

“Isn’t the Bible full of errors?”

THE OBJECTION

It is a common belief among non-Christians (and among some who consider themselves to be Christians) that the Bible is “filled with errors.” For example, Jehovah’s Witnesses frequently claim that the Bible contains “50,000 errors,” and this figure is often quoted in arguments against the reliability of the Bible.¹ Some people, of course, dismiss the Bible entirely and so are unconcerned with whether or not it contains errors, while others argue that it is true in its spiritual message (for example, that God loves us and Christ died for our sins), but not in specifics such as historical facts. Here is the problem: If the Bible is in error on historical matters, how do we know that we can believe it when it comes to spiritual matters? Moreover, if we cannot believe the Bible when it speaks about salvation, forgiveness, and eternity, then we are left without hope.

Much of this skepticism regarding the Bible is due to reports in the popular media which are often badly distorted or sadly misinformed. As a result, many people question that the Bible has anything of value to say about their lives, or else they wonder whether or not what they read can actually be trusted. These are serious questions and must be addressed. Since Christianity is a revealed religion, we can only know what God has chosen to reveal about Himself, about eternity, and about the way to know Him. Therefore, the reliability of our source of information is a question of the utmost importance.

¹The claim by Jehovah’s Witnesses of 50,000 mistakes in the Bible can be traced back to their magazine *Awake!* 38 (8 September 1957).

RESPONSES TO THE OBJECTION

1. We should begin by asking what the Bible says about itself. Critics often object to asking this question, but it seems only reasonable to do so. Suppose we were walking on a beach and came upon a man who had obviously been washed ashore during a storm the night before. We do not know this man, but we want to know who he is, where he came from, and how he got there. We might try to guess his origin and identity based on his clothing, the color of his skin, and his manner of speech. However, the most reasonable thing to do would simply be to ask him. Why would this not be a reasonable thing to do in the case of the Bible? Even an accused criminal, in most societies, is allowed to speak in his or her own behalf—so why not allow the Bible to do the same thing? There is nothing at all unreasonable about allowing the Bible to speak for itself; rather, it would be unreasonable not to do so.

What does the Bible say about itself?

In John 10:31–35, Jesus quoted from Psalm 82:6 and referred to what He had quoted as “Scripture” (that is, sacred writing). He then said that “Scripture cannot be broken.” Why can it not be broken? This can be true only if it is from God. In a similar fashion, the apostle Paul declared that “all Scripture is inspired [literally, ‘breathed out’] by God” and added that, since it *is* from God, it is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). In the verse preceding this, he had referred to the Scriptures as “sacred writings,” indicating their divine origin.

The apostle Peter concurred with Paul’s view of the Scriptures and their origins. In 2 Peter 1:20,

21, he wrote that the Scriptures did not originate as a matter of human opinion or “interpretation,” but that men spoke as they were “moved by the Holy Spirit,” so that they “spoke from God.” Likewise, in Romans 9:6 Paul referred to the Old Testament Scriptures as “the word of God.” More than ninety times in the New Testament, quotations from the Old Testament are introduced with the phrase “It is written,” indicating a statement of authority.

Jesus and the New Testament writers were convinced that the Old Testament was the Word of God. What about the New Testament itself? While people may debate whether or not the New Testament authors were aware that what they were writing was also Scripture, it is obvious that these men believed they were writing with the authority of God. Paul did not hesitate in his letters to command “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thessalonians 3:6) or to claim that what he knew about Jesus came directly from God (Galatians 1:11, 12). When he wrote on controversial subjects, he made a point of reminding his readers that he had the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 7:40). Paul said he knew “the things freely given to us by God” and that he imparted these “not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:12, 13).

When we examine what the Bible says about itself, the charge of “errors in the Bible” seems far less likely to be accurate.

2. The Gospels give an accurate portrayal of Jesus. One of the greatest concerns of many people is whether or not the New Testament Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) can be trusted to give accurate information about Jesus. While many suggest that the writers of these documents simply made up much of the story they were recording, that was not the opinion of the earliest Christians, who lived much nearer to the actual events than we do today. For example, all four of the Gospels were readily included in the New Testament “canon” (body of authoritative literature) because they were believed to have been written either by eyewitnesses of the events recorded in them or by those who were closely associated with the eyewitnesses (see Luke 1:1–4). The Gospels of Matthew and John were written by those numbered among the apostles of Jesus, while Mark and Luke were close

associates of the apostles (Acts 12:12, 25; 13:13; 15:36–41; Colossians 4:10, 14; 2 Timothy 4:11; 1 Peter 5:13). Numerous other writings claiming to have been written by apostles of Christ were rejected as inauthentic. In other words, the early Christians were not nearly as gullible as they are often portrayed in regard to accepting information about Jesus.

Likewise, when we examine other ancient writings which are contemporary with the New Testament, we find that they confirm much of what we read in the Gospels. For example, simply by reading the works of such authors as the Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius and the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, we could know the following details: (1) Jesus was a Jew from Palestine who lived in the first century A.D., (2) He was believed by many to be the Messiah, (3) He was known as both a teacher and a miracle-worker, (4) He had a brother named James, (5) His death was demanded by the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, (6) He was crucified by the Romans when Pilate was governor of Judea, (7) He was worshiped as Deity, and (8) His followers were called “Christians.”² This close correlation between what the Gospels say with what other historians of the time wrote strongly suggests that the Gospels are accurate in what they say about Jesus.

3. Textual variations are not “errors in the Bible.” Part of the richness of the New Testament testimony about Jesus comes from the fact that there are more than five thousand manuscripts of the New Testament, or portions of it, surviving in the Greek language alone. In addition, many other manuscripts exist in such languages as Latin, Coptic, Syriac, and Armenian, as well as numerous quotations from the New Testament contained in the writings of other early Christian writers. A great many variations can be found among these manuscripts, and these are often described by critics as “errors.” (This is where the Jehovah’s Witnesses get their charge that there are “50,000 errors” in the Bible.)

These variations are not errors in the original text itself, but are mistakes made by those who copied the manuscripts by hand (a tedious task that lent itself to making minor mistakes). The

²Tacitus *Annals* 15.44; Suetonius *Lives of the Twelve Caesars: Nero* 16; Josephus *Antiquities* 18.3.3; 20.9.1.

vast majority of these involve only a word or two and result from such mistakes as miscopying one letter in place of another, misspelling of words, or a difference in the order of words (such as “the Lord Jesus Christ” rather than “Jesus Christ the Lord”). None of these variations call into question any teaching of the Christian faith. Besides, there is so much manuscript evidence available for the purpose of comparison that it is usually possible to determine what was most likely the original reading. The presence of textual variations in the New Testament does not constitute the presence of “errors in the Bible.”

4. Varying Bible translations are not “errors in the Bible.” Without question, some translations are more exact than others, but the presence of differences among translations does not constitute errors in the Bible. Bible translation is an inexact science that is done by fallible human beings; therefore, no translation is perfect. However, even a poor translation still teaches the message of the gospel of Christ.

5. Difficulty with reconciling historical facts does not indicate “errors in the Bible.” In spite of centuries of careful inquiry by scholars and ordinary Bible readers, some questions about the Bible simply cannot be answered with certainty, and Christians should readily acknowledge this. For example, the Gospel of John suggests that the Last Supper took place the day before Passover, on “Preparation Day” (John 13:1; 19:31), while the other Gospels say that the Supper was the Passover meal itself, presumably eaten on Passover Day (Matthew 26:17, 19; Mark 14:12; Luke 22:8). Several possible explanations for this difficulty have been suggested. One is that various Jewish groups may have observed Passover based on different calendars, in the same way that some religious groups today differ over the correct date for Easter. Another is that Jesus and the disciples may have eaten the Passover meal a day earlier than was normally done, since Jesus knew that He would be crucified the next day and therefore would be unable to eat the meal with them at that time. No one knows for sure how this is to be explained, but it is certain that the early Christians who included all four Gospels in the New Testament realized the difference yet did not see it as a discrepancy. We must always admit the limitations of our knowledge, rather than assuming that the Bible has made a mistake,

since it speaks with such accuracy about so many other things.

6. The unexplained is not necessarily unexplainable. Critics of the Bible often operate on the assumption that what has not been explained cannot be explained, but this is faulty reasoning. For example, in times past many critics argued that the Bible was in error because it spoke of the Hittites, Jebusites, and other population groups who are referred to in the Old Testament but were otherwise unknown to history. The claim was confidently made that such people never existed, but were rather the inventions of the biblical authors. More recent discoveries have proved that the Bible was correct all along in the matter, and this is now acknowledged by all scholars. Our current inability to explain a Bible difficulty does not mean that the explanation can never or will never be known.

7. A partial report is not the same as an error. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark both say that one angel spoke to the women at Jesus’ empty tomb. Luke and John say that two angels were present. Are two of the Gospels incorrect, or do two of them simply report the words of the one angel who spoke? Likewise, Matthew 27:5 says that Judas “hanged himself,” while Acts 1:18 says that, “falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out.” Which account is correct? Both of them. If Judas hanged himself, as Matthew reports, who would willfully contract the ceremonial impurity connected with dead bodies in order to take him down? He had alienated himself from the other disciples of Jesus, and the Jewish and Roman authorities would not have cared what happened to him, so he must have hung there until his body fell and burst open, just as Acts describes. Neither report is in error; both are merely partial. Together they give the full story of Judas’ tragic end.

8. Archaeology has not proven the Bible to be false. Some claim that it has, but their claim is simply untrue. No archaeological discovery has ever shown that the Bible is in error. (Anyone who makes this claim should be asked to produce the evidence.)

9. Human science is not infallible, so it cannot rule out the possibility of miracles. One of the major objections in our modern technological age is that miracles simply “cannot happen” based on the knowledge that we have through

science. As a result, some say the Bible is not to be believed because it records so many miraculous occurrences. For example, in matters such as creation *versus* evolution as an explanation of the origin of the universe and of life on earth, most people simply assume that what “science” says is beyond dispute and that the Bible must therefore be incorrect. This is a very questionable assumption, given the record of science in proving its prior conclusions to have been false. Further, not all scientists agree on this subject. It is the nature of scientific inquiry to engage in continual testing of presently accepted theories (“scientific knowledge”). This often results in the determination that what was once accepted as “fact” can no longer be seen as factual. Many scientists once argued that the universe had no beginning, but now the “Big Bang Theory” (that is, the concept that the universe began at a specific point in time) is accepted by virtually everyone. Likewise, modern medicine is constantly revising its own conclusions about the causes and treatments of various illnesses. Whereas it was once standard procedure to remove children’s tonsils if they became infected, it is now realized that the tonsils play some role in supporting the human immune system (although exactly what that role is remains uncertain). With this current knowledge, doctors are much more hesitant to remove tonsils during a

patient’s childhood.

It is strange that so many people will scoff at accepting what the Bible says and label those who do so as “naive,” often without even reading it. However, they will naively quote “science” and “scientists” (without knowing who these people are or the facts about their research) as though they are infallible, when it is obvious even to scientists themselves that they are not!

CONCLUSION

The accusations against the Bible’s accuracy are so numerous that no attempt is made here to respond to all of them, only to the most common ones. However, these should be sufficient to give at least a basic defense of the Bible’s reliability. Christians are often hesitant to speak to non-believers about these matters because most of us are not experts in science, history, or the textual criticism of the Bible. However, we should keep in mind that most of those who raise these questions are not experts in these areas either, but are merely repeating what they have heard others say. Even a very basic response to their objections about the Bible may be sufficient to cause them to think again about the arguments they are raising and perhaps to read the Scriptures and find in them the life that God longs to give them. ■ Tommy South

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