

# **The Bible: Trustworthy and Authoritative**

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The Bible is a collection of completely unified books that find its fulfillment in Jesus. It is a dual authored, human-Divine work of God, as Holy Spirit moved in such a way that God expressed His reliable Truth and Word. It was written by humans in their own specific language and cultures without compromising the authors' personalities or destroying their intentions. The books of the Bible were collected, edited, and finally compiled by many humans over nearly 1,500 years. I believe the Bible, comprised of Protestant Old and New Testaments, to be infallible as it reveals Gods truth, through Jesus, that is meant to make us wise for salvation (2 Tim. 3:15-17).

Consequently, the Bible is both fully trustworthy and authoritative, and any question of belief and practice must begin with its authority. The fact that the Bible was not written to us, but rather, for us, means we must undergo a cross-cultural experience as we try to understand the context, culture, intentions, and encyclopedia of the biblical authors. We must approach the Bible with these questions in mind: What does Scripture teach, how would the original audience have understood it, and how do we respond in our time and place? Ultimately, the Bible reveals how the God who saved and invited the Israelite people into a covenant relationship is rescuing and inviting all humanity into a covenant relationship through faith in Jesus the Messiah.

While most all protestant hold that the Bible is wholly true and authoritative, there seems to be a divide in what that means in its interpretive application. Theologians have developed three popular models. The first model that people hold on to is called absolute inerrancy. This view emphasizes Scripture's precision, exactness, and technicality. Those who have this conviction believe that if there were security camera footage of everything written in the Bible, they would see it exactly how it was written. For example, if the Molten Sea is recorded as thirty cubits round and ten cubits in diameter then that is its exact dimensions (2 Chron. 4:2). While the

zeal for Scripture and faith to submit to its authority are admirable, those who hold tight to the conviction have to do significant biblical gymnastics to get around “contradictions” that arise from two different versus talking about the same event and having different detailed outcomes. The caution with this model is that it could result in limiting the biblical author’s intention while also imposing our own authority of what Scripture is telling us.

The second model is known as full inerrancy. Those who hold to full inerrancy believe that the Bible speaks accurately in ordinary language, giving us rounded numbers, speech summaries, phenomenal rhetoric. For example, those that hold the Bible to be fully inerrant would say that the dimensions of the Molten Sea may not be exactly thirty cubits round and ten cubits in diameter, but it probably close to those numbers, so the biblical author has given us the closest, rounded numbers. Another example is seen in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). Matthew records that Jesus spent the entire day on the mountain talking to the people, but when reading the two chapters that comprise Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, it only takes ten minutes to read. Those who follow the full inerrancy view, would say Matthew’s recording of the Sermon on the Mount was just a paraphrase of everything Jesus’ talked about that day. The full inerrancy model does a good job holding tight to the wholly truthfulness of Scripture while doing less biblical gymnastics than the absolute inerrancy model. Still, it maintains the assumption that everything written in the Bible was written as if it were a video camera recoding. Again, this could result in limiting the biblical author’s intention while also imposing our own authority of what Scripture is telling us.

The third model that helps interpret the Bible while still holding to its truthfulness and authority is called limited inerrancy. Those who prescribe to this model believe that all the Bible teaches about God and salvation are true, but it may error in what it teaches about science or

history. That means that any given verse or chapter about God and/or salvation is wholly true, but any verse or chapter that speaks to other topics, could be wrong. This is best exemplified when Jesus referred to the mustard seed as the smallest seed. Recent scientific studies have proven that the orchid seed is actually the smallest seed. Limited inerrancy does not see this as a contradiction that would take away from the Bible's truthfulness because the subject, a seed, is not about God's character or about salvation. Therefore, the Bible is still wholly true. While the limited inerrancy model makes a valiant attempt to show both the human aspect of Scripture (the authors were not scientists nor had the modern scientific capabilities like we do today) and the Divine (the Bible is wholly reliable when it comes to talking about God and salvation), it leaves far too much room for human error, failing to ensure the reliability of all of Scripture.

These three models are theologians best way of answering the age-old debate of biblical inerrancy. I think the topic of inerrancy is a really important topic, mainly because the Bible is a primary way that people experience God. But I believe using language such as "inerrant" is not helpful. What most people are really wanting to know is if the Bible is fully trustworthy and reliable to base their full belief and practice on its authority. For example, the differences between the Masoretic Texts, which our English Old Testament is written from, the Qumran Texts, and the Septuagint, the Old Testament the New Testament authors used, seems to suggest a fluid process of giving the final shape of the Hebrew Bible. Different communities of early Jesus followers, as well as many of the Jewish communities before Jesus, had different versions of specific books (scrolls) of Scripture, based on different time periods.

This is best exemplified in the book of Jeremiah. His amanuensis, what is equivalent to a modern-day scribe, Baruch, wrote the first edition of Jeremiah. This would have been copied and distributed to Jeremiah's disciples and the communities dedicated to following and listening to

him. Then, as Jeremiah 36 records, Baruch, took the writing read it to Jehoiakim, king of Judah, who was so angered by it (because it called out his and the people disobedience to Yahweh) that he ripped it up and burned it. “So Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to the scribe Baruch son of Neriah, and as Jeremiah dictated, Baruch wrote on it all the words of the scroll that Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire. And many similar words were added to them” (Jer. 36:32). Jeremiah’s second version was longer because “more words were added.” So, which version was the “Word of God”, the first one or second one. While version one was being distributed among Jewish communities, so was version two. And it seems that no one would claim the other was not God’s Word, perfectly preserved for His people.

Similarly, there have been preserved letter correspondences in the second and third centuries between Origen of Alexandria and Julias Africanus, as well as in the third and fourth centuries between Jerome in Bethlehem and Augustin of Hippo, asking each other what versions of Esther and Daniel their community is reading. They were having this discussion because Greek version, used by Origen and Augustin, was longer, while the Hebrew version, used by Julias and Jerome, was shorter. This is why there are some footnotes in our Bibles, whether it be Jeremiah 10 or Mark 16, that inform the reader which transcript it is taken from. Based off of Jeremiah 36 and how longer and shorter versions of Jeremiah began circulating, it makes sense how this could have been so with these other books. And it seems that God’s “inspiration” in the text was held in full esteem by each of these communities.

Instead of following the three previously stated models, I suggest a different approach, what I call the authors intent model. This model finds the truth and meaning in the content and intent of the author. Said differently, the Bible is trustworthy and reliable in as much as it accomplishes the biblical authors purpose and intent. The “literal” form of each word, verse,

chapter, or section is in what the author wanted to convey and in the manner he wanted to convey it. This model, therefore, does not force the reader to read the Bible as if watching security camera footage of each story. Nor does it require the reader to put constraints on the Bible to say or mean things that it was never meant to say. Rather, it calls the reader to have a cross-cultural experience, go an extra step to learn what the author meant in each word, sentence, and paragraph.

For example, 1 Samuel 15, says Saul “completely destroyed” the Amalekites, yet a couple chapters later the Amalekites are back again, stronger than before (1 Samuel 30). And in Joshua 10:20 it says, “When Joshua and the Israelites had finished inflicting a very great slaughter on them, until they were wiped out, and when the survivors had entered into the fortified towns.” If Saul or Joshua had completely wiped out their enemy, how were their enemies still around? How were there still survivors? For those that hold to the fully or limited inerrant view, “completely” and “totally” would have to mean “all”, and, as if watching the video camera recorded events, one would have to do a lot of biblical gymnastics to answer how if everyone was completely destroyed were there still the people left alive. For those that claim limited errancy, they might interpret this verse as an error in historical data, but one that should not be seen as a dent in the truthfulness of Scripture because Scripture is only inerrant and truthful in matters regarding to God’s character or our means of salvation.

For those who adhere to the authors intent model, to know how to interpret the example text, one would first have to find out what the author meant by “completely destroyed” or “wiped out” (depending on which translation you read), and once they do, they would be able to interpret the text the way the author intended it to be interpreted. In the previous examples, it seems this drastic language is a hyperbole, war rhetoric, that was very common in the Ancient Near Eastern

cultures. Dating all the way back to the fifteenth century B.C. Egypt claimed to have “annihilated totally” their enemy, the Mitanni’s. But in actuality, the Mitanni’s continued to live (and fight) on, causing Egypt trouble for more than a century to come. Even in the eighth century B.C. the Moabites defeated Israel in a battle, claiming outrageous genocide saying, “Israel has utterly perished for always.” But to this day, Israel is a thriving sovereign nation.<sup>1</sup>

This war rhetoric should be taken more like a victory cry. It would be similar to a basketball team, after winning a game, going back to the locker room claiming they “destroyed the other team.” But when one actually looks up at the scoreboard, the team only won by four points. Renown Old Testament theologian, Christopher J.H. Wright, says that Ancient Near Eastern cultures, which included Israel,

had a conventional rhetoric that liked to make absolute and universal claims about total victory and completely wiping out the enemy. Such rhetoric often exceeded reality on the ground...This is not to accuse the Biblical writers of falsehood, but to recognize the literary convention of writing about warfare.<sup>2</sup>

Those who adhere to discovering the author’s intent, understand that the biblical author was simply using his culture’s war rhetoric to proclaim they were victorious and therefore, grasp, without any needing to do biblical gymnastics, how the “wiped out” enemies are seen in later chapters. While this model may cause one to have to study deeper and search outside the Bible for contextual understanding, sometime to no avail, it is the best model to faithfully read Scripture and let what the author, the one who inspired by Holy Spirit, be the authority of the text.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 2011), 176.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher J H Wright, *The God I Don’t Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008), 88.

Trying to find the authors intended meaning in each verse, chapter, section, or book of Scripture is sometimes hard than it may seem. Even with the incredible work and headway that historians and theologians have made through the years in the excavation and uncovering of more Ancient Near Eastern cultures and artifacts, some passages leave people wavering like a flag on a windy day in the trustworthiness of the Bible. A prime example of this is seen in what appears to be a blatant contradiction, or discrepancy, between the gospels. As Jesus breathed His last breaths on the cross before giving up His Spirit to the Father, a centurion soldier watched close by. The gospel according to Mark records the centurion soldier saying, “Truly this man was the Son of God” while Luke’s gospel records him saying, “Truly this man was innocent” (Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47). Depending on which view one holds about the inerrancy of Scripture, there will be multiple interpretations.

If you take absolute or full inerrancy, the security camera footage models as I like to refer to it, then a couple solutions could be plausible. It would allow for both biblical authors to be correct. One interpretation is that both Mark and Luke were referencing two different centurion soldiers, which would validate why they each had a different response. Another possibility is that Mark and Luke were referencing the same soldier who did indeed say both of those statements, but at different times throughout the scene. Now, one of these possibilities may actually be what really took place, but in order to submit my interpretation to the authority and intent of the biblical author, I have to be willing to shed my desire to find out what actually took place, as if I needed the video camera footage to validate the Bible, and seek what the authors were trying to show and reveal to us. When I step back and take look at the surrounding context of Mark 15 and Luke 23, as well as both books as a whole, the uncertain becomes a lot more clear.



Mark introduces the purpose of his gospel in the opening sentence. He says, “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet (Mark 1:1). From the start, Mark’s audience can expect Mark to prove how Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. And in the last sentences of his gospel, Mark unexpectedly uses the words of a centurion soldier to proclaim Jesus to be “the Son of God” (Mark 15:39). Not only does Mark make sure to show that Jesus was the Son of God, he also connected it to another main points found throughout his gospel, that the way Jesus as the Messianic King, the Son of God, was quite different than anyone expected. This was made clear through the centurion soldier’s words, who ironically, was one of the first people to refer to Jesus as the Son of God in Mark’s gospel.

Luke, on the hand, spends his last section, from Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem to His execution, proving Jesus to be the Innocent One. Multiple times, Luke records both Pontious Pilot and Herod repeatedly say that Jesus has done nothing wrong, and they are unable to find a charge against Him (Luke 23:4,14,15, 40). Masterfully, Luke affirms this theme by recording the centurion soldier to have claimed Jesus to be “the innocent one” (Luke 23:47). Both authors told us the story exactly how they intended to in order to depict aspects of Jesus that Holy Spirit has inspired them to reveal. They have designed for us a beautifully woven picture, revealing the fullness of Jesus as Messiah, God with us, from different facets (John 20:31). If one never assumed that the Bible records for us stories that must be read like one would watch security camera footage, then a lot of these “contradictions” and “controversies” would resolve themselves. On the other hand, if one needs the Bible to be read as if they were watching security camera footage, then the biblical authors are forced say and mean things they never meant to say

or mean. In fact, God gave the biblical authors the authority to write in their unique way and style, and it is our duty to find out what they meant.

Unfortunately, many people question if the Bible should hold any authority in their life, or if they should even submit themselves its authority. While it is understandable (but still foolish) for those who have no faith in Jesus to not trust the Bible and not allow it to claim authority in their life, followers of Jesus must indefinitely submit themselves to the authority of Scripture. I boldly claim this truth because my life and allegiance is in King Jesus. I naturally do not enjoy reading ancient documents written by a people groups who spoke a dead language from a culture that has very little crossover to my modern western, twenty-first century world. But because Jesus had such high regard for Scripture, and submitted Himself to Scripture's authority in His life, I do to, and consequently, so should every follower of Jesus.

Jesus looked back over all of Scripture and said that every single page of the Bible was about Him (Luke 24:24, 47). He claimed that every single word and mark in the Bible found its completeness in Himself (Matt. 5:17-20). For the New Testament, it captures the very life of Jesus, the full revelation of God for us (Heb. 1:1-4; Col 2:9), as well as how the first followers of Jesus lived, interacted with each other and culture, as new transformed people of Way of Jesus. For the Bible to have any meaningful authority in one's life, Jesus first needs to be their personal author. They need to put their entire hope, faith, and trust in Jesus as the Messiah because whatever Jesus holds as important, valuable, trustworthy, and authoritative, so will His disciples. Still, there are some important questions that must be answered in order to fully come to know the nature of biblical authority.

What is the nature of the Bible's authority? Some people believe that Bible is a rule book, meant to boss people around and tell them what to do and not to do. Unforuntly, this is the

farthest from the truth. I believe that nature of biblical authority is best understood in two separate but connected stories from within Scripture itself. In Exodus 17, no sooner after God saved Israel from the oppression of slavery in Egypt did the Israelites meet their first enemy on the battlefield. And again, God proved victorious as He delivered Israel from their enemy. Moses, with his hands stretched high to the heavens on a nearby mountain top, was told to write down everything God had done, from the redemption from slavery and victory from the hands of their enemies. God wanted to be remembered as a God who saves and redeems. Similarly, in Exodus 24, Moses was again up on a mountain top. But this time God told Moses to write down how He was to enter into covenantal relationship with the Israelite people. These two stories, the first two recordings of the writing Scripture found within itself, make clear that when one places themselves under the authority of Scripture, they are committing to be shaped into a person who needs the Redeemer, as well someone who intimately lives in relationship with the Redeemer. In other words, Exodus 17 and 24 shows us that we submit to the Bible's authority in order to intimately know the God of the universe who saves his people and draws them into a personal relationship with Him.

Contra popular opinion, the authority of the Bible is not meant to make us obedient to its rules, but rather, it is meant to give us wisdom of how to live as restored image bearers of Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15-17). The wisdom the Bible offers comes only through Jesus and His faithfulness to God. By following Jesus, one will submit to the authority of Scripture, not out of obligation to a written text, but by putting on Christ and internalizing the transcendent set of values of loving God and loving others that Scripture is an expression of (Matthew 22:34-40). Submitting to the authority of the Bible also means submitting to the authorities of the authors of the Bible. As a result, each literary technique, writing style, and genre that the biblical authors use is what we

must allow to speak His truths to us. For instance, 43% of the Bible is narrative, while 33% is poetry and 24% is discourse. This means submitting to the authority of Scripture is a lot more than just picking up the Bible and treating it like a reference manual.

It is crucial for Christians to know the different genres of the Bible and how to hermeneutically read and exegete them. Old Testament theologian, Ray Lubeck, says in his book, *Reading the Bible For a Change*, that “How we read any piece of literature depends completely on what kind of literature it is that we think we are reading.”<sup>3</sup> A narrative reads much differently than poetry and requires the reader to put on a different interpretive lens. A story best illustrates this point. One summer day in the city of Boston, an English professor at the local university was teaching two summer classes back-to-back. The first class was an English class and the second class was a religious poetry class. One day the professor wrote the reading assignments on the board for the first class, listing just the authors last names, it read: *Jacobs-Rosenabum, Levn, Thorne, Ohman(?)*. After the first class had finished, the professor then left the names on the board for the second class, the poetry class, and asked them to interpret the names. The students in the second class came up with an elaborate connection between *Jacobs* and Jacob's ladder. Insisting how instead of a ladder the poem was asserting that the way to heaven was through a rose tree, translated from the name *Rosenbaum*, a German noun, which was a clear reference to Mary. They understood *Levin* to refer to the tribe of Levi, as well as to the unleavened bread of the Passover and mass. *Thorne* was a reference to Jesus' crown of thorns. And *Ohman(?)*, the professor forgot how to spell the authors last name, so he left the question mark there, was interpreted as either “oh man” or the Middle Age English form of “Amen”- the proper way to end any good religious poem. Even the shapes of the names, written downward across the board

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<sup>3</sup> Ray Lubeck, *Reading the Bible for a Change, Second Edition* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2023), 21.

suggested a cross. The point of the story is to demonstrate how our understanding of the category of literature influences how we will interpret it. The fact that the second class was a religious poetry class caused them to see things in the names, and even shapes, that the English class would never have seen.<sup>4</sup>

A biblical example of recognizing and learning how to read and interpret the different genres is found in Exodus 14 and 15. Both Exodus 14 and Exodus 15 tell of the story of Israel's rescue from slavery, dash across the desert, parting of the Red Sea, and destruction of the Egyptian army. Exodus 14 says that God sent a wind, and the wind parted the sea, while chapter 15 is a praise song that describes the same events but with imagery of God's nostrils parting the sea. Which one is it? Is God this cosmic size Gennie up in heaven with the world's biggest, most powerful nostrils, or is He an invisible, Spirit who speaks and creation obeys? Does it make a difference knowing that Exodus 14 is written in a narrative form while Exodus 15 is poetic? The fact that the authority of Scripture is connected to the authors' intent, paired with the fact that different genres evoke different responses, it seems like there is no problem squaring the differences between these two verses. Exodus 14 and 15, along with the bigger section it is in, speaks to the unfailing love of God for His people. It seems the biblical author put Exodus 14 and 15 together to reveal the redeeming God of Israel as the all-powerful, orchestrating Creator who sustains all of life. By using different genres, like narrative in Exodus 14, and poetry, like Exodus 15, the Biblical authors reveal an even more beautiful picture of the biblical story that all leads to Jesus.

Pastorally, I have found it best to respond to people who are struggling with the truthfulness, trustworthiness, and authority of Scripture by encouraging and shepherding them to

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

a closer relationship with Jesus. Falling more madly in love with Jesus realigns one's heart to the Father. As stated earlier, because Jesus held such a high view of Scripture and saw Himself as the fulltime of it, those who follow Jesus begin to look like Him and become like Him (John 6:40), which means they will value what Jesus values, including the importance of Scripture. I would encourage them to make spending alone time with God- praying, worshiping, reading the Bible, communing with Holy Spirit- a daily pattern of life their life; when they wake up in the morning, rest their heads at night, and eat lunch in the middle of the day. Secondly, I would invite them into one-on-one discipleship with me where I can teach them how to read, study, and hermeneutically interpret different genres of the Bible. Lastly, throughout our discipleship, I would incorporate time working through the questions, Bible verses, and topics that makes them most question the truthfulness, trustworthiness, and authority of Scripture.

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