

The Bible: Imperfect Text, Perfect Purpose.

People spend a lot of time and energy arguing over the doctrine of **Biblical inerrancy**. The irony of this sixteen page document to that end is not lost on me. Skeptics compile lists of apparent errors while apologists offer potential harmonizations. Some even ask if the Bible has errors in it then how can it be trusted when dealing with important issues like salvation or the teachings of Jesus? I believe that the Bible is inspired and absolutely normative for Christians today. It is sufficient to mediate the sacred and equip us for a life of faith and service. Even if it has errors, we should approach it with a hermeneutic of trust and treat it with reverence the same way the individual we *Christians* worship and are named after did. I have similar feelings about wide-spread Church tradition and Creeds as I believe Jesus handpicked his closest followers and the Holy Spirit came to assist the Church He established. With that being said, I find the importance of inerrancy to be largely overinflated, and the doctrine itself inconsistent with the evidence--including how God normally works through humans. I will lay out exactly what I believe about the Bible and then delineate the reasons why I reject inerrancy.

The Purpose of Scripture

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." From cover to cover the Bible wants us to be saved; it wants us to be in a right standing before God and to obey his commands. It starts that way in the garden and that is how God, who desires all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4), wants it to end.

The Sufficiency and Inspiration of Scripture

The Bible is inspired by God and adequate to serve the purposes for which He intends it. He allowed human authors to tell his story from their own limited perspectives. This is often called Divine accommodation. I believe God moved over these ancient authors and compelled them to write and put ideas on their hearts. But more importantly, the Holy Spirit moves over us today when we read the Bible in faith. I don't think either end of that process is inerrant, and I think the general role of the Holy Spirit in the composition of

scripture was more *suggestive* as opposed to being *coercive*. Both ends of the inspiration process are important. As fallible sinners, we read the Bible seeking spiritual truths and without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, we may be comparable to swine trampling pearls.

Hypothetically speaking, even if God did not inspire theses authors to compose the Bible, I would still consider it reliable in its intended purposes by the mere fact that God uses it as His instrument for teaching us about Jesus. I reserve no doubts about God's ability to accomplish His will through whatever means He deems appropriate. If He wants to lead me to salvation via scripture, a dead cat, a communist manifesto or a symphony orchestra, who am I to question Him? *Infallibility* should be a statement more so about God than Scripture. I believe God did move over those ancient authors and compelled them to write, putting ideas and thoughts on their hearts. I also believe when collected into a canon, there is a *sensus plenior* or full sense that goes well beyond what any individual author wrote. The Bible is more than the sum of its parts, but I do not believe God completely overrode the Biblical author's free will or continually provided them with supernatural knowledge. God wasn't filling empty vessels with divine revelation. He let them tell His story from their perspective while maintaining His divine prerogative to suggest what He wanted included in Scripture and override content where He deemed necessary.

I would describe the dual human and divine authorship of Scripture with a chess analogy. God is the Grandmaster, and the human authors are novices. Our moves—the babble we think we mean—can be clumsy, but God anticipates them, and can respond in ways that controls the direction of the board. He knows each player's limitations and how best to orient the game toward his intended purposes. God will win the game regardless of what moves we make. Why can we be confident of that? God's timelessness is one reason, but even setting that aside, inspiration being primarily suggestive rather than coercive does not mean God cannot act coercively when he deems it necessary. If God decides to make a move for us, the pot has no right questioning the potter. A final reason that will be expanded much more fully below: God accomplishes His will *in spite* of what people do all throughout Scripture itself.

The Bible is a witness to the sinless and perfect Word of God. It is a holy and venerated instrument that the triune Godhead played a role in composing and uses to mediate the sacred. I affirm that the Bible—the **w**ord of God-- is a reliable witness to the **W**ord of God and can equip us to do every good work and that makes it normative for Christians everywhere when read humbly and prayerfully under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Problems with Biblical Inerrancy

[1] Errors in the Bible:

The simplest reason I do not subscribe to the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy is because I think there are examples of legitimate human errors in the Bible. I believe there are *internal contradictions* in the Bible pertaining to events, numbers, figures, narrative details, theology, and even morality. I also believe there are *external contradictions* meaning there are some statements in scripture that appear at odds with the findings of historians and modern scientists. It is not my goal to argue for any specific examples here. Lists of potential errors in the Bible are not hard to find nor are potential solutions to them—many of which I would agree with based on genre considerations. The intention of a text certainly matters for how we understand its accuracy, or lack thereof. But it seems a bit ironic that one conservative exegete composed a four hundred plus page “*Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*” which attempts to offer faithful solutions to all manner of problems within the text. Is God the author of confusion? Might the need for such a text itself be taken as an indication our understanding of scripture may be in need of tweaking? I do not think it is plausible to harmonize every potential internal and external error in scripture. Since I believe God was more suggestive than *coercive* throughout the inspiration process, I see no reason to assume the text must be inerrant and I know that scripture is more than adequate for the omnipotent and omnipresent God I worship to work through. Furthermore, there is nothing within scripture itself that teaches the modern doctrine of Biblical inerrancy.

[2] Textual Criticism:

Open your Bible and read the following verses: Matthew 17:21, 18:11, 23:14; Mark 7:16, 9:44, 9:46, 11:26, 15:28; Luke 17:36, John 5:3-4; Acts 8:37, 15:34, 24:6-8, 28:29; Romans 16:24 and 1 John 5:7-8. If you are not using a King James Version, you might be a bit perplexed. They are all missing from modern translations of the Bible which just skip right over them. It turns out that most textual scholars today feel these were not part of the original New Testament documents (the *autographs* as they are called) but were added to the text at a later time period. In most cases, they are missing from key early manuscripts leading textual scholars to conclude they are additions or corruptions of the autographical text. Most of them do not amount to very much and doctrinally speaking, 1 John 5:7-8 is the most significant of these 16 omitted verses as it gives very direct statement of the Trinity.

A knowledge of textual criticism is another reason I think the Biblical content is good enough to serve God's purposes but not inerrant. The Bible did not fall from heaven. It is a collection of many dozens of discrete publications written by different authors from all walks of life, stemming from different regions thousands of miles apart, over a thousand-year period. We do not possess any of the original writings or "autographical texts" as they are called. What we have are copies of copies of copies and through centuries of copying and transmission, some variation and ambiguities have emerged. In the ancient world, writing was a more expensive and difficult task and once a text was written and disseminated, it had to be copied by hand. The original books of the New Testament were probably written as scrolls on papyrus or parchment, and neither can withstand the vicissitudes of time. As these texts were passed around and read, they would degrade and even the very moisture in the air would damage them. It is no coincidence that we find so many manuscripts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls in deserts where dry climate prevails. It is inevitable that the original autographs would need to be copied and recopied over and over again—unless God decided to supernaturally preserve the originals and keep them free from all material degradation. When we look at all the copies of the Biblical manuscripts, we find a large number of unintentional copyist errors but there are also numerous instances of intentional changes.

There are countless examples of textual alternations known in the ancient world. Copyright laws did not exist in antiquity and whoever received or was in possession of a text could do their best to copy it verbatim or they could alter parts of it as they saw fit. In the former case, it is inevitable that accidental scribal errors would occur in transmitting it. As for the later case, looking at the synoptic problem and Markan priority might be telling. Most scholars believe Matthew and Luke are literarily dependent (copied) on the Gospel of Mark. Two authors took an existing Gospel and composed their own from it in very short order. While both authors were largely faithful to the Markan text, they certainly felt free to make alterations of existing material and add in lots of new details. Reading the triple-tradition material in a synopsis makes this quite clear. The synoptic gospels show how fast one text could be adapted and turned into another.

Some Biblical books come in different versions. Not many Christians know there is a Western recension of Acts that is 10% longer than the version we find in our canon. The Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) version of Jeremiah has material reordered and is about 1/8th shorter than the canonical version. The Dead Sea Scrolls seem to support the shorter text as well as having additional material for 1 Samuel 11. The Greek translation of Job is significantly shorter than the canonical version (Hebrew Majority Text). The woman caught in adultery (John 7:53-8:11) is widely thought to have been added to the text at a later date and the original ending of Mark is hotly disputed with many scholars

thinking the Gospel originally ended at 16:8. In Luke 23:34, while Jesus is on the cross he says, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” This is missing from several high-quality codices in the 4th century and Papyrus 75 which dates quite early (ca. 200 CE).

There are also examples of interpolations and textual changes that may have occurred so early, they predate our ability to detect them in the manuscript record. Many scholars feel the Gospel of John was redacted given what appears to be major disorder inside and a perfectly good ending (John 20:31) having additional material tacked on. The second epistle to the Corinthians is another example of an NT work with a potentially complicated compositional history. Many scholars think it originally consisted of multiple letters of Paul that have combined into a single letter. The letter is disjointed with clear breaks in tone and content. For example, 2 Cor 7:2 appears to pick up right where 6:13 leaves off. 2 Corinthians 2:13 ends with Paul’s concern about not finding Titus. This is not picked up until 7:5, five chapters later. It is then suggested by some that 2 Cor 14-7:4 was inserted into the text at this point. We must also consider in 2 Cor 8:17 Titus has not arrived in Corinth but 12:17-18 depicts him at work there. In addition, the first-person plural is used predominantly in chapters 1-9 whereas this switches to first-person singular in chapters 10-13. It seems that some of the Biblical works were quite fluid textually speaking in their earliest years.

There are numerous cases where the original text of the Biblical manuscripts is quite difficult to reconstruct or where our earliest manuscript evidence may be a century or several centuries removed from when a text was first written. Within our surviving manuscripts themselves there are hundreds of thousands of differences and textual scholars have to decide which reading is likely to be more original in some cases. Most of our modern Bible translations are based on the 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland critical Greek text (*Novum Testamentum Graece*). A committee or team of scholars has to sort through almost 6,000 Biblical manuscripts and form a judgment on which one they think is the best reading. Most of the differences in the manuscript tradition are minor and insignificant. The sheer volume of them stems from the wealth of biblical manuscript data that we do possess but apologists tend to overstate our textual certainty.

It’s fairly easy to see where I am going with all this. It took a while for all the Biblical works to be collected into a single volume and in that time, some copyist errors inevitably crept in (and continued to do so afterwards). **This leads to what I consider an inescapable conclusion.** Even if each scriptural document was authored completely free from all error, it is unlikely anyone in the history of the Church has ever possessed a completed, inerrant Bible. work. Let that sink in. Some theologians and apologists make inerrancy such an

important issue—and the reliability of the Bible does qualify as such—but I think I am well justified in saying that even if the autographs were kept 100% error free by God, no one in the entire history of the Church has ever possessed a completed, inerrant Bible. It should be noted, however, that compared to other classical works, New Testament scholars are inundated by and practically drowning in manuscript evidence. As an example, while there are some 6th century Latin translations of the first century Jewish historian Josephus's works, the earliest (*incomplete*) Greek text is from the 11th century. When placed next to other classical works, the textual data for the majority of the Biblical books is monumentally better. While the Bible is not textually perfect, the abundance of manuscripts, early church father citations and translations into other languages deem it reliable enough to relay its original message to most textual scholars. The Bible as we possess it is not textually perfect, and there is legitimate uncertainty in some places as to what was originally written, but it is textually *good enough* to serve God's purposes and relay apostolic teachings.

If we argue the New Testament manuscripts with their thousands of known errors, additions, omissions and divergent readings, are *good enough* at conveying the essential message and meaning of the original texts, then so too can a softer model of Biblical inspiration whereby every single word was not mechanically dictated by God and free from all error. The findings of textual criticism show that no Christian has ever possessed an inerrant Bible. What we have always possessed was a *reliable* record of God's salvific work.

We know that if God inspired perfect and inerrant *autographs*, He is perfectly capable of inspiring perfect and inerrant *copies*. God could have supernaturally preserved the autographs and kept them free from degradation or harm if He so chose to. The data is 100% unequivocal in that God did not do this nor did he force scribes to make perfect and inerrant copies. Not in the case of inadvertent errors and not in the case of intentional errors. All Christians throughout history have made use of a textually imperfect Bible and I tend to reject the *ad hoc* claim that God let errors creep in so that people wouldn't worship the Biblical text. Wouldn't the God of truth want us to have as accurate a copy of the Bible as possible? I believe so but free will is the answer to why we do not have a perfectly accurate copy. Since God was more *suggestive* than *coercive*, errors were allowed to creep into the manuscript record. If God did not force inerrant copies, why is it so important I believe he forced inerrant autographs? Inerrancy is something we generally bring with us to scripture and gleaning it from internal Biblical contents is often circular. I don't see the importance or necessity of an inerrant Bible when no one in the Church ever possessed one.

[3] Canonization

How many books are in the Bible? It depends on who you ask. Most Protestants will tell you 66 (39 OT, 27NT) but Catholics will tell you 73 (46 OT, 27NT) and we do not distinguish between scripture and apocrypha. It is all scripture, and we refer to the works missing from Protestant Bibles as deuterocanonical books. There is also the Ethiopian canon which has 81 books while the Greek Orthodox Bible varies from 75-79 books. Closely related to textual criticism is canonization. Just as the Church transmitted scripture, it also had to – with the aid of the Holy Spirit--determine which books belonged in our Canon and which did not. This process is referred to as canonization, and it was a bit messy at times. Canon comes from the Greek word ‘reed,’ a straight measuring rod, but it has come to mean rule or the standard by which we measure. The Bible is our reed or doctrinal standard.

It is worth noting the Muratorian fragment (ca 200CE) is often used as evidence for an early canon list, and it very well may be (most scholars), but a number of scholars do date it to the fourth century, so we have to tread cautiously. The development of the canon over time is a fascinating subject but one beyond the scope of this writing. Suffice to say, in the early Church there were a number of books that were widely used by some Christians that did not make it into the Bible (Gospel of Thomas, Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, etc.). It seems we have discovered almost 40 other gospels not found in the New Testament. Most of them are later, 2nd-century works, however. There is also an alleged 3 Corinthians that was rejected and an Epistle to the Laodiceans some thought Paul wrote but ultimately was excluded from the canon. Some books like Revelation were quite controversial with a number of Christians being against its inclusion in the canon.

I believe God moved over the Church during the canonization process but again, without necessarily erasing Her free will. I do not think God mechanically dictated which books were included or made it impossible for there to be mistakes nor do I think God made sure the reasoning leading to the inclusion of some books was completely accurate. As an example, Hebrews seems to have been included at least partly since it was believed to have been authored by Paul. Very few scholars believe this today. Thus, at least one of the chief reasons it was included in the canon turns out to be incorrect. The same might be said of the Pastorals (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) which many scholars now believe were written in Paul’s name posthumously. This can also be argued of 1 and 2 Peter. In terms of probability, I think it is more likely that 1st Peter could be connected to the apostle Peter through a secretary--but in my opinion, 2 Peter may be a late second century work that is dependent on the Gospel of Peter. Many modern scholars do not accept the traditional authorship of the Gospels as accurate either. I am not arguing for or against these positions. As Christians it seems that we must allow for the idea that some of the reasoning

the Church used to include certain texts in the canon appears incorrect. I am not saying these works do not belong in the Canon. I would say we have a reliable Canon but sometimes for reasons that were not originally sound. I also believe the Gospels represent apostolic teachings regardless of who wrote them. The Church also tends to think Matthew was the first Gospel written and originally in Hebrew. Most scholars now believe Matthew was literarily dependent on the Greek text of Mark. We can imagine God continuously working on all parties involved, giving us confidence the Church essentially gets the canon correct. This is where my faith in God comes into play. My trust is in my perfect and infallible Lord to leave us a reliable Bible that serves His intended purposes.

There is some uncertainty as to the **exact** extent of the Canon but the majority of it is generally fairly certain. Churches today cannot all simultaneously have a completely correct view of the canon's extent. But even here, within that diversity there is a very broad agreement on most of both the Old and New Testaments. All Christian groups tend to accept a 27 book New Testament. That is not in dispute so I don't worry so much if a single book that should have been in the canon did not make the cut or if a pseudonymous work or two slipped in, or if the canon has 66 or 73 books, because I trust God can work with any of these scenarios. I do believe the canon that current Christians use today, despite its diversity and some potential questions, *is good enough* to serve God's intended purposes.

[4] Translating the Bible

There are numerous translations of the Bible: KJV, NKJV, ESV, NLT, NIV, NAS, CSV, RSV, NRSV and the NAB just to name a few English ones I am aware of. These modern Bibles are all translated from their original languages by teams of scholars based on what other teams of scholars (textual critics) think the original autographs looked like. Things do get lost in translation and sometimes controversial interpretive decisions have to be made. Occasionally, a mistranslation can have a significant impact on Church history. A notable example in history occurs with St. Augustine who used the Latin translation of the Romans when formulating the doctrine of original sin. There is a notorious problem with the translation he used in regards to Romans 5:12. The accepted version today says that "death spread to all because **all have sinned**" but Augustine had "in whom" all have sinned and this led him to thinking we sinned with Adam and inherited his guilt as opposed to the consequence of death along with a privation of God's grace.

Another particularly embarrassing example of how translations can go awry is from modern times and it occurs in Romans 16:7. It is easy to miss but here Paul calls Junia (a female) an apostle, and a well esteemed one at that. As you can imagine, this is going to ruffle some patriarchal feathers. A female apostle is not consistent with the theological outlook of some complementarians who believe that a woman cannot be placed in such a role. In

their view the Bible could never say what most professional translators think it does since this would contradict how they interpret other Pauline passages that forbid women to teach or have authority over men. This has led to various attempts at reinterpreting the passage and delineates how theological commitments may sometimes take precedence over sober translation practices.

Those uneasy with this verse have tried two strategies to circumvent a woman apostle. The first was using the masculine form of their name and turning Junia (a female) into Ju'nias (a male). That has rightly been rejected by the vast majority of commentators and now by almost all modern translations. The second prong in the attack was to change Junia from being "well esteemed among the apostles" to "well esteemed *to* the apostles." In other words, Junia, a female, is not an apostle but was well regarded by them. This seems to be the favorite route complementarians take today. Compare the following 4 translations of Romans 16:7:

NRSV	NIV	ESV	RSV
Greet Andronicus and Junia ,* my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. * Or <i>Junias</i> ; other ancient authorities read <i>Julia</i>	Greet Andronicus and Junia , my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among * the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. * Or <i>are esteemed by</i> :	Greet Andronicus and Junia , my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me	Greet Androni'cus and Ju'nias , my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners; they are men of note among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.

The NRSV's main text translates the name as Junia (a woman) and an apostle. It adds in a footnote: that Junia might be Junias (male) and correctly references that a few ancient manuscripts have Julia (also female) instead of Junia. It should be noted that there are no ancient authorities for Junias. This translation is unheard of until the 13th century. The NIV translates the passage in the same way as the NRSV: Junia (a woman) is an outstanding apostle. It should be noted the 1978 and 1984 editions of the NIV had Ju'nias (male) but now render it as Junia (female) without a footnote meaning there is no doubt on the gender of the individual in question to that committee. The NIV includes a footnote very different from the NRSV, however. Instead of leaving the option for the male Ju'nias as the NRSV does, they include the alternate translation "esteemed by the apostles." The ESV which is unashamedly complementarian, correctly renders the name as the feminine Junia, but

translates the second half as: “well known to the apostles.” Finally, the RSV renders the two individuals as “among the apostles,” but translates the name as Ju’nias (a male).

It should be noted that the critical Greek edition of the New Testament, and the majority of modern Bibles translate this passage with the name Junia who is a well-regarded female apostle. This is the only known translation of this passage in the ancient Church by patristic scholars (who probably understood the nuance of the language best). All the evidence we have and ancient commentaries on scripture understood it this way. That Junia was Ju’nias is not found anywhere until the 13th century. The case serves as a cautionary tale, but I digress.

We know that Jesus was a Galilean Jew and though he may have picked up or learned some Greek, he spoke primarily in Aramaic. The Gospels were all written in Greek—a language removed from Jesus himself. We of course read them in English a language removed from Greek. We do not possess the exact words (*ipsissima verba*) of Jesus as reading parallel versions of the gospels overwhelmingly demonstrates. It is even debatable if we even have the exact voice. (*ipsissima vox*) of Jesus. Historical Jesus scholar Brant Pitre pursues:

“ . . . the *substantia verborum Jesu*—that is, the “substance of the words of Jesus.” . . . I am interested in what he said and did and what it might have meant in a first-century Jewish context. Hence, whenever I conclude that a particular saying or action is “historical,” I am not saying that Jesus said exactly these words (*ipsissima verba*), nor am I just saying the text “sounds exactly like Jesus” (*ipsissima vox*). Instead, I am claiming that the basic substance of the teaching or action can be reasonably understood as having originated with him. That is what I mean by historical—no more and no less.” – Jesus and Divine Christology

The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew (aka the Hebrew scriptures) and it was translated into Greek in a prominent work known as the Septuagint. We, of course, read it all in English. I do not think we have a single translation of the Bible that is without flaws and this would have begun when Jesus’s teachings were first being transcribed into Greek and used in different contexts by the Church. All translations are interpretive by their very nature. Even if the autographs were inerrant, even if the New Testament was copied without error, even if we had a perfect canon, we still would not have an inerrant or perfect translation at our disposal. It seems there are flawed humans at every link in the chain when it comes to how the Bible we read in our native tongues came to be.

It could be said that if God could inspire an inerrant autograph, he could inspire inerrant copies and to be frank, *better* translations. I would not use the phrase *inerrant translation*

because I feel one language may not be able to be perfectly transcribed into another language so I wouldn't expect God to inspire a perfect translation any more than I think he could create a round square. Despite this imperfection, we translate between languages well enough so that effective communication does happen and there are good translations and bad translations of ancient texts. Our modern Bibles are translated by educated professionals and though we are greatly in their debt, there is certainly room for improvement, and I am sure the translation committees themselves would point out plenty of instances where uncertainty abounds and their chosen translation is contentious. None of our modern translations have any real claim to being perfect and we are reading Jesus's words twice removed from their original language (Aramaic → Greek → English). I do not think we need to learn ancient Hebrew or Greek for the Bible to be valuable. Most of us will never know these languages but God is able to work through translations that sometimes get things wrong quite well. Our Scripture is sufficient as God is able to transcend our human imperfections.

[5] The NT use of the Septuagint

The Septuagint (or LXX) is the name for the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures beginning several hundred years before Christ. In later legends it is claimed 72 Jewish scholars (6 from each tribe) were involved in this process (Philo, Josephus, Letter of Aristeas, Augustine) with one later source (Babylonian Talmud) claiming that all 72 Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Scriptures independently and their finished works perfectly agreed word for word. In reality, it took centuries for the Septuagint to be completed and this there were several versions of it. The name Septuagint means "seventy" as does LXX in Roman numerals. With that aside out of the way, we can now turn to the New Testament.

When citing the Old Testament, New Testament authors, who naturally wrote in Greek to Greek speaking audiences, often quote a version of the Greek Septuagint --whether it was done laboriously from a physical copy in front of them or from memory--which is occasionally different from the Hebrew version. Either way, Biblical authors are occasionally quoting a translation of scripture that has disagreements with parts of the original Hebrew text. This opens up its own can of worms because we need to ask if both the Masoretic text (Hebrew version) and the Septuagint (Greek) are both inspired by God? Sometimes the point made by New Testament authors depends specifically on a Septuagint translation. Paul J. Achtemeier relays the following examples:

“An even more difficult problem is raised when a New Testament author quotes not from the Hebrew Old Testament but from the Greek translation of it (called the

Septuagint) and when the point of the New Testament author depends on something in the Greek translation which is not in the Hebrew original. For example, the point being made in Heb. 10:5-9 depends on the Septuagint reading of Ps. 40:6-8, which says: "A body you have prepared for me" rather than the Hebrew original, which reads: "you have given me an open ear." The same is true of the quotation of Ps. 16:10 in Acts 2:26-28. Whereas the Hebrew speaks of God keeping the faithful servant from the "pit," the Septuagint translation speaks of keeping the "Holy One" from "corruption," a change that lies at the heart of the point Peter is making in this sermon. The prophecy of Jesus' resurrection depends on the Septuagint translation, which is again different from the Hebrew original. When Paul quotes "Scripture" in Rom. 4:3, what he quotes is closer to the Septuagint than to the original Hebrew version of Gen. 15:6." -- *Biblical Inspiration*

The Greek Septuagint or the Hebrew (Masoretic) text? The Christian use of the Septuagint certainly does not invoke images of a slavish and exacting devotion to immutable and inerrant words of God. It would be anachronistic to assume ancient authors, writing in oral cultures before the printing press, would have the same standards for quoting sources as modern exegetes. Slight alterations of quoted material is a common enough practice in antiquity and often we cannot know if an author is quoting a physical text in front of them, making an allusion to a text or offering a specific quotation from memory.

If God is preventing all errors throughout the composition of scripture, we have to wonder why He is quoting a Septuagint mistranslation of the original Hebrew text that He inspired? Which version of scripture is inerrant here? Was it not the hypothetical Hebrew autograph? Or are we now extending inerrancy and inspiration to the various Greek translations of the Bible (that have differences themselves) known as the Septuagint? Is only the source being used by the New Testament author, who sometimes makes use of the Hebrew text but more frequently the Septuagint, the inerrant version? It seems unreasonable to say that we have two inerrant versions of the Old Testament that disagree with one another on some details. None of these changes appear very substantial as far as understanding the points the scriptural authors intend to teach but they do seriously challenge how one might understand inerrancy. Here again, a model where God is much more *suggestive* than *coercive* seems to be a better fit for the data.

[6] Interpreting the Bible:

Comedian Emo Philips once used the following joke:

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

Some sources suggest there are now over 40,000 different denominations within Christianity. That is staggering amount. Of course, just because people interpret the Bible differently, that does not make what it actually intends to teach wrong. That goes without saying. Yet it is quite to this reader that even if the Bible was completely inerrant, we still are left with the task of interpreting it. If you do not accept the authority of the Church this problem is greatly magnified/ Outside of statements such as the Nicene Creed, Christians disagree on a wide-array of issues. Below are some of the more significant ones:

- The extent of the Canon
- Arminianism vs Calvinism
- Baptizing infants
- Penal substitution, Christus victor or Satisfaction
- Once Saved Always Saved
- Cessation vs Continuation
- Preterism or Futurism
- Women in the ministry
- Premillennial, amillennial or postmillennial
- The real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist
- Sabbath: Saturday or Sunday
- Hell, Annihilationism or Universal Salvation
- How to Interpret Genesis 1-11
- What to do with Divine violence in the Bible

- Is slavery ethical? (very significant in the past)
- Complementarianism vs Egalitarianism

To this could be added thousands of different interpretations of various Biblical passages. Is God the author of confusion? Is our inerrant scripture unclear or are we simply bad at interpreting it? I reiterate what I said up above: God moved over these ancient authors and compelled them to write and put ideas on their hearts. But more importantly, the Holy Spirit moves over us today when we read the Bible in faith. I don't think either end of that process is inerrant, and I think the Holy Spirit was *suggestive*, not *coercive*." Any advocate of inerrancy could claim the Bible is inerrant and we are just really bad at interpreting it. It can be claimed that an inerrant text we misinterpret is better than a text prone to errors that we misinterpret. But I think the alarming diversity within Christianity shows how unimportant the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy actually is. Every link in the Biblical chain we can observe and evaluate shows God not overriding human freedom to restrict all errors and that includes interpretation.

- Humans compose the Biblical works
- 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)

There is an unavoidable and fallible human hand at every step of the Bible's composition. I struggle to see why I should assume anything different about the ancient Biblical authors as they first dipped their reed pens into soot, gum, and water and inscribed their thoughts onto papyrus.

[7] God's Modus Operandi

I think the understanding of inspiration I am advocating is also consistent with how God is seen to work throughout scripture. This leads us to our next point which is very significant since it models how God actually works through humans. Scripture consistently portrays God as employing imperfect humans to do His bidding. Over and over again these humans screw up, sometimes in spectacular fashion. But in the end, God's will is accomplished *despite their shortcomings*. Some examples will illustrate this point:

- **Abraham** is twice seen using deception (Gen. 12:10–20; 20:1–18), he sometimes hesitates at God's promises (Gen 17:17-18) and was going to abandon his concubine and son to death in the desert before God stepped in (Gen 21:8-21). Yet, Abraham also showed great faith and was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac at God's

request. Abraham was not perfect, yet he was good enough for God to use to be the father of many nations.

- **Moses** repeatedly complained about God's calling (Ex 3-4), instead of waiting on the Lord's deliverance, he murdered an Egyptian and had to flee (Ex 2) and after not trusting the Lord and striking the rock (Num. 20:10-12), he never made it to the land of milk and honey. We all know how important Moses was to God's plans.
- **Jacob** deceived his father and manipulated his brother Esau into giving him his birthright (Gen. 27). In the end, God renamed him Israel and the twelve tribes of Israel stem from his family.
- **Jonah** ran from God and we all know where that ultimately landed him. He was resistive and reluctant and hardly redeemed at the end of the book where we find him still very much rebelling against God's mercy. Yet through Jonah's malcontent and half-hearted obedience, the entire pagan city of Ninevah repented and was spared God's destruction (Jonah 3:5-10).
- **David** is described as "a man after God's own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14) much to my dismay. He committed adultery with a woman and in order to take her for himself, he essentially had her husband sent to the frontline in battle so he would die. Somehow, Moses striking a rock seems mild in comparison. Yet it is the royal line of David that leads to Jesus.
- **The Disciples** were handpicked by Jesus. Yet they fall asleep on the job, repeatedly misunderstand His teachings, argue over who among them is the greatest and when he is arrested, they are found to be deserters. Peter, the chief apostle, denied Him three times and Judas betrayed Him to his death.

None of these Biblical figures—even the righteous ones with faith--were perfect but they were sufficient to serve the purpose for which God intended them. If God could use such imperfect humans to accomplish his will, to establish a lasting covenant, to deliver His Laws, to build the nation of Israel and to finally build His Church, why on earth could He not use imperfect scripture? It would be obnoxiously belittling to God to suggest otherwise. The important part for me is that God did not seem to force any or most of these individuals to do what He wanted them to and some of them went in the opposite direction for a time. But in the end, God's will is done. In Scripture God operates through imperfect humans. This doesn't prove scripture has material imperfections, but it certainly calls into question the necessity and justification for the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy. It also reinforces the dominant theme we have seen throughout this document: God is more suggestive than coercive in His dealings with humanity.

[8] Science and Bible

The Bible does not appear to possess any supernatural knowledge when it comes to science. Jacob describes a dream about climbing a ladder to heaven (Gen 28), the same place the tower of Babel was apparently going to reach (Gen 11). This reflects the three-tiered cosmos of the time. There seems to be a bit of incorrect scientific background knowledge scattered throughout the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Parts of the Bible refer to the four corners of the earth (Is. 11:12), think thoughts come from our kidneys (Psalm 16:7), believe there is a solid firmament or metal dome in the sky (Gen 1:6, Job 37:18), identify the moon as a light like the sun (Gen 1:16), proclaim the earth is immutable and does not move (1 Chron 16:30, Ps 93:1, 96:10, 104:5; Is 45:8), consider the earth flat (Mt 4:8, Dan 4:10-11), thinks stars are small and close enough to the earth they can fall from the sky and land on it (Rev 6:13-16, 8:10; Mt 2:10, 24:29; Dan 8:10), rain and snow are kept in heavenly storehouses (Job 38:22, Ps 135:7), heaven and hell/Sheol are up and down in the earth (Isaiah 66:1, Psalm 33:14, Mt 12:40, Eph 4:9). These examples could be multiplied. We can certainly argue this is background knowledge and not what the Bible intends to teach and I am okay with that. The Bible is not a scientific textbook. But what if the background knowledge the Bible is using to teach something is not scientific, but historical, theological or moral? Ancient authors didn't only possess incorrect background knowledge or mistaken worldviews as it pertains to science. For those of us who think God accommodated His message, there is no reason to arbitrarily limit that accommodation to modern scientific issues. Thus, we can find errors of all sorts in scripture. Some might not call these strict errors since they are not what the Bible intends to teach. Many interpreters extend inerrancy only to what the Bible intends to teach or what it affirms. Nonetheless, there are going to be material falsehoods in the text and distinguishing them from what the Bible only affirms or intends to teach can be difficult at times.

Conclusion

We know that God's strength is made perfect in human weakness. It seems this extends to the Biblical authors. Inerrancy advocates want us to believe God inspired inerrant autographs that were imperfectly copied, imperfectly canonized, imperfectly reconstructed, imperfectly translated and imperfectly interpreted. It very much seems like the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy is irrelevant or even meaningless. No one has that perfect, heavenly book on their shelf. We all have a Bible that is *good enough* or sufficient to serve God's purposes. My trust is not in a book that was written by humans, copied by humans, canonized by humans, textually reconstructed by humans, translated by humans and finally, interpreted by humans. Instead, my faith and trust are in the God I believe moved

over and inspired those ancient authors to write, my faith is in the Holy Spirit Jesus promised would guide the Church. The infallibility of Scripture is much more a direct statement about trust and faith in God than it is about belief in the Bible.