

The Problem with Inerrancy

For many Christians, the Bible is inspired by God (or “God breathed”). They also assume that if the Bible is inspired, it must also be without errors (or inerrant). The general view of Biblical inerrancy is that as God filled people with his Spirit and enabled them to write down His revelation, everything that was written down (every word, every phrase) is directly from God and adequately represents God’s revelation of himself. This view asserts that in the process of revelation, God ensured no mistakes or errors occurred. The problem with this view is that a careful read through the entire Bible reveals that there are a great many inconsistencies, some of them potential errors and others intentional contradictions.

This should not mean that the Bible must be disregarded or that it has no revelation from God to offer. This author is persuaded that the Bible does contain God’s revelation and a person can adequately come to know God, what God is like by reading the pages of Scripture, including the kind of relationship God wants with people, and what his overarching purpose for humanity was and remains. The author also believes that the same Spirit who inspired all the Bible book authors is the same Spirit of God at work in God’s world today touching and speaking and reaching people without requiring they sit down, open a Bible, and read its pages.

The author of this short outline, despite his belief and insistence that Scripture is not inerrant, still holds to a convictional belief in the one and only Triune God, who is Father, Son (Jesus), and Spirit, the original calling on the people of Israel to represent him and be the light to the nations, the unique way God revealed himself to a descendant of Israel, Jesus of Nazareth, and in the unique way God revealed himself in and through the entire life of Jesus ...(so much so that the author of Hebrews says that when we look at Jesus we will know what God is like (Hebrews 1:1-2, not to mention what Jesus spoke to Philip on the last night prior to his death...“Have I not been with you all this time. When you see me you see the Father”; John 13-14). This should give Bible-believing Christians reason to pause and reread the entire Gospel narratives Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John much more carefully than is often done. It isn’t merely that Jesus is just like God (attached to all other revelations or presuppositions about what God is like) but rather that God is like Jesus, and is in fact Jesus (see Hebrews 1 and John 1). As Greg Boyd has said in his sermons and books, Jesus culminates but supersedes all other revelations of who God is and what God is like.

Far from the Bible being inadequate in revealing who God is and what God is like and what God intends for all creation, including his purpose for humanity, it does exactly this. However, it should be noted that there are inconsistencies throughout the whole of Scripture both in the details shared (that a careful and honest reading will reveal), and that some of the portraits of God are inconsistent (*not all portraits and images of God in the Bible are created equal...so to speak*). Any errors or inconsistencies are not the fault of God, but rather the fault and immaturity of men. God, apparently in his sovereign plan, was ok to, in the process of inspiring men to write down the sacred texts, give degrees of flexibility to make mistakes, of which they apparently did.

The author of this outline does not hold to the unprovable notion that “the original autographs were without error but the copies are”. That is a view that simply sidesteps the reality of the evidence within Scripture itself. If God wanted to ensure the autographs were inspired and inerrant (of which we have no originals; we have copies), then why wouldn’t God also ensure that any copies made from the originals were also errorless (that is, inerrant)? That argument simply falls flat, particularly because no autographs exist, and the copies that do exist have a number of inconsistencies. Unfortunately the view of inerrancy has become a sort of litmus test for what a true Christian is, so much so that both established church branches, denominations and other Christian institutions require their members and students to adhere to a belief in Biblical inerrancy (including the college this author graduated from). This is unfortunate and has damaged many young people and adults who have clearly done their homework by researching this topic. After reading the Bible thoughtfully all the way through carefully, it has become apparent to them that believing in Biblical inerrancy is a violation of their conscience. If they are to be honest with themselves and God, they can no longer hold this view as true and adequate. Rather than rejecting the view out of some “liberal bias,” they do so to honor God with conviction. Rather than being a compromise of their faith, their conviction and claim is an expression of their faith in God.

Below is a short list of reasons (or evidences) for why inerrancy is a faulty stance to hold.

Old Testament

1. Time Israel spent in Egypt (inconsistencies)

- A. 400 years (Genesis 15:13 & Acts 7:16)
- B. 430 years (Exodus 12:41 & Galatians 3:17)
- C. Is God rounding? How does rounding fit within the strict view of inerrancy?
- D. This is a more minor inconsistency, but still if you want to hold to a strict view of inerrancy, these passages show it to be faulty.

2. Inconsistent records when comparing the Books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles: the books of 1 and 2nd Samuel and 1 and 2nd Kings are believed to be written by the same author & that 1 and 2nd Chronicles are from a different author. Samuel and Kings is one telling of the years of Israel and Judah’s monarchies. Chronicles is then a retelling of the monarchy that is believed to have been written during the years of exile in Babylon.

The very odd thing is that in a great number of places, the author of Chronicles changed details, some of them not so important, some of them incredibly important. This is what historians would call a clear discrepancy. In these instances, only one of those authors could be correct in their telling. To say this is simply being honest and up front.

There are different ways that theologians and scholars explain these discrepancies, but it must be noted that they are discrepancies nonetheless and their existence immediately poke holes in Biblical inerrancy. It is apparent to say that men made these mistakes, not God.

A. Number of Aramaeans David killed

- 1). 700 charioteers (2 Samuel 10:18)
- 2). 7000 charioteers (1 Chronicles 19:18)

B. Number of sons Jesse had

- 1). 8 sons (1 Samuel 16: 10, 17:12)
- 2). 7 sons (1 Chronicles 2:13)

C. Census that was taken (vast difference in the number of valiant men for the military)

- 1). Israel 800,000 & Judah 500,000 (2 Samuel 24:9)
- 2). Israel 1,100,000 and Judah 470,000 (1 Chronicles 21:5)

D. Amount of money David spent buying the threshing floor and oxen from Araunah/Ornan

- 1). David paid 50 shekels of silver (2 Samuel 24:18-25)
- 2). David paid 600 shekels of gold (not silver) (1 Chronicles 21:18-30).

E. Solomon's stalls of horses

- 1). 40,000 stalls of horses (1 Kings 4:26)
- 2). 4,000 stalls of horses (2 Chronicles 9:25)

F. Solomon's foreman (chief deputies)

- 1). 3,300 foreman (1 Kings 5:16)
- 2). 3,600 foreman (2 Chronicles 2:2)

G. Solomon's Palace Pillars

- 1). 18 cubits high (1 Kings 7:15)
- 2). 35 cubits high (2 Chronicles 3:15)

H. Solomon's Molten Sea

- 1). Holds 2,000 baths (1 Kings 7:26)
- 2). Holds 3,000 baths (2 Chronicles 4:5)

I. Gold used in the Temple construction

- 1). 420 talents of gold brought from Ophir (1 Kings 9:28)
- 2). 450 talents of gold brought from Ophir (2 Chronicles 8:18)

J. Number of Overseers (chief officers) Solomon had

1. 550 overseers (1 Kings 9:23)
2. 250 overseers (2 Chronicles 8:10)

K. Age of Jehoiakim when he reigned in Judah

1. 18 years old and reigned only 3 months; then his uncle Mattaniah took the throne (2 Kings 24:8-17)
2. 8 years old and reigned 3 months 10 days; then his kinsman Zedekiah ruled. (2 Chronicles 36:9)

L. Age of Baasha, king of Israel, when he died

1. 26th year of Asa, King of Judah (1 Kings 16:6-8)
2. 36th year of Asa, King of Judah, fortified the city of Ramah so he died sometime after 36th year of Asa, not the 26th year according to the author of Kings (2 Chronicles 16:1)

M. King Asa and the high places (where idols were kept)

1. Asa did NOT remove the high places; there was war between King Asa of Judah and King Baasha of Israel throughout their reigns because Asa did not remove the high places (1 Kings 15:14-16).
2. Asa DID remove the high places and because of this there was peace in the land (2 Chronicles 14:2-5).

Did he or did he not remove the high places? We will never know.

N. King Jehoshaphat and the high places

1. He did NOT remove the high places (1 Kings 22:42-43).
2. He DID remove the high places (2 Chronicles 17:5-6).

Did he or did he not remove the high places? We will never know.

O. King Ahaziah's (of Israel) death

1. Shot by an arrow from someone in King Jehu's (of Judah) army near Ibleam, but Ahaziah escaped to Meggido and died there.
(2 Kings 9:27)
2. Ahaziah was captured in Samaria, then brought to King Jehu and was put to death. No mention of being shot first, going into hiding, and then dying in Meggido
(2 Chronicles 22:9).

P. David and the census he took of Israel.

1. According to the author of 2nd Samuel, God was angered with Israel. This inspired David to take a census. The census also angered the Lord. David was given 3 choices as a consequence by the prophet Gad (2 Samuel 24:1-17).
 - a. 7 years of famine
 - b. flee 3 years before enemies
 - c. or 3 days of pestilence
2. According to the author of 1 Chronicles, Satan inspired David to take the census. As in 2 Samuel, this angered the Lord. David was given 3 choices by the prophet Gad as a consequence (1 Chronicles 21:1-12).
 - a. 3 years (instead of 7) of famine
 - b. 3 months swept away by enemies
 - c. or 3 days of pestilence of the Lord

Q. Father of Zerubbabel

1. Shealtiel (Ezra 3:2)
2. Pedaiah (1 Chronicles 3:19).

R. Who was Judah's king following King Josiah?

1. Shallum (Jeremiah 22:11)
2. Jehoahaz (or Joahaz) (2 Chronicles 36:1)

S. Who is Abijah's mother?

1. Maachah, Absalom's daughter (2 Chronicles 11:20-22)
2. Michaiah, daughter of Uriel (2 Chronicles 13:2)

Isaiah:

There are good intelligible reasons to believe that entire book we know as "Isaiah" was not written only by the man known as the prophet Isaiah. There were other editors who came in after. It is highly

probable that at least two to three authors' works are contained in the compilation we know as Isaiah, one of whom was the prophet Isaiah. In this large compilation referred to as "Isaiah", there are a number of inconsistencies and abrupt and choppy places in the storyline, which demonstrate a likelihood of additions added to the original work (for example, read the *New Interpreter's Commentary on Isaiah* to help notice where; however, a good read through any English translation should make this apparent). There is a lot of more to the topic of the book of Isaiah that involves the original language and how the thought flow is not consistent throughout. Even though there are some odd and inconsistent elements to this book, this does not necessarily mean there are theological errors.

Do these realities mean that followers of Jesus should discard Isaiah? No. Is there revelation from God in this incredibly powerful book? This author believes "Yes." Revelation from God regarding himself, the world, his people Israel and what He's called them to do and what they failed to do, and his larger purpose for humanity are all found in the beautiful, powerful book. So Yes! Yet these great truths are encamped by a lot of troubling inconsistencies and choppy places, not to mention horrific descriptions of a God who is vindictive and brutally violent to anyone or anything who crosses him, like an abusive father or mother not knowing when to let up beating their children. If there is anything that is choppy, inconsistent, or error in this powerful book, it should be assumed that they are due to the mistakes of men, not God.

New Testament inconsistencies

1. Jesus Birth: Discrepancies between Matthew and Luke's narrative account

A. Matthew's account in chronological order

- 1). Jesus is born in Bethlehem and Maggi from the East follow a star to his home (Matthew 2:1-12).
- 2). Joseph is warned in a dream that he needs to flee to Egypt and so takes his family and flees (Matthew 2:13-15).
- 3). King Herod has all male children 2 years old and under killed (Matthew 2:16-18).
- 4). Joseph intends to move back to Bethlehem of Judea after Herod dies (not Nazareth as we would suspect if we read Luke's account), but because Joseph hears that Herod's son Archelaus is ruling in Judea, he moves farther north to Galilee, and ends up in the city of Nazareth (Matthew 2:19-23)

B. Luke's account in chronological order

- 1). Due to a census that Caesar Augustus required of all his empire, Joseph is forced to move temporarily from Nazareth to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-7).
- 2). Shepherds are met by angels and told the good news about the Messiah's birth (Luke 2:8-20)

3). Joseph and Mary take Jesus to the Jerusalem temple to be circumcised and offer sacrifices to the Lord according to the command in the Old Testament Scriptures (Luke 2:21-38).

4). After this week long period of time, they returned to Nazareth, which was their hometown (where they were from before moving to Bethlehem; no mention of rushing to Egypt as in Matthew's account. In fact, no mention of them fleeing to Egypt at all (Luke 2:39-40).

C. Discrepancies

1). Where are Joseph and Mary and Jesus from? Matthew likely intends his readers to think they are from Bethlehem. (Matthew 2:19-23). According to Luke, they are clearly from Nazareth originally (Luke 2:1-52).

a). After their time in Egypt escaping Herod's clutches, Joseph was intending to take the family back to Bethlehem; not Nazareth (Matthew 2:19-23).

b). According to Luke, they went back to Nazareth (Luke. 2:23).

2). Jesus is originally from Nazareth according to Luke and returns there after Caesar's census was taken and the purification ritual for Jesus was accomplished (Luke 2:1-4, 39).

3). Much of the account in Matthew and Luke could have happened, but it is clear that the events do not line up chronologically. Joseph and Mary's hometown is different depending on which author we trust. As some scholars suggest, it is probable that the author of Matthew and Luke each had particular theological goals in telling the story of Jesus so they give a different chronology.

4). Do we throw it all out? No, but we have to be honest with the discrepancies. We must be honest about what we are reading above a prior assumption of Biblical inerrancy.

2. The Day Jesus was crucified and died

A. Passover afternoon (*according to Mark*)

1. Jesus participated in the Passover feast; likely Thursday evening/pm (our Wednesday evening) (Mark 14:12-31).

2. Jesus dies the following afternoon around 3pm (the 9th hour); the day he died is technically still the same day of Passover since a Jewish day begins with the nightfall (when Passover was celebrated the night before) and continues through the afternoon of the following day; likely Thursday afternoon (our Thursday as well) (Mark 15:27-42).

3. The evening following Jesus death in afternoon was Preparation Day for the Sabbath; likely Friday evening (our Thursday evening) (Mark 15:42).

4. Sabbath begins our Friday evening and goes through Saturday afternoon.

B. Preparation Day for Passover/which is the day before Passover (*according to John*)

1. Jesus did not participate in the Passover (John 13:1-2; chapters 13-17 context)
2. Jesus died on the Preparation Day for Passover likely around noon/the sixth hour (John 19:13-16); this may also have been preparation day for the Sabbath coincidentally, but it's important to note that John assumes Passover celebration has not yet occurred.

3. The Resurrection account

1. Number of women at the tomb Sunday morning

- A. 2 women: Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (Matthew 28:1)
- B. 3 women: Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, and Salome (Mark 16:1)
- C. 3 women: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary mother of James (Luke 24:10)
- D. 1 woman: Mary Magdalene

2. Who did the women/woman meet at the tomb Sunday morning?

- A. 1 angel (Matthew 28:1-7)
- B. 1 man in white robe (Mark 16:5)
- C. 2 men (Luke 24:4)
- D. 2 angels (John 20:12)

3. Can you still believe in the resurrection even though there are some discrepancies?

- A. Absolutely!
- B. Whether it was one or two angels, a representative of God showed up and told the women (or woman) what had just happened.
- C. Whether it was one woman (Mary Magdalene) or a few women, the angel(s) met with her (or them) following his resurrection.
- D. The differences in accounts do not discredit the event, but rather it affirms that it likely did happen (the more the sources the more likely the event). Like any historical event, ancient or modern, when people report about an event sometimes the details are different depending on their point of view, line of sight, what they heard from others, etc. Rather than the differences being cause to dismiss the event, they are cause to believe something actually did happen. The entire reason for claiming there are

discrepancies in those passages is precisely because some (not all) of the details contradict or are different enough from each other. This is yet another reason why the strict view of Biblical inerrancy is not accurate.

4. What did Paul do immediately following his conversion accepting that Jesus is the Messiah of Jews and Lord of this world?

Galatians Letter account (a letter of Paul)

- A. Paul himself claims he did not consult “any flesh and blood” (Galatians 1:15-17)
- B. Paul did not go to Jerusalem to visit the apostles (Galatians 1: 17).
- C. Paul went to Arabia, and the back to Damascus (Galatians 1:17).
- D. After 3 whole years, Paul then went to Jerusalem to visit the apostle Peter, and then James, the brother of Jesus (Galatians 1:18-20).
- E. Then, he went to Syria and Cilicia (Galatians 1:21).

Acts (Luke the doctor’s account)

- A. In Damascus, he was with several disciples and was provided food and was strengthened by it (Acts 9:17-19).
- B. Immediately, he began preaching Jesus in the synagogues of Damascus (Acts 9:20-22).
- C. He ended up in Jerusalem at some point after (Acts 9:23-28).

Discrepancies between Galatians and Acts

- A. Paul in his Galatians letter claimed he did consult people but went to Arabia and Damascus following his encounter with Jesus.
- B. Luke in Acts claimed that Paul *immediately* began preaching in Damascus.
- C. He either began preaching immediately or he didn’t; the chronology does not sink together in both accounts. It makes more sense to go with Paul’s own letter for the chronology rather than Luke’s. That doesn’t mean we should throw out the entire book of Acts, but in this instance, Luke is likely incorrect when he wrote Acts.

More below

Theological discrepancies

What is God like and how does God express His character?

A. The portrait of God that we find in Jesus Christ

The revelation of God that supersedes all others is that revelation of God in the face and person of Jesus, taking careful attention to look at the whole span of Jesus's lifestyle and teaching which culminated on a Roman cross due to His love for all creation; the Revelation of God in Jesus is the revelation supersedes all others.

1. God's power is understood by the particular way (or manner) He demonstrates His power in and through and as Jesus (Mark 10:41-45)
 - a). serving and blessing humanity and creation both in life and in death by a cross (Mark 10:35-45; Galatians 3; 1 John 3:16; 1 John chapters 3-4, etc.).
 - b). washing the feet of his disciples (John 13:1-11).
 - c). spending time with those who are outcasts to give them value and show their worthiness to participate in the kingdom due to God's goodness and grace (Matthew 9, Mark 2, Luke 5, etc.).
 - d). healing people who others gave up on (Matthew 9; Mark 1-2; Mark 5, and (really) the entire gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John).
 - e). showing mercy as a priority over judgment (John 8; James 2:13, etc.).
 - f). by forgiving people, even 70 X 7 times (Matthew 18:22).
 - g). loving his enemies (Matthew 5:38-48).
2. God's love and mercy are unique in the particular way He demonstrates both His love and mercy in the entire life of Jesus and consummated at the cross of Jesus (John 3:16; 1 Corinthians 13; 2 Corinthians 5: 11-21; Ephesians 5:1-2; Colossians 1:1-29; Hebrews 1:1-2; 1 John 4:18-19; Isaiah chapters 52-53, the entire books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John; Psalm 86, Psalm 51, etc.).
3. God is patient (long suffering) and quick to show mercy (John 8; James 2:13, etc.).
4. God's judgment (or wrath/anger) is not a separate category of God different than His love (as some would have us to believe), but rather His judgment (or the way he judges humanity) is rooted in His love for humanity and is in fact an expression of His love (not visa versa...love is an expression of judgment). And the manner in which He demonstrates his judgment, or wrath (anger), is by continually giving people over their choices so that they might see how horrible living outside his good design their ways can be (Romans 1:16-32, etc.). He has decisively judged humanity's sins against him by Jesus' death on a Roman cross (John 3:1-17; 1 John 3:1-24; 1 John 4:1-19; Romans 1:16-32; Romans 3:1-30; Romans 5; 2 Corinthians 5; etc.). Instead of destroying humanity, he gave his life away.

5. God in Jesus cares about the young (both children and babies), including their innocence, and he opposes the behavior of anyone who would hinder children from coming to Jesus (Matthew 18:1-7; Matthew 19:13-15; Luke 17:1-4; Luke 18:15-17).

6. God in the face of Jesus expects his people to follow in the same way of Jesus (that is the way that Jesus lived so should we). (See all of Matthew 5, Romans 12, 1 John 3:16, Ephesians 5, among others). And for Jesus, that was non-violently forgiving those who sin against us, treating them the way we want to be treated (not the way we are treated), giving instead of taking, serving instead of cursing. This simply is a different way of being human.

B. An very different portrait of “God” (contrary to what Jesus taught)?

(The following includes some of the images in the Old Testament that are contrary; this does not mean all the images in the Old Testament are contrary; merely some)

1. God’s power is understood by overthrowing humanity and human authorities with great violent demonstrations when they disobey him or cross him. And he expects his people to follow his lead in destroying (violently) the people who do them harm.

a). destroying the whole world; men, women, children, babies (think about this for a moment...innocent babies) drowning them all in a great flood (Genesis 6-9). Most people today call this genocide and disprove of genocide.

b). ordering the annihilation of all 5 tribal groups in Canaan; or at least commanding Israel to do so; they never accomplished this fully; men, women, children, babies (everyone destroy utterly with a sword). (Exodus 23:20-33; Deuteronomy 20, etc. these particular commands in the Book of Joshua). Again, most people today call this genocide and disprove of genocide.

2. This portrait of “God?” is vicious when he punishes people; both his own people and others (see the above Scripture passages).

3. After looking at the Canaan account where God orders the annihilation of the entire 5 tribal groups of Canaan, including men, women, children, and babies (leave no survivors) in addition to the Noah account where God himself wipes out the entire earth’s population, including men, women, children, babies (drowning babies and children...again leaving no survivors), it is clear there is a stark contrast between those portrayals of God and what we find in the person, words, and lifestyle of Jesus. Jesus’ statements on forgiveness, people, and little children are a very different portrayal of God than some of the violent images of God in the Old Testament. Not all the portrayals of God in the Old Testament, but a large number of them.

Final thoughts

This is not to suggest that any use of physical force is evil or wrong, but it to say there is great contrast between some (not all) of the accounts of bloodshed in the Old Testament with the very words and

commands of Jesus, and Paul's command in Romans 12:1-21 ("bless those who persecute you, do not return evil with evil but return evil with good"), I cannot (nor should I) mesh these portrayals of God together. God in the face of Jesus is the definitive portrayal of who God is (Hebrews 1:1-4). Jesus commanded his followers to pray for and love our enemies. In the Old Testament, God instead orders the murder of men, women, children, and little babies both in the Noah story and the Canaan Account. Those are extremely different portrayals of God.

The author of this outline recognizes this is a very minimal summary account of the entire Bible. Many more Scriptures can be quoted and cited. Studies in the original language take this study to even further places that this outline did not uncover.