

Biblical Inerrancy Defined

A good deal of what is on pages 1-4 is taken from one of my favorite books,¹ so do not think I am such a clear thinker... it comes from elsewhere. To be a skeptic, means, that you will have to place your own skepticism under the same microscope you typically hold other belief to. One place to start is definitions. So here we go on our “defining” moment (pun intended).

As you read however, keep in mind that we do not serve a God who would override our being and make us automatons. If this is what the person is looking for, there is the *Qur'an*, the *Book of Urantia*, *Book of the Law*, *Conversations with God*, and other pagan literature. Geisler so aptly words the issue this way:

The [biblical authors] who wrote Scripture were not automatons. They were more than recording secretaries. They wrote with full intent and consciousness in the normal exercise of their own literary styles and vocabularies. The personalities of the [biblical authors] were not violated by a supernatural intrusion. The Bible which they wrote is the Word of God, but it is also the words of men. God used their personalities to convey His propositions. The [biblical authors] were the immediate cause of what was written, but God was the ultimate cause.²

The internal test utilizes one Aristotle's dictums from his *Poetics*. He said,

They [the critics] start with some improbable presumption; and having so decreed it themselves, proceed to draw inferences, and censure the poet as though he had actually said whatever they happen to believe, if his statement conflicts with their notion of things.... Whenever a word seems to imply some contradiction, it is necessary to reflect how many ways there may be of understanding it in the passage in question.... So it is probably the mistake of the critics that has given rise to the Problem.... See whether he [the author] means the same thing, in the same relation, and in the same sense, before admitting that he has contradicted something he has said himself or what a man of sound sense assumes as true.

.....

LANGUAGE GAP

...Consider how confused a foreigner must be when he reads in a daily newspaper: “The prospectors made a *strike* yesterday up in the mountains.” “The union went on *strike* this morning.” “The batter made his third *strike* and was called out by the umpire.” “*Strike up* with the Star Spangled Banner.” “The fisherman got a good *strike* in the middle of the lake.” Presumably each of these completely different uses of the same word go back to the parent and have the same etymology.³ But complete confusion may result from misunderstanding how the speaker meant the word to be used.... We must engage in careful exegesis in order to find out what he meant in light of contemporary conditions and usage.

We speak English, but the Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek (and a few parts in Aramaic, which is similar to Hebrew). Therefore, we have a language gap; if we don't bridge it, we won't fully be able to understand the Bible.

¹ Norman Geisler and Peter Bocchino, *Unshakeable Foundations: Contemporary Answers to Crucial Questions About the Christian Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2001), 259-264.

² Norman L. Geisler & William E. Nix, *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1974), 13.

³ Etymology: “the study of the origins of words or parts of words and how they have arrived at their current form and meaning” (*Encarta Dictionary*).

Biblical Inerrancy Defined

THE CULTURE GAP

If we don't understand the various cultures of the time in which the Bible was written, we'll never comprehend its meaning. For example, if we did not know anything about the Jewish culture at the time of Christ, the Gospel of Matthew would be very difficult to grasp. Concepts such as the Sabbath, Jewish rituals, the temple ceremonies, and other customs of the Jews must be understood within cultural context in order to gain the true meaning of the author's ideas.

THE GEOGRAPHY GAP

A failure to be familiar with geography will hinder learning. For instance, in I Thessalonians 1:8 we read, "For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith [toward] God is spread abroad." What is so remarkable about this text is that the message traveled so quickly. In order to understand how, it is necessary to know the geography.

Paul had just been there, and when he wrote the letter, very little time had passed. Paul had been with them for a couple of weeks, but their testimony had already spread far. How could that happen so fast? If you study the geography of the area you'll find that the Ignatian Highway runs right through the middle of Thessalonica. It was the main concourse between the East and the West, and whatever happened there was passed all the way down the line.

THE HISTORY GAP

Knowing the history behind a passage will enhance our comprehension of what was written. In the Gospel of John, the whole key to understanding the interplay between Pilate and Jesus is based on the knowledge of history.

When Pilate came into the land with his emperor worship, it literally infuriated the Jews and their priests. So he was off to a bad start from the very beginning. Then he tried to pull something on the Jews, and when they caught him, they reported him to Rome, and he almost lost his job. Pilate was afraid of the Jews, and that's why he let Christ be crucified. Why was he afraid? Because he already had a rotten track record, and his job was on the line.

Consider something known as the psychology of testimony. This refers to the way witnesses of the same event recall it with a certain level of discrepancy, based on how they individually observe, process, store, and retrieve the memories of an event.

One person may recall an event in strict chronological order; another may testify according to the principle of the association of ideas. One person may remember events minutely and consecutively, while someone else omits, condenses, or expands. These factors must be considered in comparing eyewitness accounts, and this is why history expects a certain amount of variability in human testimony. For example, let's say that twelve eyewitnesses observed the same event--a car accident. If those witnesses were called to testify in a court of law, what would the judge think if all twelve witnesses gave the same exact testimony of the event, with every detail being identical? Any good judge would immediately conclude they were in collusion and reject their accounts. The variations of the

Biblical Inerrancy Defined

observations of the eyewitness testimonies actually add to the integrity of their recall. What are the most essential guidelines used as criteria for deciding if the testimonies are true?

COMPLETE AGREEMENT ON THE MAIN POINTS

For instance: (1) The car accident occurred at a specific time and at a certain place; (2) a general description of the two vehicles involved; and (3) the drivers were both males, etc. Let's say all twelve witnesses agreed on the time and place and said the accident involved a red Ford Escort and a black Dodge truck. They all testify that the Escort driver was a younger man and the Dodge driver was an older man. They are in agreement on the main points. With respect to the New Testament and the person of Jesus, the eyewitnesses reached a clear consensus on the main points of His miraculous life, how He died, and His resurrection from the dead.

COMPLETE AGREEMENT ON SIGNIFICANT DETAILS SUPPORTING THE MAIN POINTS

A good judge looks for agreement on crucial facts that support the main event. In our example, the weather, the road conditions, and the impact that occurred would be considered to be some of the essential supporting facts relevant to the case. The type of accident that occurred is also important--was it a head--on collision, a sideswipe, a rear--end?

In the New Testament, the Gospel accounts all agree on the significant details that support Jesus' virgin birth, the calling of His twelve disciples, and His teachings about the nature of God, humanity, good and fallen angels, salvation, etc. They also agree on the reactions of the religious and political leaders, which led to His death. They all agree that Jesus had both a religious and political trial and was sentenced to death by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. They all agree that Jesus was beaten, crucified, buried, and raised from the dead on the third day after His death.

APPLICATION OF ARISTOTLE'S DICTUM

Earlier, we mentioned Aristotle's dictum involving the principle of giving the benefit of the doubt to the author of the document and not allowing it to be arrogated by the critic. In *Poetics* Aristotle outlined twelve responses to critics who hunt for various kinds of defects when examining the work of authors from the past. He divided the critics' mistakes into five categories.

The objections, then, of critics start with faults of five kinds: the allegation is always that something is either (1) impossible, (2) improbable, (3) corrupting, (4) contradictory, or (5) against technical correctness. The answers to these objections must be sought under one or other of the above--mentioned heads, which are twelve in number.

Before we apply this to the New Testament, allow us to illustrate it. One of us has a friend—let's call him Ken—who lives in the Midwest. Ken had three very good friends—let's call them Jim, John, and Mark—who live on the East Coast. One day Ken received a note from John saying that Jim was involved in a terrible automobile accident and *died instantly*. The following day, Ken received a letter from Mark saying that Jim was in an automobile accident and survived but *died some time later*. At first glance,

Biblical Inerrancy Defined

these two accounts seem to contradict each other. Either Jim died instantly in the accident or he did not.

Now, Ken knew that John and Mark were reliable sources, and he trusted them to give him an accurate account of the events surrounding their mutual friend's death. As it turned out, John and Mark were both right, but there was missing information. Jim was actually involved in two automobile accidents on the same day. In the first accident, Jim was badly injured but survived. A "Good Samaritan" stopped to help him, taking him to the nearest emergency room. However, on the way to the hospital, the driver of that vehicle was involved in a very serious accident, and as a result Jim was instantly killed. Hence, both accounts were correct. John was not aware of the first accident; he only knew about the second one that instantly killed Jim. Mark was only aware of the details of the first accident in which Jim survived, and not the second; he only knew that Jim died later that day. The apparent contradiction was solved when the rest of the truth was discovered.

Aristotle's dictum applies to the New Testament as well, as this next example shows. In the Gospel according to Matthew, he records the death of Judas as suicide by hanging (Matthew 27:5). However, in Acts 1:18 Luke records the death of Judas as having occurred when he fell down and his body "burst open." Some scholars have determined that these two divergent accounts are, irreconcilable; they assume that one or even both of these accounts are incorrect. If Matthew and Luke are trustworthy in giving an accurate accounts of the events, it certainly seems as if at least one of them is in error: Judas either fell down or he hung himself. Or is it another option?

If the branch from which Judas hung himself was dead and dry--and there are many trees that match this description even to this day on the brink of the canyon that tradition identifies the place where Judas died--it would take only one strong gust of wind to yank the heavy corpse and split the branch to which it was attached and plunge both with great force into the bottom of the chasm below. There is indication that a strong wind arose at the hour Christ died and ripped the great curtain inside the temple from top to bottom (Matthew 27:50C.)

These accounts are not contradictory, but mutually complementary. Judas hung himself exactly as Matthew affirms that he did. The account in Acts simply adds that Judas fell, and his body opened up at the middle and his intestines gushed out. This is the very thing one would expect of someone who hanged himself from a tree over a cliff and fell on sharp rocks below.

So with all that in mind,⁴ can we then define what we mean by biblical inerrancy, of course my favorite definition comes from the main text I used at the seminary I attended. I will also give definitions from some other main text that other seminaries use as well.

- "...inerrancy means that Scripture in the original manuscripts⁵ does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact."⁶

⁴ End of *Unshakeable Foundations*.

⁵ For the seminary student:

Biblical Inerrancy Defined

In case you didn't catch what that sentence meant is “that the Bible always tells the truth, and that it always tells the truth concerning everything it talks about.”⁷ In the index in the back under “inerrancy” you find some of the following topics under that heading: allows for free quotation; allows for ordinary language; allows for round numbers; allows for textual variants; allows for uncommon grammar; allows for vague statements; human language doesn’t prevent. I will choose one example from this list so you can get the “gist” of what Grudem is saying:

A similar consideration applies to numbers when used in measuring or in counting. A reporter can say that 8,000 men were killed in a certain battle without thereby implying that he has counted everyone and that there are not 7,999 or 8,001 dead soldiers. If roughly 8,000 died, it would of course be false to say that 16,000 died, but it would not be false in most contexts for a reporter to say that 8,000 men died when in fact 7,823 or 8,242 had died: the limits of truthfulness would depend on the degree of precision implied by the speaker and expected by his original hearers.

This is also true for measurements. Whether I say, “I don't live far from my office,” or “I live a little over a mile from my office,” or “I live one mile from my office,” or “I live 1.287 miles from my office” all four statements are still approximations to some degree of accuracy. Further degrees of accuracy might be obtained with more precise scientific instruments, but these would still be approximations to a certain degree of accuracy. Thus, measurements also, in order to be true, should conform to the degree of precision implied by the speaker and expected by the hearers in the original context. It should not trouble us, then, to affirm both that the Bible is absolutely truthful in everything it says and that it uses ordinary language to describe natural phenomena or to give approximations or round numbers when those are appropriate in the context.

We should also note that language can make vague or imprecise statements without being untrue. “I live a little over a mile from my office” is a vague and imprecise statement, but it is also inerrant: there is nothing untrue

The significance of the distinction between inerrant autograph and errant apograph may be seen from another angle. What difference would it make, some have asked, if the autographs did contain some of the errors that are present in the copies? Is not the end result of textual criticism and hermeneutics by both nonevangelical and evangelical essentially the same? As far as the results of textual criticism and hermeneutics as such are concerned, the answer to this last query is yes. By sound application of the canons of textual criticism, most by far of the errors in the text may be detected and corrected. And both nonevangelical and evangelical can properly exegete the critically established text. But the nonevangelical who fails to make a distinction between the inerrancy of the autographs and the errancy of the copies, after he has done his textual criticism and grammatical-historical exegesis, is still left with the question, Is the statement which I have now reached by my text-critical work and my hermeneutics true? He can only attempt to determine this on other (extrabiblical) grounds, but he will never know for sure if his determination is correct. The evangelical, however, who draws the distinction between inerrant autograph and errant apograph, once he has done proper text-critical analysis which assures him that he is working with the original text and properly applied the canons of exegesis to that text, rests in the confidence that his labor has resulted in the attainment of truth.

Some critical scholars have suggested that the distinction between inerrant autographs and errant apographs is of fairly recent vintage, indeed, an evangelical ploy to minimize the impact of the “assured results of textual criticism” upon their position. This is erroneous. Augustine's statement, which represents the opinion generally of the Patristic Age, is a sufficient answer to demonstrate that the distinction is not a recent novelty:

I have learned to defer this respect and honor to the canonical books of Scripture alone, that I most firmly believe that no one of their authors has committed any error in writing. And if in their writings I am perplexed by anything which seems to me contrary to truth, I do not doubt that it is nothing else than either that the manuscript is corrupt, or that the translator has not followed what was said, or that I have myself failed to understand it. But when I read other authors, however eminent they may be in sanctity and learning, I do not necessarily believe a thing is true because they think so, but because they have been able to convince me, either on the authority of the canonical writers or by a probable reason which is not inconsistent with truth. And I think that you, my brother, feel the same way; moreover, I say, I do not believe that you want your books to be read as if they were those of Prophets and Apostles, about whose writings, free of all error, it is unlawful to doubt.

Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 91-92.

⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 90.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

Biblical Inerrancy Defined

about it. It does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact. In a similar way, biblical statements can be imprecise and still be totally true. Inerrancy has to do with truthfulness, not with the degree of precision with which events are reported.⁸

Another definition comes from a newer systematic theological 4-volume set, it reads as follows:

...the inspiration of Scripture is the supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit who, **through the different personalities and literary styles** of the chosen human authors, invested the very words of the original books of Holy Scripture, alone and in their entirety, as the very Word of God without error in all that they teach (including history and science) and is thereby the infallible rule and final authority for the faith and practice of all believers.⁹

Another popular text in seminaries defines inerrancy in this way:

By "inerrancy" we mean that as a product of supernatural inspiration the information affirmed by the sentences of the original autographs of the sixty-six canonical books of the Bible is true.

By "true" content we mean propositions that correspond to the thought of God and created reality because they are logically noncontradictory, factually reliable, and experientially viable. Therefore, as given, the Bible provides a reliable guide for healthfully experiencing the physical, mental, moral, and spiritual realities that people face in time and eternity.

To grasp the truth that was given, as fully as possible, a passage of Scripture must be taken (interpreted) by a believer in accord with its author's purpose; **degrees of precision appropriate to that purpose at that time; and its grammatical, historical, cultural, and theological contexts** (all under the illumination of the Holy Spirit who inspired it).¹⁰

One of my favorites comes from large theological treatise, I will here only put his definition, however, the author goes on for about four pages defining some of the ideas and words used in that smaller definition:

We may now state our understanding of inerrancy: The Bible, when correctly interpreted in light of the level to which culture and the means of communication had developed at the time it was written, and in view of the purposes for which it was given, is fully truthful in all that it affirms.¹¹

One must also keep in mind the psychological foreboding that all of us have. The question is thus: in order to suppress our biases *as much as possible*, is there a construct and model in which one should view any literary work with in order to test its internal soundness? Besides what I will again post as some rules all persons should follow in order to limit his or her preconceived values and biases they bring to the table, C. Sanders, a famous military historian, in his *Introduction to Research in English Literary History*, lists and explains the three basic principles of historiography. These are the **bibliographical test**, the **internal evidence test**, and the **external evidence test**.

⁸ Ibid., 91-92.

⁹ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology: Introduction: Bible, vol. I* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2002), 498.

¹⁰ Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology: Three Volumes in One, vol. I* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 160-161.

¹¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology, 2nd ed.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books/Academic, 1998), 259.

Bibliographical Test

The bibliographical test is an examination of the textual transmission by which documents reach us. In other words, since we do not have the original documents, how reliable are the copies we have in regard to the number of manuscripts (MSS) and the time interval between the original and the extant (currently existing) copies?

Internal Evidence

Internal Evidence, of which John Warwick Montgomery writes that literary critics still follow Aristotle's dictum that "the benefit of the doubt is to be given to the document itself, not arrogated by the critic to himself." therefore, one must listen to the claims of the document under analysis, and do not assume fraud or error unless the author disqualified himself by contradictions or known factual inaccuracies. As Dr. Horn continues:

- "Think for a moment about what needs to be demonstrated concerning a 'difficulty' in order to transfer it into the category of a valid argument against doctrine. Certainly much more is required than the mere appearance of a contradiction. First, we must be certain that we have correctly understood the passage, the sense in which it uses words or numbers. Second, that we possess all available knowledge in this matter. Third, that no further light can possibly be thrown on it by advancing knowledge, textual research, archaeology, etc.... Difficulties do not constitute objections. Unresolved problems are not of necessity errors. This is not to minimize the area of difficulty; it is to see it in perspective. Difficulties are to be grappled with and problems are to drive us to seek clearer light; but until such time as we have total and final light on any issue we are in no position to affirm, 'Here is a proven error, an unquestionable objection to an infallible Bible.' It is common knowledge that countless 'objections' have fully been resolved since this century began."

External Evidence

Do other historical materials confirm or deny the internal testimony provided by the documents themselves? In other words, what sources are there – apart from the literature under analysis – that substantiate its accuracy, reliability, and authenticity?¹²

Of course there will be people who refuse to use the tools that literary critics and legal scholars have devised to keep as much prejudice out as possible. My final story I wish to share with the reader explains what this looks like better than I ever could:

Psychological Prejudice

But even a sound epistemic system, flawless deductive reasoning, and impeccable inductive procedure does not guarantee a proper conclusion. Emotional bias or antipathy might block the way to the

¹² Taken primarily from, Bill Wilson, ed., *A Ready Defense: The Best of Josh McDowell* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 43.

necessary conclusion of the research. That thinkers may obstinately resist a logical verdict is humorously illustrated by John Warwick Montgomery's modern parable:

- Once upon a time (note the mystical cast) there was a man who thought he was dead. His concerned wife and friends sent him to the friendly neighborhood psychiatrist determined to cure him by convincing him of one fact that contradicted his beliefs that he was dead. The fact that the psychiatrist decided to use was the simple truth that dead men do not bleed. He put his patient to work reading medical texts, observing autopsies, etc. After weeks of effort the patient finally said, "All right, all right! You've convinced me. Dead men do not bleed." Whereupon the psychiatrist stuck him in the arm with a needle, and the blood flowed. The man looked down with a contorted, ashen face and cried, "Good Lord! Dead men bleed after all!"

Emotional prejudice is not limited to dull-witted, the illiterate, and poorly educated. Philosophers and theologians are not exempt from the vested interests and psychological prejudice that distort logical thinking. The question of the existence of God evokes deep emotional and psychological prejudice. People understand that the question of the existence of God is not one that is of neutral consequence. We understand intuitively, if not in terms of its full rational implication, that the existence of an eternal Creator before whom we are ultimately accountable and responsible is a matter that touches the very core of life.¹³

All this defining and understanding above is key for any person to start dissecting Scripture (or as some would view it, scripture) on a level playing field with others who come to this conversation as well. Hermeneutics and exegesis should also be thoroughly defined. These constructs that have been applied to not only theology, but other scholarly endeavors as well; literary critics (say, someone critically looking into Homer, or Plato) and historians as well as legal writers use these guidelines also. Below are some religious and non-religious sources to help the Christian and skeptic discern what these loaded words mean.



Hermeneutics

- the science of interpretation, esp. of the Scriptures. 2) the branch of theology that deals with the principles of Biblical exegesis. (*Random House Webster CD-Rom Dictionary*, 1999)
- her-me-neu-tics – (Gk., hermeneuo, to explain, interpret) Branch of theology dealing with the principles governing Biblical exegesis and interpretation. It is concerned with various types of interpretation, as allegorical and literal, multiple meanings and senses, and the role of historical criticism. The four principle hermeneutical approaches are romanticist, existential, ontological, and socio-critical. in the romanticist tradition, the goal of the interpreter is to reach behind the text to the mind of its author. Existential hermeneutics interprets the Bible in terms of the

¹³ R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 69-70.

Biblical Inerrancy Defined

interpreter's own life situation. Ontological hermeneutics interprets the meaning of the Bible in the light of the reality it is attempting to create. Socio-critical hermeneutics examines the social traditions and assumptions underpinning Biblical narratives. (*Nelson's New Christian Dictionary*, 2001)

- her-me-neu-tics – Traditionally the sub-discipline of theology concerned with the proper interpretation of scriptural texts. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the term widened to include the discipline that seeks to understand the interpretation of text in general, including the proper roles and relationships among author, reader, and text. Still, more broadly, the term has been used by philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur to refer to the attempt to articulate the nature of understanding itself, with an emphasis on the role of interpretation as a key component in all human knowing. (*Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion*, 2002)
- her-me-neu-tics – From the Greek hermeneutikos, “interpretation.” Hermeneutics is the science of the study and interpretation of Scripture, the branch of theology that prescribes rules by which the Bible should be interpreted. Biblical hermeneutics strives to formulate guidelines for studying Scripture that help recover the meaning a Biblical text had for its original hearers. (*The Compact Dictionary of Doctrinal Words*, 1988)

Exegesis

- ex-e-ge-sis – From the Greek meaning “interpretation,” from ex, “out,” and hegeisthai, “to guide.” Exegesis is a method of attempting to understand a Bible passage. The reader of Scripture studies the word meanings and grammar of the text to discern what... was communicated, drawing the meaning out of the text rather than reading what he wants into the text (isegesis). (*The Compact Dictionary of Doctrinal Words*, 1988)
- ex-e-ge-sis – (Gk., explanation) Critical exposition or explanation of the meaning of a scriptural passage in the context of the whole Bible. (*Nelson's New Christian Dictionary*, 2001)
- ex-e-ge-sis – critical explanation or interpretation of a text or portion of a text, esp. of the Bible. (*Random House Webster CD-Rom Dictionary*, 1999)
- ex-e-ge-sis – critical explanation of the meaning of words and passages in a literary or Biblical work. (*Funk & Wagnalls Standard Desk Dictionary*, 1986)
- ex-e-ge-sis – interpretation of a word, passage, esp., in the Bible. (*Webster's New World Dictionary*, 1994)

Eight Rules of Interpretation ~ ...the Eight Rules of Interpretation used by legal experts for more than 2500 years.

- 1) Rule of Definition: Define the term or words being considered and then adhere to the defined meanings.
- 2) Rule of Usage: Don't add meaning to established words and terms. What was the common usage in the cultural and time period. When the passage was written?
- 3) Rule of Context: Avoid using words out of context. Context must define terms and how words are used.
- 4) Rule of Historical background: Don't separate interpretation and historical investigation.
- 5) Rule of Logic: Be certain that words as interpreted agree with the overall premise.
- 6) Rule of Precedent: Use the known and commonly accepted meanings of words, not obscure meanings for which there is no precedent.
- 7) Rule of Unity: Even though many documents may be used there must be a general unity among them.
- 8) Rule of Inference: Base conclusions on what is already known and proven or can be reasonably implied from all known facts.