

Alleged Errors in the Bible—Part Three

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(Dr. Geisler continues the list of mistakes critics make when considering the Bible.)

Assuming 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 biblical writers express the same thing in different ways, or at least from different viewpoints, at different times, stressing different things. Hence, inspiration does not exclude a diversity of expression. The four Gospels relate the same story—often the same incidents—in different ways to different groups of people and sometimes even quotes 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).

Luke: "The Christ of God" (9:20).

Even the Ten Commandments, which were "written by the finger of God" (Deut. 9:10), are stated with variations the second time they are recorded (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.

New Testament Citations of the Old Testaments. Critics often point to variations in the New Testament use of Old Testament Scriptures as a proof of error. They forget that every *citation* need not be an exact *quotation*. Sometimes we use indirect and sometimes direct quotations. It was then (and is today) 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 New Testament citations of the Old Testament fall into different categories. Sometimes they are 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 New Testament, John, not God, is speaking. So it is changed to "They shall look on *him* whom they have pierced" (John 19:37).

At other times, writers cite only part of the Old Testament 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 farther he could not have made his central point from the text, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (vs. 21). The very next phrase, "And the day of vengeance of our God," refers to his second coming.

Sometimes the New Testament paraphrases or summarizes the Old Testament 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.” Several texts speak of the Messiah’s lowliness. To be from Nazareth, a Nazarene, was a byword for low status in the Israel of Jesus’ day.

There are instances where the New Testament applies a text in a different way than the Old Testament 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 Hosea 11:1). In no case does the New Testament misinterpret or misapply the Old Testament, nor draw some invalid implication from it. The New Testament makes no mistakes in citing the Old Testament, as critics do in citing the New Testament.

Assuming Divergent Accounts Are False. Because two or more accounts of the same event differ, does not mean they are mutually exclusive. 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. An infallible mathematical rule easily explains this problem: Where there are two, there is always one. Matthew did not say there was *only* one angel. There may also have been one angel at the tomb at one point on this confusing morning and two at another. One has to add the word “only” to Matthew’s account to make it contradict John’s. But if the critic comes to the texts to show they err, 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 are not mutually exclusive. If Judas hanged himself from a tree over the edge of a cliff or gully in this rocky area, and his body fell on sharp rocks below, then his entrails would gush out just as Luke vividly describes.

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 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).

Forgetting That the Bible Is Nontechnical. 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, every-day 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). Meteorologists still refer to the times of “sunrise” and “sunset.”

(This series concludes next week.)