no way contradicts the fact that the historical parts of the Bible should be taken literally. Of course even in those historical contexts the writers or speakers in the narrative will sometimes use figures of speech. They should be recognized as such. Just because

most of the account is literal doesn't mean its figures of speech should be taken literally.

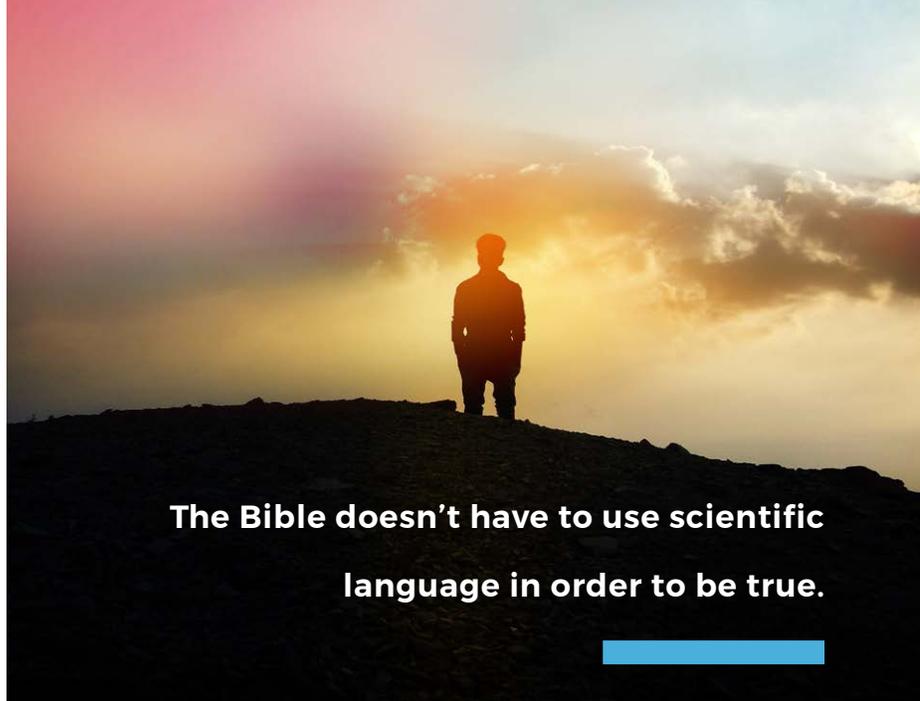
The apostle John also used hyperbole when he wrote, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (John 21:25). We intuitively know that he wasn't speaking literally, and also know the powerful point he was making.

The Bible is different from all other books because it is inspired by God. Yet our approach to understanding what those inspired words mean should be very similar to how we normally interpret books, articles, speeches, and conversations with friends. Most of what we read and hear we should understand literally, but some of it is obviously figurative, which itself conveys a real and significant meaning. The same is true of God's Word.

## **PHENOMENOLOGICAL LANGUAGE (DESCRIPTION OF APPEARANCES) IS ROUTINELY USED IN SCRIPTURE, MUCH AS WE USE IT TODAY.**

Some say, "If you believe the Bible is without error, how do you deal with the fact that it talks about the sun rising and setting, when what's really happening is the earth is turning on its axis?"

That's very easy to answer, since people routinely use that type of language today and no one tells them they're wrong to do so. Instead of simply saying "sunrise," when was the last time you heard someone say, "While the earth flew through space, it rotated on its axis so that the sun, also flying through space,



**The Bible doesn't have to use scientific  
language in order to be true.**

in its relative position to Earth, appeared to be rising, even though it really wasn't"? Aren't you glad we just call it a "sunrise"?

Idioms that describe the way things appear to the naked eye are called "phenomenological language." It is everyday language used to describe how things look from the human perspective. They aren't technical terms and aren't intended to make a scientific statement; they are the simple vocabulary of appearance.

It's no more "errant" for the Bible to speak of the sun rising and setting than it is for the weather reporter, trained in the science of meteorology, to say in every forecast what time the sun will rise and set the next day. Nobody accuses her of being ignorant or inaccurate for speaking this way.

Similarly, "the four corners of the earth" (Revelation 7:1) is a figure of speech, and doesn't mean that the biblical writers, who also spoke of the "circle of the earth" (Isaiah 40:22), believed the earth was square. The four corners of the earth parallels the four directions of the compass and the four corners of a map. The four corners of a city, country, house, or other building means the far reaches of that place, even if it's not in the shape of a square.



The Bible contains many examples of phenomenological language. That isn't inaccuracy, nor is it an attempt to make scientific statements, which isn't the Bible's purpose anyway.

Scripture is not technical, nor does it try to be. As [Norman Geisler says](#), the Bible is written "for the common person of every generation, and it therefore uses common everyday language. The use of observational,

non-scientific language is not *unscientific*, it is merely *prescientific*."

There's no reason to impose modern scientific standards on something written in ancient times. The Bible doesn't have to use scientific language in order to be true.

I agree with the person who asked the question, that the Bible is not a science textbook. I *do* believe that the Bible, in the "autographa" or original manuscripts, was fully inspired, which is what "God-breathed" means in this text: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16, NIV).

Note that the usefulness in teaching, correction, and training is dependent on being "God-breathed." If it wasn't accurate, it couldn't be from God, nor could it be useful for imparting knowledge and correcting false doctrine.

God invented speech and created people in His

image. Is it surprising that when God speaks to people, He would employ the ordinary language people use?

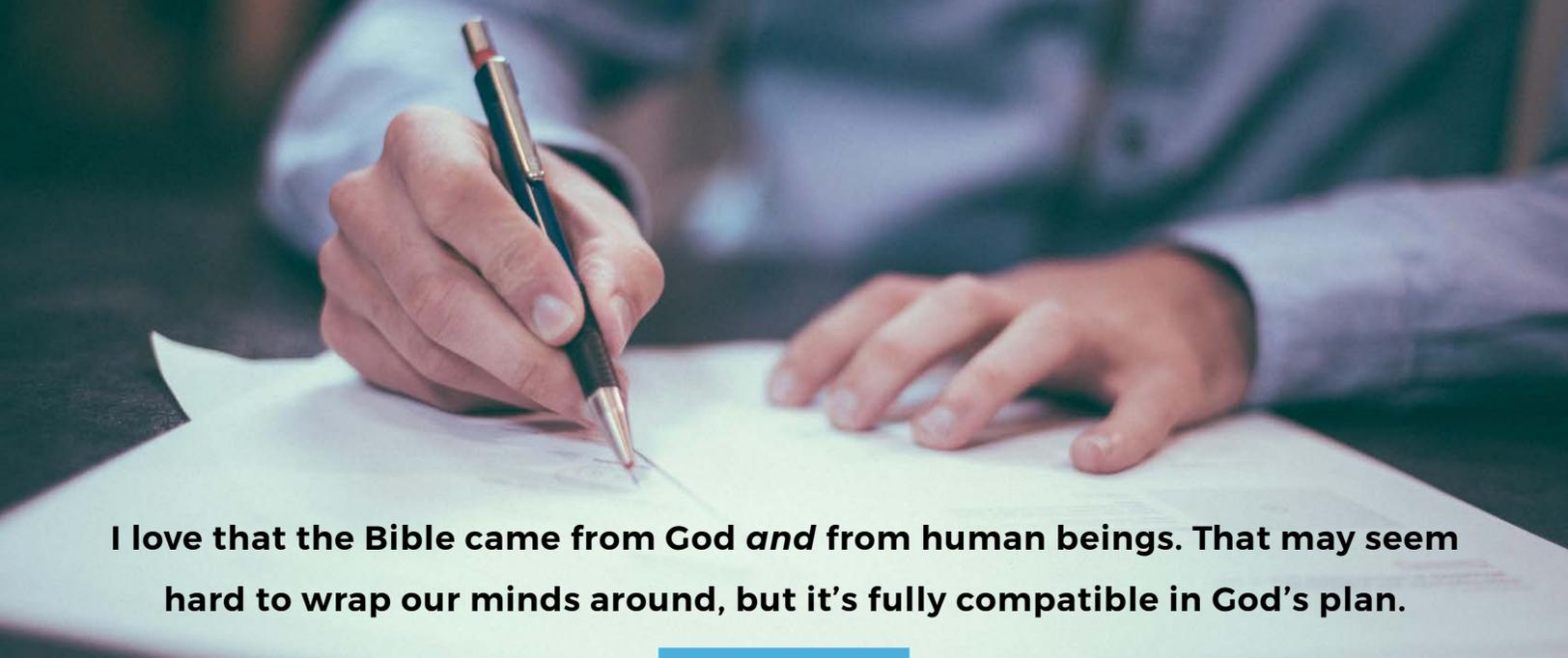
## WAS THE BIBLE WRITTEN BY HUMANS? OF COURSE!

I've heard critics say, "I believe the Bible was written by human beings, not God." This statement shows a fundamental ignorance of what people who affirm biblical inspiration and inerrancy actually believe.

I've yet to meet anyone who believes God wrote down the words of Scripture Himself. True, He did inscribe on stone tablets the words of the Ten Commandments, which Moses later wrote in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. But that's a very small portion of Scripture. Likewise, I've never had someone tell me they believe God dictated the Bible word for word, other than in small portions where we are told God actually did so, for instance to Isaiah (Isaiah 38:4-6) and John (Revelation 2:1-3:22).

Exodus 34:27-28 is often cited as a contradiction proving the Bible is in error. It's worth a brief (yet somewhat related) digression to note that Exodus 34:1 indicates, "The Lord said to Moses, 'Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke.'" (See also Deuteronomy 10:1-4.) Critics point out that later in this same chapter we're told, "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Write down these words.'" So was it Moses or God who wrote down the words?

If you read the passage in context verse by verse (as critics never seem to do), "these words" are the words God has previously spoken that were in fact recorded by Moses in Exodus 34:10-26. This does not include the Ten Commandments, as anyone knows who reads it, but is rather a series of ceremonial and judicial instructions. Here it is in the NASB, where I'll add in brackets what or who is being referenced:



**I love that the Bible came from God *and* from human beings. That may seem hard to wrap our minds around, but it's fully compatible in God's plan.**

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write down these words [v. 10-26], for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." So he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he [Moses] did not eat bread or drink water. And he [God, as stated in verse 1] wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.

Appropriately, the NASB inserts a footnote after this final pronoun "he," reading "Or *He*, i.e., the Lord." We know from the context that the "he" of verse 28 refers to God, because of what is revealed in verse 1. So in verse 28 we're told that Moses wrote the contents of the previous verses, "these words," and we're also told that God wrote the Ten Commandments on the tablets, just as He said He would at the beginning of this text. No contradiction.

Now, back to critics who argue "The Bible was written by humans, not God." When I say of course humans wrote the Bible, sometimes the response is, "Oh, so you *admit* that the Bible was written by human beings?" My reply is, "I don't *admit* it; I *affirm* it! It's a core part of what I believe."

It's like someone saying, "So you admit Jesus was human?" Admit it? I shout it from the rooftops and

cling to it! I love that Jesus was and is fully human and fully God. I also love that the Bible came from God *and* from human beings. That may seem hard to wrap our minds around, but it's fully compatible in God's plan. He has given us a perfect living Word, His Son, and a perfect written Word, the Bible, each fully human and fully divine.

One of the questions the writer of the letter asked was "*Why can't we believe the Bible was written by imperfect human beings?*" Actually, those of us who affirm the Bible's inspiration *do* believe the humans who wrote it were imperfect! They were sinners, fully capable of errors in logic and communication, just like the rest of us. But we also believe that in the specific case of the books that form the Bible, God supernaturally worked in the human writers to guard them against error while composing the biblical text. So while they could say other things that were wrong when not supernaturally inspired by God, they could not do so while writing God's Word. The biblical writers were not passive stenographers; they wrote from their minds and hearts, in their own styles, yet God made sure what they wrote was also God-breathed, the result of His creative breath.

In this regard the Bible tells us, "No prophecy of scripture ever comes about by the prophet's own

imagination, for no prophecy was ever borne of human impulse; rather, men carried along by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:20-21). This doesn't mean the biblical writers were perfect and without error in *other* aspects of their lives, or even in their sermons and writings that aren't part of the Bible. Rather, it means that God specifically guided them to write Scripture, and in doing so protected them from error.

The biblical authors spoke in their own style, with their own vocabulary (for instance, the apostle John's terminology and style is noticeably different than the apostle Paul's). But those of us who believe this passage affirm that the writers were "carried along by the Holy Spirit" in their writing, with the result that they "spoke from God."

"But that would require a miracle." Of course! Who would suggest otherwise? To believe that the original biblical manuscripts were without error *is* to believe in a miracle. But that shouldn't be an obstacle to Christians whose entire faith is based on God's many interventions in human history in miraculous ways.

Just as it took a miracle for God to bring about the implantation of a blastocyst (newly conceived human being) who was Jesus (the living Word), fully human and *also* fully God, so it took a miracle for God to guide the words written by the biblical writers so that they were in fact the words of human beings, yet *also* the words of God.

To claim Christians don't believe human beings wrote the Bible is like claiming that since we believe Jesus is God that means we don't believe He was born of a woman, or that He's human. In fact, we believe *both*, and the two are not mutually exclusive. So it's no more of a stretch for me to believe that God supernaturally gave us His flawless Word through the writings of otherwise flawed human beings, than that He supernaturally sent His eternal Son to become a flawless human child born to a flawed (though wonderful) human named Mary.

To state or imply that those believing in biblical inspiration and inerrancy claim God wrote the Bible and humans didn't is a straw man. It's a false accusation that's popular to say because it's so easy to disprove.

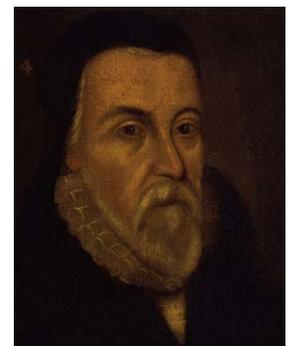
Humans wrote the Bible, and God inspired the Bible so that the words humans wrote were the words of God.

If the original "God-breathed" biblical manuscripts contained errors, this would mean that God is capable of error. It would mean He didn't inspire all of the Bible, only parts of it. But the claim is that "All Scripture is inspired by God" (2 Timothy 3:16). Since the Bible is by definition a whole and not a part, it's contradictory to say one believes "the Bible is inspired" while believing parts of it are in error.

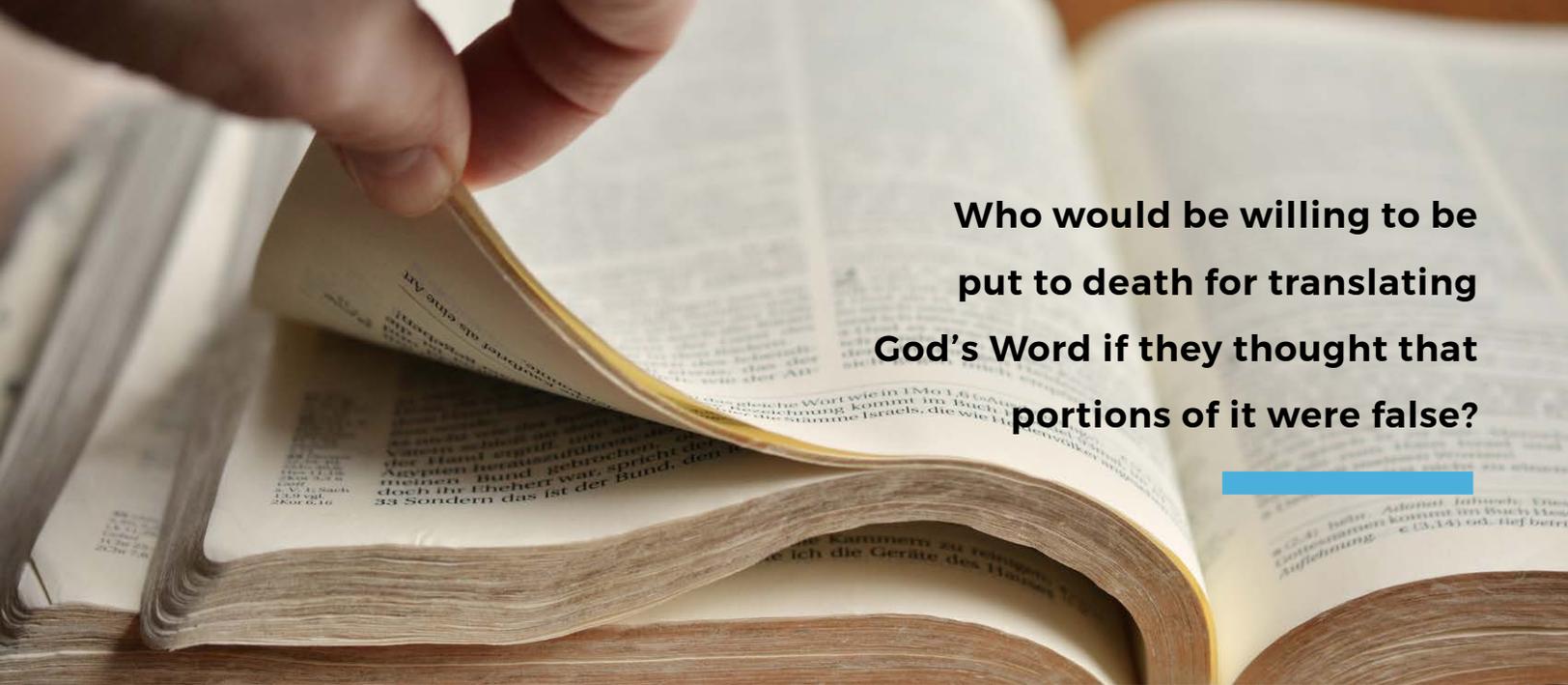
Some say the Bible shouldn't be allowed to testify for itself by making claims about its own inspiration. While defendants in courtrooms don't always testify on their own behalf, they are permitted to do so. In some cases, their testimony proves critical. Any jury should listen to their claims and determine whether or not they are credible. Sometimes jurors find the defendant to be more credible than other witnesses, who sometimes haven't told the truth.

If God's Word were not fully true, it could not be fully profitable and helpful—indeed it could be harmful—because what if one ended up believing, and acting on, an uninspired portion of Scripture?

William Tyndale was arrested largely for his efforts to translate God's Word into the language of the common people. In 1536, after seventeen months in prison, William Tyndale was strangled, then burned at the stake.



In 2016, 480 years later, four Wycliffe Bible translators



**Who would be willing to be put to death for translating God's Word if they thought that portions of it were false?**

were murdered in the Middle East for putting God's Word into the languages of the common people.

Who would be willing to be put to death for translating God's Word if they thought that portions of it were false? Would anyone be willing to die to get God's Word into people's hands if they believed "some of it's true and some of it isn't; good luck figuring out which is which"?

**"ALL SCRIPTURE IS GOD-BREATHED" REFERS TO BOTH THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS.**

Paul writes, "What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words" (1 Corinthians 2:12-13).

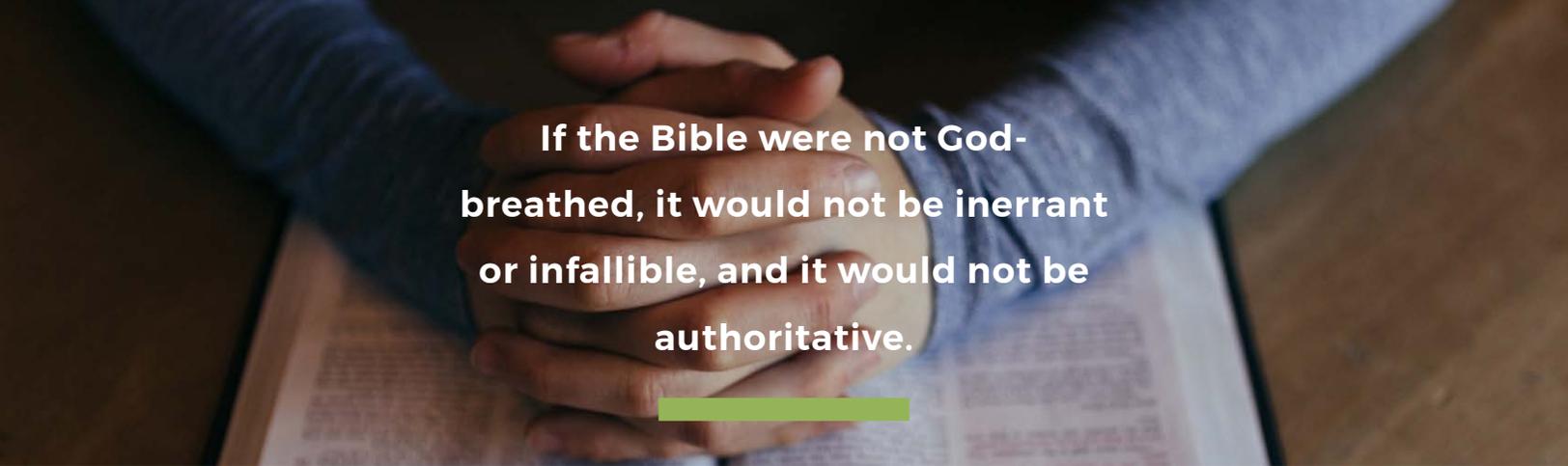
Notice that this passage doesn't just talk about general thoughts, but specific words coming from God's Spirit.

I believe in what is often called "*verbal plenary inspiration*." "Verbal" refers to the actual words used by the biblical writers, and the fact that they were superintended and guided by God's Holy Spirit, so that what the authors wrote was God's own truth, which He fully approved.

"Plenary" means full or complete, so that the whole Bible—not just select parts—is God's revealed Word. Again we come back to 2 Timothy 3:16: "All [not some, or a lot or most, but *all*] Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Some suppose that "all Scripture" being inspired could refer only to the Old Testament because there was no New Testament yet. But by the time 2 Timothy, Paul's last letter, was written, some New Testament writings were already being recognized as Scripture.

For instance, in 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul writes, "For Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages.'" This first quotation is from Deuteronomy 25:4. But the second is a quotation from Jesus recorded in Luke 10:7. Hence, Paul calls the Gospel of



**If the Bible were not God-breathed, it would not be inerrant or infallible, and it would not be authoritative.**

Luke “Scripture” in the same sense that Deuteronomy was Scripture.

Consider the remarkable statement of the apostle Peter who speaks of the apostle Paul’s writings:

Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. (1 Peter 3:15-16).

Peter refers to Paul’s letters as having the same status as “the other Scriptures.” This clearly means he regarded Paul’s writings, which were already circulating among the churches, as Scripture.

**“ALL SCRIPTURE IS GOD-BREATHED” APPLIES EQUALLY TO EVERY WORD AND SENTENCE—TO SCRIPTURES THAT DO AND DON’T ADDRESS SPIRITUAL ISSUES.**

Some claim the Bible is only inspired by God, and therefore fully trustworthy, concerning spiritual issues, not matters of fact, history, or culture. This

would mean that very large portions of Scripture would not be divinely inspired.

In fact, Jesus ascribed God’s authority not only to the words of Scripture, but also to the smallest components of those words. He referred to the very letters and even the smallest flourish on a letter when He said, “For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter [“jot,” KJV], not the least stroke of a pen [“tittle,” KJV], will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matthew 5:18).

The jot was the Hebrew word *yodh*, the tenth letter of that alphabet. It is also the smallest letter, corresponding to the “iota,” the 9th letter of the Greek alphabet. The tittle is used by Greek grammarians, and consists of the little lines or projections by which the Hebrew letters differ from each other. A close equivalent would be to say, “This agreement will be binding right down to the dotting of every *i*, and the crossing of every *t*.”

In the end, not only every word, not only the smallest letter, but even the tiniest decorative projection of God’s Word will have proven true!

Isn’t this an emphatic statement of Jesus when it comes to the utter accuracy and dependability of God’s Word? And doesn’t it have implications for not only those who deny the accuracy of Scripture, but also those who reinterpret it in such a way as to teach something other than the natural or obvious meaning of the words?

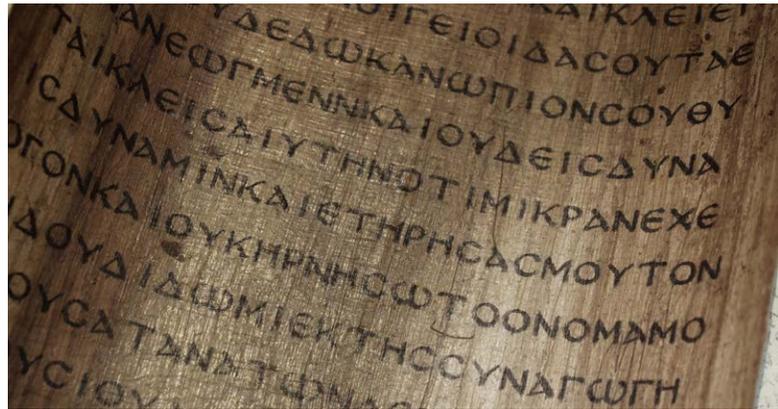
So it's not just the parts of the Bible that deal with major doctrines that are inspired. Rather, it's each and every word from the Bible's beginning until its end. If the Bible were not God-breathed, it would not be inerrant or infallible, and it would not be authoritative. Other people, who are essentially no more or less perfect than the biblical writers were, could always add their own inspirational thoughts and insights to it.

The emphasis on *all* Scripture makes particular sense because the book of 2 Timothy warns against teachers of false doctrines (2 Timothy 4:3-4). Such teachers almost always overemphasize some portions of Scripture to the exclusion of others, and thereby distort God's truth. Just after Paul told the Ephesian elders "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27, ESV), he said, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock...I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!" (Acts 20:28-31, NIV).

## HOW RELIABLE ARE THE ANCIENT BIBLICAL MANUSCRIPTS IN OUR POSSESSION?

There are vast numbers of manuscript copies (non-originals) in existence today. Not surprisingly, given the long labors of thousands of scribes, there are variations in them. Mistakes happen today even when we have built in spell-checkers and teams of trained people combing through manuscripts searching for errors. (As an example, we recently found a missing comma in one of my books, *Truth*, which actually changed the meaning of the sentence. It will be corrected in the next printing.)

There were drowsy scribes, working by candlelight,



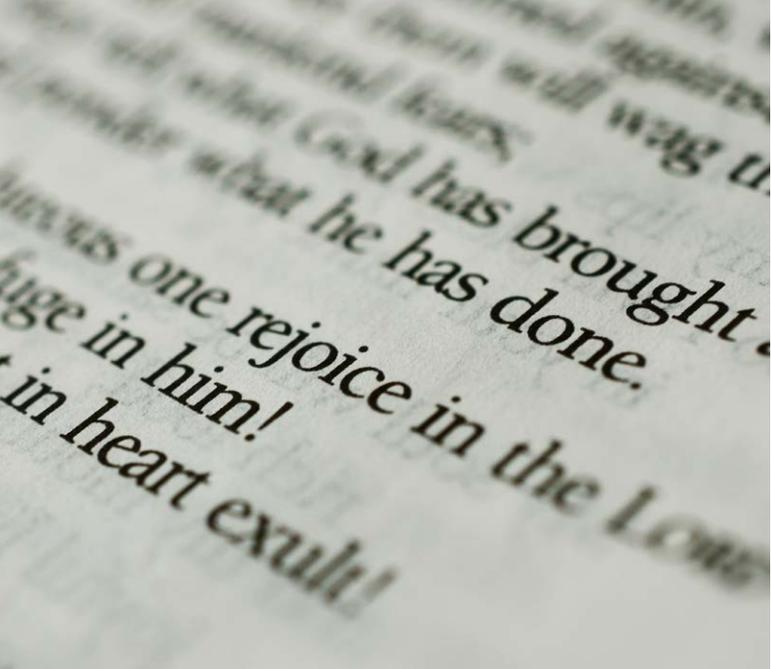
who missed a line here or added a word there. It had to be a mind-numbing job at times! While we're told God supernaturally protected the writers of Scripture from error, that promise was never made of everyone who copied it.

In fact, most scribes were extremely diligent, even meticulous in copying and checking and rechecking what they wrote. Sometimes they would count the number of words and even letters of the original and compare it to the copy, to make sure nothing had been added or left out.

The good news for us is that the scribal errors of spelling and inserted or omitted words are normally obvious and easy to spot. They take nothing away from the reliability of the original manuscripts or the basic message of the Bible. In fact, textual critics are certain of 99.5% of the biblical texts. The only uncertainties involve one half of one percent of all Scripture.

The earliest copies of Julius Caesar's writings go back to 900 A.D.—about 950 years after they were penned. We have none of his originals, yet who questions whether they are accurate representations of what he wrote? There are only seven copies of Plato's writings, the first of which was copied by a scribe 1,200 years after Plato died! Yet the vast majority of people are confident that what we have is what Plato wrote.

In contrast, there are about 5,686 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament and over 19,000 in Syriac,



Latin, Coptic, and Aramaic. This makes nearly 25,000 manuscripts, and some of them date to within 100 years of the originals. One portion of the gospel of John, the Rylands fragment, dates back to A.D. 125, probably about 30 years after John wrote the book. This is unparalleled by any other ancient book. Daryl Witmer, executive director of AIIA Institute, [calls these](#) “virtual originals.” By all standards of ancient literature, this brief interval, coupled with the substantial numbers of copies, makes a powerful case for reliability.

New Testament professor [Kenneth Berding states](#), “...if someone wants to question the integrity of the Greek New Testament based upon manuscript evidence, that person ought to be ready to throw out everything he thinks he knows about ancient history, since we have so many more—and better-quality manuscripts—than any other document from ancient history... historians of other ancient documents find themselves wishing they had so many manuscripts to work with.”

Critics have argued that inerrancy became a belief only in the last two hundred years. Norman Geisler argues that a line of continuity can be established going back to the third century. Those throughout history who upheld inerrancy include Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Warfield, Hodge, Wesley,

Spurgeon, and many more. [Geisler says](#), “Inerrancy is neither a late nor a denominational doctrine. It is not provincial but universal. It is the foundation for every group that names the name of Christ. . .” (Dr. John Woodbridge carefully refutes the claim that inerrancy was a late developing doctrine in his book [Biblical Authority](#).)

## **BUT IF INERRANCY APPLIES ONLY TO THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPTS, CAN I TRUST THIS BIBLE IN MY HANDS?**

In his book *Misquoting Jesus*, famous skeptic Bart Ehrman says, “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, and the vast majority of these are centuries removed from the originals and different from them, evidently, in thousands of ways...There are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.”

Part of this is technically true, but it’s extremely misleading. It fails to recognize that the vast majority of these variations are extremely minor and easily recognized as such. In over 99% of the cases there is no confusion whatsoever as to the original wording of the inspired text. When an eleventh century manuscript and dozens of other copies based on it or on each other have a variant reading different from hundreds of older manuscripts (which all agree with each other), it isn’t rocket science to immediately identify which manuscript, and those based on it, was in error. So if the error were major (and it almost never is), it would quickly be seen as an error by anyone familiar with the previous manuscripts.

One example of this is in Romans 16:7, where someone named Junia is said to be “significant among the apostles.” Junia is normally understood to be feminine, and therefore a reference to a woman.

## EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS, BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF SCRIPTURE, CAN BE EQUALLY ACCURATE, EVEN WHEN INCOMPLETE AND USING DIFFERENT TERMINOLOGY.

But there was a scribe who apparently decided to alter this by changing the name to Junias, a male name. However, that change on his part shows up in the manuscript comparisons.

Similarly in Acts 18:26 Priscilla is mentioned first as one who taught and corrected Apollos, with her husband Aquila second. A manuscript copyist decided to switch the order of names to “Aquila and Priscilla,” presumably to give greater prominence to the man, not the woman.

Now this is disturbing to some, but note that it has no effect whatsoever on the original inspired manuscripts, nor in the great majority of cases even on our English Bibles. Why?

Since there are so many ancient manuscripts, this alteration is immediately conspicuous as a departure from what the abundance of earlier manuscripts show to have been the original. As a result, the only translations that say “Aquila and Priscilla” instead of “Priscilla and Aquila” are the very old ones, such as the Geneva and the King James Version, and a few modern versions based on the King James. Rather than discouraging us, this should encourage us as to the ability of scholars to clearly ascertain what the original writings, the autographa, actually said.

Even when there is some uncertainty about which manuscript reading is more true to the original, most English Bibles supply the variant reading so the English reader isn't left in the dark. Often, though, even that variant reading does very little to affect the meaning of the passage. (See Greg Koukl's article [“Misquoting Jesus”? Answering Bart Ehrman](#) for further reading.)



After looking at hundreds of passages that critics claim are errors in the Bible, I'm confident that simply reading them in their immediate literary

and historical contexts resolves the problems the great majority of the time. Still, are there certain passages where I don't yet know what the answers are? Of course.

But to me, assuming that what's currently unexplained is therefore unexplainable makes no sense. Critics once insisted Moses could

not have written the books of the Pentateuch because his culture was pre-literate. Yet subsequent archaeological findings eventually proved that writing predated Moses by thousands of years. Those who rejected Mosaic authorship because of the consensus of the day believed the wrong authorities. They would have done better – far better – to believe God's Word all along.

The human component of the Bible must not be forgotten. Every book has a human composer, each with different personalities, temperaments, and individual literary styles. Geisler says, “The writers were not secretaries of the Holy Spirit...Like Christ,

A person is shown from the waist down, holding a large, dark-colored Bible. They are standing in a field of tall grass or reeds, with a warm, golden light from a setting or rising sun in the background. The person is wearing dark clothing. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

**Multiple  
eyewitnesses of the  
same event always  
have differing  
viewpoints and  
see and mention  
different details.**

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the Bible is completely human, yet without error. Forgetting the humanity of Scripture can lead to falsely impugning its integrity by expecting a level of expression higher than that which is customary to a human document.”

Some of the apparent errors critics cite are the result of assuming that a partial report, providing different details than another, necessitates that one or both reports must be false. One of the most common claims is that the Gospels contradict each other in terms of how many angels and men were at the tomb of Jesus after His resurrection.

Before looking at these passages, we need to understand that multiple eyewitnesses of the same event always have differing viewpoints and see and mention different details. Police detectives say that when two people agree in every detail of a crime scene, they have either contaminated each other’s

observations, or are in collusion, having rehearsed their stories. With truthful, reliable witnesses, one can actually expect a variety of perspectives. (See [“How Can Two Witnesses See the Same Event Differently?”](#))

Matthew tell us Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” came to the tomb, and “*an angel of the Lord* descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it” (Matthew 28:2).

Mark says, “Entering the tomb, they saw *a young man* sitting at the right, wearing a white robe; and they were amazed” (Mark 16:5).

Luke says, “And it happened that while they were perplexed about this, behold, *two men* suddenly stood near them in dazzling apparel” (Luke 24:4).

John says that after going to tell Peter and John the tomb was empty, Mary came back and “beheld two

angels in white sitting, one at the head, and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying” (John 20:12).

Wait, was it one angel outside or two angels inside? Or two men inside? Or one man inside? Many claim it’s impossible to reconcile these passages.

These testimonies may seem contradictory until you closely examine them, and consider that these are different beings seen and mentioned by different writers, using different terms, based on eyewitness testimonies from different vantage points (outside and inside the tomb).

First, it’s crucial to understand that because angels appear in human form, the same beings are frequently called men. For instance, the “three men” of Genesis 18:2 that Abraham bowed down in front of were angels (and one of them actually appears to be God, perhaps Christ in human form, see 18:17-33). In Genesis 32:24 the “man” who wrestled with Jacob is an angel. The “man” of Joshua 5:13 calls himself in the next verse the “commander of the army of the Lord.”

“Man” in such passages is not a technical term suggesting someone’s DNA has been tested and confirmed to be human. Rather, it simply means one who *appears* to be a male human.

Some mistakenly assume angels always have wings and therefore should be easily distinguished from humans. In fact, in the Bible angels usually do *not* have wings. The exceptions to this are the cherubim depicted on the ark of the covenant (Exodus 25:20) and the seraphim of Isaiah 6 who remain in God’s presence saying “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.”

Most angels that come to earth look just like people, explaining why “some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2).

Going back to the Gospel accounts, what’s the explanation?

First, an angel moved the stone and sat upon it outside the tomb (Matthew 28:2). That’s one angel outside the tomb.

Inside the tomb, the two men of Luke 24:4 were the two angels of John 20:12. As explained above, it’s no contradiction at all for one person to call angels appearing in human bodies “angels,” and the other to call them “men.” It happens many times in Scripture. (In fact, it shows that the Gospel writers felt no need to collude together and agree on terminology. If anything, this testifies to the authenticity of the accounts, as does John saying they were “in white” and Luke that they were “in dazzling apparel.” Which was it? Both.)

Mark 16:5 says, “As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.” This man proceeds to tell them that Christ has risen from the dead and is going to Galilee and they would see Him.

This doesn’t contradict Luke or John’s claim of two men/angels in the tomb. Why? Because Mark does not say there was *only* one man/angel in the tomb. Rather he only refers to the particular one on the right side. The focus on that one man/angel is understandable since he was the one telling them about Jesus rising and going to Galilee.

Think about it. Suppose I tell you that I saw Alan at the coffee shop today and he told me something very important. Then later Steve tells you he and I were at the coffee shop together today and saw Alan and Paul. Would you assume one of us was lying? Of course not. My story is accurate, even though I didn’t mention Steve or Paul. Steve’s story is accurate, even



though he didn't mention Alan saying something important.

So what is the bottom line of the Gospel accounts of the empty tomb? It seems clear there was an angel outside the tomb and two inside. The passages don't contradict each other. They simply bring four varied but equally accurate testimonies, using different terminology.



This same reality of eyewitness testimony focusing on different people and details accounts well for differences such as those between the books of Kings and Chronicles, whether Jesus healed a second blind man with Bartimaeus, as well as Peter's confession of Christ in the different Gospels. When viewed as a whole, parallel passages (including Kings and Chronicles or the four Gospels) present complementary but also unique perspectives on the events they record, something any fair-minded judge and jury would expect.

People are quick to point out so-called errors in Scripture such as Matthew and Mark saying after a particular prophetic statement Jesus ascended the Mount of Transfiguration "after six days" and Luke says "about eight days after" (Matthew 16:28-17:2; Mark 9:1-2; Luke 9:27-29). But the Greek word Luke uses, translated "about," is a term of approximation, not precision. It allows for the fact that in tallying days,

one could count only full days, or could count a partial day. Therefore, saying an event that happened after six full days, or was "about" eight days later (counting two partial days plus the six full ones), is no contradiction at all.

[John Frame writes,](#)

Inerrancy...means that the Bible is true, not that it is maximally precise. To the extent that precision is necessary for truth, the Bible is sufficiently precise. But it does not always have the amount of precision that some readers demand of it. It has a level of precision sufficient for its own purposes, not for the purposes for which some readers might employ it.

Other critics have not made allowances for the progressive revelation we see throughout the Old and New Testaments. Does a parent give the same rules to her five-year-old and her fifteen-year-old? God does not lay down the same instructions for every era, and He does not choose to reveal everything at once. When taken out of context, some of God's revelations may appear contradictory. But a change is not the same as an error. Early revelation may be replaced by later ones, without the earlier ones being regarded as wrong.

## **BUT DON'T "ALL THOSE SCHOLARS" SAY THE BIBLE IS FULL OF ERRORS?**

This claim is often made in a way that is supposed to end the discussion about inerrancy. Many people hear this and believe it because they haven't taken the time to think deeply and research for themselves. Instead, they mindlessly follow wherever the so-called scholarly consensus currently leads.

Ironically, there isn't one consensus about Scripture. Rather, there are multiple ones of people who are equally smart and informed, but who come to very different conclusions. One person's understanding

of who constitutes “the scholars” is radically different than another’s. The university student who hears his professor say “the Bible is full of errors” will probably give that statement a lot of weight, even if the professor—and there is a good chance of this—has never once read an English Bible, much less the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek manuscripts it’s based on.

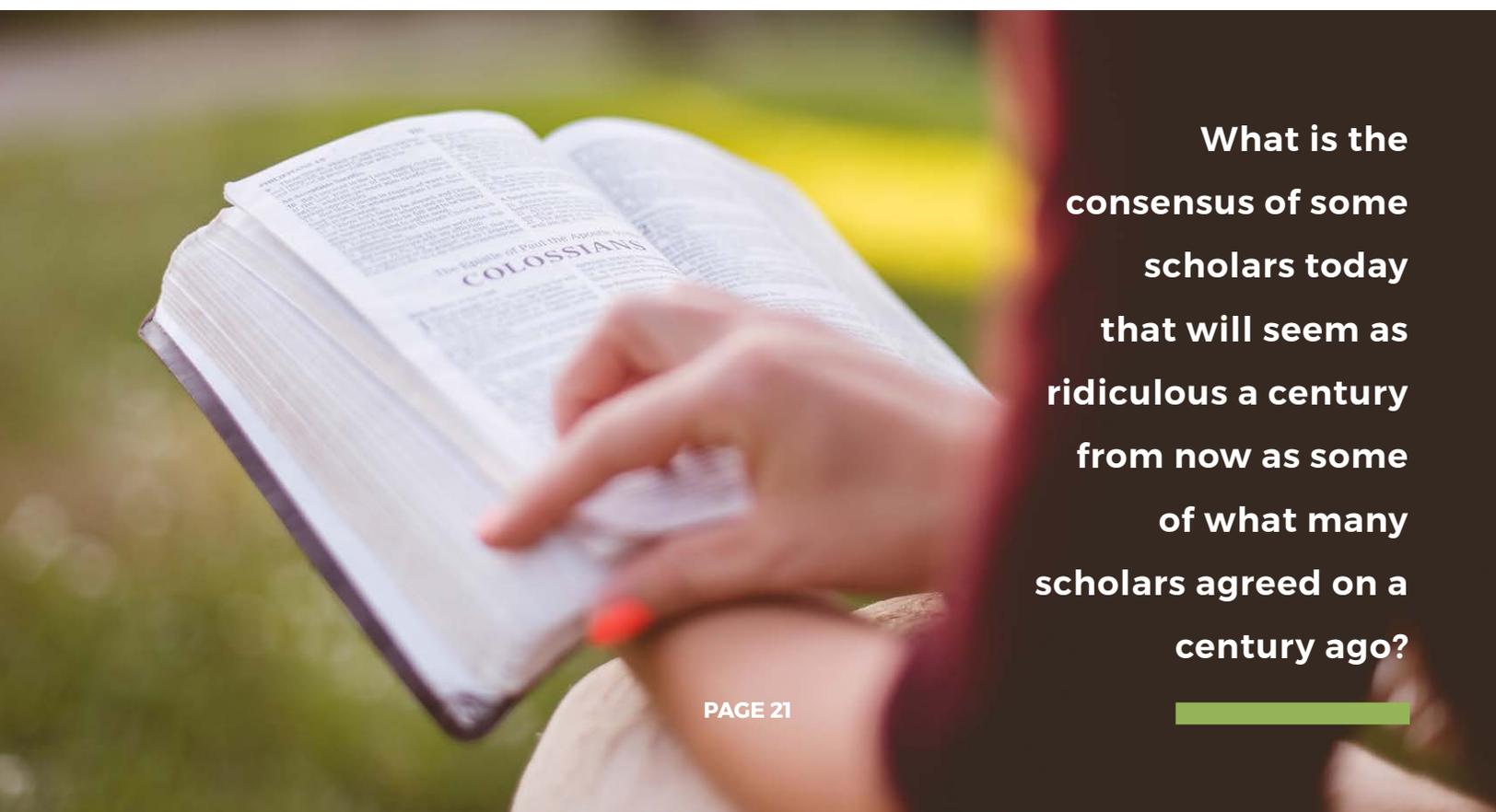
Many are either unaware of or dismiss without ever personally examining the consensus of “the other scholars” who significantly disagree. I am sometimes struck with how poorly read some scholars appear to be. They read and cite the people who went to their school, or their kind of schools, and who agree with their own conclusions. But they rarely cite those who have devoted their lives to studying the Bible, but who, it appears, commit the unpardonable sin of actually believing it!

We also fail to recognize that the consensus of intelligent and educated people throughout history changes. Scholars once believed all things were composed of either earth, fire, water, or air, and that spontaneous generation was an indisputable fact (“just look at that rotting meat, and all the flies it creates”).

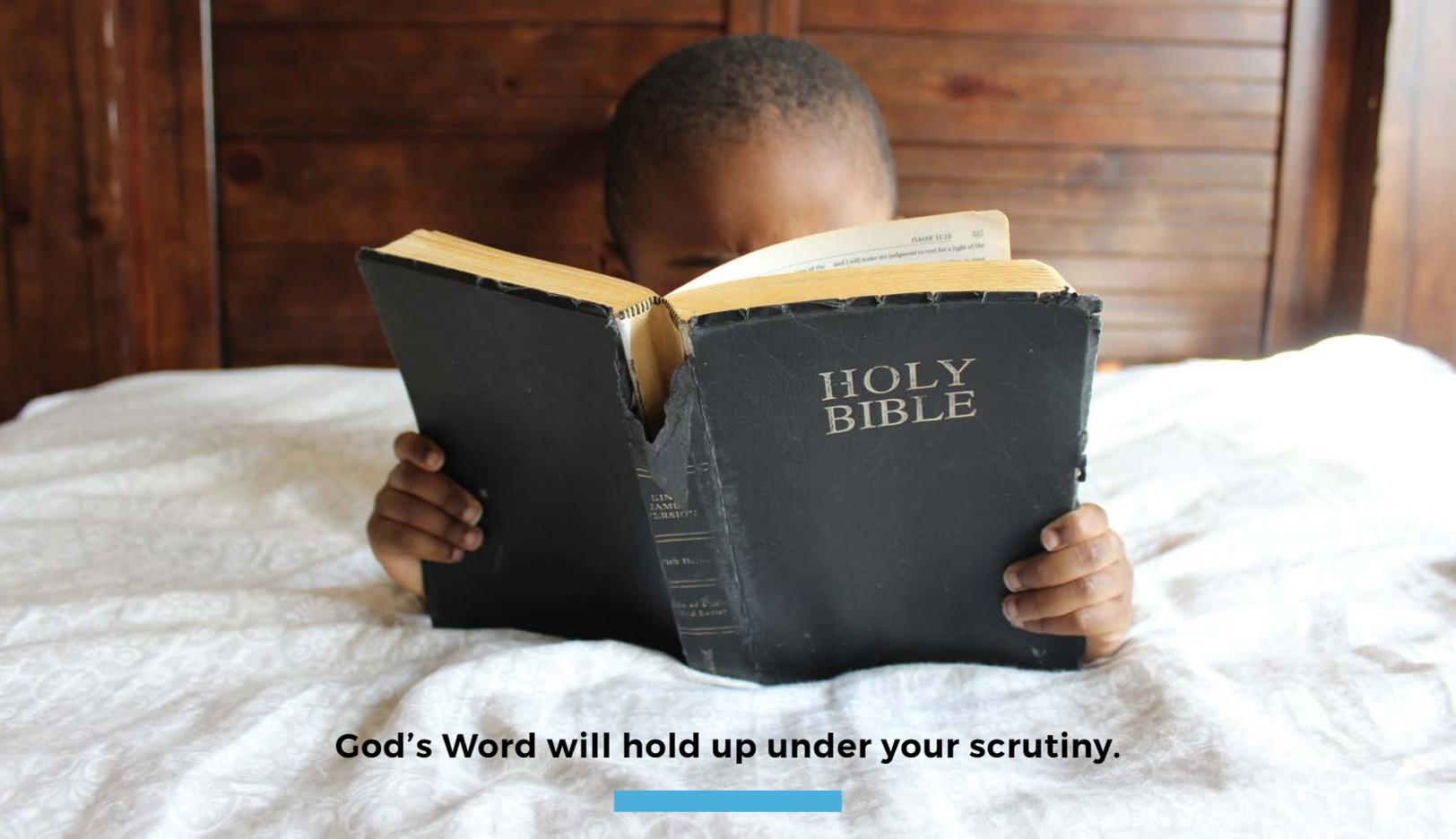
Years ago I was with my wife’s family in their home and someone took from the shelves a medical guide which was about 40 years old. When printed, it had great endorsements by prestigious people, and was considered cutting edge, scientific, and authoritative. It likely represented the consensus of the most brilliant medical experts and health scientists of the day.

I started reading portions aloud from it, and we all laughed at page after page spouting “facts” which we know today to be baseless or contradicted by countless studies! Sure, some of it was what we would consider accurate, but large portions of it were so out of touch with modern thinking as to appear ludicrous.

But this raises the question, what do we all “know to be true” today that will be ridiculed by our great-grandchildren? Isn’t it as silly to trust in what “everyone knows” today as it was to trust in what “everyone knew” 50 years ago? What will “everyone know” 50 years from now? What is the consensus of some scholars today that will seem as ridiculous a century from now as some of what many scholars agreed on a century ago?



**What is the consensus of some scholars today that will seem as ridiculous a century from now as some of what many scholars agreed on a century ago?**



**God's Word will hold up under your scrutiny.**

Some believers may be guilty of wishful thinking affecting their beliefs, but so are many unbelievers. As Compelling Truth explains, [sometimes their vested interests in rejecting God compels them to reject Scripture](#):

Atheists love to point out supposed errors and contradictions and expect others to answer their objections. The truth is that most Bible attackers are not really interested in, nor are they seeking, truth. They are seeking a reason to reject the Bible and the God who wrote it (2 Timothy 3:16). Despite their noisy protestations, one day they will stand before the Author of Scripture who declared it to be perfect, right, pure, true, righteous and more to be desired than gold (Psalm 19).

There has been a long history of the Bible being misquoted, misinterpreted, and misapplied by both its adherents and its opponents. But this has no bearing whatsoever on the accuracy of Scripture itself.

## **BUT WHAT ABOUT THE PARTS OF THE BIBLE THAT APPEAR TO BE IN ERROR?**

When people say they believe the Bible contains errors, it's a good practice to ask them to name those errors so you can open a Bible and look at them together.

Sometimes they will raise old and easily answered questions such as "Where did Cain get his wife?" But usually they can't name many supposed errors, if any at all. Often, they've taken as truth the word of other people that the Bible contains errors, without investigating for themselves.

When you take the time to talk about their concerns, you can demonstrate that you have investigated it for yourself, that you have done your homework, and are convinced that when God says all Scripture is "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16), He means that it

is all accurate and reliable. Of course, if you haven't actually done that, it's time to start! Don't be afraid, because God's Word will hold up under your scrutiny (at least it did and does under mine!).

Remember, if someone asks a question you don't know the answer to, it's okay to say, "That's a great question. Let me research it, and I'll get back with you." [The Christian Research Institute](#) gives this advice: "...rather than taking a fearful attitude when faced with an alleged biblical contradiction, we should view these occasions as opportunities to search and explore the Scriptures. One thing I can guarantee is this: your awe of the majesty of Scripture will deepen."

Let's go back to "Where did Cain get his wife?" She is referred to in Genesis 4:17 as the mother of Enoch. The typical claim is that Cain couldn't have had a wife since only he and Abel were born to Adam and Eve.

This fails to recognize that Genesis 5:4 specifically tells us that Adam and Eve had other sons and daughters. Considering their long lifespans they likely had many childbearing years. But is there a problem since Genesis 4:17 precedes Genesis 5:4? Not at all. The narrative is not strictly sequential. It's very common for books of history to talk about one person's life, tracing out what they did for decades, then move back to deal with another of their contemporaries. With Cain, the text of Genesis has fast-forwarded in decades, and by then he likely had a number of sisters of marriageable age. He obviously married one of them, or if it was multiple decades later, possibly one of his nieces. If in those days no one had children by a close relative, the human race would have quickly become extinct.

The problem of Cain's wife is no problem to anyone but the most superficial reader of Scripture (and to those who have heard others say it is a problem).

There are many claims of various errors in the Bible; I'll deal with several of them.

Some say that since it groups bats with birds, the Bible falsely teaches that bats are a type of bird (Deuteronomy 14:11, 18). First, there was no scientific definition or established classification of a bird in that time. It makes perfect sense that bats could be grouped with birds due to the fact that both fly.

The inspired original manuscript, in reference to bats, used a Hebrew word meaning a kind of animal that can fly. Unfortunately, some English translations render the word as "bird." When a bat is involved, a better English translation would be "flying animal." Obviously, it's not an error to categorize a bat as a flying animal!

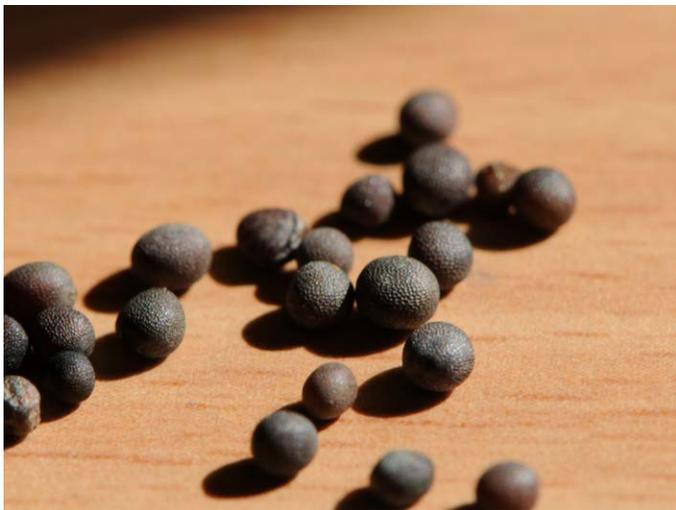
The rabbit and its "cud" pose another oft-cited "contradiction." Leviticus 11:3-6 places rabbits with camels and rock hyraxes as cud-chewing animals. In our modern classification system, ruminants chew their cud and have four stomach compartments to digest their food. These include cattle, giraffes, deer, and goats. But rabbits are not ruminants. So is this a biblical error?

Scientists have discovered that rabbits engage in a process called cecotrophy, a different way of gaining nutrients by re-ingesting partially digested foods. The rabbit kneads the cecotrope pellet in its mouth before swallowing. It's not unreasonable to think the definition of "cud" had a less restrictive meaning



in the past than it does to us today. However, it *is* unreasonable to expect a document that is 3,500 years old to adhere to our current man-made classifications.

Some critics claim attribution errors, such as in Matthew 27:9-10: “Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, ‘And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, and they gave them for the potter’s field, as the Lord directed me.’” This reference is actually found in Zechariah 11:13, not in the book of Jeremiah.



The answer to this lies in early Judaism’s understanding of the canon of the Old Testament. The standard Jewish practice was to group the prophets together, even as Jesus did in referring to “the Law and the Prophets” in Matthew 22:40. According to Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna, Jeremiah was once regarded as the first book of the prophets, before Isaiah. He further explains “...in the Jewish way of labelling things you call a book by its first few words, and you call a collection of books by the first book in that collection.” So a learned Jewish exegete would see nothing strange in Matthew’s attributing this fulfilled prophecy of the potter’s field to Jeremiah.

Some claim that when Jesus said the mustard seed was the “smallest of all the seeds on earth” (Mark 4:31), He was mistaken, since there are smaller plant seeds.

According to botany experts, the seed of the black mustard variety was in fact the smallest garden-variety seed commonly used in Palestine—even the entire eastern world—at that time. It grew into a very large shrub. Jesus used it as an illustration twice, and both times was speaking proverbially with statements about faith (Matthew 17:14-20) and the Kingdom of God (Mark 4:30-34).

John Piper lends a helpful perspective by clarifying the proper definition of error for judging the reliability of any literature. Thus when Jesus said the Kingdom of God is “like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth” (Mark 4:31), His basic intention was “not in the least botanical...Jesus capitalized on the proverbial smallness of the mustard seed to make a perfect, inerrant point about the kingdom of God.”

## HOW DO WE KNOW THE BOOKS IN OUR BIBLES ACTUALLY BELONG THERE, AND THAT OTHERS DON'T?

The 66 books that make up the Bible we use today are called the “canon of Scripture.” The word “canon” comes from a Greek word for “measuring stick” or “standard,” and it relates to the rule of law that was used to govern the standards for books.

The Old Testament books were written from about 1400 to 400 B.C. In approximately 250 to 200 B.C. those Hebrew books were translated into Greek, which we know as the Septuagint. The books of the Greek New Testament were penned from A.D. 45 to about 85.

One basis of determining what belonged in the Old

Testament was whether the book was quoted in the New Testament. There are about 850 times when the Old Testament is quoted in the New. Jesus and the apostles who used Scripture in their own writings obviously deemed them to be authoritative, authentic, and true.

Jesus explicitly spells that out when He quotes David in Psalm 110: "David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord..." (Matthew 22:43). When Jesus instructs Peter to sheath his sword so "the Scriptures be fulfilled" (Matthew 26:52-54), He is clearly referring back to passages in the Old Testament that predicted His suffering like Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22. In John 10:35, He quotes Psalm 82:6, with this vital comment: "The Scripture cannot be broken." This is a powerful acknowledgment by Christ of the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture.

Another basis for determining Old Testament canonicity is the endorsement of the rabbis and other Jewish scholars who had painstakingly preserved them. Because of their thoroughness, there were few controversies over what did or did not belong. Jesus also essentially legitimized the Hebrew canon when He cited the early narrative of Abel and the late one of Zechariah (Matthew 23:35).

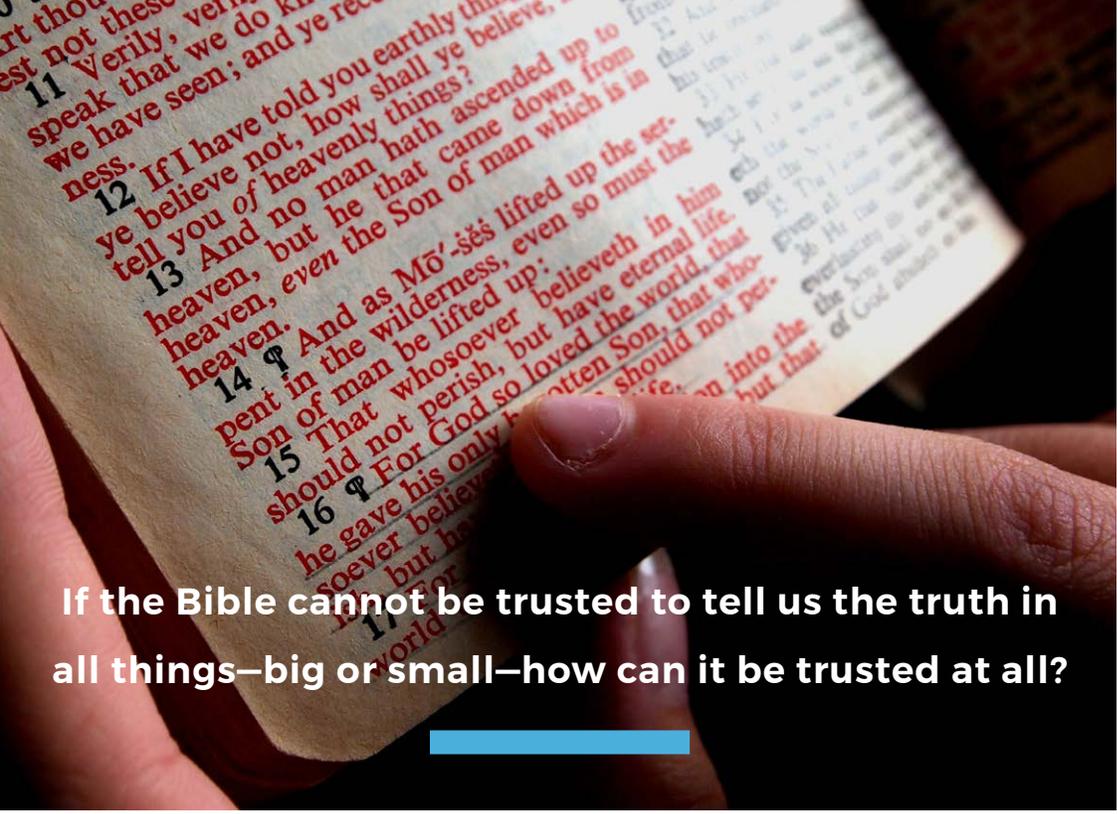
For the New Testament, the books had to pass a "truth test." Was the message orthodox? Did it harmonize with other already agreed-upon Scripture? Did it reflect the work of the Holy Spirit with evidence of moral integrity and values? The early church also considered whether the human author was an eyewitness of Jesus, usually an apostle or someone closely associated with an apostle. Once these criteria were met, the churches accepted a book as scriptural, and this is true of all 27 books.



A common myth is that some obscure group of scholars or theologians sat down and arbitrarily chose the books of the Bible, based on whatever personal preferences they had at the time. Kenneth Berding, a New Testament professor, writes, "Long before biblical books were even discussed in councils, all the books of the New Testament had been accepted as Scripture in the churches. And Christians didn't decide it; they simply recognized it to be so."

The Old Testament canon of 39 books was affirmed at the Councils of Jamnia (A.D. 90 and 118) and garnered nearly universal acceptance by A.D. 250. When Marcion of Sinope created his own collection of books to agree with his heretical view that the deities of the Old and New Testaments were two different gods, orthodox Christians were spurred to formalize a New Testament canon. The 27 books of the New Testament were listed by Athanasius in A.D. 367 and upheld as authoritative by the Council of Hippo (A.D. 393) and the Council of Carthage (A.D. 397).

In considering these things, we should ask two questions: Why would God go to all the trouble to inspire His word and then not protect and sustain it?



## If the Bible cannot be trusted to tell us the truth in all things—big or small—how can it be trusted at all?

And why would He speak to us and then neglect to lead us to recognize His speech? Since the authority of Scripture is the basis of the entire Christian worldview, it's important to remember that the books of the Bible were canonical at that moment "when the pen touched the parchment." The psalmist recognized this when he said, "Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens" (Psalm 119:89).

God is an excellent and accurate communicator, and He gave us His Word to reveal Himself to us. God chose human authors to accomplish this purpose, and then guided the early church and her councils to *recognize*, not *select*, the books He intended.

### WHY DOES ALL THIS MATTER?

It matters because if we cannot trust the Bible—if we can't rely on it to tell us the truth in everything it speaks to—then it cannot be, as 2 Timothy 3 says, "profitable" for us. We can't correct ourselves with it if it is sometimes incorrect. And if it isn't reliable in this and that area, why would I think it is correct about love, holiness, grace, justice, idolatry, greed,

gossip, fornication, adultery, homosexuality, or even the Gospel itself?

If the Bible cannot be trusted to tell us the truth in all things—big or small—how can it be trusted at all? And if God considers truth so precious, and His Word so powerful, why would He claim to breathe out Scripture from His mouth, and bear along the writers of Holy Scripture, and then fail to guard that Scripture against error?

In the early church, God's Word, all of it, was viewed as the standard by which God's people should evaluate any and all teachings. The Berean Christians were commended for measuring the apostle Paul's words against the Old Testament Scriptures: "Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11).

But what if they believed the Old Testament was wrong, that there really was no Eden or Adam and Eve, that the crossing of the Red Sea was a myth, and that God didn't really send plagues upon Egypt?

Or what if they didn't believe the early teachings of the church that would become the New Testament, that Jesus was the God-man and did many miracles and rose from the dead, conquering sin and death?

If God didn't extend the length of the daylight when Joshua prayed (so the "sun stood still," phenomenological language but a miracle nonetheless), why believe God did other recorded miracles? Unless the Bible were fully inspired, fully

true, “examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were true” would be meaningless. How can you take something containing untruths—and with no objective way to decide what’s true and what isn’t—and use it to measure whether something else is untrue? If you had a tape measure you knew to be inaccurate, would you bother using it?

If the Bible contained falsehoods, the biblical warnings against false doctrine would be nonsensical, because then we would only have a book with its own falsehoods that we would somehow need to use to determine what else is true and false.

In contrast, Paul said, “Preach the word...correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths” (2 Timothy 4:2-4).

## **BIBLICAL INERRANCY IS VITALLY CONNECTED TO THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH.**

[Don Carson](#) says, “Inerrancy is not an isolated belief that one can carve off or tack on to an otherwise robust Christian faith. Rightly articulated and worked out in our lives, it shapes how we think about God, it forms a huge part of our epistemological structures, it determines where we go to hear the voice of God, it calls us back to the gospel and its promises both for this life and for the life to come, it establishes common ground with believers in other cultures and other centuries, it impels us to worship—in short, it is ‘a place to live.’”

Is the doctrine of inerrancy, and questions about the smallest details of Scripture, a distraction from



the large themes of the Bible, like redemption and restoration? [John Frame](#) states,

Those...who confess inerrancy know that this doctrine encourages us most in the big themes. The inerrancy of the word of God enables us to state with confidence the most extraordinary fact—that the whole world is God’s, and displays his glory. It enables us to say that Jesus is really Lord, that he really saved us from sin and its consequences, and that he is coming again to restore the whole universe to something pure and even more beautiful. And inerrancy assures us that we have a God who speaks to us in our own experience—the Lord of language who knows how to use symbols to talk to human beings...

He continues:

The attack on inerrancy does not limit itself to details. It will not be satisfied until it has set to rest the idea that a man can be God, that he can die for the sins of others, that he can rise from the dead, that he can communicate clearly with us. But if we have settled the question of inerrancy, we can dispatch such questions in short order. Yes, a man is God, He died for our sins, He rose again, and He is coming again—because God told us that this story is true.

## YOU MAY STILL “LOVE AND TRUST THE BIBLE” WHILE BELIEVING IT IS ERRANT AND DENYING SOME OF ITS TEACHINGS, BUT MOST OF THOSE WHO HEAR YOU WON’T.

When people claim to believe the Bible is inspired and authoritative, yet do not believe it is inerrant, I know many of them are sincere. But I think they can hang on to this logical inconsistency only temporarily. The person holding to it may not end up setting the Bible aside because of their belief that parts of it are not reliable, but their children and grandchildren will.

Meanwhile, they trust themselves and others to sit in judgment of revealed Scripture—which, if it is breathed out from God, cannot be other than true, and if not true cannot be breathed out from God. So instead of sitting under Scripture’s judgment, we set ourselves up as judges over Scripture. I believe this is inappropriate and simply won’t work in the long haul. It will lead to problems of disbelief not only in the culture but also in the church.

Francis Schaeffer warned us about this 30 years ago. (For those unfamiliar with Schaeffer, you can find excerpts from nearly all of his books on [this site](#).)

### IF THE BIBLE IS WRONG IN SOME PLACES, WHY SHOULD WE BELIEVE IT’S RIGHT IN OTHERS?

If I doubt there was a first man named Adam created from the ground, as Genesis tells me, then how can I believe that we all sinned in Adam, as Romans



5:12 tells me? Neither can I believe Christ is God, since it seems clear to me that He believed in the Genesis record of an original man and woman (Matthew 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-9).

If Jesus was wrong about this, I don’t see how I could trust Him with other things He says. Nor could I believe He was and is the eternal Son of God, and the perfect sacrifice for my sins.

When I hear Christians say that Jonah really wasn’t swallowed by a fish, because that’s just impossible, I consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 12:40: “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

If it wasn’t true about Jonah, why should we believe in Christ’s literal death, burial, and resurrection either? And more to the point, why should we believe Christ’s claim to be and speak the truth and that “I and the Father are one” if He naively believed in what was false—that Jonah was actually swallowed by a fish?

I recently read someone who claimed that when Jesus called the “whale” that swallowed Jonah a “fish,” He made His “most famous scientific error.” But neither Jonah nor Jesus spoke English, and regardless of the English translations, the meaning of the Hebrew word used in Jonah and the Greek



Once we say the Bible contains errors, who decides what is true and what is false?

and ascension, and a return of Christ that is as certain as all of these events were real.

## IF WE DON'T TRUST GOD'S WORDS, WE WILL INSTEAD TRUST OURSELVES OR OUR CULTURE.

One of my biggest problems with not embracing inerrancy is this: once we say the Bible contains errors, who decides what is true and what is false?

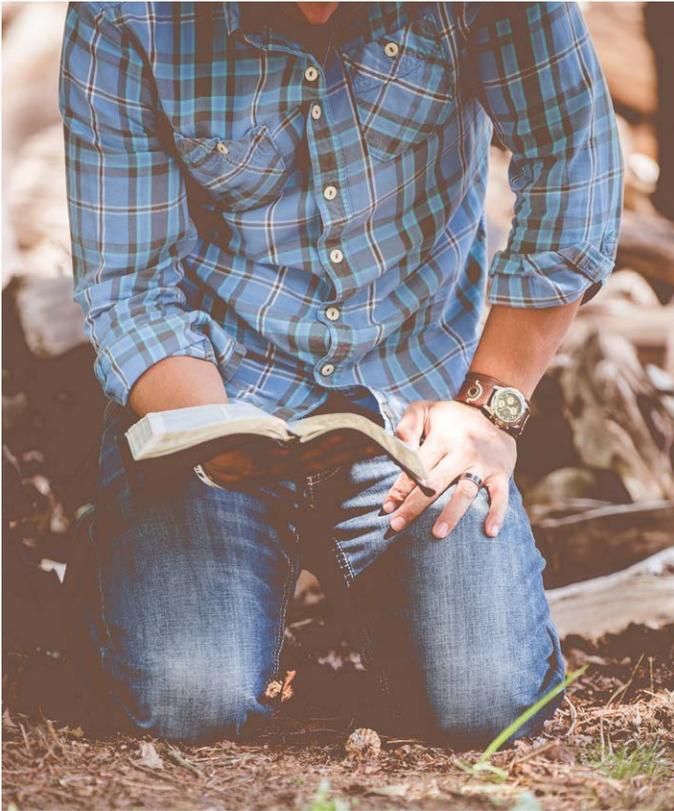
word used by Jesus were the same, referring to a giant sea creature. (See [Was Jonah Swallowed by a Fish or a Whale?](#)) It is the critics, not Jesus, who are mistaken, even naïve, in not bothering to consult the languages the Bible was written in.

To believe that Jonah wasn't swallowed by a giant sea creature may seem a minor point—but how can it be minor if it means that Jesus was *wrong*? Theologically speaking, not just the basis for bibliology but also for Christology is at stake. Failure to believe in inerrancy will lead me to believe Jesus was mistaken in implicitly trusting Scripture—which means not only that the Bible is errant, but also that the One who died for me on the cross was errant. If He was, then the whole redemptive work of God comes tumbling down like a house of cards.

But if Jesus was the infallible living Word, affirming the infallible and authoritative written Word (by which I mean inerrant, for if it's errant it isn't infallible or authoritative), then redemption is not a house of cards to be blown in the wind by every passing critic. Rather, it is a chain of rock-solid historical truths involving Adam and Eve, a garden, a flood, Abraham, David, Christ, a crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection

A group of scholars, such as the Jesus Seminar, can cast their votes on whether Jesus really said a certain thing (and decide He didn't, because as a loving person, Jesus would not really say people are going to an eternal Hell). These scholars speak not on God's authority, but their own.

Do I really trust my own judgment, my biases, my frail and faulty and ever-changing "knowledge," my desires and felt needs, and my personal comfort levels? And what if I then conclude that because I want to leave my wife (I don't, by the way—she's terrific!), the passages limiting divorce are not really accurate, and come from the gospel writers' and Paul's restrictive conservatism, not from the loving heart of God? Or maybe I want to live with my girlfriend or my partner of the same gender, or steal from my workplace, or cheat someone. Perhaps I'll choose to believe the love and grace parts of Scripture, but not those that define the things I want to do as wrong. If I do this, then who is my real authority? Not Scripture, but myself (and "myself" is prone to being deceived and largely shaped by the current values of my culture).



Thomas Jefferson constructed a literal cut and paste Bible that included what he liked and excluded what he didn't. (There was a great deal he didn't like—once you start cutting, where do you stop?) Who then was his authority? Not the Bible, but Thomas Jefferson.

If we do likewise, we'll inevitably end up like the Israelites in the time of the Judges: "There was no King in Israel; and every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Unless God's Word is fully trustworthy, inevitably I must rely upon myself or others to decide which parts I should trust and which I shouldn't. If some of Scripture is false, I must develop some process whereby I determine which parts are true, since truth-seekers will not wish to embrace what isn't true.

Failure to believe in inerrancy must logically lead to my inability to trust the Bible as authoritative. Clearly those parts which are supposedly false cannot be authoritative. I cannot rely upon what I do not believe to be accurate. I cannot place myself under the authority of that which is historically false. I cannot

build my belief system upon the sand and chaff of historical error. (See Francis Schaeffer's *Genesis in Space and Time* on this subject.)

Augustine said, "If you believe what you like in the gospel, and reject what you don't like, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself."

Christians who arbitrarily embrace some biblical truths and reject others are severely handicapped in representing Christ to a truth-starved world. Churches desperately need to focus on teaching people "the whole counsel of God," which referred to the whole teachings of God's Word (Acts 20:27).

Who are we to pick and choose which truths we like and don't like when God's Word says "the sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever" (Psalm 119:160)?

## **IT'S NOT ARROGANCE, BUT HUMILITY, TO TRUST GOD'S WORD MORE THAN WE TRUST ITS CRITICS AND OURSELVES.**

Those who believe Scripture are often accused of arrogance. But Jesus said God's word is truth (John 17:17). It's not arrogance to believe what the Bible teaches. It's the opposite. It's humility.

Arrogance is when we believe whatever makes us feel better about ourselves, justifies our actions, or makes sense to us. We act as if we are qualified to judge truth, but in the process we put ourselves in the judgment seat over God's Word. Then we either reject the truth or tailor it, reinterpreting it and spinning it to fit our preferences. So instead of us submitting to God's Word, we try to make God's Word submit to us.

But we are temporary. Our opinions come and go from continent to continent, decade to decade,



**Our opinions come and go from continent to continent, decade to decade, century to century. In contrast, God's truth is eternal and never-changing.**

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century to century. In contrast, God's truth is eternal and never-changing: "Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:7-8).

I believe many of the efforts to discredit Scripture come from pride. It feeds our egos to think "We know better than people did back then." C. S. Lewis called this "chronological snobbery." It's when we assume that new ideas and standards are superior to the old simply because they are newer. In the history of theology, certainly new insights arise. But while insights which contradict all that preceded them may be intriguing and appeal to modern people, often they are also heretical—they are false doctrine that contradicts the teachings of Scripture (infallible) and the teachings of the church (fallible) that preceded them. The first thing that Paul says about false teachers in 1 Timothy 6 is that they are "conceited" (v. 3). They trust in their *own* interpretations and refashion Scripture to fit current beliefs.

Ironically, without studying Scripture or researching the actual facts, countless believers embrace the claims of the Bible's critics. Yet most of those critics' claims are nothing new. The Bible has been criticized incessantly for the last 150 years, and long before that. The charges just haven't stuck. "Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens" (Psalm 119:89).

## **SUMMARY: EXCERPTS FROM THE CHICAGO STATEMENT ON BIBLICAL INERRANCY**

This statement was produced in 1978, and signed by 300 evangelical scholars. The [full statement](#) is certainly worth reading, I have chosen to include here very small portions of it.

These are five summary statements at the beginning of the document:

1. God, who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God's witness to Himself.

2. 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.

3. The Holy Spirit, Scripture's divine Author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.

4. 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.

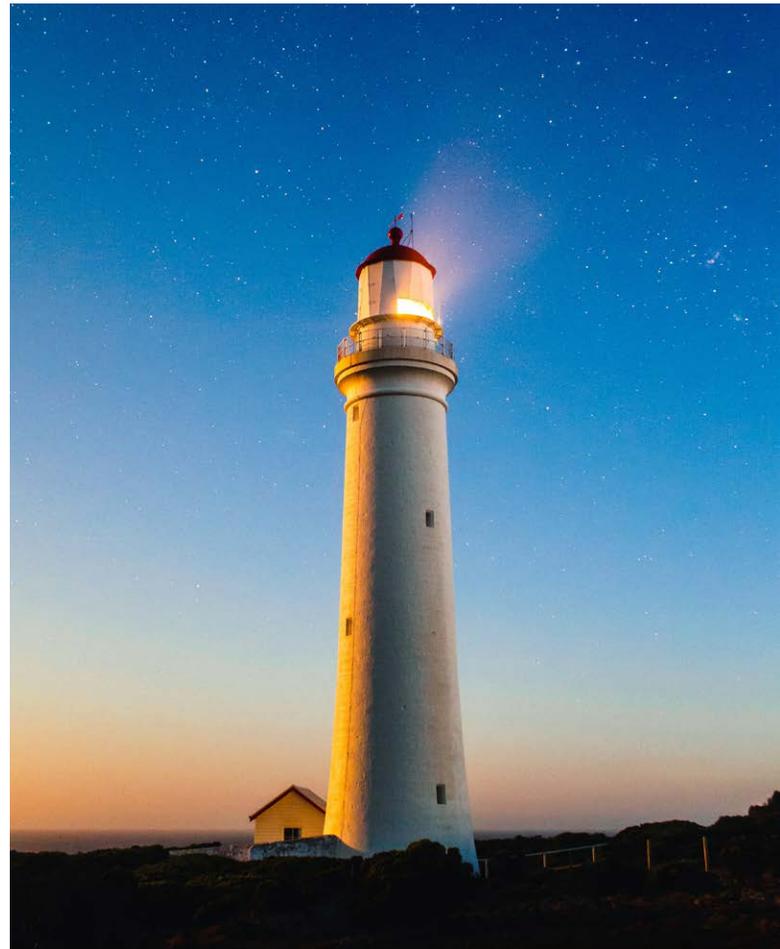
5. The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.

These are three of the nineteen articles in the Chicago Statement which I consider particularly relevant:

**Article VI: We affirm** that the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration.

**We deny** that the inspiration of Scripture can rightly be affirmed of the whole without the parts, or of some parts but not the whole.

**Article XI: We affirm** that Scripture, having been given by divine inspiration, is infallible, so that,



far from misleading us, it is true and reliable in all the matters it addresses.

**We deny** that it is possible for the Bible to be at the same time infallible and errant in its assertions. Infallibility and inerrancy may be distinguished, but not separated.

**Article XII: We affirm** that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit.

**We deny** that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science.

**We further deny** that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.

## CONCLUSION: THE BIBLE IS ACCURATE, VITALLY IMPORTANT AND SURE TO BE ATTACKED.

I've had the same life-changing experience with God's Word as millions of others in human history. I grew up in an unbelieving home. When I was fifteen, God spoke to me directly through the words on the pages of the Bible, drew me to Him, convicted me of my sins, and freely forgave me. There is no separating my knowledge of God and my walk with Jesus from the accuracy, authority, and power of God's Word.

The skeptic Voltaire was a bitter enemy of the Christianity. He was absolutely right when he said this: "If we would destroy the Christian religion, we must first of all destroy man's belief in the Bible."

Here's what others have said about the Bible:

"I have a fundamental belief in the Bible as the Word of God, written by men who were inspired. I study the Bible daily." —Sir Isaac Newton

"It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible." —George Washington

"I believe the Bible is the best gift God has ever given to man." —Abraham Lincoln

"The Bible is worth all other books which have ever been printed." —Patrick Henry

"The Bible has stood the test of time because it is divinely inspired by Almighty God, written in ink that cannot be erased by any man, religion, or belief system." —Billy Graham

"The Bible is no mere book, but it's a living creature with a power that conquers all who oppose it." —Napoleon Bonaparte

"It is impossible to enslave mentally or socially a Bible-reading people. The principles of the Bible

are the groundwork of human freedom." —Horace Greeley

"So great is my veneration of the Bible that the earlier my children begin to read it, the more confident will be my hope that they will prove useful citizens in their country and respectful members of society." —John Adams

"The secret of my success? It is simple. It is found in the Bible." —George Washington Carver

"Sink the Bible to the bottom of the ocean, and man's obligations to God would be unchanged. He would have the same path to tread, only his lamp and his guide would be gone; he would have the same voyage to make, only his compass and chart would be overboard." —Henry Ward Beecher

"All that I am I owe to Jesus Christ, revealed to me in his divine book." —David Livingstone.

"Men do not reject the Bible because it contradicts itself but because it contradicts them." —E. Paul Hovey

Finally, I'm reminded of what the Huguenots said of the Bible and its critics:

**"Hammer away ye hostile hands;  
your hammers break,  
God's Anvil stands."**





## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### Online Articles and Resources

[Full Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy](#)

[Differences, or Contradictions? Responding to Apparent Contradictions in the Bible](#)

[Are There Errors in the Bible?](#)

[Does the Bible contain errors, contradictions, or discrepancies?](#)

[Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry](#) (see, for example, their article [How many men or angels appeared at the tomb?](#))

[Are Errors in the Bible?](#) (8-minute video on scribal errors in the copying of biblical manuscripts)

[Is Belief in Biblical Contradictions Consistent with Inerrancy?](#)

[Answering Bible skeptics \(FAQs\)](#)

[Are There Any Errors in the Bible?](#) by Norman Geisler

[Why Critics of the Bible Do Not Deserve Benefit of the Doubt](#)

[Solutions to Bible “Errors”](#)

[How Can We Be Sure the Biblical Books Are All the Inspired Ones?](#)

[The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics](#)

[Why I Trust the Bible](#)

[5 More Reasons Why I Trust the Bible](#)

### Books

[Seven Reasons You Can Trust the Bible](#) by Erwin W. Lutzer

[Biblical Inerrancy: The Historical Evidence](#) by Norman Geisler

[Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization](#) by Vern S. Poythress

[Hard Sayings of the Bible](#) by Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Peter H. Davids, F. F. Bruce, and Manfred Brauch

[The Book of God](#) graphic novel



Eternal Perspective Ministries (EPM) is a Bible-believing, Christ-centered nonprofit organization, founded and directed by author Randy Alcorn, with two goals:

- to teach the principles of God's Word, emphasizing an eternal viewpoint;
- to reach the needy in Christ's name, calling attention to the needs of the unreached, unfed, unsupported, unborn, unreconciled, and untrained.

EPM is the recipient of the author royalties from Randy Alcorn's books, and 100% are given away for ministry purposes: 90% to other worthy Christian organizations and 10% to EPM to help offset the costs related to the writing/researching/editing of the books, as well as to help facilitate the giving away of our books to people all over the world. We love the fact that God uses Randy's books to change people's lives in two ways: through the reading of his words and through the giving away of his royalties.

You can order all of Randy's books and products through EPM's online store at [epm.org/store](http://epm.org/store). (The EPM website also has many free resources, including articles, audio, video, pastors' kits, and more.) When you purchase Randy's books from EPM, the profits go directly to support the work of the ministry and fund our operating expenses.

Twice a year, EPM produces *Eternal Perspectives*, a full-color magazine. EPM also sends a periodic email newsletter with the latest news about Randy's books, projects, and speaking events, as well as special promotions from EPM. You can subscribe at [epm.org/subscribe](http://epm.org/subscribe).

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