

Voices: Does the Bible have mistakes?

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If you're a traditional Christian, especially an evangelical, your answer to the question in the title is probably, "Absolutely not!" After all, God inspired the Bible, and God doesn't make mistakes. Moreover, how could we trust a set of Scriptures riddled with errors?

The above point is fair. However, there remains a significant question: What counts as a mistake?

God did inspire the Bible, but he inspired it using human languages and literary forms. Language and literature are not the same from culture to culture and have changed dramatically over the past several thousand years, and standards of "error" have changed with them.

Anachronistic standards

I'm not arguing that truth itself is changing or unstable. Rather, I'm suggesting we should understand Scripture on its own terms, rather than assume our own standards are the norm.

Even the (in)famously conservative [Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy](#) states, "We deny that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose" (Article XIII). The document proceeds to list a variety of biblical phenomena that might *appear* to be "errors" but should not be considered as such.

Some might argue all these "exceptions" cause inerrancy to "die the death of a thousand qualifications." But regardless of how one feels about the

Chicago Statement or “inerrancy” in general, those of us who claim the Bible is completely true and trustworthy still must explain precisely what we mean.

We should not “evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose.” But what does that look like? How do we apply this principle in practice? I will offer three examples.

Astronomical nonsense?

Joshua 10 records a famous miracle story wherein the Israelites are fighting the Amorites and Joshua calls on God for help. God works a miracle, causing the sun to stop in the sky (10:13) and giving the Israelites more daylight to defeat the Amorites.

The issue here is Scripture describes the sun as stopping in the middle of the sky. Why is this a problem? Well, virtually all people living more than 3,000 years ago believed the sun revolves around the earth. We have no evidence the Israelites knew otherwise, and the language of Joshua 10:13 reflects that scientifically inaccurate view.

So, does this make Joshua 10:13 wrong? Well, if Joshua 10 was an astronomy research paper, it would. But Joshua 10 is a story of God fighting alongside his people, told from the perspective of the people involved. Trying to get an astronomy lesson from Joshua is completely “alien to its usage or purpose.” Why would God need to teach his people heliocentricity, anyway?

Viewing Joshua 10 through the lens of modern astronomy doesn’t substantially undermine it in any way. If you confronted the author of Joshua with modern astronomical science, he instead might have written the text, “God stopped the Earth turning on its axis,” but that’s it. However, he also might have considered you an irritating pedant.

Trouble at the temple?

The differences between the four Gospels are well-documented, and one of the most famous is Jesus' attack on the Jerusalem temple. Matthew, Mark and Luke say this event happened near the end of Jesus' ministry. John, however, records it happening near the beginning.

The apparent contradiction is obvious. Some have tried to solve this problem by claiming Jesus cleansed the temple twice. But this "fixes" the contradiction by positing a scenario *none* of the four Gospels say happened. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all say only once that Jesus cleansed the temple.

However, the study of ancient Greek and Roman [biographies](#) reveals it was very common for biographers to recount events out of chronological order. Instead, they would order events according to their significance or according to a thematic scheme. This was standard practice and was not considered deceptive, misleading or inaccurate.

John places the story of the temple cleansing at the beginning of his Gospel to underscore an important [thematic point](#) about Jesus' relationship with the temple, not to present a precise chronology that contradicts the other Gospels. This principle applies to many other differences between the Gospels, as well.

Scripture correcting Scripture?

Another area rife for confusion and dispute about the truthfulness of the Bible is the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. There are many places where it appears the New Testament "fixes," alters or outright contradicts the Old. If the Old Testament is inspired, true and trustworthy, why would the New Testament do such a thing?

One example of such “correction” is in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also” (Matthew 5:38-39).

Jesus is referring to a teaching found in multiple Old Testament passages (Exodus 21:23-25; Deuteronomy 19:21), and he appears to be contradicting it. But is he? These laws originally served not to endorse vengeance, but to *restrain* it. Vigilantism was outlawed, and criminals could only receive a punishment proportional to their crime.

Jesus isn’t contradicting the Old Testament; he is fulfilling it (Matthew 5:17). These laws restricted vengeance, and Jesus—who as God gave the laws in the first place—now is taking them to their logical conclusion. We must re-interpret Old Testament passages like these in light of the New Covenant in Christ, but that doesn’t mean these passages are or were “wrong.” It’s more complicated than that.

The Bible is not a “flat” document consisting solely of timeless abstract propositions and rules, nor is it a modern document. It consists of various genres, addresses different contexts, and follows a narrative arc. All these realities should lead us to slow down and operate with careful nuance when talking about “mistakes” in the Bible.

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