MAKING SENSE of BIBLE DIFFICULTIES

Clear and Concise Answers from Genesis to Revelation

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Preface

The Bible is without errors, but the critics are not without criticism. In the face of this, the Bible insists that we “know how you ought to answer each one” (Col. 4:5–6). Peter urged believers, “Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you of the reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15). Indeed, Jesus commanded us to “love the Lord your God with all your heart . . . soul . . . and . . . mind” (Matt. 22:37). Part of this loving duty to Christ is to find answers for those who criticize God’s Word. For, as Solomon said, “Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes” (Prov. 26:5).

This book is offered as a guide to fulfill these biblical mandates. Jesus said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). We have nothing to fear from the truth. Jesus said to the Father, “Your word is truth” (John 17:17). The Bible has withstood the criticisms of the greatest skeptics, agnostics, and atheists down through the centuries, and it is able to withstand the feeble efforts of unbelieving critics today. Unlike many other religions today that appeal to mystical feeling or blind faith, Christianity says, “Look before you leap.”

This is a book for those who believe we should think about what we believe. God places no premium on ignorance, nor does He reward those who refuse to look at the evidence. On the contrary, He will condemn those who refuse the plain evidence He has revealed (Rom. 1:18–20).
This book grows out of over forty years of attempts to understand the Bible and answer those who would undermine faith in God's eternal Word. It is written as a companion to the Bible, so that one may find the answer to a difficulty in the text at the very place the problem occurs. As you read through the Bible and encounter a difficulty, just look up the verse and study the comment on it. If your question is not answered here, then look in The Big Book of Bible Difficulties (Baker, 2008).

In many ways, this book is five books in one. First, it is a book on Bible difficulties that gives answers to many of the major questions raised about the Bible. Second, this is a work in apologetics, since it helps defend the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Third, it functions like a critical commentary, since it treats most of the difficult passages in the Bible. Fourth, it is a book that will help strengthen your spiritual life as you receive answers to your questions and your faith in God's Word is increased. Finally, this book is helpful in pre-evangelism and evangelism. For as you witness for Christ, people will ask you questions to which you may not have an answer. Rather than stop sharing Christ because you fear questions you can't answer, you can continue in confidence because you have a ready guide to help answer the questions of those who sincerely seek to know the truth.

It is our prayer that God will use this book to strengthen your faith and to help bring many others to the faith. Our own confidence in the Sacred Scriptures has increased over the years as we have delved deeper into the marvels of God's truth. We are confident that yours will also.
Introduction
How to Approach Bible Difficulties

Critics claim the Bible is filled with errors. Some even speak of thousands of mistakes. The truth is there is not even one demonstrated error in the original text of the Bible.

The Bible: Errors, No!

This is not to say that there are not difficulties in our Bibles. There are, and that is what this book is all about. It is only to point out that there are not actual errors in the Scriptures. Why? Because the Bible is the Word of God, and God cannot err. Come, let us reason. Let's put it in logical form and then examine the premises:

GOD CANNOT ERR.
THE BIBLE IS THE WORD OF GOD.
THEREFORE, THE BIBLE CANNOT ERR.

As any student of logic knows, this is a valid syllogism (form of reasoning). So, if the premises are true, the conclusion is also true. As we will show, the Bible clearly declares itself to be the Word of God.¹ It

also informs us that God cannot err. The conclusion, then, is inevitable. The Bible cannot err. If the Bible errs in anything it affirms, then God would be mistaken. But God cannot make mistakes.

**God Cannot Err**

The Scriptures declare emphatically that “it is impossible for God to lie” (Heb. 6:18). Paul speaks of the “God who cannot lie” (Titus 1:2). He is a God who, even if we are faithless, “remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself” (2 Tim. 2:13). God is truth (John 14:6) and so is His Word. Jesus said to the Father, “Your word is truth” (John 17:17). The psalmist exclaimed, “the entirety of Your word is truth” (Ps. 119:160).

**The Bible Is the Word of God**

Jesus referred to the Old Testament (OT) as the “Word of God” that “cannot be broken” (John 10:35). He said, “until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matt. 5:18, NIV). Paul added, “All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16, NIV). It came “from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). Although human authors recorded the messages, “prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20, NIV).

Jesus said to the religious leaders of His day, “You nullify the word of God by your tradition” (Mark 7:13, NIV). Jesus turned their attention to the written Word of God by affirming over and over again, “It is written . . . It is written . . . It is written” (see Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). This phrase occurs over ninety times in the New Testament (NT). It is a strong indication of the divine authority of the written Word of God. Stressing the unfailing nature of God’s truth, the Apostle Paul referred to the Scriptures as “the word of God” (Rom. 9:6). The writer of Hebrews declared that “The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb. 4:12, NIV).
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The Logical Conclusion: The Bible Cannot Err

Yes, God has spoken, and He has not stuttered. The God of truth has given us the Word of Truth, and it does not contain any untruth in it. The Bible is the unerring Word of God.3

Can the Bible Be Trusted in Science and History?

Some have suggested that Scripture can always be trusted on moral matters but it is not always correct on historical matters. They rely on the Word in the spiritual domain, but not in the sphere of science. If true, however, this would render the Bible ineffective as a divine authority for two reasons. First, the whole Bible claims to be the inspired Word of God. Second, the spiritual is often inextricably interwoven with the historical and scientific so that the two cannot be separated.

A close examination of Scripture reveals that the scientific (factual) and the spiritual truths of Scripture are often inseparable. For example, one cannot separate the spiritual truth of Christ’s resurrection from the fact that His body permanently vacated the tomb and later physically appeared (Matt. 28:6; 1 Cor. 15:13–19). Likewise, if Jesus was not born of a biological virgin, then He is no different from the rest of the human race on whom the stigma of Adam’s sin rests (Rom. 5:12). Likewise, the death of Christ for our sins cannot be detached from His shedding literal blood on the cross, for “without shedding of blood there is no remission” (Heb. 9:22). And Adam’s existence and fall cannot be a myth. If there were no literal Adam and no actual fall, then the spiritual teaching about inherited sin and eventual or physical death are wrong (Rom. 5:12). Historical reality and theological doctrine stand or fall together.

Also, the doctrine of the Incarnation is inseparable from the historical truth about Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:1, 14). Further, Jesus’s moral teaching about marriage was based on His teaching about God’s joining a literal Adam and Eve together in marriage (Matt. 19:4–5). In each of these cases the moral or theological teaching is devoid of its meaning apart from the historical or factual event. If one denies that the literal space-time event occurred, then there is no basis for believing the scriptural doctrine built upon it.
Jesus often directly compared OT events with important spiritual truths, such as His death and resurrection, which were related to Jonah and the great fish (Matt. 12:40). Or His second coming as compared to the days of Noah (Matt. 24:37–39). Both the occasion and the manner of comparison make it clear that Jesus was affirming the historicity of those OT events. Indeed, Jesus asserted to Nicodemus, “If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” (John 3:12). In short, if the Bible does not speak truthfully about the physical world, then it cannot be trusted when it speaks about the spiritual world. The two are intimately related.

Inspiration includes not only all that the Bible explicitly teaches, but also everything the Bible touches. This is true whether the Bible is touching upon history, science, or mathematics. Whatever the Bible declares is true—whether it is a major point or a minor point. The Bible is God’s Word, and God does not deviate from the truth in any point. All the parts are as true as the whole that they comprise.

**If It Is Inspired, Then It Is Inerrant**

Inerrancy is a logical result of inspiration. Inerrancy means wholly true and without error. And what God breathes out (inspires) must be wholly true (inerrant). However, it is helpful to specify more clearly what is meant by “truth” and what would constitute an “error.” By truth we signify that which corresponds to reality. An error, then, is what does not correspond to reality. Truth is telling it like it is. Error is not telling it like it is. Hence, nothing mistaken can be true, even if the author intended his mistake to be true. An error is a mistake, not simply something that is misleading. Otherwise, every sincere utterance ever made is true, even those that were grossly mistaken. Likewise, something is not true simply because it accomplishes its intended purpose, since many lies succeed.

The Bible clearly views truth as that which corresponds to reality. Error is understood as a lack of correspondence to reality, not as intentionally misleading. This is evident from the fact that the word “error” is used of unintentional mistakes (Lev. 4:2). The Bible everywhere implies a correspondence view of truth. For example, when the Ten Commandments declare “You shall not bear false tes-
“Has God Said?”

Of course, wherever God has made the truth clear, Satan’s strategy is to cast doubt on it. Whenever God has spoken with authority, the devil desires to undermine it. “Did God really say that?” he sneers (cf. Gen. 3:1). This confusion often takes the following form: the Bible may be the inspired Word of God in some sense, but it is also human words. It had human authors, and “to err is human.” Hence we are to expect some errors in the Bible. So goes the argument. In short, the clear, simple truth of God has been confused by the lie of Satan, the master of lies (John 8:44).

Let’s analyze what is wrong with this reasoning. A simple analogy will help. Consider some parallel but equally faulty reasoning:

1) Jesus was a human being.
2) Human beings sin.
3) Therefore, Jesus sinned.

Any Bible student can readily see that this conclusion is wrong. Jesus was “without sin” (Heb. 4:15). He “knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus was “a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Peter 1:19). As John said of Jesus, “He is pure” and “righteous” (1 John 2:1; 3:3). But, if Jesus never sinned, then what is wrong with the above argument that Jesus is human and humans sin, therefore, Jesus sinned? Where does the logic go astray?

The mistake is to assume that Jesus was like any other human. Sure, mere human beings sin. But, Jesus was not a mere human being. He was a perfect human being. Indeed, Jesus was not only human, but He was also God. Likewise, the Bible is not a mere human book. It is also the Word of God. Like Jesus, it is both divine and human. And just as
Jesus was human but did not sin, even so the Bible is a human book but does not err. Both God’s living Word (Christ) and His written Word (Scripture) are human but do not err. They are divine and cannot err. There can no more be an error in God’s written Word than there was a sin in God’s living Word. God cannot err, period.

The Bible: Difficulties, Yes!

While the Bible is the Word of God and, as such, cannot have any errors, nonetheless, this does not mean that there are no difficulties in it. However, as St. Augustine wisely noted, “If we are perplexed by any apparent contradiction in Scripture, it is not allowable to say, the author of this book is mistaken; but either the manuscript is faulty, or the translation is wrong, or you have not understood.”

The mistakes are not in the revelation of God, but are in the misinterpretations of man.

The Bible is without mistake, but the critics are not. All their allegations of error in the Bible are based on some error of their own, and these mistakes fall into the following main categories.

Mistake 1: Assuming That the Unexplained Is Not Explainable

No informed person would claim to be able to fully explain all Bible difficulties. However, it is a mistake for the critic to assume, therefore, that what has not yet been explained never will be explained. When a scientist comes upon an anomaly in nature, he does not give up further scientific exploration. Rather, he uses the unexplained as a motivation to find an explanation. No real scientist throws up her hands in despair simply because she cannot explain a given phenomenon. She continues to do research with the confident expectation that an answer will be found. And the history of science reveals that such faith has been rewarded over and over again.

Scientists, for example, once had no natural explanation of meteors, eclipses, tornadoes, hurricanes, or earthquakes. Until recently, scientists did not know how the bumblebee could fly. All of these mysteries have yielded their secrets to the relentless patience of sci-
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ence. Neither do scientists know how life can grow on thermo-vents in the depths of the sea. But no scientist throws in the towel and cries “contradiction!”

Likewise, the Christian scholar approaches the Bible with the same presumption that what is thus far unexplained is not therefore unexplainable. He or she does not assume that discrepancies are contradictions. And, when something is encountered for which there is no explanation, he or she simply continues to do research, believing that one will eventually be found. In fact, if he or she assumed the opposite, studying would stop. Why pursue an answer when one assumes there is none? Like their scientific counterparts, Bible students have been rewarded for continued faith and research. For, many difficulties for which scholars once had no answer have yielded to the relentless pursuit of truth through history, archaeology, linguistics, and other disciplines. For example, critics once proposed that Moses could not have written the first five books of the Bible because there was no writing in Moses’s day. Now we know that writing was in existence a couple of thousand years or more before Moses. Likewise, critics once believed that the Bible was wrong in speaking of the Hittite people, since they were totally unknown to historians. Now all historians know of their existence by way of their library that was found in Turkey. This gives us confidence to believe that biblical difficulties that have not yet been explained have an explanation and we need not assume there is a mistake in the Bible.

Mistake 2: Presuming the Bible Guilty until Proven Innocent

Many critics assume the Bible is wrong until something proves it right. However, like an American citizen charged with an offense, the Bible should be presumed “innocent” until proven guilty. This is not asking anything special for the Bible—it is the way we approach all human communication. If we did not, life would not be possible. For example, if we assumed road signs and traffic signals were not telling the truth, then we would probably be dead before we could prove they were telling the truth. Likewise, if we assume food labels are wrong until proven right, we would have to open up all cans and packages before buying. And what if we presumed all the numbers on our currency
were wrong? And what if we assumed all restroom signs were wrong? Well, enough is enough.

The Bible, like any other book, should be presumed to be telling us what the authors said and heard. Negative critics of the Bible begin with just the opposite presumption. Little wonder, then, that they conclude the Bible is riddled with error.

**Mistake 3: Confusing Our Fallible Interpretations with God’s Infallible Revelation**

Jesus affirmed that the “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). As an infallible book, the Bible is also irrevocable. Jesus declared, “Truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:18, NIV; cf. Luke 16:17). The Scriptures also have final authority, being the last word on all it discusses. Jesus employed the Bible to resist the tempter (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10), to settle doctrinal disputes (Matt. 21:42), and to vindicate His authority (Mark 11:17). Sometimes a biblical teaching rests on a small historical detail (Heb. 7:4–10), a word or phrase (Acts 15:13–17), or even the difference between the singular and the plural (Gal. 3:16). But, while the Bible is infallible, human interpretations are not. The Bible cannot be mistaken, but we can be mistaken about the Bible. The meaning of the Bible does not change, but our understanding of its meaning does.

Human beings are finite, and finite beings make mistakes. That is why there are erasers on pencils, correcting fluid for typing, and a “delete” key on computers. And even though God’s Word is perfect (Ps. 19:7), as long as imperfect human beings exist, there will be misinterpretations of God’s Word and false views about His world. In view of this, one should not be hasty in assuming that a currently dominant view in science is the final word on the topic. Prevailing views of science in the past are considered errors by scientists in the present. So, contradictions between popular opinions in science and widely accepted interpretations of the Bible can be expected. But this falls short of proving there is a real contradiction between God’s world and God’s Word, between God’s general revelation and His special revelation. In this basic sense, science and Scripture are
not contradictory. Only finite, fallible human opinions about each can be contradictory.

**Mistake 4: Failing to Understand the Context of the Passage**

Perhaps the most common mistake of critics is to take a text out of its proper context. As the adage goes, “A text out of context is a pretext.” One can prove anything from the Bible by this mistaken procedure. The Bible says, “there is no God” (Ps. 14:1). Of course, the context is that “The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God” ” (Ps. 14:1). One may claim that Jesus admonished us “not to resist an evil” (Matt. 5:39), but the anti-retaliatory context in which He cast this statement must not be ignored. Likewise, many fail to understand the context of Jesus’s statement to “Give to him who asks you,” as though one had an obligation to give a gun to a small child who asked, or nuclear weapons to a militant dictator just because he asked. Failure to note that meaning is determined by context is perhaps the chief sin of those who find fault with the Bible, as comments on numerous pages in this book will illustrate.

**Mistake 5: Neglecting to Interpret Difficult Passages in the Light of Clear Ones**

Some passages of Scripture are hard to understand. Sometimes the difficulty is due to their obscurity. At other times, the difficulty is because passages appear to be teaching something contrary to what some other part of Scripture is clearly teaching. For example, James appears to be saying salvation is by works (James 2:14–26), whereas Paul taught clearly that it was by grace (Rom. 4:5; Titus 3:5–7; Eph. 2:8–9). In this case, James should not be construed as contradicting Paul. Paul is speaking about justification before God (which is by faith alone), whereas James is referring to justification before men (who cannot see our faith, but only our works).

Another example is found in Philippians 2:12 where Paul says, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” On the surface this appears to be saying salvation is by works. However, this is flatly contradicted by a host of Scriptures that clearly affirm that we are “saved by grace through faith, and that not of ourselves; it is a gift of God, not
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of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). And, “to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness” (Rom. 4:5). Also, it “is not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy [that] He saved us” (Titus 3:5–6). When this difficult statement about “working out our salvation” is understood in the light of these clear passages, we can see that, whatever it does mean, it does not mean that we are saved by works. In fact, what it means is found in the very next verse. We are to work salvation out because God’s grace has worked it in our hearts. In Paul’s words, “for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

Mistake 6: Basing a Teaching on an Obscure Passage

Some passages in the Bible are difficult because their meanings are obscure. This is usually because a key word in the text is used only once (or rarely), and so it is difficult to know what the author is saying, unless it can be inferred from the context. For example, one of the best-known passages in the Bible contains a word that appears nowhere else in all existing Greek literature up to the time the NT was written. This word appears in what is popularly known as the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:11). It is usually translated, “Give us this day our daily bread.” The word in question is the one translated “daily”—epiousion. Experts in Greek still have not come to any agreement either on its origin or its precise meaning. Different commentators try to establish links with Greek words that are well-known, and many suggestions have been proposed as to the resulting meaning. Among these are:

Give us this day our continuous bread.
Give us this day our supersubstantial (indicating supernatural, from heaven) bread.
Give us this day bread for our sustenance.
Give us this day our daily (or, what we need for today) bread.

Each one of these proposals has its defenders, each one makes sense in the context, and each one is a possibility based on the limited information that is available. There does not seem to be any compelling reason
to depart from what has become the generally accepted translation, but this example does serve to illustrate the point. Some passages of the Bible are difficult to understand because the meaning of some key word appears only once, or very rarely. At other times, the words may be clear but the meaning is not evident because we are not sure to what they refer. This is true in 1 Corinthians 15:29 where Paul speaks of those who were “baptized for the dead.” Is he referring to the baptizing of live representatives to ensure salvation for dead believers who were not baptized (as Mormons claim)? Or, is he referring to others being baptized into the church to fill the ranks of those who have passed on? Or, is he referring to a believer being baptized “for” (i.e., “with a view to”) his own death and burial with Christ? Or to something else?

When we are not sure, then several things should be kept in mind. First, we should not build a doctrine on an obscure passage. The rule of thumb in Bible interpretation is “the main things are the plain things, and the plain things are the main things.” This is called the perspicuity (clearness) of Scripture. If something is important, it will be clearly taught in Scripture and probably in more than one place. Second, when a given passage is not clear, we should never conclude that it means something that is opposed to another plain teaching of Scripture. God does not make mistakes in His Word; we make mistakes in trying to understand it.

**Mistake 7: Forgetting That the Bible Is a Human Book with Human Characteristics**

With the exception of small sections, like the Ten Commandments that were “written with the finger of God” (Exod. 31:18), the Bible was not verbally dictated. The writers were not secretaries of the Holy Spirit. They were human composers employing their own literary styles and idiosyncrasies. These human authors sometimes used human sources for their material (Josh. 10:13; Acts 17:28; 1 Cor. 15:33; Titus 1:12). In fact, every book of the Bible is the composition of a human writer—about forty of them in all. The Bible also manifests different human literary styles, from the mournful meter of Lamentations to the exalted poetry of Isaiah; from the simple grammar of John to the complex Greek of...
Hebrews. Scripture also manifests human perspectives. David spoke in Psalm 23 from a shepherd’s perspective. Kings is written from a prophetic vantage point, and Chronicles from a priestly point of view. Acts manifests a historical interest and 2 Timothy a pastor’s heart. Writers speak from an observer’s standpoint when they write of the sun rising or setting (Josh. 1:15). They also reveal human thought patterns, including memory lapses (1 Cor. 1:14–16), as well as human emotions (Gal. 4:14). The Bible discloses specific human interests. For example, Hosea possessed a rural interest, Luke a medical concern, and James a love of nature. But like Christ, the Bible is completely human, yet without error. Forgetting the humanity of Scripture can lead to falsely impugning its integrity by expecting a level of expression higher than that which is customary to a human document. This will become more obvious as we discuss the next mistake of the critics.

**Mistake 8: Assuming That a Partial Report Is a False Report**

Critics often jump to the conclusion that a partial report is false. However, this is not so. If it were, most of what has ever been said would be false, since seldom does time or space permit an absolutely complete report. Occasionally the Bible expresses the same thing in different ways, or at least from different viewpoints, at different times. Hence, inspiration does not exclude a diversity of expression. The four Gospels relate the same story in different ways to different groups of people, and sometimes even quote the same saying with different words. Compare, for example, Peter’s famous confession in the Gospels:

**Matthew:** “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16:16).
**Mark:** “You are the Christ” (8:29).

Even the Ten Commandments, which were “written with the finger of God” (Deut. 9:10), are stated with variations the second time God gave them (cf. Exod. 20:8–11 with Deut. 5:12–15). There are many differences between the books of Kings and Chronicles in their description of identical events, yet they harbor no contradiction in the events they narrate. If such important utterances can be stated in different ways,
then there is no reason the rest of Scripture cannot speak truth without employing a wooden literalness of expression.

*Mistake 9: Demanding That NT Citations of the OT Always Be Exact Quotations*

Critics often point to variations in the NT’s use of the OT Scriptures as a proof of error. However, they forget that every citation need not be an exact quotation. It was then (and still is today) a perfectly acceptable literary style to give the essence of a statement without using precisely the same words. The same meaning can be conveyed without using the same verbal expressions.

Variations in the NT citations of the OT fall into different categories. Sometimes they vary because there is a change of speaker. For example, Zechariah records the Lord as saying, “they will look on Me whom they have pierced” (12:10). When this is cited in the NT, John, not God, is speaking. So it is changed to “They shall look on Him whom they pierced” (John 19:37).

At other times, writers cite only part of the OT text. Jesus did this at His home synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:18–19, citing Isa. 61:1–2). In fact, He stopped in the middle of a sentence. Had He gone any further, He could not have said as He did, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (v. 21). For the very next phrase, “And the day of vengeance of our God,” is a reference to His second coming.

Sometimes the NT paraphrases or summarizes the OT text (e.g., Matt. 2:6). Others blend two texts into one (Matt. 27:9–10). Occasionally a general truth is mentioned, without citing a specific text. For example, Matthew said Jesus moved to Nazareth “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, ‘He shall be called a Nazarene’” (Matt. 2:23). Notice, Matthew quotes no given prophet, but rather “prophets” in general. So it would be futile to insist on a specific OT text where this could be found.

There are also instances where the NT applies a text in a different way than the OT did. For example, Hosea applies “Out of Egypt have I called My son” to the Messianic nation, and Matthew applies it to the product of that nation, the Messiah (Matt. 2:15, from Hos. 11:1). In no case, however, does the NT misinterpret or misapply the OT,
nor draw some implication from it that is not validly drawn from it. In short, the NT makes no mistakes in citing the OT, as the critics do in citing the NT.

**Mistake 10: Assuming That Divergent Accounts Are False Ones**

Just because two or more accounts of the same event differ, it does not mean they are mutually exclusive. For example, Matthew (28:5) says there was one angel at the tomb after the resurrection, whereas John informs us there were two (20:12). But these are not contradictory reports. In fact, there is an infallible mathematical rule that easily explains this problem: wherever there are two, there is always one—it never fails! Matthew did not say there was *only* one angel. One has to add the word “only” to Matthew’s account to make it contradict John’s. But if the critic comes to the Bible in order to show it errs, then the error is not in the Bible, but in the critic.

Likewise, Matthew (27:5) informs us that Judas hanged himself. But Luke says that “he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out” (Acts 1:18). Once more, these accounts differ, but they are not mutually exclusive. If Judas hanged himself on a tree over the edge of a cliff and his body fell on sharp rocks below, then his entrails would gush out just as Luke vividly describes.

**Mistake 11: Presuming That the Bible Approves of All It Records**

It is a mistake to assume that everything contained in the Bible is commended by the Bible. The whole Bible is *true* (John 17:17), but it records some *lies*, for example, Satan’s (Gen. 3:4; cf. John 8:44) and Rahab’s (Josh. 2:4). Inspiration encompasses the Bible fully and completely in the sense that it records accurately and truthfully even the lies and errors of sinful beings. The truth of Scripture is found in what the Bible *reveals*, not in everything it *records*. Unless this distinction is held, it may be incorrectly concluded that the Bible teaches immorality because it narrates David’s sin (2 Sam. 11:4), that it promotes polygamy because it records Solomon’s (1 Kings 11:3), or that it affirms atheism because it quotes the fool as saying “there is no God” (Ps. 14:1).
Mistake 12: Forgetting That the Bible Uses Nontechnical, Everyday Language

To be true, something does not have to use scholarly, technical, or so-called “scientific” language. The Bible is written for the common person of every generation, and it therefore uses common, everyday language. The use of observational, nonscientific language is not unscientific, it is merely prescientific. The Scriptures were written in ancient times by ancient standards, and it would be anachronistic to superimpose modern scientific standards upon them. However, it is no more unscientific to speak of the sun “standing still” (Josh. 10:12) than to refer to the sun “rising” (Josh. 1:16). Contemporary meteorologists still speak daily of the time of “sunrise” and “sunset.”

Mistake 13: Assuming That Round Numbers Are False

Another mistake sometimes made by Bible critics is claiming that round numbers are false. This is not so. Round numbers are just that—round numbers. Like most ordinary speech, the Bible uses round numbers (1 Chron. 19:18; 21:5). For example, it refers to the diameter as being about one-third of the circumference of something. It may be imprecise from the standpoint of a contemporary technological society to speak of 3.14159265 . . . as the number three, but it is not incorrect for an ancient, nontechnological people. Three and fourteen hundredths can be rounded off to three. That is sufficient for a “Sea of cast metal” (2 Chron. 4:2, NIV) in an ancient Hebrew temple, even though it would not suffice for a computer in a modern rocket. But one should not expect scientific precision in a prescientific age. In fact, it would be as anachronistic as wearing a wristwatch in a Shakespearian play.

Mistake 14: Neglecting to Note That the Bible Uses Different Literary Devices

An inspired book need not be composed in one, and only one, literary style. Human beings wrote every book in the Bible, and human language is not limited to one mode of expression. There is no reason to suppose that only one style or literary genre was used in a divinely
inspired Book. The Bible reveals a number of literary devices. Several whole books are written in poetic style (e.g., Job, Psalms, Proverbs). The Synoptic Gospels are filled with parables. In Galatians 4, Paul utilizes an allegory. The NT abounds with metaphors (e.g., 2 Cor. 3:2–3; James 3:6) and similes (cf. Matt. 20:1; James 1:6); hyperboles may also be found (e.g., Col. 1:23; John 21:25; 2 Cor. 3:2), and possibly even poetic figures (Job 41:1). Jesus employed satire (Matt. 19:24 with 23:24), and figures of speech are common throughout the Bible.

It is not a mistake for a biblical writer to use a figure of speech, but it is a mistake for a reader to take a figure of speech literally. Obviously when the Bible speaks of the believer resting under the shadow of God’s “wings” (Ps. 36:7), it does not mean that God is a feathered bird. Likewise, when the Bible says God “awakes” (Ps. 44:23), as though He were sleeping, it is a figure of speech indicating God’s inactivity before He is aroused to judgment by man’s sin. We must be careful in our reading of figures of speech in Scripture.

**Mistake 15: Forgetting That Only the Original Text, Not Every Copy of Scripture, Is without Error**

When critics do come upon a genuine mistake in a manuscript copy, they make another fatal error—they assume it was in the original inspired text of Scripture. They forget that God only uttered the original text of Scripture, not the copies. Therefore, only the original text is without error. Inspiration does not guarantee that every copy of the original is without error. Therefore, we are to expect that minor errors are to be found in manuscript copies. But, again, as St. Augustine wisely noted, when we run into a so-called “error” in the Bible, we must assume one of two things—either the manuscript was not copied correctly, or we have not understood it rightly. What we may not assume is that God made an error in inspiring the original text.

While present copies of Scripture are very good, they are not without error. For example, 2 Kings 8:26 gives the age of King Ahaziah as twenty-two, whereas 2 Chronicles 22:2 says forty-two. The later number cannot be correct, or he would have been older than his father. This is obviously a copyist error, but it does not alter the inerrancy of the original.
Several things should be observed about these copyist errors. First of all, they are errors in the copies, not the original. No one has ever found an original manuscript with an error in it. Second, they are minor errors (often in names or numbers) that do not affect any doctrine of the Christian faith. Third, these copyist errors are relatively few in number, as will be illustrated throughout the rest of this book. Fourth, usually by the context, or by another Scripture, we know which one is in error. For example, Ahaziah (above) must have been twenty-two, not forty-two, since he could not be older than his father. Finally, even though there is a copyist error, the entire message can still come through. In such a case, the validity of the message is not changed. For example, if you received a letter like this, would you understand the whole message? And would you collect your money?

“YOU HAVE WON THE FIVE MILLION DOLLAR READER’S DIGEST SWEEPSTAKES.”

Even though there is a mistake in the first word, the entire message comes through—you are five million dollars richer! And if you received another letter the next day that read like this, you would be even more sure:

“Y#U HAVE WON THE FIVE MILLION DOLLAR READER’S DIGEST SWEEPSTAKES.”

Actually the more mistakes of this kind there are (each in a different place), the more sure you are of the original message. This is why scribal mistakes in the biblical manuscripts do not affect the basic message of the Bible. So, for all practical purposes, the Bible in our hand, imperfect though the manuscripts are, conveys the complete truth of the original Word of God.

**Mistake 16: Confusing General Statements with Universal Ones**

Critics often jump to the conclusion that unqualified statements admit of no exceptions. They seize upon verses that offer general truths and then point with glee to obvious exceptions. In so doing, they forget that such statements are only intended to be generalizations.
The Book of Proverbs is a good example of such an issue. Proverbial sayings by their very nature offer only general guidance, not universal assurance. They are rules for life, but rules that admit of exceptions. Proverbs 16:7 is a case in point. It affirms that “when a man’s ways please the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.” This obviously was not intended to be a universal truth. Paul was pleasing to the Lord and his enemies stoned him (Acts 14:19). Jesus was pleasing the Lord, and His enemies crucified Him! Nonetheless, it is a general truth that one who acts in a way pleasing to God can minimize his enemies’ antagonism.

Another example of a general truth is Proverbs 22:6, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” However, other Scripture passages and experience show that this is not always true. Indeed, some godly persons in the Bible (including Job, Eli, and David) had some very wayward children. This proverb does not contradict experience because it is a general principle that applies in a general way, but allows for individual exceptions. Proverbs are not designed to be absolute guarantees. Rather, they express truths that provide helpful advice and guidance by which an individual should conduct his or her daily life.

It is simply a mistake to assume that proverbial wisdom is always universally true. Proverbs are wisdom (general guides), not law (universally binding imperatives). When the Bible declares “You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:45), then there are no exceptions. Holiness, goodness, love, truth, and justice are rooted in the very nature of an unchanging God and therefore admit of no exceptions. But wisdom takes God’s universal truths and applies them to specific and changing circumstances that, by their very nature as changing, will not always yield the same results. Nonetheless, they are still helpful guides for life, even though they may admit of an occasional exception.

**Mistake 17: Forgetting That Later Revelation Supersedes Previous Revelation**

Sometimes critics of Scripture forget the principle of progressive revelation. God does not reveal everything at once, nor does He always lay down the same conditions for every period of time. Therefore, some
of His later revelation will supersede His former statements. Bible critics sometimes confuse a change of revelation with a mistake. The mistake, however, is that of the critic. For example, the fact that a parent allows a very small child to eat with his fingers, only to tell him later to use a spoon, is not a contradiction. Nor is the parent contradicting herself to insist later that the child should use a fork, not a spoon, to eat his vegetables. This is progressive revelation, with each command suited to fit the particular circumstance in which a person is found.

There was a time when God tested the human race by forbidding them to eat of a specific tree in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:16–17). This command is no longer in effect, but the later revelation does not contradict this former revelation. Also, there was a period (under the Mosaic law) when God commanded that animals be sacrificed for people’s sin. However, since Christ offered the perfect sacrifice for sin (Heb. 10:11–14), this OT command is no longer in effect. Here again, there is no contradiction between the latter and the former commands. Likewise, when God created the human race, He commanded that they eat only fruits and vegetables (Gen. 1:29). But later, when conditions changed after the flood, God commanded that they also eat meat (Gen. 9:3). This change from herbivorous to omnivorous status is progressive revelation, but it is not a contradiction. In fact, all these subsequent revelations were simply different commands for different people at different times in God’s overall plan of redemption.

Of course, God cannot change commands that have to do with His unchangeable nature (cf. Mal. 3:6; Heb. 6:18). For example, since God is love (1 John 4:16), He cannot command that we hate Him. Nor can He command what is logically impossible—for example, to both offer and not offer a sacrifice for sin at the same time and in the same sense. But these moral and logical limits notwithstanding, God can and has given noncontradictory, progressive revelation that, if taken out of its proper context and juxtaposed with each other, can be made to look contradictory. This, however, is just as much a mistake as to assume a parent is contradicting herself when she allows a child to stay up later at night as he gets older.

After forty years of continual and careful study of the Bible, one can only conclude that those who think they have discovered a mistake in the Bible do not know too much about the Bible—they know too little.
about it! This does not mean, of course, that we understand all the difficulties in the Scriptures. But it does lead us to believe that Mark Twain was correct when he concluded that it was not the part of the Bible he did not understand that bothered him the most, but the parts he did understand!