

ARE THERE MISTAKES IN THE BIBLE?

Bible students throughout the centuries have accepted the Scriptures as God's written word of truth, and Seventh-day Adventists today join those who continue to uphold God's word. Their Fundamental Belief number one states that "the Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God's acts in history."¹ While Seventh-day Adventists support the divine authority and complete reliability of the Bible, they do not claim absolute perfection for the Bible because of their understanding of the nature of inspiration.

Especially since the Enlightenment in the seventeenth century, many biblical scholars have claimed that the Bible contains a variety of mistakes – doctrinal errors, scientific mistakes, contradictions, discrepancies in names and numbers, as well as imprecise language. Before we address these claims we need to understand the nature of Scripture.

Scripture is of divine origin – According to the self-testimony of Scripture, the entire Bible is indeed God-breathed or God-inspired. In the Old Testament, the writers, at times, claim to be recording what the Lord said to them, e.g., "Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying . . ." (Exod 25:1) or "The word of the Lord came to me, saying . . ." (Ezek 32:1). David said, "The Spirit of the Lord spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue" (2 Sam 23:2). It has been estimated that there are about twenty-six hundred such claims in the Old Testament.

The New Testament confirms the divine inspiration of the Old Testament. Paul wrote, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim 3:16). And Peter stated that "prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:21). The same is true, of course, of the New Testament. Although the apostles do not claim inspiration as frequently as did the Old Testament writers, it is clear that they did regard their messages as given by divine authority. Paul, for example, wrote, "These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches" (1 Cor 2:13), and "When you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God" (1 Thess 2:13).

Paul also acknowledged the inspiration of other parts of the New Testament. In 1 Timothy 5:18, he quotes from both Testaments as Scripture, “For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages.’” The first part of the text is a quote from Deuteronomy 25:4 and the second from Luke 10:7. Similarly, Peter refers to the writings of Paul as Scripture when he says that in Paul’s epistles “are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction as they do also the rest of the Scriptures” (2 Pet 3:15, 16). In summary, the Bible is clearly of divine origin.

The human element in Scripture – While Scripture was given by divine inspiration, the writers of the biblical books were not simply God’s pens but his penmen, i.e., they wrote the sixty-six books in their own characteristic style, language, and thought form under the guidance of the Holy

The word “pseudepigraphal” refers to those ancient Jewish writings not in the Old Testament canon or in the apocrypha whose authorship is falsely ascribed to a famous person, e.g., Enoch, Abraham, Ezra, etc.

Spirit. All the books of the Bible, therefore, bear the hallmarks of human authorship. Many books carry the name of the author, and the multitude of historical references and literary links with the times and backgrounds in which these books were written

“give the Bible a very human face.”² Some books, like Kings, Chronicles, and the Gospel of Luke provide evidence of historical research (1 Kgs 22:39, 45; 1 Chron 29:29; Luke 1:1-4); some biblical writers even quoted pagan authors (Acts 17:28) while at least Jude seems to refer to a pseudepigraphal work (Jude 14, 15). Following are some elements of this “human face”:

Language – In dealing with biblical statements we need to remember that the Bible writers frequently used non-technical, ordinary, everyday language to describe things. For example, they spoke of sunrise (Num 2:3; Josh 19:12) and sunset (Deut 11:30; Dan 6:14), i.e., they used the language of appearance rather than scientific language. Furthermore, one must not confuse a social convention with a scientific affirmation. The need for technical precision varies according to the situation in which a statement is made. Therefore imprecision cannot be equated with untruthfulness.³

Literary devices – The Bible writers also used different literary devices, such as poetry, parables, metaphors, symbols, etc. Many biblical books, particularly in the OT, are historical narratives; others contain legal texts,

wisdom sayings, or apocalyptic prophecies. Because different types of literary material require slightly different methods of interpretation, to distinguish these different literary devices in Scripture helps to avoid wrong interpretations.

Ancient customs – Many biblical passages reflect ancient customs, a knowledge of which can be very helpful in interpreting a text. For example, in ancient times it was common to give the same person different names (Edom/Esau; Gideon/Jerubbaal), and different methods were used to count the reigns of kings.⁴

The transmission of biblical manuscript – It is a well known fact that all the biblical autographs, i.e., the original manuscripts of the biblical authors, have been lost. Although the Jews were very careful in copying biblical manuscripts, some minor mistakes have crept into the text in the course of transmitting and copying the Bible manuscripts.⁵ Yet, these mistakes are so insignificant that not one honest soul need stumble or get lost over them (1SM 16). “The Lord has preserved this Holy Book,” says Ellen White, “by His own miraculous power in its present shape” (1SM 15). Indeed, the Bible is the best transmitted and best preserved document of antiquity. No other ancient book has been so well preserved as the Bible, with some copies going back to just a few years after the original was written.

In contrast to the verbal inspiration theory, Seventh-day Adventists generally believe in thought inspiration. However, this does not mean that words were not important. Many times the prophets were also given the very words to write. “The Holy Spirit’s guidance did not overrule the thinking and the writing process of biblical writers but supervised the process of writing in order to maximize clarity of the ideas and to prevent, if necessary, the distortion of revelation, or changing divine truth into a lie” (F. Canale “Revelation and Inspiration” in *Understanding Scripture*, ed. G. W. Reid [Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2006], 65).

Nevertheless, there are a number of differences or discrepancies in the extant Hebrew and Greek texts upon which our Bible translations are based. For example, the Old Testament contains a number of numerical discrepancies in referring to the same events or things in the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. In 2 Samuel 8:4, David is said to have taken

700 horsemen from Hadadezer while in 1 Chronicles 18:3, 4 the figure is given as 7000.⁶ According to 1 Kings 4:26, Solomon had 40,000 stalls for horses, but, in 2 Chronicles 9:25, he had only 4000 stalls. In Matthew 27:54, the centurion says, “Truly, this was the Son of God.” In Luke 23:47, however, the centurion is quoted as saying, “Truly, this man was righteous.”⁷ In the book of Acts, Stephen told the Jews that Abraham bought the cave of Machpelah for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem (Acts 7:16). According to the book of Genesis, however, Abraham bought the cave from Ephron the Hittite (Gen 23:8), and it was Jacob who bought his plot of land from the sons of Hamor in Shechem (Gen 33:19).⁸ Some of these discrepancies may have perfectly good explanations; others may be due to copyists’ mistakes or human frailties. Ellen White wrote: “Some

“When reading Scripture we should not expect to find perfect accuracy. The imperfections and inaccuracies we do find there serve us as evidences of its historicity” (F. Canale, *The Cognitive Principle of Christian Theology* [Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, Lithotech, 2005], 464).

look to us gravely and say, ‘Don’t you think there might have been some mistake in the copyist or in the translators?’ This is all probable . . . All the mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth” (1SM 16). Do such minor discrepancies destroy our confidence in the Bible? No,

unless we insist on a verbal inspiration of Scripture, which claims that “all the words and all the verbal relationships are inspired by God.”⁹ As Seventh-day Adventists we do not hold this view. “It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man’s words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts” (1SM 21). Ellen White also stated that God “by His Holy Spirit, qualified men and enabled them to do His work. He guided the mind in the selection of what to speak and what to write” (1SM 26; GC v-vi; cf. also 1SM 36, 37; 3SM 51, 52). Nevertheless, we cannot exclude the possibility of discrepancies or a lack of precision in minor details in the text – details that could be left out without changing the overall reliability of the historical records or the veracity of the theological message.

The historical reliability of Scripture – Even when we allow for the

possibility of discrepancies, this does not mean that we cannot trust the Bible when it speaks about historical events or scientific facts. The presence of discrepancies in the Bible does not give license to call into question the historicity of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the patriarchal stories, or the events related in the Prophets and in the Gospels. The Christian faith is a historical faith in the sense that it essentially depends upon what did, in fact, happen (cf. 1 Cor 15:12-22). The historical aspects of Scripture, therefore, cannot be separated from their theological content. In fact, “to remove the historical from the concerns of Scripture is to remove what demonstrates the faithfulness of God,”¹⁰ because God acts in history. From the New Testament we know that Jesus Christ and the Apostles accepted as true the historical events recorded in the Old Testament (Matt 19:4, 5; 24:37; Acts 24:14; Rom 15:4), because historical events, such as Creation, the Flood, and the Exodus, are part of the salvation history revealed in Scripture.

The infallibility of Scripture – In spite of imperfections and discrepancies in the Bible, Seventh-day Adventists believe that “the Holy Scriptures are the *infallible revelation of [God’s] will*.”¹¹ But what do we mean by this statement?

Within Christianity, the Eastern Orthodox Church believes that the first seven general councils of the church were infallible; Roman Catholics teach that the pope is infallible when he speaks *ex cathedra*; and conservative Protestants accept Scripture as infallible in matters of faith and practice though some take the belief in the infallibility of Scripture further by saying that the original autographs of the Bible must have been completely inerrant in all matters, whether they referred to history, chronology or science, etc.

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God, through the prophetic gift, made His truth and will known to humanity without error. “God’s Word is full of precious promises and helpful counsel. It is infallible; for God cannot err” (FLB 27). Infallibility, however, does not mean the Gospel writers cannot differ in the way they recount the words and works of Jesus. Just as witnesses in a court of law will describe

the same event somewhat differently, so in the Gospels we have sometimes slightly different accounts of the same events. Neither does infallibility mean that the authors of the biblical books were infallible or perfectly understood everything they wrote; nor does it mean they could not use historical or general information in recording God's messages. Yet, despite all the possible discrepancies found in Scripture, the Bible is still the Word of God.

Ellen White and the trustworthiness of Scripture – Ellen White repeatedly stated that the Word of God is “an unerring counselor, and infallible guide” (FE 100) and an “unerring standard” (MH 462). Does this mean she believed the Bible to be inerrant? While Ellen White strongly defended the infallibility of the Bible, she never used the words inerrant or inerrancy. “The Bible,” she said, “is not given to us in grand superhuman language. Jesus in order to reach man where he is took humanity. The Bible must be given in the language of men. Everything that is human is imperfect. Different meanings are expressed by the same word; there is not one word for each distinct idea” (1SM 20). Yet, she claimed that the Bible is, nevertheless, characterized by a “simple beauty of language” and an “unerring truthfulness” (YI, May 7, 1884, cf. LHU 127). Ellen White did not deify Scripture: to her God alone is infallible (Letter 10, 1895, in 1SM 37). But she also firmly believed that “His word is true” (Letter 10, 1895 in 1SM 37) and “reliable” (ST, Oct 1, 1894).

How to Deal with Difficult Texts

What do we do when we come across apparent mistakes in the Bible? The biblical writers themselves freely admit that there are in Scripture “some things hard to be understood” (2 Pet 3:16, KJV), and, as we indicated above, some discrepancies do exist in the Old and New Testaments. The challenges of such difficult passages in the Bible have been recognized by serious students throughout history. Although many discrepancies and contradictions disappear under open-minded scrutiny, some problems remain. To frankly admit those difficulties as unanswered questions is something quite different, however, from claiming that Scripture has definitely erred. The latter is a value judgment on Scripture while the former shows an awareness of the limitations of our human understanding and acknowledges that humans are not omniscient but dependent upon further information and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit in understanding spiritual things (cf. 1 Cor 1: 18-20; 2: 12-14).

Identifying difficulties – In dealing with difficulties in Scripture we must remember, that many so-called mistakes are not the result of God’s revelation but are the result of the misinterpretation of human beings. It has been pointed out that “many contradictory opinions in regard to what the Bible teaches do not arise from any obscurity in the book itself, but from blindness and prejudice on the part of interpreters. Men ignore the plain statements of the Bible to follow their own perverted reason” (RH Jan 27, 1885). Thus, often the problem is not with the biblical text but rather with the interpreter.

Some apparent mistakes in some versions of the Bible may be due to a wrong, or misleading, translation of the original words. Ideally one should have a knowledge of the biblical languages in order to be able to study the Bible in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Because this ideal is generally not the case, one should compare several good translations before drawing any conclusions. Extended paraphrases such as *The Clear Word* or *The Message*, are not translations and should not be used in Bible Study; they may, however, be useful for devotional reading.

Integrity – When we deal with a difficult passage in Scripture we do well to approach it in perfect honesty. God is “*pleased with integrity*” (1 Chron 19:17, NIV). This preference implies, first of all, that we acknowledge a difficulty and do not try to obscure or evade it. An honest person has an open mindset that is receptive toward the message and the content of what is being studied. Furthermore, honesty includes the willingness to use proper methods of investigation. To explain and understand the word of God properly we cannot use methods with secular presuppositions that are based on atheistic premises running counter to God’s Word.

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Deal with difficulties prayerfully – Prayer is no substitute for hard work and thorough study. However, in prayer we confess that we are dependent upon God to understand His Word. It is an expression of humility to acknowledge that God and His Word are greater than our human reason and greater than our current understanding. On our knees we can ask for the leading of the Holy Spirit and gain a new perspective of the biblical text that we would not have if we placed ourselves above the Word of God.

Explain Scripture with Scripture – With God as the ultimate author of Scripture, we can assume a fundamental unity among its various parts.

That assumption is to say that to deal with challenging aspects of Scripture we need to deal with all difficulties scripturally. The best solution to Bible

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difficulties is still found in the Bible itself. There is no better explanation than explaining Scripture with Scripture. This means that we have to compare Scripture with Scripture, taking into consideration the biblical context and moving from the clear statements of the Bible to those that are less

clear. In other words, we shed light from the clear passages of Scripture on those statements that are more difficult to understand.

Be patient – While all of the aspects mentioned above can help in dealing with any difficulty in Scripture with confidence, this method will not always produce an easy or swift solution. We have to be determined that, no matter how much time and study and hard thinking it may require, we will patiently work on finding a solution. At the same time, as we wrestle with difficulties in Scripture, we need to focus on the main points and not get lost in the difficulties. And if some problems persistently defy even our hardest efforts to solve them, we should not get discouraged. It is interesting to note that one characteristic of the faithful believers at the end of history is to live patiently (Rev 14:12). Part of our perseverance is to be able to live with open questions, yet to be faithful to God’s Word. For God’s Word has proved to be reliable and trustworthy.

Summary – Are there mistakes in the Bible? If by mistake we mean that Scripture teaches error or is fallible and historically unreliable, the answer is “No!” The Bible is God’s infallible revelation of His truth and will. Many so-called “problems” in the Bible often are not with the biblical text but rather with the interpreter. Furthermore, particularly since the rise of biblical criticism, the historical reliability of the Bible has often been confirmed by new discoveries in archaeology and other sciences. The suggestion that the Bible contains mistakes can easily be misunderstood to mean that God makes mistakes or that He has placed them there, but this is not the case. The discrepancies and imperfections in Scripture are due to human frailties.

Without question, we do find challenging statements and even discrepancies in the Bible. But none of these discrepancies negatively affects the teaching or the historical reliability of Scripture. We can have full confi-

dence that the Bible we have today is God's truth making every willing man and woman wise unto salvation.

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References

¹"Fundamental Beliefs," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook 2007* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2007), 5.

²Peter M. van Bemmelen, "Revelation and Inspiration," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 35. See also the box on page 36.

³Cf. Noel Weeks, *The Sufficiency of Scripture* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Trust, 1988), 32.

⁴For more than two thousand years Hebrew chronology has been a serious problem for Old Testament scholars. The numbers of one kingdom could not be made to agree with the numbers of the other. After many years of painstaking research into these apparently hopeless contradictions, the Adventist scholar Edwin R. Thiele succeeded in solving this problem in his widely recognized and well accepted book *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, third ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983).

⁵Cf. Paul D. Wenger, *A Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

⁶For an explanation of this problem see Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 184.

⁷On this question see the helpful discussion in Archer, 346-356.

⁸For possible explanations see Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Peter H. Davids, F. F. Bruce, and Manfred T. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 521, 522, and Archer, 379-381.

⁹Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 1139.

¹⁰Weeks, 50.

¹¹Fundamental Belief No. 1, emphasis added.

