Is the Bible Inerrant?

By Mark M. Mattison

Introduction

The Bible – and especially that part of the Bible known as 'the New Testament" – is the guide and most trusted source of divine revelation for Christians. We use many terms to describe the Holy Scriptures (Sacred Writings) and their role in the Church. Following 2 Timothy 3:16, we say that the Bible is "inspired" by God. The term in 2 Timothy is "God-breathed." In other words, we believe that the testimony of Scripture is an expression of God Himself. At the same time, we generally understand that these inspired writings were not simply "dictated" through the authors; their own vocabularies, writing styles, and personal expressions become the conduit of divine revelation.

We also hold that the Scriptures are "authoritative" and "infallible." In 2 Peter 1:20,21, we read that "no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (NIV). Though the Scriptures were written by men like David, Isaiah, John, and Paul – and though their unique way of writing and communicating shaped their inspired revelations – their words were not theirs alone. We believe that God communicates to the church today through their writings. And these sacred tests are authoritative in a way that Mark Twain's are not. The Scriptures are "infallible," that is, incapable of failing, certain; without error in their teachings about faith and morals. The Scriptures are trustworthy and reliable.

There is another, more controversial term used to describe the Scriptures: Inerrant. "Inerrant" means "free from error." On the face of it this descriptive term seems to corroborate what has been said so far. Unfortunately, however, the term has become a shibboleth within evangelicalism. Though the exact definition of "inerrancy" differs from church to church, for most Christians it implies that the Bible is "free from error" in every way by *post-Enlightenment* standards. Scripture is considered infallible not only in the realm of doctrine and ethics, but in the fields of modern science, geography and history as well. Often inerrancy becomes a litmus test of evangelical orthodoxy. This is largely due to the context in which the doctrine of inerrancy emerged; the doctrine was developed at the turn of this century, largely among northern Presbyterians, in response to the historical-critical method of Bible study.

It is this version of inerrancy that will be critiqued here. Why? Because of its serious limitations. Inerrancy as taught in many churches focuses too much attention on the Bible and not enough on what it teaches. It drives commentators to harmonize passages that were never meant to be harmonized, turning literary accounts of faith into wooden historical biographies and homogenizing Scripture in such a way as to overshadow the original authors' individual meanings. Finally, it tends to weaken Christian faith by unnecessarily tying it to an indefensible Bibliology. Every historical detail, no matter how insignificant, becomes as important as the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. If in actual fact Caesar Augustus did not really order a census while Quirinius was governor of Syria – if it turns out there really was only one Gadarene demoniac rather than two – then the entire Bible

becomes worthless and every tenet of Christian faith falls flat. If one single discrepancy emerges, it's all over. This makes Christian faith an easy target for skeptics, and drives believers to unimaginable lengths to "defend" the Bible.

Inerrancy is unnecessary and problematic, and deserves to be challenged for the sake of faithful Christians everywhere. As will be seen, inerrancy is not at all essential to maintaining the inspiration, authority, and infallibility of the Holy Scriptures, and can even become a hindrance.

In this light it needs to be asked how the authors of Scripture themselves would have related to our modern standards of inerrancy. What look to us like disconcerting contradictions may to them have been acceptable literary conventions. In other words, we must consider whether our idea of "errors" and their idea of "errors" are really the same thing, and whether a more literary approach to their writings yields greater insights into their original intent and meaning. In other words, our concern is not to "attack" or "disprove" the Scriptures (as non-inerrantists are sometimes accused of doing) but to appreciate what the Scriptures really intend to teach.

The inerrantist reader may object that the exercise itself is inappropriate, that posing questions about the Scriptures' historical accuracy exalts sinful human reason above the testimony of the inspired texts. It does no such thing. The human intellect is a gift of God, and it is through the intellect that we comprehend the meaning of Scripture in the first place. Striving to let the individual texts speak for themselves, it could be argued, is actually more respectful than trying to improve upon them by creating elaborate harmonized scenarios which may obstruct their original meaning.

This essay will demonstrate the issues at stake by focusing primarily on the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life. Though the principles worked out here apply to all of Scripture, the Gospels are an ideal "laboratory" for working through these issues. Why? Not only because they point us to Jesus Christ, but also because they provide many parallel accounts of the same historical events. Carefully examining their divergent testimonies will enable us to see not only the weaknesses of inerrancy, but also the strengths of a literary approach to Scripture. So we will seek not only to criticize inerrantist interpretations; we will seek also to demonstrate meaningful interpretations more conducive to faith, allowing the authors' intended theological motifs to emerge from the narratives themselves.

Specifically, chapter one lays the groundwork for a non-inerrantist approach by considering the concessions of inerrantists, exploring ground held in common. Chapter two illustrates the ways in which inerrantists depart from these most common inerrantist strategies and proof-texts. Chapter three then articulates the first main argument of this essay, that letting minor historical discrepancies stand in the tests actually strengthens the value of the texts' historical testimony. Chapter four articulates the second main argument, that literary approaches to Scripture clarify the original meaning of the texts. This, however, raises an important question about the relationship between the tests and the history on which they're based, which is considered in chapter five. Chapter six wraps up the study by considering the larger question of how the Bible ought to be defined and used, and finally a concluding chapter summarizes the salient points.

For some Christians, this exercise may seem pedantic. For yet others, it may seem sacrilegious. But if the Scriptures are indeed the sacred literature of the church, as we maintain, then an honest

attempt at any such exercise can only lead us closer to the God who inspired the Scriptures and to the divine Son revealed in them. The reader may just find the principles in this essay liberating and enlightening; in fact, these principles may just strengthen Christian faith generally, releasing it from indefensible theories of inspiration and placing it squarely in the One who must be accepted by faith rather than sight.

Chapter One

Common Ground:
Genealogies, Round Numbers, and Chronological Narratives

Before considering some inerrantist arguments and some alternative ways of treating Scripture, let's consider first the whether the authors of Scripture would have shared our standards of accuracy and error. Inerrantists themselves do seem to take this question into consideration. This is particularly true in the case of the Scriptures' genealogies.

Genealogies and Numbers

For example, consider the genealogy of Jesus as described by Matthew (1:1-17). A careful reading of this list will reveal that it clearly contains many gaps. For example, consider this part of the genealogy from verses 3 and 4:

Hezron the father of Ram,
Ram the father of Amminadab (NIV)

In actual fact, four centuries separated Hezron (Gen. 46:12) and Amminadab (Num. 1:7) – a considerable omission on Matthew's part. Similarly, consider verse 5 and the first part of verse 6:

Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,
Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,
Obed the father of Jesse,
And Jesse the father of King David (NIV)

However, two centuries separated the generations of Rahab (Josh. 2) and Boaz (Ruth 2 – 4), and there were certainly more than three or four generations between Rahab and King David.

Again, consider this part from verse 8:

Jehoram the father of Uzziah (NIV)

This omits three generations. Between Jehoram and Uzziah lived Ahaziah, Joash, and Amaziah (2 Chron. 21:4-26:23).

Finally, in verse 11, we read:

Josiah the father of Jeconiah (NIV)

However, Jehoiahim lived between Josiah and Jeconiah (2 Chron. 36:1-9), though one wouldn't know it from this genealogy.

The number of names is also problematic, in that there aren't nearly enough. Matthew lists only 41 names from Abraham to Jesus, a span of two thousand years. To make matters apparently worse, Matthew baldly goes on to state that "there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, Fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ" (v. 17). Only 42 generations covering two thousand years? Did Matthew have an unrealistic view of history?

Inerrantist scholars have come to grips with this question by realizing that ancient expectations of genealogies and modern expectations are quite different. Ancient genealogies were never intended to provide the inflexible, unabridged histories that we expect from our genealogies. Commenting on the role of chronologies in 1 Chronicles, Raymond Dillard writes in the *NIV Study Bible*:

> Analysis of genealogies, both inside and outside the Bible, has disclosed that they serve a variety of functions (with different principles governing the lists), that they vary in form (some being segmented, others linear) and depth (number of generations listed), and that they are often fluid (subject to change)…Comparison of genealogical lists of the same tribal family or line often brings to light surprising differences. This fluidity of the lists may reflect variation in function. But sometimes changes in the status of relations of social structures are reflected in genealogies by changes in the relationships of names in the genealogy (see 1:35-42; 6:22, 27) or by the addition of names or segments to a lineage (see 5:11-22; 6:27; 7:6-12). The most common type of fluidity in Biblical materials is telescoping, the omission of names from the list. Unimportant names are left out in order to relate an individual to a prominent ancestor, or possibly to achieve the desired number of names in the genealogy. Some biblical genealogies, for example, omit names to achieve multiples of 7: For the period from David to the exile Matthew gives 14 generations (2 times 7), while Luke gives 21 (3 times 7), and the same authors give similar multiples of 7 for the period from the exile to Jesus (Mt 1:1-17; Lk 3:23-38). [1]

So inerrantist scholars have come to grips with the "fluidity" tolerated by ancient readers in their historical records, at least as far as geneologies are concerned. As is also apparent from the preceding citation, they tend to appreciate the Scriptures' practice of rounding numbers, sometimes in the interest of symbolism. Inerrantist Millard J. Erickson writes:

> We often find approximations in the Bible. There is no real conflict between the statements in Numbers 25:9 that 24,000 died by the plague and Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 10:8 that 23,000 died. Both are approximations, and for the purpose involved, both are adequate and therefore may be regarded as true. [2]

Historical Narratives

Erickson admits that this principle extends also to the chronological order of historical narratives, [3] as well as to the reporting of dialogue: In some cases, a changed in words was necessary in order to

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[1] *The NIV Stdy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Bible Publishers), 1985, p. 581

[2] *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House), 1990, p.236

[3] *Ibid.*

communicate the same meaning to different persons. Thus Luke has 'glory in the highest' where Matthew and mark have 'Hosana in the highest'; the former would make better sense to Luke's Gentile readership than would the latter. [4]

Erickson is undoubtedly correct. Even a cursory comparison of the Gospels indicates that their writers did not intend simply to convey straight history. This is apparent from the fact that they do not even provide the same chronologies. However, while accepting all of these points, in actual practice inerrantists don't always follow through on these principles. Often inerrantist scholars are willing to concede "fluidity" in genealogies, numbers, and (to an extent) chronology, but insist on exactness in other minor details. This is inconsistent and unnecessary, and as we will see in the next chapter, leads to some highly questionable interpretations.

Examples of Historical Discrepancies

An example of chronological difference involves John the Baptists' sending his disciples to ask whether Jesus really was the Christ. When did this event happen? According to Matthew, first Jesus calmed the storm (8:23-27); healed the Gadarene demoniacs (8:28 –34), the dead girl and sick women (9:18-26); and sent out his twelve disciples (10:1-42). "After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee" (11:1, NIV). Following this we read that "John heard in prison what Christ was going" and sent his disciples to ask Jesus whether he really was the Christ (11:2-6 NIV).

By contract, in Luke's account John sent his disciples to Jesus (7:18-23) *before* Jesus calmed the storm (8:22-25); healed the Gadarene demoniac and sent out the twelve (9:1-6), adding that John had already been killed by the time of the sending of the twelve (9:7-9), a point corroborated by Mark (6:7-29). This type of chronological discrepancy is very common in the Gospel accounts, but is not problematic from the standpoint that it was not the writers' intent to convey an exact historical chronology.

As another example, did Jesus cleanse the Jerusalem temple near the beginning of his ministry, as John indicates (2:12-25), or near the end, as Matthew, Mark, and Luke indicate (Matt. 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46)?

Unfortunately, inerrantists are often unwilling to allow the Gospel writers the poetic license necessary to give divergent accounts, insisting that for them all to be correct the event had to have happened twice –once at the beginning or his ministry (John), and once at the end (Matthew, mark, Luke).

A more difficult question of chronology involves the Last Supper. Was the Last Super of Jesus and his disciples eaten on the Passover, as Matthew, Mark, and Luke clearly indicate (Matt. 26:17-20; Mark 14: 12-17; Luke 22:7-15)? Or was it the evening before the Passover, as John clearly writes (13:1,29; cf. 18:28; 19:14,31,42)?

Another question: Did Judas Iscariot share the loaf and the cup with the other disciples? That would seem to depend on whose account we follow. According to John, Judas left immediately

[4] *Ibid.,* p.237.

after having been exposed by Jesus (13:18-30). According to Matthew and Mark, the disclosure of Judas' betrayal happened before the loaf and cup (Matt. 26:21-15; Mark 14:18-21). But according to Luke, it happened afterward (22:20-23). So when did Jesus describe and identify the traitor? Before or after the loaf and cup?

Yet another point of discrepancy can be noted with regard to Jesus'prediction of Peter's denial. According to Matthew and Mark (Matt.26:30-35; Mark 14:26-31), Jesus and the disciples went to the Mount of Olives before Jesus' prediction, whereas according to Luke they went to the Mount only after Jesus' prediction (22:31–34, 39). Which was it?

Consider also the difference between Acts and Matthew on when the field Akeldama was purchased. According to Acts 1:18,19 Judas Iscariot bought the field with the thirty pieces of silver which he received for betraying Christ. Shortly thereafter he died in the field, "so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is Field of Blood" (Acts 1:19b, NIV).

On the other hand, according to Matthew 27:3-10, the remorseful Judas threw the thirty pieces of silver into the temple and then hanged himself. The chief priests could not put the silver into the treasury, since it was "blood money" (Matt. 27:6). "So they decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners. *That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day*" (Matt. 27:7, NIV, emphasis mine).

The chronological question is apparent: Did Judas buy the field before he died, or did the chief priests buy the field after he died?

There are other questions raised by these accounts besides chronological ones. Did Judas buy the field with the thirty pieces of silver, or did he return the silver to the temple? Why was the field called "Field of Blood"? Because Judas died there, or because it was bought with tainted money?

As another example of historical discrepancy, what were Jesus' twelve disciples to take on their mission? Did Jesus instruct them to carry *nothing but* a staff and sandals (Mark 6:8,9), or did he instruct them not to take a staff and sandals (Matt. 9:9,10; Luke 9:3)?

These are the types of questions which vex inerrantist interpreters, despite their acknowledgement that the Gospel narratives do not intend to convey straight history with exact chronologies. So what principles do they use to harmonize such discrepancies? That is the point of the next chapter.

Chapter Two
Inerrantist Arguments

As we have seen, inerrantists as a principle often admit that minor variations in historical reports are well within the parameters of Scripture's truthfulness. In *Thy word is Truth,* E.J. Young provides the following example:

> Mr. A. says to me, 'Will you please tell Mr. B that I should like to see him as soon as it is convenient?' I go to Mr. B and say, "Mr. A says that he would like to see you as soon as you can make it'. I have given correctly the message of Mr. A, but I have not given a verbatim repetition. It is quite possible that the evangelists likewise did not intent to report the conversations verbatim.[i5]

However, when it comes to concrete test cases, Young and other inerrantists seem to retreat from this principle and seek to vindicate the complete historical veracity of every word. Consider, for example, Young's harmonization of the Gospel accounts of the Rich Young Ruler.

The Rich Young Ruler

The designation "Rich Young Ruler" is actually itself the result of harmonization: Mark calls him "rich" (10:22), Matthew adds that he is "young" (19:22), and Luke calls him a "ruler" (18:18), hence "Rich Young Ruler."

One of the obstacles for inerrantists is the form of the rich man's question, and the form of Jesus' answer, which differ slightly in the three accounts:

"Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

"Why do you ask me about what is good? (Matt. 19:16,17, NIV)

"Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" (Mark 10:17,18; Luke 18:18,19, NIV)

The differences are minute, yet apparently significant enough for many inerrantists to warrant a defense. Hence Young strives to reconcile the differences by reconstructing the original conversation and supposing that each Gospel writer reported only part of the question:

> In all probability, the full question was, 'Good teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may possess eternal life?' To this the complete answer of the Lord may have been, 'Why callest thou Me good and why askest thou Me concerning that which is good?' [*Translations by the*

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[5] *Thy Word is Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.), 1957, p.129

author.] No one of the evangelists, however, has seen fit to give the complete question or the complete answer. [6]

This strategy is very common among inerrantists, as we will see. No matter how improbable the historical reconstruction, the inerrantist will often postulate an event or a form of a quotation regardless of how redundant the reconstructed event becomes. The more elaborate the reconstruction, the more unwieldy the argument. Yet as the following examples show, there appears to be no limit to the extent to which inerrantists will go to make such strategies work. The arguments simply collapse under their own weight.

The Blind Beggar(s)

A more difficult set of discrepancies for inerrantists revolves around the healing in Jericho just prior to Jesus' triumphal entry. In Mark's account, we read that Jesus healed a blind beggar named Bartimaeus (10:46). In Luke's account, we read that this event happened "As Jesus *approached* Jericho" (18:35). However, Matthew tells us that there were *two* blind men, and that the event happened "as Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho" (20:29). Here is a discrepancy which is difficult to reconcile.

But of course inerrantists must construct a scenario which will fit each account word-for-word, with no contradictions. Some suggest, for example, that Matthew and Mark were writing of the ancient, abandoned Jericho, and that Luke was writing of the rebuilt Jericho.[7] Gleason Archer creates a more imaginative scenario, however. "It is only after we compare the testimony of all three witnesses that we obtain a fuller understanding of the whole episode," he writes. [8]

Archer surmises that Bartimaeus learned of Jesus' visit as he and his disciples were entering the city. He tried to get Jesus' attention, but was unable in the crowd. After Jesus entered the city, Bartimaeus "picked up a blind colleague" [9] and explained to him that he was attempting to get to Jesus. The colleague Matthew describes was not a close friend, since Bartimaeus spoke only for himself according to Mark and Luke. The two of them waited for Jesus to emerge from the city, which he did after staying with Zacchaeus and then telling the parable of the ten minas or talents. When Jesus and his disciples left the city, at that point both men caught his attention, though because of his stronger personality it was only Bartimaeus who features in Mark's and Luke's accounts.

However, even this imaginative reconstruction does not fit well with Luke's chronological description ("As Jesus approached Jericho," 18:35; "Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through," 19:1; "After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem," 19:28). Luke specifically places the entire account before Jesus enters the city.

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[6] *Ibid.*, p.130.
[7] *Ibid.*, p.132.
[8] *Encyclopedia of Biblical Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 1982, s.v. "Matthew". This statement is problematic in that it implies that the individual testimonies of Gospel accounts are not adequate until a plausible "harmony" is created.
[9] *Ibid.*

The various inerrantist explanations for the differences in these tests seem most implausible.

The Inscription on the Cross

To the inerrantist, the tiniest discrepancy has the potential to destroy the entire Bible. Consider the explanations suggested for the divergent reports of the inscription on the cross. The differences themselves are insignificant:

"This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" Matt. 27:37, NIV)

"The King of the Jews" (Mark 15:26, NIV)

"This is the King of the Jews" (Luke 23:38, NIV)

"Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (John 19:19, NIV)

In actual fact, the striking similarities of the four versions are so significant that the inscription's historicity seems highly credible; each writer confirms that a sign on the cross identified Jesus as the king of the Jews, regardless of whether his name or hometown was included.

Nevertheless, inerrantist scholars have been driven to extreme arguments to explain the minute differences. E.W. Bullinger, in his book *How to Enjoy the Bible*, describes some of the explanations.[10] One possibility, Bullinger writes, is that the full text of the inscription read "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews," and that each Gospel writer reported only a portion of the inscription. Another common explanation, he writes, is that the differences can be accounted for by the different languages in which the inscription was written (Aramaic, Latin, and Greek, John 19:20).

Gleason Archer, in his *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, articulates this view.[11] According to Archer, the Latin inscription read "This is the King of the Jews," and it was this inscription which was reported by Luke. Mark abridged the Latin inscription, reporting only the words "The King of the Jews." The Greek inscription, however, read "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews," and it was this inscription which was reported by John. Finally, the Aramaic inscription read "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews," and it was this inscription which was reported by Matthew.

Bullinger himself, however, prefers yet another explanation for the discrepancies.[12] He suggests that the inscription as reported by Mark, "The King of the Jews," was only an indictment, not a sign which was put on the cross. The inscription recorded by John, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews," was written by Pilate and put on the cross before it left his presence. The inscription recorded by Matthew, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews," was then substituted for it and placed on the cross after Jesus had been crucified. Finally, the inscription recorded by Luke, "This is the King of the Jews," was put on the cross at a later point.

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[10] *How to Enjoy the Bible* (London, England:Samuel Bagster & Sons Ltd.), n.d. p. 343.
[11] Archer, s. v. "Matthew".
[12] Bullinger, pp. 342-344.

It seems singularly incredible that Bullinger's view of inerrancy actually drives him to postulate four different inscriptions just to explain the minor variations in the Gospel accounts. The argument is simply too elaborate to be credible.

The Others Crucified with Christ

Bullinger used a similar technique to explain the divergent accounts of the men with whom Jesus was crucified. In Matthew and Mark, the two thieves crucified with Jesus mocked him (Matt. 27:44; Mark 15:32). In Luke, however, one mocked him, but the other was sympathetic (Luke 23:39-43). A frequent explanation is that initially both mocked him (as recorded in Matthew and Mark), but that one of them then changed his mind and repented (as described in Luke).

Bullinger suggests yet another possibility: Jesus was actually crucified with four men, not just two. Two of them were "robbers" (Matthew and Mark) who mocked him; two of them were "criminals" (Luke), one of whom mocked him and one of whom defended him.[13] Again, such explanations are implausible.

"Original Autographs"

As these four examples make clear, the most common inerrantist strategy for explaining discrepancies is to combine each parallel narrative and reconstruct an event to include each detail of each account, regardless of how redundant or implausible is the reconstruction. Hence, for example, Peter denied Christ six or nine times, as many as four inscriptions identified Jesus as the king of the Jews, and as many as four others were crucified with Christ. However, this tactic does not always work. Consider, for example, the following tests from the Hebrew Scriptures.

1 Samuel 17 relates how young David killed the giant Goliath. However, according to 2 Samuel 21:19, Goliath was killed by Elhanan son of Jaare-Oregim the Bethlehemite. This is a real discrepancy. On the other hand, 1 Chronicles 20:5 gives a slightly different version of 2 Samuel 21:19. According to 1 Chronicles 20:5, Elhanan "*killed Lahmi the brother* of Goliath" (NIV). If Elhanan killed *the brother* of Goliath rather than Goliath himself, as 1 Chronicles 20:5 testifies, then the discrepancy between 1 Samuel 17 and 2 Samuel 21:19 would be resolved. However, that does not resolve the discrepancy between 1 Chronicles 20:5 and 2 Samuel 21:19.

Now the NIV often reconciles discrepancies between 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles by relying on manuscripts (like ancient Greek translations) that have already harmonized the accounts.[14] However, in the case of 2 Samuel 21:19, there are no other textual variants; the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts all state that "In another battle with the Philistines at Gob, Elhananson of Jaare-Oregim the Bethehemite killed Goliath the Gittite, who had a spear with a shaft like a weaver's rod" (NIV; cp. 1 Sam. 17:4,7). The discrepancy between this verse, on the one hand, and 1 Samuel 17 and 1 Chronicles 20:5, on the other, is very real and very difficult to avoid.

To explain discrepancies like these, the inerrantist needs a better argument. And that argument revolves around the question of the "original autographs" or original manuscripts.

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[13] *Ibid.*, pp.345-348.
[14] Cf. the NIV text notes on 2 Sam. 8:4,12,13; 10:18; 21:8; 23:18,27; 24:2,13; etc.

This argument is used only after all others have failed. The argument is that the *original* texts of Scripture were inerrant, but not necessarily the copies of those originals (the received tests). Hence completely irreconcilable data may be due to copyists' errors. For example, regarding the discrepancy about who killed Goliath, J. Robert Vannoy comments on 2 Samuel 21:19 in the *NIV Study Bible*:

> Since it is clear from 1 Sam 17 that David killed Goliath, it is possible that an early copyist misread the Hebrew of "Lahmi the brother of" (see 1 Ch 20:5) as "the Bethlehemite." [15]

In other words, if 2 Samuel 21:19 originally agreed with 1 Chronicles 20:5 but a subsequent copyist accidentally introduced an error into the text, then the discrepancy between the Scriptures (in the original manuscripts) would be resolved, and the claim that 2 Samuel was (as least originally) inerrant would be vindicated.

This is a very convenient argument, since none of the original manuscripts exist. In fact, no original manuscript of *any* book of the Bible currently exists; hence the claim of inerrancy, when applied to the original manuscripts only, cannot in the end be tested.

However, this argument about the "original manuscripts" is faulty for two reasons.

First, if God felt it was important to provide inerrant manuscripts to us, why did He not allow them to be preserved, or a least prevent subsequent copyist from introducing error into the texts? It makes little sense to argue that God provided inerrant Scripture only for it to be lost to mankind shortly after its creation. In essence, this is to argue that the Scriptures *used to be* inerrant, but that they're not inerrant any longer.

Second, if the original manuscripts contained none of the discrepancies that our current texts contain, then those manuscripts were so different from our received texts that the latter must be totally unreliable. In the final analysis the argument about inerrant original manuscripts serves only to defeat the purpose of inerrantist claims in the first place.

Inerrantist Proof-Texts

Remarkably, the Scriptures nowhere claim to be "inerrant" according to the modern inerrantist's standards. On the contrary, the Scriptures' use of other Scriptures would seem to preclude a preoccupation with peripheral details (e.g., cp. 1 Cor. 10:8 with Num. 25:9). Nevertheless, inerrantists regularly produce two major proof-texts to buttress their position that Scripture is scientifically and historically accurate by modern-day standards.

The first is Isaiah 40:22, which states that God "sits enthroned above the circle of the earth" (NIV). It is often claimed that the word "circle" implies a round earth, demonstrating that Isaiah was far ahead of his time in understanding, under divine inspiration, that the earth is not flat. However, there would appear to be no practical reason for God to reveal such scientific propositions well out

[15] For some other examples of this argumentation, see the *NIV Study Bible* comments on 2 Sam. 8:17; 1 Chron. 21:5; 2 Chron 3:15; 4:3.

of a culture's context. It would seem even more curious that such a remarkable revelation should go apparently unnoticed among the people of that day. The only apparent purpose for this remarkable revelation would be to provide twentieth-century inerrantists with a good proof-text.

Does the term "circle" imply a round earth? The simple fact is that not all circles are three-dimensional, spherical objects. Circles can also be two-dimensional, flat objects, such as the circle of the horizon which Isaiah envisioned in his poetic writing. There is no compelling reason for us to believe that Isaiah was communicating scientific theorems about the earth.

Another frequent proof-text is Galatians 3:16, where Paul writes that "The promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. The Scripture does not say' and to seeds,' meaning many people, but' and to your seed,' meaning one person, who is Christ" (NIV). Paul's argument, in other words, is based on the specific form of one word. And if the form of this one word was so important, then by extension one may suppose that the very form of every word is also critical. Or to put it another way, if the specific form of each word in Scripture is not significant, then Paul's argument in Galatians 3:16 would lack merit.

However, one need not extrapolate a universal principle from one isolated case. Elsewhere in Galatians, Paul is not as particular in his use of Scripture; when citing Genesis 21:10 in Galatians 4:30, he freely replaces "my son Isaac" with "the free women's son." Because the form of one particular word is important in establishing a particular argument does not automatically mean that every form of every word is equally significant. Galatians 3:16 does not support inerrantists' claims.

In fact, if anything, it may work against them, since Paul's argumentation from logic and Scripture tells us something of the way he viewed his own writing. We tend to think of the apostles as mini-popes, walking around speaking and writing ex cathedra. But the apostles themselves, and other early Christians, did not see them in that way. The apostles struggled with revelation (cf. Acts 10), they argued among themselves (cf. Gal. 2:14), and in their writings had to resort to argumentation and established Scripture. Had they seen their own writings as inherently authoritative Scripture at the time, they would not have had to rely on such techniques of persuasion. The writings we know as the New Testament, themselves the product of the church, had to be confirmed as Scripture in the life and experience of the church before attaining authoritative status. Paul's letters attained this status rapidly (cf. 2 Pet. 3:15, 16), whereas the authority of other books, like the book of Revelation, were hotly debated for centuries. This easily verifiable fact should give inerrantists pause to reconsider their mechanistic view of inspiration.

The Central Issue

The last inerrantist argument we will consider reflects the central issue in this controversy. E.J. Young asks, "If the Gospels are filled with minor blemishes and errors, how do we know that they do not also contain greater blemishes? If in so-called minor matters they have failed us, by what warrant may we declare that in so-called major matters they are trustworthy?"[16] Quite simply, we affirm it *by faith*. That is the whole point. We do not need the crutch of inerrancy to buttress our faith in Jesus. If anything, inerrancy detracts from faith in Christ by focusing our faith on Scripture.

[16] Young, p. 127.

The inerrantist's Christian hope rises or falls not on Christ, but on whether we can get the Gospels to harmonize, on whether four men were crucified with Christ rather than two. What a terrible burden to place on our faith? Can the smallest historical discrepancy of a written record really destroy a solid Christian faith? A theory of inspiration which so effectively prepares believers for inevitable disappointment must certainly be challenged.

Otherwise, the sincere inerrantist must always be vigilant to reconcile hundreds of discrepancies. For example, who was Moses' father-in-law? Was he Reuel (Ex. 2:15-22), Jethro, a Midianite (Ex. 21:15, 16: 3:1) or a Kenite (Judg. 4:11)?

Did God reveal His personal name to Abraham and Jacob (Gen. 15:7; 28:13), or not (Ex. 6:3)? Was the Canaanite city Hazor, together with its king Jabin, destroyed by Joshua (Josh. 11:1-11), or by Deborah and the later Israelite armies (Judg. 4)? [17] Did Saul first meet young David as a musician (1 Sam. 16:18 – 21), or as the killer of Goliath (1 Sam. 17)? Was Jether an Israelite (2 Sam. 17:25) or an Ishmaelite (1 Chron. 2:17)? Did Ahaziah die at Megiddo of wounds inflicted during a narrow escape in his chariot (2 Kings 9:27), or was he found in Samaria, taken to Jehu, and killed (2 Chron. 22:9)? These and countless other discrepancies await the avid inerrantist at every turn.

But if the Scriptures are not inerrant, what does that imply? That they are full of outright errors? Is "errancy" the natural alternative to "inerrancy"? Not necessarily. Remember the point established in the introduction: The authors of Scripture erred *only if they failed to achieve their intended purpose*. But if it was not their intent to provide straight history by our twentieth century standards, then the error is ours for imposing our modern expectations on them. What we should really ask is how *they* intended their writings to be understood.

To that end, now that we have considered the weaknesses of inerrancy as it is taught in many churches, let us next consider some of the strengths of a non-inerrantist approach to Scripture. The two major strengths proposed here are (1) the strengthening of major historical claims and (2) the literary interpretation of the authors' original intent and meaning.

[17] The *NIV Study Bible* comment on Joshua 11:1 suggests that "Jabin is perhaps a dynastic name, used again in the days of Deborah (Jdg 4:2)". But how could a dynasty have survived the total destruction of Hazor by Joshua?

Chapter Three
Credibility Without Inerrancy

Now that we have considered the fundamental weaknesses of inerrancy as it is taught in many churches, let us begin to consider the strengths of non-inerrantist approaches to Scripture. One of the main strengths, the value of literary interpretations, will be considered in chapter four. For now we will consider the value of recognizing minor discrepancies in order to establish the credibility of more important historical events.

The Infancy Narratives

Let's consider first the infancy accounts contained in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. It will not be our intention to examine every historical claim or consider all of the details of the narratives; our case will be sufficiently served if we limit our query to discrepancies between the two accounts. Can any discrepancies be found? It would appear so.

Consider, for example, whether Jesus ever lived in Bethlehem. Luke's account seems to preclude that possibility. According to Luke's account, Joseph and Mary had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem as a result of Augustus' decree that a census be taken (2:1-4). While they were visiting Bethlehem, Jesus was born (2:5-30). Eight days later, as required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary circumcised Jesus (2:21). Then, "When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed" (2:22, NIV), i.e., after 40 days (Lev. 12:2-8), they took Jesus to the temple to make the appropriate sacrifice (2:22-24). Then, "When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord [cf.2:22-24,27], they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong" (2:39,40a, NIV). So Joseph, Mary, and Jesus spent little more than a month in Bethlehem before returning to Nazareth.

Matthew's account, on the other hand, is quite different. By the time the Magi from the east arrived to worship the infant Jesus, two years had elapsed since his birth (2:7,16). The Magi found the young Jesus and his mother Mary in their house (2:11). "When they had gone" (v. 13, NIV), Joseph was warned by an angel in a dream that Herod would try to have Jesus killed, so he took the family to Egypt (2:13–18) prior to moving to Nazareth (2:19-23).

Question: Where did Jesus spend the first years of his life? In Nazareth (Luke) or in Bethlehem and Egypt (Matthew)? According to Luke, Jesus' parents took him back to Nazareth when he was just over a month old, whereas according to Matthew the family lived in Bethlehem for two years before moving to Egypt and then to Nazareth. This discrepancy simply cannot be reconciled.

To an inerrantist, this type of divergence threatens the integrity of the whole Bible. But can this divergence not confirm some important truths rather than undermine them? Consider the implications of the differences between Matthew and Luke in describing Jesus; infancy. Most scholars believe that Matthew and Luke were written entirely independent of one another. It is also apparent that Matthew and Luke are using considerably different sources for their narratives. Yet these minor differences lend credibility to the historical claims they make in common. Basically, the more often an event is reported by different sources, the more likely it is that the

event really happened. Two or three witnesses are more credible than one. And slight differences in the testimonies confirm their independence from one another. Consider: If Matthew and Luke agreed word-for-word, how likely is it that they would be considered independent sources? Not very. If their accounts lined up that exactly, we would be more likely to conclude that one had copied from the other, or that they had simply collaborated together to formulate the story. But independent testimonies provide greater credibility to their historical claims. If four people witness an automobile accident and each are interviewed independently, their versions will differ in the details but lend credibility to the most important points. The same principle can be invoked in our reading of the Gospels.

Again, the significant differences between Matthew and Luke confirm their literary independence. Yet even with their differences, they agree on critical points. Jesus was conceived of a virgin; angelic announcements preceded the event; Mary was Jesus' mother, and Joseph his legal father; Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but grew up on Nazareth. Matthew and Luke differ in their accounts of why Jesus was born in Bethlehem but lived in Nazareth, but both affirm the central points. So it is that by discarding inerrantist dogma, the more important claims of Scripture can be supported.

If anything, then, dissimilar passages can be a compelling argument for the historicity of the most critical and meaningful events described in Scripture. Nowhere can this point be made more poignantly then by considering the Resurrection narratives.

The Resurrection Narratives

The four Gospels' accounts of the Resurrection story contain details that simply cannot be harmonized. For example, who went to the tomb that Sunday morning? Luke writes that it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and "the others with them" (24:10) – at least five women. Mark writes only of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome – only three. Matthew writes only of the two Marys, and John writes only of Mary Magdalene.

As we have seen, the typical inerrantist response to this type of discrepancy is to choose the largest number of people (in this case, the five or more women of Luke's account) as the historical number, then to argue that the others knew about the larger group but decided to mention only a few of them, or one of them. This isn't a bad argument, but it sometimes begs the question and doesn't always fit. For example, where were the other women in John 20:10-18 when Jesus first appeared to Mary?

Another question: When Mary (or the group of women) went to the tomb early in the morning, was it light yet or was it still dark? Mark writes that it was "after sunrise" (16:2), when there would have been plenty of light, but John writes that it was "still dark" (20:20). These texts simply do not agree.

Consider also the descriptions of the angels. First, how many were there? Matthew and Mark write one; Luke and John write two. Again, a typical response is that there were really two, but Matthew and Mark only mention one of them. But the descriptions cannot be reconciled so easily. For example, was (were) the angel (s) standing or sitting? Matthew writes that he was sitting on

the stone in front of the tomb (28:2). Mark writes that he was sitting inside the tomb "on the right side" (16:5). John writes that they were sitting in the tomb, "where Jesus' body had been" (20:12). On the other hand, Luke writes that the angels were standing (28:4). And what did the angel(s) say? "Do not be afraid/alarmed…" (Matthew and Mark), "Why do you look for the living among the dead…" (Luke), or "Woman, why are you crying" (John)?

Again, the inerrantist might argue that the angels said all of these things, and that each Gospel writer has reported only a portion of what was said. For example, it could be argued that the angels asked Mary why she was crying (John 20:13) only after making the announcement about the Resurrection as recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But Mary demonstrated no knowledge of such an announcement when responding to the question (John 20:13). And it is unlikely that they asked Mary the question before the announcement, because immediately after responding to the angels' question "she turned around and saw Jesus standing there" (20:14).

A more compelling discrepancy, however, may be a question of chronology: Who entered the tomb first? Mary or Peter? Mark and Luke both write that Mary "entered," whereas John writes that upon seeing the stone rolled away, she ran to Peter and John. Peter and John both ran to the tomb, and although John arrived first, Peter went in first and saw the linens (John 20:5-9). No angels, no Jesus; simply an empty tomb. Then, after the two of them "went back to their homes" (v.10), Mary stood outside crying, looked into the tomb, and saw the angels. By contrast, in Luke's account, Peter ran to the tomb and saw the linens only after the angelic announcement had been made to Mary (Luke 24:4-12).[18] So which happened first? Did Peter enter the tomb first and find the linens (John), or did Mary enter the tomb first (or look into it) and see the angels? The accounts cannot be fully harmonized.

Finally, the Resurrection accounts differ on where Jesus first appeared to the disciples. The original text of Mark's manuscript ends at 16:8, so Mark does not narrate the appearance of the risen Jesus. But the angel's instruction to the disciples is to proceed to Galilee, where they will see him (16:7; cp. 14:28). Following Mark, Matthew writes that the angel said "then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him'" (28:7). So the disciples "went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go" (28:16; cp 26:32), and saw the resurrected Jesus for the first time (v.17).

By contrast, according to Luke and John, the resurrected Jesus appeared to his disciples on the very evening of the Sunday on which he had arisen. Furthermore, according to Luke, at the time of that initial appearance Jesus specifically instructed his disciples to "stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49; cf. Acts 1:4), an event which did not happen until Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) – which makes it even more difficult to harmonize Luke's version with Matthew's and Mark's, where the disciples were told by an angel to go to Galilee to see the risen Jesus. Again, these accounts cannot be harmonized.

What does this imply? That the accounts are untrustworthy? Not necessarily. Remember the principle of multiple divergent testimonies considered in the previous section: The more frequently an event is reported by different sources, the more likely it is that the testimonies are

[18] Since a few Western manuscripts omit Luke 24:12, it has been argued by some that verse 12 is an interpolation but 24:12 seems to be a natural precursor to 24:24.

true. That the Gospels base their accounts on a multiplicity of sources is apparent from their lack of complete agreement. Yet those very discrepancies lend greater credibility to the claims they do make in common. Had each account of the empty tomb agreed word-for-word, it would seem that they were copied from an identical source, or that the account was the result of elaborate collaboration. Yet the clear independence of these accounts makes their agreement on the important points all the more striking. They differ on the details of how many women went to the tomb, when they went, how many angels there were, what was said, and in what order certain events transpired. But all four accounts affirm that at least Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early Sunday morning to find the tomb empty, and that an angelic announcement was made about the resurrection. Three of the four explicitly state that Jesus appeared to his disciples, and the other (Mark) implies it.

Once again, the divergence of the Gospel accounts, when divorced from the harmonizing science of inerrancy, lends greater credibility to the most critical historical claims of the Gospel writers. Hence historical credibility is easier to establish apart from the doctrine of inerrancy.

Chapter Four
Literary Interpretation

We have established one important principle of a non-inerrantist approach so far: The principle of multiple divergent testimonies. There is another, more important principle that is opened up to us once we are willing to resist the temptation to harmonize: The appreciation of the literary meaning of the Gospels.

The unique literary points of the Gospel writers may be discerned by considering the general tenor of their narratives apart from the narratives of the other Gospels. Comparing the different Gospels can then highlight the different emphases and help us to appreciate the unique message intended by each writer. Considering how each writer edited his material is an important part of this approach.

Some of these differences are well known. For example, it is well known that where Mark and Luke quote Jesus as talking about "the kingdom of God," Matthew quotes Jesus as talking about "the kingdom of heaven" (e.g., cp. Matt. 4:17 with Mark 1:15; Matt. 10:7 with Luke 9:2). Commentators realize that Matthew is thus showing his Jewishness by using a circumlocution for "God" rather than naming God directly. Matthew's substitution of the work "heaven" for "God" is one practice unique to Matthew's Gospel.

Another example is Luke's use of the term "Holy Spirit." Luke's unique "charismatic" theology emphasizes the Holy Spirit more than Matthew or Mark; the term appears seventeen times in Luke, compared to six times in Mark and twelve in Matthew. Luke also edits his material in such a way as to include this term in Jesus' sayings. For example, according to Matthew, Jesus said:

> "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give *good gifts* to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matt. 7:9-11, NIV).

In reporting the same saying, Luke substitutes "the Holy Spirit" for the term "good gifts":

> "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give *the Holy Spirit* to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:11-13, NIV).

Space will not allow us to consider all of the literary insights available in the Gospels. For our purposes, however, considering some major highlights and motifs will suffice to demonstrate the superiority of this method over the inerrantist's harmonizing method. As we consider some of the literary points of each Gospel in isolation, it will become apparent that inerrancy would preclude some of the most enlightening insights available to us.

"Son of God" in Mark

Mark's Gospel begins: "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1, NIV). This revelation establishes the central irony of Mark's Gospel: The reader knows exactly who Jesus is (1:1), and the demons know who Jesus is (1:24, 3:11; 5:7), but no one else understands, including the disciples that Jesus has gathered around himself. The tension isn't resolved until 15:39, when the centurion figures out that Jesus is the Son of God only after he has died on the cross. This is Mark's christological message: Jesus' Sonship cannot be understood apart from suffering and humility. This is the point which none of Jesus' followers understand throughout his entire ministry.

The problem is that none of Jesus' contemporaries understand what Messiahship means. They expect a powerful, military Messiah who will defeat the Romans and restore Israel's glory (cf. 8:31-33, 9:31, 32). As a result, Jesus shrouds his identity in secrecy and mystery, forbidding anyone to reveal his true identity because it will be misunderstood (1:34; 3:12; 8:26,30). And though Jesus explains his enigmatic parables to his disciples (4:10-12, 33,34), by their ignorance they place themselves in the same category as those spiritually blind people who do not understand (8:17, 18).

The narrative following this last Scripture helps to provide an interpretative framework for what is about to happen at Caesarea Philippi. At Bethsaida, Jesus heals a blind man in two stages (8:22-26). Similarly, Jesus' followers will recognize him in two stages: First they will "see" that he is the Christ (8:27-29), though they will not yet "see" what that means (8:30, 28). In fact Mark's description of Peter's confession is highly significant. If we are too quick to harmonize Mark's account with Matthew's, we will miss Mark's point altogether. Unlike Matthew's version, in which Jesus praises Peter for his confession (16:17-19), in Mark's version Jesus rebukes him (8:30). The NIV doesn't convey this point well; it reads, "Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him" But unlike Matthew 16:20, the Greek terminology behind this translation is more strong. The word *epitimao* implies more than simple warning; it means "to rebuke," and is in fact the same work used to describe Jesus' rebuke of the demons (3:11) as well as Peter's and Jesus' subsequent argument (8:32,33). Mark's point is that Peter has no idea what "Christ" really means; his Messiahship cannot be interpreted in terms of power and glory, but in terms of suffering and sacrifice (8:33-38).

Jesus' use of miracles in Mark's Gospel also illuminates this point. Prior to the confession at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus performs as many as fifteen miracles; but after that critical point, he performs only three, and even then with reluctance. Mark seems to be specifically downplaying the miraculous aspect of Jesus' ministry to make the point that if Jesus is understood primarily as a powerful wonder-worker, he is not understood at all.

Even after Jesus is revealed as the suffering Son, however, the irony of this mysterious Gospel continues. Throughout Mark's narrative, Jesus has continually asked people not to spread the word about him, a request which is largely ignored (cf. Mark 7:36: "Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it," NIV). Finally after the discovery of the empty tomb, the time has come to spread the word. The angel asks the women to go and tell the disciples (16:7), but instead "the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid" (16:8), NIV). What an irony! Jesus' followers continue to do the opposite of what they're asked to do.

The abrupt ending of Mark at 16:8 has bewildered subsequent copyists, who have attached various endings to try to complete the Gospel. Most Bible translations will point out that anything after Mark 16:8 cannot be found in the earliest manuscripts. But we would do well to consider why Mark ends his Gospel in this way. Why doesn't he bring closure to his narrative?

The answer may be that Mark intends us to supply our own end to the story. The tomb is empty; the angelic announcement is made; Jesus is risen. His appearance is imminent, just around the corner. What are we going to do about it? The enigmatic nature of Mark's Gospel places us in the position of needing to answer the question for ourselves. This is the impact of Mark's literary retelling of Jesus' story.

Founder of the Church in Matthew

Matthew's Gospel is very different from Mark's. Whereas Mark presents enigmas and paradoxes, Matthew explains everything. Though following Mark's basic outline, Matthew has provided his Gospel with both a beginning (consisting of a genealogy and an infancy narrative) and an ending (consisting of a resurrection appearance and commissioning). He fills out Mark's presentation of Jesus' ministry by adding lengthy teachings (like the Sermon on the Mount) and specific instructions for the church. There is no mistaking in Matthew that Jesus is the founder of Christianity; only in Matthew's Gospel does the word "church" appear (16:18; 18:17). He provides instruction for the church, including procedures for administering discipline (18:15-20), though that key passage is sandwiched between parables which temper these instructions with a call to mercy (18:10-14; 21-35). From the explaining of Bible prophecy to the specific words of the Great Commission (28:16-20), Matthew leaves no loose ends hanging, no questions unanswered.

Also unlike Mark, the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God to be worshipped is barely repressed. At key points in the Gospel –beginning (2:11), middle (14:33), and end (28:9,17) – Jesus is worshipped by his followers as the Son of God. This second-to-last Scripture well illustrates the difference of Matthew's approach from that of Mark. The disciples in the boat had just seen Jesus walk on water. Now he had climbed into the boat. "then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God'" (14:33, NIV). According to Mark, on the other hand, they were completely bewildered and still didn't understand; "their hearts were hardened" (6:52), even though the feeding of the five thousand (6:30-44) should have tipped them off (cp. 8:1-21).

Concerns Unique to Luke

Like Matthew, Luke presents much teaching material. But like both Mark and Matthew, Luke has emphases all his own. The shape of this Gospel is more complex, but for brevity's sake let's consider just a couple of features unique to Luke. One such feature is that of social concern. Luke includes the same narratives criticizing wealth which we find in Matthew and Mark (from the parable of the Sower, Matt. 13:22; Mark 4:19; Luke 8:14; about the Rich Young Ruler, Matt. 19:21-24; Mark 10:21 – 25; Luke 18:22-25), but includes much more material advocating ministry to the poor. This comes as early as 1:52, 53. With the dawning of the new age, Mary sings:

> He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty (NIV).

The theme emerges again in 4:18, 19 when Isaiah 61:1,2 is cited, announcing good news for the poor and freedom for the oppressed. Also unique to Luke is the parable of the rich fool (12:13-21), instructions to feed the poor (14:12-14), the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31), and Zaccheus' decision to give half his possessions to the poor (19:1-10).

Luke's emphasis on social concerns also becomes apparent when we compare Jesus' sayings about the poor with the versions found in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Whereas Matthew's beatitude blesses "the poor in spirit" (5:3), Luke's blesses "you who are poor" (6:20). And unlike Matthew, in Luke this is followed by a corresponding pronouncement of woe to the rich (6:24). Furthermore, though Luke 12:22-34 contains the material found in Matthew 6:19-21, 25-34, it adds "Sell your possessions and give to the poor" (12:33, NIV). These differences are no accident; Luke is specifically making a point about social and economic justice which is not reflected in Matthew and Mark.

Luke's version of Jesus' words also reflects slightly different emphases with regard to the second coming. For example, in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus' Olivet Discourse describes the fall of Jerusalem in conjunction with his return, with no clear indication of whether these events would be concurrent (Matt. 24; Mark 13). In Luke's version of this discourse, however, the enigmatic "abomination of desolation" in Jerusalem is clearly identified as the Gentile armies (21:20), and the fall of Jerusalem (21:20-24) is clearly distinguished from the events signaling the second coming (21:25-28). Probably writing after Jerusalem had already fallen, Luke clarified the prophecy somewhat in the way he presented the material.

Jesus' answer to the Sanhedrin also demonstrates this difference in emphasis. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus says, "you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64; Mark 14:62, NIV). Luke's account, however, is slightly different: "But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the Mighty God" (22:69, NIV). Notice the difference: What in Matthew and Mark is a promise of the second coming has in Luke been turned into a reference to the ascension, possibly to avoid the implication that the members of the Sanhedrin would live to see the second coming. In these two examples of Luke's editing of Jesus' prophetic sayings, we can see a specific concern to clarify Jesus' meaning.

Jesus in John's Gospel

Because of the many similarities between Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we have been able to consider their emphases with reference to one another. However, John's Gospel is considerably different. In fact, only eight percent of the material in John can be found in the other Gospels.

The differences are considerable. Whereas Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe primarily a ministry in Galilee which culminates in a Passover in Jerusalem, John describes much more ministry in Judea during the course of as many as three Passovers. Whereas the other Gospels are filled with parables, John contains lengthy discourses. Another unique feature of John is that it is often difficult to know when a character ceases to speak and John begins to editorialize, since everyone in

John's Gospel talks like John (cf. 3:10-21; 27-36). History and theology blend together in a way so as to become virtually indistinguishable.

In addition, an influential rival teaching exercised considerable influence on the way John describes Jesus and his ministry. That teaching was a developing Gnosticism, which denied the humanity of Jesus, completely spiritualized the kingdom of God, and obsessed on angels and spiritual beings. As a result, John hardly ever mentions the kingdom (only in 3:3,5), unlike the other Gospels, and he doesn't mention angels at all until the narrative of the empty tomb (20:12,13), probably to focus attention on the historical Jesus. Furthermore, John emphasizes Jesus' humanity to a greater degree than the other gospel writers. For example, he uses the word *anthropos*, "man," to describe Jesus 16 times – twice as much as Matthew, Mark, and Luke put together.

John also differs considerably from the other Gospels in that whereas they focus more attention on Jesus' message, John focuses more attention on Jesus himself. In fact John is essentially a lengthy tract written that people might "believe" in him (20:30,31).

Literature and History

Admittedly this literary approach to the Gospels – however enlightening about the authors' original messages – does turn up a thorny question for scholars today, a point quickly made by inerrantists. The question is this: Does this sort of interpretation drive too large a wedge between the actual words of Jesus and the tests bearing witness to them? To put it another way, which is more important? The original history or the meanings of the texts? It is to this question that we now turn.

Chapter Five
The Historical Jesus

A more literary approach to the Gospels at once poses and answers an important question that faces Christian scholars today: The question of "the historical Jesus."

The issue revolves around a common assumption held by both liberals and inerrantists alike. The assumption is that the words and deeds of the historical Jesus are more important than the theological retelling of the Gospels. Basically, if Jesus didn't actually say it or Paul didn't actually write it, then it doesn't count. This approach, however, is highly problematic.

The various "quests for the historical Jesus" that we've witnessed over the last hundred years testified to the weakness of this approach. In trying to "get behind" the Gospels and recover the Jesus of history, scholars have variously reconstructed Jesus as a sage, a cynic, a feminist, a revolutionary, a mystic, or whatever reflects their particular interests. If anything, these various exercises prove that apart from the Gospel narratives, it is not possible to reconstruct a more plausible Jesus of history.

For example, some have suggested that whatever sounds too Jewish or too Christian cannot have been spoken by the historical Jesus. This assumes that Jesus was neither Jewish nor Christian – and on what basis? One cannot assume that which one hopes to prove.

The strength of the literary approach to Jesus' story lies precisely in the fact that the crux lies not so much in the actual history as much as in the testimony of the texts themselves. Hence, for example, the question of whether Jesus *actually said* a particular thing is not immediately relevant; the fact that it has been preserved in our Scriptures is what matters. A saying's presence in our accepted Scripture testifies to its authority. Even if Jesus didn't say it, it is as if he did, or would have, according to the testimony of faith.

For example, we have seen that Matthew and Mark differ on whether Jesus praised Peter or rebuked him for his confession at Caesarea Philippi. This may mean a couple of things. It may mean, for example, that Jesus praised Peter, either on that occasion or on another occasion, and Mark ignored it in order to bolster his point about the disciples' ignorance. It may also mean however, that the historical Jesus never spoke the words recorded in Matthew 16:17-19 during his earthly ministry. Whether Jesus actually spoke those words, however, is not a critical question, of if – as we affirm by faith – Jesus continues to dwell in his church in the form of the Holy Spirit, we can rest assured that his quotation (which has been preserved by the church) is indeed Jesus' testimony to the church, whether or not he actually spoke those very words at Caesarea Philippi.

What this means is that the story of the Gospels is at the same time the story of the church. We read the Gospels, not just to discern who Jesus is in some detached history, but to discern who he is for us. Jesus is the Son of God to be worshipped and obeyed, who walks with and comforts us, or at times even confronts and baffles us. The story of Jesus is also the story of the Christian life. Did

Jesus suffer and die on the cross? So must his followers suffer and die to self. These are the types of insights that await us on every page of the Gospel narratives.

Chapter Six
What is the Bible?

The question of inerrancy is only a small part of the issue of the Bible's authority and inspiration. We would do well, therefore, to step back for a moment and broaden the focus of our study, at least for a moment, to take in the larger question of what the Bible is and why it is authoritative. How does the Bible describe itself, and how do we describe the Bible? And why?

The word "Bible" comes from the Greek word *biblion*, which means "book." The Bible, then, is the "book" of the church. This is an excellent description of its place and function in the Christian community. Of course, the Bible never uses this term to describe itself; that is a descriptive term which we have placed on it subsequent to our collecting its various parts into a single book. Let's consider for a moment, then, how the Bible presents itself, and why we have recognized the current collection of books as our one book, the Bible.

Is the Bible the word of God?

Many Christians refer to the Bible as "the word of God." The intent is to affirm and reinforce the divine inspiration of the Bible. However, the Bible never calls itself "the word of God" either. Why not? Because "the word" cannot be distilled to written words on a page. "For the word of God is living and active" (Heb. 4:12a, NIV). God sends forth His word, and it does not return to Him until it has accomplished its purpose (Isa. 55:10,11). The word of God spreads on earth (Acts 6:7a). We are "born again…through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23, NIV). The word of God lives in us (1 John 2:14). Through God's word all things were made (John 1:1-3). Jesus' name is the word of God (Rev. 19:13). The word of God, the revealed truth of God, is not a book, even though our book reveals many things about God. But the two are not synonymous.

What, then, does the Bible call itself? The Biblical term of the Bible is "the holy Scriptures" (2 Tim. 3:15, NIV) or simply "the Scriptures" (John 5:39, NIV). The term "Scriptures" (literally, "writings") emphasizes the character of the Bible as a library. The Scriptures of his library are "holy" or set apart from others. They are the books recognized by the church (by Christians) as inspired and normative.

Does this subtle distinction between "word of God" and "holy Scriptures" matter? It may. Why? Referring to the Bible collectively as "the word of God" may help to emphasize its divine inspiration and authority, but it may also tempt us to homogenize the distinctive testimonies of the Bible's many parts. This may prevent us from developing a more well-rounded appreciation of its message and limit our understanding of what God's word is. Hence we would do well to recognize the Bible as a holy library rather than a monolithic unit dropped straight out of heaven. But how do we know that this library contains the right books?

The Canon

This list of recognized Scriptures in the church is known as "the canon." The Protestant canon includes the 39 books of the Hebrew Bible and the 27 books referred to as "the New Testament." The Catholic canon includes these books as well as a dozen others that are found in the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible. Though many other Jewish and Christian books have been written over the last few millennia, only these 66 or so are considered authoritative. Why?

Many theories have been proposed to explain and define the canon. One proposed criterion to determine the canonicity of a New Testament writing is authorship. If a book was written by an apostle or an associate of the apostles, it is considered canonical. Hence apostolic authority is the basis of the canon. This criterion, however, is flawed since the authorship of all the books cannot be established with certainty. For example, no one knows who wrote the book of Hebrews. And what would that do to our canon if archaeologists discovered another letter of Paul (say, his letter to the Laodiceans, Col. 4:16)?

The best explanation for the canon is "God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15, NIV). The canon of Scripture as it has been preserved has shaped and defined the community of faith. We know it to be normative because it continues to confront and correct us. We know it to be inspired because we have been unable to tame or obscure its uncomfortable and radical witness. The Scriptures surprise us, embarrass us, call us to repentance, and instruct us in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16).

The canon of Scripture is important because it represents the acceptable limits of diversity and enables us to pinpoint the basis of our unity. It enables us to appreciate each Christian's canon "within" the canon. The Catholic's vision is shaped by the emphasis on tradition and order in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus; the Protestant's vision is shaped by Paul's powerful gospel in Galatians, and Romans; the charismatic's vision is shaped by Acts and 1 Corinthians; the Adventist's vision is shaped by Daniel, 2 Thessalonians, and revelation; and so on. This appreciation of each Christian's "piece" of the truth prepares us to transcend the barriers that divide us and to grow up into "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13, NIV).

What is this library we call the Bible? It is the book of the church, and each of us represents a chapter. In tying all the chapters together we begin to glimpse the glory of Christ and to discern the direction we should travel as a collective people of God (see 2 Cor. 3). That is the ultimate meaning of the canon of Holy Scripture.

Conclusion

Is the Bible inerrant, by modern standards, in everything it asserts – even incidentally – about history, science, geography, math, and every other field of human inquiry? Was it meant to be? Our answer to these questions has been a resounding "no." The Scriptures fulfill their intended purpose of communicating God's word to His people, but they never claim to be something they're not – a scientific textbook, for instance. These post-Enlightenment expectations, when superimposed upon the Scriptural testimonies, produce the most curious interpretations.

Our argument against inerrancy has been twofold.

First, inerrancy is inconsistent. Inerrantists themselves admit that Scripture is intentionally "fluid" in its genealogies, unconcerned about the exactness of numbers, and somewhat loose in its presentation of chronology and quotations. Yet when confronted by divergent accounts of certain quotations or chronologies, often inerrantists tie themselves into knots to harmonize the differences. It is truly unfortunate that issues like the working of the inscription on the cross should create so much unnecessary speculation.

Second, inerrancy hinders faith. Specifically, it ties Christian faith to a particular theory of Scripture, and an untenable theory at that. This exposes Christian faith to easy criticism by skeptics who can easily point out discrepancies in fields like history and science, and it makes every claim of Scripture – from the most minute detail of every narrative – as significant as the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Bible itself becomes an object of faith, rather than the spiritual realities to which it points.

Contrarily, our argument for a non-inerrantist approach to Scripture has also been twofold.

First, a non-inerrantist approach strengthens the Scriptures' most important emphasis on events like the resurrection of Christ. Not only does a non-inerrantist approach free us to focus attention on the more important areas of faith, and not only does it engender the maturity to look beyond Scripture, resisting the urge to get caught up in details or tie our faith to physical evidence rather than Christ; it also enables us to examine the more important claims of Scripture by using proven historical-critical tools, like the principle of multiple divergent testimonies. The differences between the various accounts of Jesus' birth and resurrection lend greater credibility to their authenticity.

Second, a literary approach to Scripture reveals the original theological meanings which the original authors were trying to communicate. Often these insights are obscured by overly hasty attempts to harmonize divergent passages. For example, in their zeal to harmonize Matthew with Mark, inerrantists often miss the true depth of Mark's point about the true paradox of Jesus' Sonship. By contrast, examining each book in isolation enables us to discern more clearly not just individual emphases, but also whole theological outlooks which are conveyed by the shape of the narratives.

None of this is to detract from the spiritual reality communicated by the accounts, nor to downplay Scriptures' authority, inspiration, or canonicity. On the contrary, literary approaches to interpreting Scripture keep us focused on the central story to which they bear testimony – in the case of the Gospels, the life of Jesus Christ as defined by his redemptive death – and enables us to appreciate the fundamental unity of the diverse Scriptures which make up our one recognized Book. That is why inerrancy deserves to be challenged – to free Christian faith from the narrow confines of a stifling theory of Bible inspiration and interpretation.

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