

The Reliability and Inspiration of the Old Testament

by

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Introduction

Alleged discrepancies within the Old Testament pose a problem for Christians. Suppose there are legitimate discrepancies within the text. In that case, the believer must either reconcile the differences or conclude that there is a chance, however minor, that the same errors can manifest within books of the Bible, possibly with more doctrinal. This paper will examine the Old Testament Scriptures' inspiration and reliability, addressing some of the alleged ethical, historical, and numerical discrepancies to help build up the Christian's confidence toward the Old Testament.

Defining Inspiration

The first topic that will be addressed is what is meant when theologians speak of inspiration. Inspiration can best be defined as "that extraordinary or supernatural divine influence vouchsafed to those who wrote the Holy Scriptures, rendering their writings infallible."¹ In Mark 12:36, Jesus says, "David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared..."² This is an example of what scholars mean when they refer to inspiration, that is, God speaking through men.

Jesus held the view that, while David spoke, it was God speaking through him. Theologians often use the word *theopneustos* to describe what is meant by inspiration. *Theopneustos* is a transliteration of the Greek word θεοπνευστος,

¹ M. G. Easton, "Inspiration," *Easton's Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893).

² All Scripture citations in this work are taken from The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001) unless otherwise noted.

meaning “*God-breathed*”³ Inspiration is exactly that, a belief that the Bible has been breathed-out by God through human writers. Stephen Yuille summarizes inspiration well,

In short, the Holy Spirit so directed the human writers that the finished product was precisely what He intended. At times, revelation and inspiration were joined; the Holy Spirit revealed truths which were communicated in words which He inspired. At other times, revelation and inspiration were separated; the authors simply wrote about things they already understood or witnessed (e.g., Luke 1:2). Either way, the authors of Scripture expressed the truth in words which were inspired by the Holy Spirit.⁴

Inspiration does not necessitate that the authors of Scripture be puppets in the hand of God, forgoing their tendenz. Rather, God allows men to keep their personalities and affections as they write while also guiding them in such a way as to make their work inerrant and inspired. The Bible, in its essence, is a theanthropic document, one that is both human and divine.

The core of the argument for the inspiration of the Bible comes from Scripture itself. Many argue that this constitutes circular reasoning, and in one sense, it does. Any discussion about ultimate truth, or ultimate authority, necessitates our reliance, in faith, upon the Scripture’s self-testimony. Robert Gonzales states that “If the Scripture is God’s Word ... If God is the Ultimate Definer of reality and morality... Then Scripture’s self-testimony is the most important witness and is the sieve through which all other truth claims must be sifted.”⁵

³ James Strong, “2315,” *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Abingdon Press, 1890).

⁴ Stephen Yuille, “What Does the Inspiration of Scripture Mean?” *The Gospel Coalition*, September 4, 2018. <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-does-the-inspiration-of-scripture-mean/>

⁵ Robert Gonzales, “The Importance and Inspiration of the Old Testament Lecture 1” (video lecture, Reformed Baptist Seminary) Accessed January 13, 2021. <https://rbs.populiweb.com/router/courseofferings/9894379/lessons/10011715/show>

The Bible's Self-Attestation of its Inspiration

Of primary importance to the Christian must first be the New Testament's attestation to the Old Testament's inspiration. Jesus' view of the inspiration of the authors of Scripture is clear. Jesus viewed David's speaking as being directed by the Holy Spirit (Mark 12:36). Peter also attests specifically to David's inspiration by God. In Acts 1:16, he states that the "Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David..." Beyond just references to David's writings being led by the Holy Spirit, there are also accounts of the writings of Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Moses being specifically mentioned as being spoken by God (cf. Rom 9:17; Matt 19:4-5; Acts 28:25-26; Matt 22:31-32; John 10:34-36).⁶

Although not the primary reason for our acceptance of the Old Testament Scriptures, it helps to determine if the authors and prophets believed that God inspired their words. The use of the phrase "says the Lord" and other wordings of this phrase in various books presents the most compelling evidence of the Scripture's view of its inspiration. This exact phrasing occurs 505 times in the Old Testament. Such heavy usage shows the confidence of the prophets that they spoke the words of God.⁷

David in 2 Samuel 23 also makes clear his view on the subject, stating, "The spirit of Yahweh speaks through me, and his word is upon my tongue."

Matthew Henry notes,

The Spirit of the Lord, the God of Israel, and the Rock of Israel, which some think is an intimation of the Trinity of persons in the Godhead – the Father the God of

⁶ Stephen Yuille, "What Does the Inspiration of Scripture Mean?" The Gospel Coalition, September 4, 2018. <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-does-the-inspiration-of-scripture-mean/>

⁷ The books that use this phrase are Exodus, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

Israel, the Son the Rock of Israel, and the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son, who spoke by the prophets, and particularly by David, and whose word was not only in his heart, but in his tongue for the benefit of others. David here avows his divine inspiration, that in his psalms, and in this composition, The Spirit of God spoke by him. He, and other holy men, spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.⁸

While much more can be said on the subject, it is clear that the Old Testament authors believed that they were speaking and writing God's inspired words.

The Reliability of the Old Testament

While most Christians acknowledge that God has inspired the autographs, many doubt the reliability of the Bibles that exist today. Often cited are both perceived discrepancies within the text and the process by which the Scriptures have been copied and translated.

The Scriptures, though they have a divine origin, were given via the means of men.⁹ The requirement that God's words be accurately preserved through history mandate the text's writing and not simply reliance upon spoken tradition.¹⁰ The parchment and papyrus on which Scripture was written easily degraded over time, while the stone on which some of the law was written is prone to breaking.¹¹ The frailty of materials necessitated a process by which the Scriptures could be copied. Thus, early scribes and priests were given charge

⁸ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 476.

⁹ Audibly (Gen 3:8; Exod 3:4-6; Exod 20:1-22; Acts 9:3-7.), Written (10 Commandments), Dreams and Visions (Gen 28:12-13; 2 Chron 18:18; Dan 7:9; Isa 6.)

¹⁰ While oral tradition was often used to communicate God's words widely, it was far more susceptible to error, thus the necessity of the Christian to use the more accurately transmitted method of writing as the authoritative source for doctrine.

¹¹ Gonzales, "Composition and Transmission" (ET 310 Introduction to the Old Testament Lecture for Reformed Baptist Seminary, 2020), 172-173, Accessed January 11, 2021. <https://rbs.populiweb.com>

over the accurate and methodical copying of the Scriptures to preserve them for future generations.

Proper understanding of the alleged discrepancies within the Old Testament requires foundational knowledge and confidence in the process by which the text has been transmitted. What will be shown next is that the lengths the copyists used to ensure the proper and accurate transmission of the Old Testament go far beyond what has been used for any other piece of text in history.

Copyist's Character, Errors, and Methodologies

The Scribes of the Old Testament era were devoted to ensuring the accurate transmission of the Scriptures. The Israelite scribes knew that the source of their culture, religion, and government, was the Old Testament, and as such, treated it with utmost care.¹² Beyond the material value to them, they also viewed the Old Testament as being given by God, which caused them to take the task of perfect transcribing beyond that of a layperson. Being so heavily involved in Scripture, Scribes soon rose to prominence, becoming authorities on theological matters.¹³ Although the scribes were highly trained, errors and alterations still crept their way into the copied manuscripts. When copyist errors

¹² Scott Manning, "Process of Copying the Old Testament by Jewish Scribes," *Scott Manning*, March 17, 2007. <https://scottmanning.com/content/process-of-copying-the-old-testament-by-jewish-scribes/>; This care even extended beyond just the accuracy of the copied text to the care that was shown even in the material on which the copyist could write on, the ink that could be used, and other ritualistic methods of ensuring that the copy was treated as holy.

¹³ Peter Tan-Gatue, "Scribe," *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016); This rise to prominence shows how much the Israelite people valued the Scriptures. The task of copying was of such high regard that the office itself became esteemed.

appear within ancient manuscripts, they fall under three major categories: Omission, Addition, and Transposition.¹⁴

Errors of omission tend to be caused by the human eye losing track of the scribe's position in the text. For example, homearchy is the accidental skipping of a section of text because both lines start with the same phrasing.¹⁵ Errors of addition are caused by the human brain wandering during the copying process. For example, Dittography is when the scribe repeats a sequence of words or phrases, usually when the text has repetitive elements.¹⁶ Transposition errors contain the accidental reversing of words, phrases, and letters. This error type is far more common in ancient Hebrew manuscripts because of its similar-looking letters and the parchment available for copying.¹⁷

These errors are common even in modern times since they are mistakes that are prone to human beings. Due to the importance of copying the Scriptures, the scribes used various marking methods to identify and correct these mistakes. The first method developed was that of added consonants to further elaborate on a word's intended pronunciation.¹⁸

When errors occurred in the copied work, the scribes would use marginal notes to indicate where an error was located and its correction. This method of correction is known as a gloss. Marginal notes were also used to explain difficult

¹⁴ Allan Mitchell, "Scribal Error," *University of Alberta*, December 2, 1998. <https://sites.ualberta.ca/~sreimer/ms-course/course/scbl-err.htm>

¹⁵ Ariela Housman, "A Short Guide to Scribal Errors," *Greek Calligraphy*, August 1, 2016. <https://geekcalligraphy.com/blog/2016/7/4/a-short-guide-to-scribal-errors>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Mitchell, "Scribal Error"

¹⁸ Gonzales, "Composition and Transmission," 187

wording, phrasing, or history that may confuse the reader. These marginal notes occasionally caused difficulty for later scribes who had to differentiate between error correction and commentary, requiring the council from other manuscript copies.¹⁹

Particularly helpful in understanding the seriousness of the scribes to ensure the copied text's accuracy is a discussion of the Masorah Finalis. The Masorah Finalis was a translation method developed by the Masoretes specifically for the Old Testament's accurate copying. It contained rules for translating the text and methods of tracking the accuracy of the copyist's work. James Sanders writes concerning their system,

The effect of the Masorah was to ensure remarkably accurate transmission of the text, including its inherent anomalies and discrepancies... The text was sacred, not a perceived understanding of it, and a scribe was to be neither more nor less than a scribe, no matter how creative or how careless he might be. Unique or rare formations of words or phrases, especially those vulnerable to error, were noted so that the next scribe would not change them to more familiar or more understandable forms... The Masorah, moreover, provides statistics of the number of verses, of lectionary sections, and of words, even noting what word or letter is precisely in the middle of a book or section, so that the next scribe would have full means of guarding the integrity of each letter, each word, each particular phrase, and hence each book that was his charge to copy.

The Masoretes would take the verse, section, and word position and compare it to the original text to ensure no errors existed in the copied work.

Robert Gonzales notes that "At the end of Deuteronomy, the Masoretes note that there are 5,845 verses, 167 paragraphs, and 79,856 words in the entire Torah."²⁰

This remarkable attention to detail gives the Christian great confidence that what they are reading is as close to accurate as humanly possible.

¹⁹ John D. Barry, "Textual Glosses," *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

²⁰ Gonzales, "Composition and Transmission," 190.

Of final note regarding the copyist errors in the Old Testament manuscripts is a brief mention of the rarity of contradictions within the texts. R. C. Sproul notes that “For more than ninety-nine percent of the cases, the original text can be reconstructed to a practical certainty. Even in the few cases where some perplexity remains, this does not impinge on the meaning of Scripture to the point of clouding a tenet of the faith or a mandate of life.”²¹ Due to the scribes’ care, of the 3000 Old Testament manuscripts that exist, there is a 90% agreement among the copies, and the 10% of variants that are to be found contain no alteration to any major doctrine.²²

Alleged Discrepancies in the Old Testament

While the foundation of the accuracy and reliability has been made for the accurate reproduction of the biblical text through time, specific mention will now be made of the Old Testament’s seemingly contradictory statements. These statements fall into four major categories: ethical, doctrinal, numerical, and historical. A single example will be given in each category for the sake of brevity.

Ethical Tensions and Discrepancies

Firstly, a general examination will be made of the book of Proverbs, a favorite among many skeptics of Biblical ethics. The “Skeptics Annotated Bible” lists 31 examples in Proverbs containing allegedly contradictory information about how humans ought to conduct themselves.²³ At first glance, they are

²¹ R. C. Sproul, *Can I Trust the Bible?*, vol. 2, *The Crucial Questions Series* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009), 33.

²² Gonzales, “Composition and Transmission,” 186.

²³ Steve Wells, “Proverbs: Contradictions,” *The Skeptics Annotated Bible*.
https://skepticsannotatedbible.com/pr/contra_list.html

correct in their assessment of the book of Proverbs. There are what seem like direct contradictions between verses that directly follow one another. For example, Proverbs 26:4 states, “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.” While the following verse states, “Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.” How can Christians claim the inerrancy and reliability of the Scriptures when passages like these exist?

Most of the contradictions in Proverbs are easily answered by taking the time to understand what the Proverbs are designed to do. John Barry states, “the book of Proverbs is not a list of rules; it is a collection of general principles for life—principles which must be applied carefully to relevant situations.”²⁴ This view of Proverbs eases the tension that exists in our example. Rather than being set rules that cannot coexist, the two Proverbs show that there is a season in which the correction of a fool is appropriate and a season where it is not.

Jesus demonstrated both Proverbs during his ministry. In Matthew 16:1–4, Jesus was being questioned by the Pharisees to try and undermine his ministry. He chose to answer them, and as far as Scripture records, there is no response to his statement; the Pharisees were, as Proverbs states, no longer wise in their own eyes but silenced. On the other hand, in Matthew 26:63, during his trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus kept silent, knowing that their hardened hearts would not allow them to overcome their foolishness.²⁵ A response here would have been both fruitless and would have resulted in Jesus having to become like them, arguing for no reason other than to be right.

²⁴ John D. Barry, *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Pr 26:4–5.

²⁵ John A. Kitchen, *Proverbs: A Mentor Commentary, Mentor Commentaries* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2006), 586.

Doctrinal Contradictions

Difficult doctrinal tensions exist within many books and moments in the Old Testament. The righteous and wicked both have moments of prosperity and punishment, moments of child sacrifice seem to be commanded by God, and God's role in the creation and cause of evil in the world are just a few of the more difficult doctrines we must reconcile. While addressing all of them is out of scope for this paper, two guidelines can shed light on these passages.

Careful examination of the immediate context and broad context of a passage reveals many solutions to doctrinal issues. For example, James 2:21–23 shows us that the goal of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22 was not the death of Isaac but the display of faith by Abraham. Additionally, Hebrews 11:19 shows that Abraham knew that God would uphold his earlier promise in Genesis 21:12. So, no matter the outcome of this moment, neither God nor Abraham believed the result would be Isaac's (permanent) death. This moment is also an exception to the rule concerning child sacrifice. As revelation was given, God made his stance more and more clear that child sacrifice was abhorrent, so we are now certainly without excuse on the topic.²⁶

Secondly, God works primarily for his glory. The nuance of how God works in the lives of mankind is far too complicated to understand completely, but we do have an insight into why events unfold in this world as they do. Isaiah 48:9–11 shows that God works in this world to bring himself maximum glory and praise; sometimes this means the wicked must prosper (Jer 12:1) as a backdrop of sin for his grace to shine brightly, and sometimes the righteous must suffer (Rom 5:3–5) to display to the world the joy of the Spirit during life's

²⁶ c.f. Lev 18:21; Deut 12:31; Lev 20:1-5; Ps 106:37-38; Jer 7:31; Deut 18:10.

harshest moments. Ultimately, the Christian must understand that this world and its events are not primarily focused on them, but rather, they are focused on God.

Historical and Numerical Discrepancies

Numerical discrepancies like those between Numbers 25:9 and 1 Corinthians 10:8 and between 1 Kings 4:26 and 2 Chronicles 9:25 are mostly resolved with an understanding of the common copyist errors discussed earlier. In the leading example of Solomons horse stalls, there was likely an additional 0 mistakenly added during the copying process.²⁷ Also common in these errors was the Israelite custom of rounding numbers as well as other cultural norms that lead to numbers being over and under-inflated. Numerical discrepancies tend to be minor and are possibly the easiest to explain away due to human involvement in the transmission process.

Historical discrepancies, unlike the previous types, are external. Rather than being inconsistencies within the text, these arguments pit Scripture against science. The Old Testament is full of such examples as Noah's flood, the plagues, the Israelite captivity in Egypt, and many more. While the scientific community attempts to rationalize away all possibility of divine intervention in the material world, there is much scientific evidence to support many supernatural events in the Old Testament.²⁸ However, despite thousands of hours of research trying to prove either the Bible or Science, there is a measure of faith that must be shown when discerning history (Heb 11:1-6).

²⁷ Gonzales, "Composition and Transmission," 663.

²⁸ Answers, "Answers," *Answers in Genesis*, February 22, 2021. <https://answersingenesis.org/answers>; Many resources are available to gain an apologetic about these topics. Further reading on this topic can be found at Answers in Genesis.

Conclusion

By its nature of being breathed out by God, the Old Testament is inerrant, containing no errors relating to life and doctrine. It is also reliable, having been preserved through time by God and faithful men, guided by the Spirit, who have meticulously copied its contents for generations. While we may not have each text's autographs, there is an abundance of evidence that the text within faithful translations of the Bible is an accurate representation of the authors' original text and intent.

While there are numerous areas within the Old Testament that the Christian must reconcile, there is no doubt that every instance, when handled properly, has a reasonable resolution. These texts may pose difficulty during seasons of life, and there may not be a time on Earth when we are fully convinced of a specific reconciliation. Each text does have a resolution that will be made known in the fulness of time. There is a measure of faith that the Christian must take when handling discrepancies within Scripture, but they can be reasonably sure of its reliability and accuracy.

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