

## If the Bible has Errors, how do we know what is true?

One of the consequences of rejecting the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy is the apparent horror this uncertainty conjures in the minds of some believers. If the entirety of the Bible is not correct in all details, if our sacred scripture has errors in it, how do we know what to believe? What if it gets salvation wrong? These are valid questions but there are some Christians, who should know better, that aren't asking these questions as questions--but instead, using them as an argument in favor of inerrancy. *Biblical hermeneutics* is basically "how to interpret the Bible" and I am going to lay out my general approach to our imperfect, inspired scripture but before I do so I want to address Christians who weaponize these sorts of questions to defend inerrancy.

### Biblical Inerrancy and Merchants of Doubt

[1] As I have argued here, an [all or nothing](#) approach to scripture cannot be sustained and is quite fallacious. We make use of people and sources prone to errors all the time in life. Requiring inerrancy for the Bible to be useful or trustworthy is a textbook example of a double standard or special pleading. It seems to be an objection that peddles doubt as it preys on our desire for certainty. It is more akin to emotional fearmongering than rational discourse. I fully understand why someone would ask this question but I don't understand why a theologian or Bible scholar would use this as an argument in favor of inerrancy after evaluating it.

[2] If we need certainty all its contents are correct to trust the Bible, we Christians are in a creek without a paddle. This black or white, all or nothing Cartesian dualism quickly becomes a fire of our own making. There is an unavoidable human hand at every step of the Bible's journey starting from its ancient authors first dipping their reed pens into soot, gum, and water to inscribe their thoughts onto papyrus, down to us modern readers interpreting a specific translation of the standard Greek New Testament that was reconstructed by a team of textual scholars.

- Humans compose the Bible (fallibly?)
- Humans copy the Bible (fallibly)
- Humans canonize the Bible (fallibly based on their reasoning)
- Humans reconstruct the original text (fallibly)
- Humans translate the Bible (fallibly)
- Humans interpret the Bible (fallibly)

I am not excluding God from any of these processes but if a Christian thinks the mere presence of errors in the Bible undermine its usefulness or trustworthiness, why could I not similarly ask, "If there are errors in my interpretations of the Bible, how can I know what it

true or that interpret its most important teachings correctly?” Or why couldn’t I ask, “If there are errors in how the text is translated from its original languages, how can I know what is true or what it really says?” These are generally shallow arguments. We can have confidence without absolute certainty in life.

[3] The purpose of scripture is of paramount importance for understanding the significance of Biblical errors. If a Physics 101 textbook has typos, it is still useful. Even if it makes a few mistakes, its content can still be considered reliable for its intended purpose. Maybe the solutions manual copied the solution from last year’s edition, or the author conflated two numbers and the final answer of a solution is off. It happens. The text can still be a very accurate and reliable introduction to Physics for undergraduate students. However, if the text gets Newton’s laws wrong, if it makes numerous math errors that demonstrate a lack of understanding of basic calculus and algebra, if the solutions are not mistakes but represent incorrect approaches to the problems, we will have reason to question the utility of this book for its intended purposes. Likewise, if God intends to use Genesis to teach us science or give us a concordant play-by-play account of how the universe was created, then it is not very useful in that regard. The errors would be significant here because they are in regard to the central purpose of what the account intends to teach.

My own view is that the purpose of the Bible is not to teach us accurate facts about history or science, but to train us in righteousness, equip us to do good works and most importantly, lead us to salvation through Christ (2 Tim 3:14-17). I do not deny that Christianity is a historic faith. Certain events described in our sacred scripture certainly happened otherwise Christianity would not be true. Paul says as much plainly about the Resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor 15:14) and I hold this as true for other pivotal moments throughout salvation history. But the Bible is in the business of transforming hearts and saving lost souls. I believe it succeeds in this regard, and it has held up well enough for any modern person to say, “Hmm, maybe I should check this work out and see what it is all about.” For us Christians, the Bible serves as a window to God. It may have smudges and cracks, but it still allows us to see through it and glimpse the character and nature of God, especially as revealed in Jesus. The Bible is absolutely normative for Christians and reliable for its intended purposes even if it has errors.

### **Some Guidelines for Interpreting Scripture**

Naturally, some Christians will disagree with my conclusions or interpretations below. I can’t address or forestall every objection or counterpoint. Nor do I have the desire to do so. That is not my goal. It is true that so called “liberal” interpreters of the Bible, of which mine

may be accused though I would disagree, are often better at stating what they don't believe or what they think the Bible gets wrong as opposed to justifying what they do believe. Some contend that without an inerrant Bible, exegetes just end up "picking and choosing" which is certainly not a sound hermeneutical strategy. What follows is an account of how I approach Scripture in light of those concerns and it is written for myself as much as it is for others --it serves as both theory and therapy.

**[1] Humility.** The Bible is the most popular and talked about work in the history of civilization and I suspect it will remain so a long way into the future. There is a rich tradition of church history and scholarship that has filled countless pages discussing every Biblical verse and idea imaginable. We are products of our culture and time just the same as our distant neighbors and ancestors. We hold no special vantage point of objectivity over any of them. The Bible is an ancient text written in languages and worldviews different from our own. We must recognize that we are *fallible sinners* reading a text purporting to teach us *spiritual truths*. We will err. Christians in the past have made grotesque errors in things they thought scripture plainly allowed or taught (e.g. slavery). Without the assistance of the Holy Spirit, pearls and swine come to mind. Approach scripture prayerfully. Stay humble when interpreting the word of God. The Bible was written *for* us, but it was not written *to* or *by* us. We should not confuse our interpretation with Scripture with exactly what God says. When we are discussing different doctrines its *fallible interpretation of scripture vs fallible interpretation of scripture*, and not God (our opinion) *vs* the interpretation of man (their opinion).

**[2] Continuity.** We believe Jesus called apostles to preach the Gospel and the Holy Spirit came after He ascended into Heaven. In other words, Jesus established the Church and we are members of that same organization. We should be very wary of Christians that cavalierly dismiss long-standing Church traditions based on limited research and less robust formulations of them. Christians who discuss doctrine while *remaining ignorant of* or *cutting themselves off from* the arguments of past Church fathers (Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin and many more) are essentially discussing the third movie of a trilogy without seeing the first two films. My advice: pay attention to the ancient Creeds, learn what the Church has taught and what most Christians have believed and investigate why, before gracing the Christian world with a novel interpretation of our religion that is thousands of years old. If you are Catholic, then you already believe "the interpretation scripture is entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church" (*Dei Verbum*) so this guideline becomes that much more important.

**[3] Purpose.** The purpose of scripture should help guide what we hope to glean from it through faithful readings. As noted above, its goals are salvific and altruistic. It wants us to

be in a right standing with God--saved through Jesus—and it wants to train us in righteousness and equip us to do good works. I don't consult with a physics textbook to gain spiritual truth, nor do I read an introduction to philosophy if I want an intimate portrait of what life was like for African Americans in Alabama in the decade after the Civil War. If the primary concern of scripture is teaching factual information like a newspaper article, then we should read it with that goal in mind. But if scripture is interested in our standing with God and equipping us to do good works, we should approach it from that perspective. We can certainly ask historical questions about whether event x, y or z happened. Some of them are quite important and in my opinion, integral to salvation history. But in most cases these details are of secondary importance to the Bible's ultimate purposes. We can ask if Adam and Eve were real people – and I think they were—but this of secondary importance to understanding that their story of disobedience is our story of disobedience. The banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden is the story of Israel during the Babylonian Exile as much as it is our story in that our sin alienates us from God. We can ask if the all the details of the wilderness are accurate but that is of secondary importance to the story of an unfaithful Israel being our story. Their need for repentance is our need for repentance.

If we approach the Bible expecting to learn science, philosophy, archaeology or exactly what happened in the past (history), I think we are going about it wrongheadedly and will be disappointed. That is treating Scripture like an *artifact* in a museum to be studied instead of using it as a *mirror* to learn about ourselves or as a *window* through which we see God. The Bible should not be approached as a ledger of past events. Reading it is to engage in a living conversation that continually transforms our hearts, reshapes our sense of identity, beliefs, purpose, and ultimately is used to restore our relationship with God. Though it certainly contains a great deal of history, the primary purpose of scripture is to teach us how to live, not what happened in the past. Given that Christianity is prone to such diversity on peripheral issues, maybe we sometimes approach the Bible looking for answers it does not intend to give.

**[4] Genre.** Different types of literature have different rules for interpretation, and the Bible is no exception. In one sense we could consider the entirety of *scripture* a genre of its own, but the Bible is a collection of individual works with distinct literary genres. Some of them include narrative, law, ancient bios, epistles, apocalyptic literature, poetry etc. Some stories might readily be seen as folklore and serve as etiologies. We often forget literacy was low and ancient people did not possess their own Bibles or copies of individual works. A lot of literary devices (chiasms, parallels, repetition of key words, figures of speech and so forth) are there to aid *hearers* in remembering these stories.

Without knowing what genre we are reading, it would certainly be difficult to understand what scripture intends to teach and distinguish it from the background it is embedded in. As a simple example, if we read George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and think its truth lies in teaching animals can talk, we have severely misunderstood it. The novel is actually a political allegory that critiques the Russian Revolution. The story teaches that power corrupts idealism and the new leaders (pigs) become indistinguishable from the former oppressors (humans). Certainly, fussing over whether Boxer really was a historical horse sent to a glue factory, is to miss the central point of his story that is about the exploitation of and discarding of the working class. We sometimes ask texts questions they never had any interest in answering. It is true that a literary reference made to teach a point does not always require or teach what is being referenced is historical. I could appeal to the tragic story of Romeo and Juliet, and readers would understand what I mean despite such figures not actually being real people. During an intense rain storm, a person who does not think Noah's ark is historical could jokingly say, "I think we are going to need an arc." Historical or not, we share this story culturally and understand the reference. We could certainly appeal to names like Odysseus, Hamlet, Achilles or Scrooge if needed to teach a point. Given the purpose of the Bible, we put too much emphasis on determining whether or not everything happened precisely as narrated and we confuse this with what it intends to teach.

**[5] Trust.** Even though I think [scripture has errors](#), I believe God inspired it and uses it to mediate the sacred. I approach it with a *hermeneutic of trust*, believing the source is inherently good, truthful and has something to teach me. That means I accept what I think *it intends to teach*, give it the benefit of the doubt and disagree with part of it after having exhausted alternative interpretations. This contrasts with a skeptical approach to the Bible that utilizes a *hermeneutic of suspicion*, looking for hidden agendas, falsehoods and requiring methodological proof for every belief. There is a difference between reading the Bible like a historian would and reading it in faith as a believer.

This trust is not blind to the point of ignoring reason and it does not entail reading the Bible like it is a modern newspaper article only interested in reporting facts. In fact, much of what I think the Bible intends to teach doesn't require the stories it narrates to be factual. We can learn from ancient stories that have been embellished in the same way we can learn from parables. None of this is said to deny that Christianity is a historic faith and teaches God interacted with us in special ways in the past.

There are certainly many parts of Scripture that give me pause. I will touch lightly on divine violence later but for now, note that Ezekiel 14:9 tells us God has deceived a prophet, 1 Kings 22:19-23 records God as sending out a lying spirit, other verses show God hardening the Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 7:3-4) and Isaiah 6 bewilderingly claims God –at that

moment--no longer desires repentance from Israel and the prophet is commissioned to "make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes and listen with their ears and comprehend with their minds and turn and be healed." I must admit I am more used to the idea that God "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4, see also 1 Peter 3:9), that God cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18, Titus 1:2), or in another phrasing, "God is not a man, that he should lie" (Num 23:19), or that per Jesus, God's word is truth (John 17:7). Some of those passages might call into question how I (theologically) understand God's sovereignty or how I (philosophically) understand God as the source of truth and therefore being incapable of falsehood (can God cause people to lie to bring about a greater good?). Or they might push me to seriously question the ancient Jewish understanding of God's sovereignty and background knowledge about the world. But I don't think any of those isolated passages can seriously put a dent in or overturn the larger theme in scripture of a gracious God who speaks truth, continually forgives a fallen people, and desires all to be saved to the point of lowering himself, entering humanity and dying on the Cross for us. Speaking of the Cross, this is generally the direction I move when something in scripture seems troubling or unclear and that brings us to our next and perhaps most important guideline.

**[6] Jesus.** The fourth gospel tells us: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things came into being through him." John is not talking about our sacred scripture here. The central purpose of the Bible, as the **word** of God, is to testify to the **Word** of God so that we may have life in Him. For me, all interpretive roads go through Jesus who Hebrews 1:3 tells us is "the exact imprint of God's very being." I am a Christ-*ian*, and that means a follower of Christ as revealed in the Bible and through personal experience. All interpretive roads ultimately find their home in Jesus who is the standard by which I measure everything else in the Bible. Even Paul, *in our sacred scripture*, if very careful to distinguish his own words from those of Jesus:

- 1 Cor 7:10: "To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—"
- 1 Cor 7:12: "To the rest I say—I and not the Lord—"

Jesus himself seems to have uttered similar thoughts about Scripture (which ultimately is what Paul's writing became) and his own view. Make no mistake, Jesus had a very high regard for the Hebrew scriptures. This is so certain it does not even require justification for someone who has read the Gospels and none will be provided here. Jesus did not come to abolish the law or prophets but to fulfill them. He said:

**Matthew 5:18:** <sup>18</sup>For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

But in the same Gospel Jesus says the following:

**Matthew 24:35:** Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The law and prophets will not pass away until heaven and earth pass away, but Jesus's words are on an even higher level. When heaven and earth pass away, His words will not. This, in my estimation is one of the many examples in the Synoptic Gospels where Jesus claims Divine status.

Paul elevates the words of Jesus above his own, and more importantly, Jesus himself elevates His words above anything found in Scripture—and *this includes content the Old Testament directly attributes to God*. We find Jesus's words embedded in our scripture today. In this regard, it would seem that not all scripture is created equal, or it may be more accurate to say it is not all of the same value in forming our beliefs. This is contrary to interpreters who treat Scripture indiscriminately and claim all it all has the same authority since God is its author. If Jesus is Lord of the sabbath (Matthew 12:8, Mark 2:28, and Luke 6:5) I take it this means He is Lord of scripture as well.

I find Jesus's teaching on divorce (Mt 5:31-32, 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-10; 1 Cor 7:10-11) quite helpful when trying to understand the Bible. Divorce was a normal part of life in the ancient world. Jeremiah even depicts God describing Himself as divorcing Israel (Jer 3:14, 31:32). Based off the Old Testament, a husband could divorce his wife if he was displeased with her by writing her a certificate of divorce.

**Deuteronomy 21:1:** "Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house;"

Jesus is posed a question on divorce and responds with, "What did Moses command you?" and then after receiving the answer straight from Deuteronomy he flatly rejects a normative practice that the Old Testament regulates and condones. It is worth quoting this passage in full:

**Matthew 19:3-9:** <sup>3</sup> Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?"<sup>4</sup> He answered, "Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,'<sup>5</sup> and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?<sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."<sup>7</sup> They said to him, "Why then did Moses command us to give a

certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?" <sup>8</sup> He said to them, "It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. <sup>9</sup> And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

John Meier highlights how astounding this is:

"By completely forbidding divorce, Jesus dares to forbid what the Law allows--and not in some minor, obscure halakic observance but in one of the most important legal institutions in society. He dares to say that a man who duly follows the Law in properly divorcing his wife and marrying another woman is in effect committing adultery. When one stops to think what this involves, Jesus' prohibition of divorce is nothing short of astounding. Jesus presumes to teach that what the Law permits and regulates is actually the sin of adultery. That is, precisely by conscientiously following the Torah's rules for divorce and remarriage, a Jewish man commits a serious sin against one of the commandments of the Decalogue, the commandment against adultery (Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18). This is no small matter; it is, at least according to the Pentateuch, a capital offense." [*A Marginal Jew, Vol. IV*]

There are other issues where Jesus seems to go beyond what the law of Moses teaches. Some parts of the sermon on the mount can rightly be considered "building a fence" around the Torah or identifying the spirit of the law, but Jesus's words certainly speak against any attempts to treat all parts of scripture with a wooden literalism as the ideal commands of God that are beyond moral reproach.

	<b>Taking Oaths</b>	<b>Eye for An Eye</b>	<b>Divorce</b>	<b>Rain</b>
<b>OT</b>	Deut 6:13: Take Oaths in the Lord's name.	Ex 21:23-25, Lev 24:19-20, Deut: 19:2: Eye for eye, life for life, tooth for tooth	Deut: 21:21 Permissible with a certificate if a woman displeases her husband	Deut. 28:1-24: Rain sent on the just. Drought sent on the unjust.
<b>Jesus</b>	Mt 5:37: Let yes be yes and no be no. Oaths are from the evil one.	Mt 5:38-39: Turn the other cheek in direct response to "eye for an eye."	Mt 19:3-9: Let no man separate what God has joined	Mt 5:45: Rain sent on the just and unjust

We can understand parts of this table as a continual stream of progressive teaching. A certificate of divorce was actually a protection for women in ancient Judaism. This required documentation would serve as proof of the woman's eligibility for remarriage and the



security it would provide. An “eye for an eye” (*ex talionis*) can be considered an improvement over other forms of retribution in the past. A proportionate system of justice limits excessive revenge which is a good thing. Jesus elevates our behavior to another level altogether however, and in this sense, he is at least partially fulfilling the Law. Internal transformation and the spirit of the Law trump external obedience (“I desire mercy, not sacrifice”--Hos 6:6, Mt 9:13) but Jesus certainly goes well beyond what the Law literally sanctions, at times even proscribing that which it prescribes. This means that everything attributed to God in the Old Testament need not be understood as if it represents what a stenographer would have heard and written down. The presence of contradictory statements attributed to God serve as a further evidence of this notion.

Jesus is my primary hermeneutic when trying to understand what the Bible teaches. When I read the something horrific like the *herem* passages in scripture or Psalm 137:9 (“Happy is he who seizes your infants and dashes them on the rocks”), I immediately turn to Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) who speaks against not only retaliation, but against even being angry at your brother. Jesus told us to pray for those who persecute us and to love our enemies! Jesus said, “let the little children come to me” and vividly noted that we are better off tying a millstone to our necks and jumping in a lake than causing children (or “little ones”) to stumble. The context of Psalm 137:9 is not what God wants but the all too real expression of a human captive wanting revenge for what happened to him. As the sovereign Lord declares in Ezekiel 18:32: “I take no pleasure in the death of anyone.” If I want to know what God is like, the clearest image is provided by Jesus and His sacrificial death. No matter how confusing or troubling any passage of scripture is, I can always turn to the Cross as the fullest and truest revelation of God’s character and nature. On the Cross, Jesus’s arms are outstretched, which is an invitation to all of us. In the midst of his brutal torture and execution he says, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

This is not to say I reject everything problematic in the Old Testament. Nor is it to say I think war is never justified. I am speaking more broadly. Jesus took scripture (roughly the Old Testament at the time) very seriously and so should I as I call him Lord and savior. I am not at liberty to correct what my Lord and Savior teaches even if I think His human side had limitations. He spoke of God’s judgment and wrath with vivid images like “fiery furnaces” and “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” He referenced the story of Noah boarding an ark which includes God flooding the world and killing all humans at the time. He not only celebrates Passover, but at the last supper, which was a Passover Seder, he identifies himself as the new paschal lamb (his blood is poured out for many). Anyone celebrating Passover knows its very name comes from the tenth plague where God struck down the first-born of Egypt (the Hebrew word means “to pass over”). For this reason, I am not a

Marcionite. There isn't a good and loving God in the New Testament and a bad or evil God in the Old Testament. Jesus didn't present us with a radically new image of God. There is only one God and there is strong continuity throughout the entirety of the Bible as to His nature and character. It is not intellectually consistent to follow Jesus as Lord and savior and think the big picture of the God described in the Old Testament is not the same one Jesus attested to and is the exact image of.

A Christ-centered-lens isn't a get out of jail free card for problematic passages in the Old Testament, but we know Jesus and the Cross is the standard every other Biblical text must measure up to. We don't have to know exactly what to do with some of the dark passages in scripture. Not all of us need to become experts in biblical Hebrew and ancient-near eastern culture. Nor do we all need to consult fifty commentaries, seventy-five books and a hundred scholarly journals discussing these passages. Whatever we are to make of them, we already know the final answer of all Scripture in that Jesus and his sacrificial death represent the truest and purist image of God possible. As Christians we should move from what is clear to what is less clear. We should start with Jesus and reread and reframe everything else in light of Him, exactly as the New Testament authors did. If there are competing theological images of God in the Bible, defer to the Cross. We are, after all, *Christ-ians*, not *Bible-ians*.

**[7] *Sensus plenior.*** The Bible can be treated by as a library of distinct texts or an anthology of discrete works. This makes sense since dozens of authors wrote the individual books in different languages, different locations and over a long period of time. Rather than looking for consistent themes or seeking a univocal message, its individual works could be interpreted on their own. Narrative criticism is one popular method used along these lines by scholars today. This is good and all but I believe there is a "canonical dimension" to scripture. The Bible may originally consist of a collection of discrete publications but it is considered an authoritative collection of God's revelation to us by the Church. The Christian belief that these texts are in some sense uniquely inspired by God—in comparison to other works--allows us to treat it as a unified, authoritative work. The sum of scripture is more than its parts.

This is what I would deem the canonical dimension of scripture. These works can tell a fuller story that might not otherwise be told if we only had selected works from the canon. The more pieces of a puzzle that are put together, the closer we get to seeing the whole picture. For this reason, a believer should not only read the Bible as a historian would, reducing it to individual works and atomizing its parts looking for individual sources. I think this sort of interpretation is perfectly valid and we have a lot to learn from these ancient stories when we read them in their original context but that is not the total extent of

scripture. This “canonical dimension” might be also called intertextuality which is the “shaping of a text's meaning by another text.”

I do generally think this makes it okay to use our interpretation of some parts of scripture to illuminate other parts of scripture. I believe this is a valid practice, but this does not mean I feel we need to harmonize every passage in tension with another one. As an example, when it comes to the death of Judas and how Acts, Matthew (and the extra-biblical) Papias (ca. 100 C.E.) diverge in detail, instead of harmonizing them, I simply accept that it was quite normal for works to ascribe condign endings to infamous individuals in antiquity. Maybe one of the authors got things right, maybe neither, or maybe both after some linguistic and mental gymnastics, but I am content to see the Biblical authors do what many others (e.g. Josephus) did in antiquity, and that is, give a fitting end to an infamous character. The more interesting historical question to me is the apparent remorse the Gospel of Matthew seems to ascribe to Judas but I digress. So while I think it is valid to use scripture to interpret scripture in terms of the bigger picture or in the case of overall themes, I reject uncritical harmonization which sometimes ends up leaving us with a view of things found in neither work. I would prefer treating the Bible as a continuous story of salvation history and God’s relationship with the world and look for recurring themes and possibly trajectories.

This is important when developing our own beliefs. I have heard numerous Christians tell me the Old Testament doesn’t have the later Greek concept of a soul. The implication of course is that this is a later theological intrusion into more pristine and original Jewish thought. Even though I think their actual case might be overstated, my response is always the same. “You believe in Christians going to heaven despite it scarcely showing up in the Old Testament.” Now I do not subscribe to the idea of platonic souls but Jesus clearly thought of “souls” of some form as distinct from the body (Matthew 10:28) but even without that nail in the coffin, there is nothing wrong with accepting that Christians came to a fuller understanding of things over time. Those who are quick to point out the Genesis is not a science textbook might benefit from understanding it is not a philosophy textbook either. It is almost as if God can’t reveal things over time in their mind.

So what does *sensus plenior* actually mean? It is Latin for “fuller sense.” The Biblical accounts can mean more or go beyond what their original author intended. The canonical dimension of scripture or “canonical intertextuality” if you will, is a mechanism for determining the fuller sense of scripture. Some might even consider this the “big picture” of scripture. However you describe it, this has been a normative Christian practice in the Church for thousands of years and we know it was utilized by the New Testament authors and Jesus himself. I say this on the following grounds:

- Some prophecies of Jesus from the Old Testament appear to be Christian “back-reading” and often these stories have meanings in their original context that stand on their own. The authors of the New Testament engaged in this activity, and we tend to see all these discrete works --when in a collection --as pointing towards Jesus. As Christians, it is difficult to reject the canonical dimension of scripture or that intertextuality is a valid hermeneutical practice when the New Testament authors engaged in such a practice regarding Jesus.
- As noted above, Christians started with Jesus and read backwards. When doing so they were engaged in typology and saw the Old Testament as pointing towards Jesus. People, places, objects, events (all *types*) prefigure and foreshadow Jesus who is said to have fulfilled them. Yet all of these Old Testament stories have legitimate meanings when interpreted on their own merit in their ancient contexts.
- I do not see this as an invention of early Christian but a continuation of the mission and message of Jesus himself. In Luke 24:44 Jesus says: “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Unless we are willing to grant this is a post-Easter creation of the Church that does not go back to Jesus (He is resurrected here), the issue seems settled. I don’t think it is feasible to reject this on historical grounds either. In John 5:46-47, Jesus says Moses wrote about him. In the upper room around Passover, Jesus has a last supper with his disciples, and he unmistakably compares himself to the Passover lamb. A number of his teachings and miracles also recall great events from Israel’s history. The feeding of the multitude (fish and loaves) strongly mirrors the manna and quail God provisioned for Israel in the wilderness. They were given water from a rock, Jesus is the living water. He gives them bread but is Himself is the bread of life. The transfiguration is so steeped in the OT, Dale Allison and W. D. Davies can ask, “How can a factual episode exhibit so many similarities to an event in the life of Moses?” This of course is not a very feasible objection even though it is made by two exceptional Biblical scholars. Brant Pitre raised the following counterpoint: “For one thing, in a first-century Jewish context, it is quite credible that an apocalyptic prophet like Jesus would recapitulate the actions of Moses by taking his disciples to a special place in order to experience a miraculous theophany. That is, after all, precisely what was done by two other first-century prophets: Theudas (active in the mid-40s CE) and “the Egyptian” (active in the mid-50s CE).” Josephus describes Theudas as gathering people and their possessions and bringing them to the Jordan river. He suggested that by his command the rivers would part similarly to how Moses parted the seas when the Israelites left Egypt. The Egyptian brought people to the Mount of Olives under the pretense that by his command they would see the walls of Jerusalem fall.

If we have evidence of two figures, from the same time as Jesus, reenacting Biblical history, why on earth would automatically think instances where Jesus does it in the gospels are made up? It is quite dubious to think this way especially when we have solid historical evidence “Jewish prophets deliberately modeled their actions on well-known figures from Jewish Scripture.” –Pitre . I cannot say whether or not every incident in the Gospels where Jesus is tied into the Old Testament through some form of typology is historical, but if there was some creativity here, certainly this practice is merely a continuation of what Jesus himself taught and believed. This typology—going back to Jesus himself—goes beyond what the historical-critical method can reconstruct when applied to the Old Testament.

- If I read the garden story in its original context, I am more inclined to see the snake as an ancient, dragon-like creature that lost its legs. The devil is nowhere in sight. Yet, Revelation 12:9 clearly identifies the serpent as Satan as does (some Jewish) most of later Christian thought. For a historian understanding the garden narrative, the devil is just completely foreign to the text. It would be like adding a scooter to the triumphal entry and imagining Jesus entering Jerusalem on a gas-powered vehicle. I don't think “Hosanna” would have been what was shouted if such that sort of anachronistic intrusion took place. But for the Christian, with a full canon and Church history guiding us, it seems Satan may have played a role in the fall of humanity (understanding the garden story is mythological but teaching real truths about humanity and/or an actual first couple). Likewise, If I only read Genesis 2-3 on its own, it would be fairly easy to treat Adam and Eve non-historically as the story of humanity. I believe they serve this purpose already, just not **only** this purpose. Why? Well, because we have Biblical genealogies whose political purposes are not served by fictional characters and a punctiliar view of sin and death from the apostle Paul in the New Testament that connects Adam and Eve's rebellion to a very historical death of Jesus. I also see the temptation of Jesus recalling both Israel in the wilderness and Adam and Eve. Jesus was hungry in a desolate land and resisted temptation whereas Adam and Eve, while in paradise, could not. Furthermore, if you think some form of the Church's teaching on original sin or a fall should be accepted, that may be a further reason to accept Adam and Eve as actual historical people (I noted the importance of continuity above).

Interpretations of scripture gleaned through intertextual relationship go well beyond what the historical-critical method would comfortably say about these individual works taken in isolation. St Augustine famously said (*Novum in Vetere latet, Vetus in Novo patet*), “the New Testament is concealed in the Old, and the Old is revealed in the New.” Vatican II expressed similar thoughts:

*“God... wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New... The books of the Old Testament... acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament. ([Dei Verbum](#) 16)*

Unless we go beyond the historical-critical method, we can never arrive at the *sensus plenior* of scripture that is found both in the teachings of Jesus and how the New Testament authors used what was Scripture at that time. This discussion has also said nothing about the supernatural miracles the Bible is replete with. A great number of historians employing the historical-critical method would exclude them as actual possibilities on methodological grounds. Note the following two quotes, one from an agnostic and the other from a Catholic whose work comes with an *Imprimatur*:

“As we will see, historians try to establish what probably happened in the past. But miracles, by their very nature, are the most highly improbable of events. Even if they have happened, they are (in common parlance) *impossible*: otherwise they wouldn’t be miracles. How then can a historian demonstrate the probability of what is most improbable?” (Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament A Historical Introduction*, 225)

“I maintain that even then it is inherently impossible for historians working with empirical evidence within the confine of their own discipline ever to make the positive judgment: “God has directly acted here to accomplish something beyond all human power.” The very wording of this statement shows that it is essentially theo-logical (“God has directly acted . . . “). What evidence and criteria could justify a historian as *a historian* in reaching such a judgement?” (John Meier, *A Marginal Jew Volume 2*, 513-514 but see the whole chapter)

Meier is not denying supernatural miracles can occur, simply stating that limiting oneself to empirical evidence does not allow one to make theological statements. A historian could parse between *a miracle happening* and *people thinking a miracle happened* but if one’s philosophical presuppositions do not allow the miraculous, I find it hard imagine how the sheer number of them in our sacred scripture will not lead exegetes so inclined to treat is with an even greater hermeneutic of suspicion. Some of the miracles certainly seem odd to me and read like legendary tales. Samson killed 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey and had supernatural powers tied to his hair? And while I am not arguing either of these are or are not actual events in the past, if God can accommodate his teachings through ancient frameworks, he can certainly accommodate miracles and perform them in ways that might have made more sense to ancient authors. My biggest problem with the story is not actually the miraculous hair or strength, but in the description of God granting the *personal vengeance* request of Samson. Such elements are not open to historical investigation, however.

Our Bible comes with a salvation history that includes a number of supernatural miracles. Christianity is based on several itself: God become man and the resurrection. “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith” (1 Cor 15:15, NIV). We must certainly make use of the historical-critical method. Scripture couldn’t even be translated into another language without it, but we must be wary of limiting our treatment of scripture to it.

**[8] Context.** After pointing out the problematic nature of limiting scripture to the historical critical method [see this outside [link](#) as well], it seems prudent to include an example of how it is also very useful to us. I think we all know how important context is to proper understanding (a text without a context is a pretext) of the Bible or any communication really. We certainly have our own culture and norms that we bring to scripture. But unless we try to understand these authors on their own terms, in their own cultures, we are going to misinterpret the text.

Genesis 1 is a textbook case of where the historical-critical method is crucial to understanding what the author intends to teach and it would be beneficial for us to examine it. Some interpreters take Genesis 1 as a factual account of exactly how God created the universe. Apparently, it teaches us scientific truths about how and in what order things were created. I think that is entirely incorrect, and to use an analogy by John Walton, it is akin to doing astronomy using Vincent van Gogh’s famous *Starry Night* painting. I have no interest in addressing that issue here. I want to point out how the historical-critical method and context help draw out the fullness of Genesis 1. The first chapter of the Bible is doing something some scholars might call “rearranging Mesopotamian furniture.” When we read the contents of Genesis 1 in the context of surrounding mythology and creation stories, its theological richness becomes greatly magnified. The interpretation which looks at Genesis as a factual account of creation is quite banal in comparison. My mind was blown when I first learned of these connections and let Genesis 1 speak to me in its own voice.

"In class, when I make a cultural allusion, its significance is lost if the class is not familiar with the movie, song or video game to which I am alluding. The line becomes a source of confusion to them because they are unaware of the connection I am referencing. Likewise, if Genesis is making allusions to the literary world of the ancient Near East (as observable in literature such as the Gilgamesh Epic) and we as readers have no knowledge of that literary world, we will miss the significance of the allusion." [The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate, pg. 111]

The thrust of Genesis 1 is clearly towards establishing the primacy of God in a polytheistic culture. When we read it considering other Ancient Mesopotamian creation stories, it plainly tells us God has no rivals, no prior lineage, there is a monopoly on power and only one true God. All these other stories present a different account and depict bickering gods battling for supremacy. It's hard to tell who is in charge but not in Genesis 1. Unlike in the *Atrahasis* epic, God doesn't need a discussion amongst peers or the approval of anyone to create human beings. Humans weren't an afterthought either. Unlike in the *Enuma Elish*, we weren't created after he proved himself defeating Tiamat the sea goddess in some cosmic struggle and gained the renown of the other gods. Unlike surrounding creation narratives, there is no conflict mythology in Genesis because the author is plainly telling us God cannot gain what he never lacked and there has never been a challenger worthy of Him. A rise in power is not possible for one who has never not been in power. Bill Arnold writes of Genesis 1:

"Israel's God has no rivals. There can be no struggle with forces opposed to his actions or corresponding to his power. There can be no victory enthronement motif because God's victory was never in doubt; rather, God has never not been enthroned. There can be no enthronement portrait here because God has not become sovereign; he has simply never been less than sovereign." [Baker Commentary]

Creation comes via command, not conquest. Chaos is reduced from cosmic foe to raw material used by God. Without understanding the cultural context of the account, all this is missed. The great sea monsters are just big fish (Genesis 1:22)--another part of God's good creation. For those who worship the sun, their deity is reduced to a lamp that lights up God's sky. Many people worshipped astral deities, but the author of Genesis 1 tells us that they are only lights created by God to demarcate the seasons. *Kings* were thought to have been made in the image of God or were his royal representatives. Genesis 1 says *all people* are made in the image of God and serve as stewards of creation. The account doesn't begin with conflict which is telling. Nor does it end with a specific temple being built like in other stories. All of creation is God's temple. When we reduce Genesis 1 to a chronological ledger of how the world was created, we do ourselves a tremendous disservice. Without understand the ancient background and culture Genesis 1 is steeped in, we miss all the rich literary references and allusions that would allow us to interpret it properly. I would compare it to eating without tastebuds or scent.

I want to look at one more area where context enhances Biblical teaching. I have heard many Christians claim that God prefers that a person is dead in their faith (cold) over them being lukewarm. It always struck me as odd that *lacking faith altogether* was somehow



preferable to having *some faith*. This interpretation of scripture is a misreading more so than anything else, but understanding the context of the passage this belief stems from helps hammer that point home.

**Revelation 3:14-16** <sup>14</sup>“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. <sup>15</sup>I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! <sup>16</sup>So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. . .

Many Christians read this as:

- Hot: faith is on fire for God
- Cold: faith is dead

God desires a faith that is on fire for him (hot), but even a faith that is completely dead (cold), it better than a lukewarm faith with unremarkable discipleship. But if we look at a map of Laodicea, it is situated right next to Hierapolis which had hot springs noted for their medicinal value,



and Colossae, known for colder, refreshing water. Paul’s letter to the Colossians mentions Laodicea and Hierapolis and this makes sense as all three are geographically nestled in close proximity (4:16). In its proper context, the verse in Revelation treats *cold* as *good*. The cold water of Colossae would be refreshing to ancient travelers. This is a good thing and faith should be like it. The account is not mentioning a cold, dead faith, but comparing faith to water that is cool and refreshing and also to water that is hot and medicinal. Anyone familiar with local geography would have picked up on this. The Laodicean faith was lukewarm, neither hot nor cold—like the waters around them. To be clear, the text speaks against lukewarm faith, but nowhere does it mention that a cold, dead faith is preferred by God over a lukewarm one. That interpretation is a creation of Christian self-flagellation.

We have seen several examples of how context can enrich and enlighten our understanding of the Biblical text and both are based on utilizing tools of the historical-critical method. As Christians who think the Bible has both human and divine origins, and given these works have specific life-settings (written for us, but not to us), we need to use the historical-critical method in order to understand them. But this cannot be the only tool in the Christian toolbox, otherwise we disconnect ourselves from Jesus, the authors of the New Testament and the *sensus plenior* of scripture.

[9] **Scripture.** This might seem odd as a heading since we are going through guidelines explaining my own general approach to scripture. But they were not formed in a vacuum but significantly in dialogue with the Bible. Since much of scripture was written roughly over a thousand-year period, sometimes later authors not only contradict earlier authors, but sometimes they critique those ideas. Jewish Rabbis have known and utilized the technique of pitting one scripture against another for a very long time.

EP Sander's wrote: "Citing one passage against another in order to justify ignoring or disbelieving an unpalatable part of the Torah is also known. The Rabbis did not agree with another major aspect of the ten commandments: that God visits 'the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation' (Exod 20.5). Against this view they could appeal to Ezekiel (Ezek. 18.1-20)." [*Jesus and Judaism*]

**Exodus 20:5-6:** "You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, *punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and the fourth generation* of those who reject me <sup>6</sup> but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation<sup>[b]</sup> of those who love me and keep my commandments.

**Ezekiel 18:20:** The person who sins shall die. *A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child*; the righteousness of the righteous shall be their own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be their own. [see 1-19 as well]

Ezekiel was responding to a popular saying at the time: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezekiel 18:2) which is similar to Exodus 20:5. I would like to point out something about Exodus 20:5-6 that is often missed. The verses seem very harsh. Punishing children for their parents sins? Whatever we are to make of this passage I want to highlight that it teaches God's love, mercy and grace far outweigh his punitive side. He will punish to the third or fourth generation but show love to a thousand generations. If we did the math, which we probably should not, God is 286 times more merciful than he is punitive. Don't quote me on that.

Just as Rabbis could pit Ezekiel against Exodus here, note how Jesus critiqued Moses permitting divorce. He did so based on appealing to the created order of Genesis 1. He used scripture to override scripture -- but that is not to say He behaved similarly in all the places we saw above where He went beyond the Old Testament. There is some indications in scripture itself that parts of Deuteronomy are simply not ideal. Ezekiel records the Lord as telling us the wilderness laws in the Old Testament were not good. This is absolutely astounding. In the account it is God speaking:

**Ezekiel 20:25:** <sup>25</sup> Moreover, I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live.

Israel was extremely rebellious in during the wilderness and was not a people we should emulate (1 Cor 10:1-11, Hebrews 3:16-19, Ezek 20:8-49, and all the wilderness narratives). Jesus himself says Moses allowed this due to the hardness of human hearts. Moses allowed this, not God. For sure, the account shows God giving his blessing but there is a lot going on here.

“First, Jesus attributes this command of Deuteronomy, not to God, but to Moses (Deut 24:1). In doing so, he follows literary indicators in the text itself. Whereas the laws of the first and second Sinai covenants are repeatedly prefaced by the phrase “The Lord spoke to Moses” or a similar phrase, almost all of Deuteronomy is presented as first-person speech of Moses. God does not speak to Moses until near the end of the book (Deut 31:16-23). None of the laws in the central legislation are prefaced by “The Lord spoke to Moses” (Deut 12-26). In Deuteronomy, Moses takes responsibility for the promulgation of its laws in a unique way, unlike the accounts in Exodus—Numbers.” *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament*, John Bergsma

Deuteronomy 29:1 tells us this covenant is different than the Sinai covenant (which was renewed after being broken) and while the latter is described explicitly as the covenant which the Lord has made with Israel, the former is described as the covenant “the Lord commanded Moses to make with the Israelites.” Given the comments of Ezekiel, Jesus calling this the commands of Moses and these indications in the text itself, it seems scripture itself is putting some distance between the legal code here and God. It seems some of these laws are tailor fit to a sinful Israel with hardened hearts and do not reflect God’s ideals as expressed elsewhere in scripture. This might explain why Paul writes: “Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions . . . (Gal 3:19). At the very least, both scripture and Jesus give indications that all scripture is not created equally. John Bergsma and Brant Pitre remain conservative here:

“The presence of accommodated or compromised laws within Scripture is a complex issue that strikes many readers as counterintuitive. How can imperfections be part of Sacred Scripture, much less be considered inspired? In response, it is helpful to remember that Aristotle, later followed by Thomas Aquinas, points out that the wise legislator will not necessarily enact perfect laws if they are beyond the capacity of his people to follow; rather, he will accommodate his standards to a level practical for them.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the presence of such laws in the book of Deuteronomy does not necessarily entail a wholesale endorsement of their principles.” [*A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament*]

As noted above, there are also places where Scripture statements attributed directly to God are at odds with one another so there is precedence for not accepting everything prefaced with “The Lord said” as the exact and immutable words of God. Exodus 20:1 starts with “Then God spoke all these words” which attributes the Sabbath to God’s rest on the seventh day of creation.

**Exodus 20:8-11:** <sup>8</sup>Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>For six days you shall labour and do all your work. <sup>10</sup>But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. <sup>11</sup>For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

In Deuteronomy 5 we are again presented with the ten commandments as coming from the Lord but the Sabbath is tied into the exodus as opposed to creation:

**Deuteronomy 5:12-15:** Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. <sup>13</sup>For six days you shall labour and do all your work. <sup>14</sup>But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. <sup>15</sup>Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Now here is the problem. Verse twenty-two in Deuteronomy says that after God finished saying these words, “and he added no more”:

**Deuteronomy 5:22** <sup>22</sup>These words the Lord spoke with a loud voice to your whole assembly at the mountain, out of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, and he added no more. He wrote them on two stone tablets, and gave them to me.

Did God say what is in Exodus 20:11? The answer of the Exodus account is obviously yes, but Deuteronomy would seemingly answer in the negative. We have a clear contradiction where even though the words are attributed to God, He could not have said them both.

There are indications that scripture was quite pliable at times. Notice how Matthew changes Micah:

**Micah 5:2:** "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days."

**Matthew 2:6** [for so it has been written by the prophet] 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'

Matthew rejects Micah's lowly view of Bethlehem as evidenced by his emended citation of the passage. Dale Allison writes: "Early Christian literature also contains examples of the reversal of scriptural subtexts, and many of these are often ironic. Matthew 2:6 inserts . . . "not at all," into its quotation of Mic 5:2, so that Micah remarks upon Bethlehem's insignificance whereas Matthew - who elsewhere affirms the continuing authority of the Law and the Prophets (5:17-20) - outright denies it." [*Resurrecting Jesus*]

Another example occurs in Romans 10:6-8, where Paul transmutes passages in Deuteronomy 30:11-14, about the accessibility of the Law to his law-free Gospel. In verse 11, God even says, "Surely, this commandment [to turn and obey God's laws] that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away." This is certainly different from what we find in Paul and elsewhere.

Dale Allison provides a nice listing of the ways scripture could be bent and used in the ancient world:

"Some of us are wont to think of ancient Jews, at least the pious ones, as though they were modern fundamentalists, so that they would never have sounded as revolutionary as Jesus sometimes does. But this is misperception. Some Jews not only felt free to rewrite Scripture - illustrative are Jubilees and the Life of Adam and Eve, both of which freely transform Genesis - but some also were further able, in the words of Michael Fishbane, to use "authoritative Torah-teaching as a didactic foil." Indeed, "the Jewish device of twisting Scripture, of subjecting the earlier canon to radical reinterpretation by means of subtle reformulations, is now recognized as central to the Bible as a whole." When Job gripes, "What are human beings, that you make so much of them, that you set your mind on them?" (7:17), is not he recalling the famous Ps 8, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (v. 4) and thereby inverting and mocking the liturgy? Psalm 144, in rewriting Psalm 18, turns it from a thanksgiving into a complaint. Joel 3:9-10 ("Prepare war....Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears") prophesies war in the language of a famous prophecy of peace (Isa 2:4 =

Mic 4:3: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks... neither shall they learn war any more"). Joel makes similar rhetorical moves elsewhere, as when he transfers prophetic threats against Babylon (Isa 13:6) and Egypt (Ezek 30:2) into warnings against Jerusalem (Joel 1:15), and when the prophecy that the wilderness will be turned into Eden (Isa 51:3; Ezek 36:35) becomes a prophecy that Eden will be turned into a wilderness (Joel 2:3). Jonah seems to revise the narrow understanding of divine grace within Joel 2:1-17 - unless it is Joel 2:1-17 that is narrowing the more universal understanding of Jonah. Isa 40:28 declares that God needs no rest, 45:7 that God creates darkness -- about-faces from the primeval history. "The oracular formula in Isa. 56.4 signals the announcement of a new word of YHWH, a word that annuls the legal stipulations of Deut. 23.2-9." Daniel 12:4 foretells that at the end, "many will be running back and forth, and knowledge will increase." This takes up Amos 8:12 - at the end 'pp, v. 2) "they will run back and forth, seeking the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it" - and so turns prophetic pessimism into words of hope." [*Resurrecting Jesus*]

It seems to me that scripture invites us into a living conversation with it. It doesn't always understand itself as issuing timeless commands from behind history. Scripture is not a frozen text nor are later authors only repetitive in relaying the same divine, immutable commands of earlier writers. Considering this Biblical diversity, Ken Sparks suggests "good theological readings of the text will seek out the "balance" of the text as a whole. Certain themes in Scripture naturally emerge as more important and fundamental to the whole, while others finally appear less important and peripheral. The best theological judgments will be those that recognize how this balance plays out." [God's Word in Human Words]

**Conclusion:** A lot more could be said but I think the content here suffices in demonstrating how I generally treat scripture. Dispensing with the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy does not warrant pessimism or treating the Bible with suspicion. We can remain faithful to it by employing sound hermeneutical strategies consistent with those of Jesus and the Biblical authors themselves. A summary of the interpretive strategies discussed above is provided here in closing. Our interpretation should be grounded in **humility**, recognizing our own fallibility and limitations. It should seek **continuity** with Church tradition and creeds and read the text faithfully according to its **purpose** which is our salvation and moral transformation. We should respect the **genre** of the Biblical works and not expect it to provide us with scientific and historical precision, or yield answers to questions it never intended to address. When we do this, we can approach it with a hermeneutic of **trust** that appreciates both its divine and human side to provide us with what we need to know for our salvation. **Jesus** is the exact image of God, and a Christ-centered lens is the primary interpretive key that unlocks all of Scripture and delineates the true character of God. If we

have seen Jesus, we have seen the Father. As Augustine said, the new is in the old *concealed* and the old is in the new *revealed*. We should seek the ***sensus plenior*** of scripture, and read it progressively and canonically, allowing later revelation and typology to deepen the meaning of earlier texts without necessarily erasing their original meanings. The historical-critical method is vital to ascertaining the **context** of individual scriptures which is crucial to understanding it. **Scripture** itself shows us that we don't need to flatten all tensions within and it provides us with a model for approaching it in open dialogue.