

Articles on Inspiration

Did Moses Write the Pentateuch?

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Introduction

Most Christians have been taught in Sunday school that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. These books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, are often referred to as the Pentateuch or Torah. However, outside of the more conservative seminaries and churches, it is commonly held that Moses did not write these books, that they are a compilation of works by numerous writers over an extended period of time.

Religious studies courses at most universities teach that the Pentateuch is a composite work consisting of four literary strands. The four strands have been assigned the letters J, E, D, and P; each representing a different document or source that was woven into the fabric of the Bible. This set of assumptions has gone by a number of names including the documentary theory and the Graf-Wellhausen theory. According to this view, the letter "J" stands for the *Yahwist* ("J" from the German Jahweh) *narrative*, coming from the period of the early Jewish monarchy, about 950 B.C. "E" stands for the *Elohist narrative* from the region of the Northern Kingdom dating from about 750 B.C. "D" is best represented by the book of Deuteronomy and is said to have originated in the Southern Kingdom about 650 B.C. or later. And finally, "P" is the priestly document that comes from the period after the fall of Israel in 587 B.C. According to the theory, the Pentateuch reached its current form around the time of Ezra or about 400 B.C.

Why is the issue of Mosaic authority an important one? Those who accept the documentary or Graf-Wellhausen theory argue that the content of these books should be seen as a mixture of credible historical events and religious poetry sparked by man's religious imagination. For example, regarding Moses and God on Mount Sinai, one author of an Old Testament survey writes that, "It would be foolish, for instance, to rationalize the burning bush, as though this vision were something that could have been seen with the objective eye of a camera."^{1} Holders of this view reject the notion of supernatural revelation and regard much of the Pentateuch as folklore and Hebrew storytelling.

On the other hand, the conservative view holds to Mosaic authorship and treats the books as a literary unit. This does not mean that Moses didn't use other documents to write his books. He obviously did. But since other Old Testament authors affirm Mosaic authorship, as do numerous New Testament writers and the early church fathers, the veracity of the Bible as a whole begins to crumble if Moses is not the author of the Pentateuch.

In this article we will take a closer look at the source of the documentary theory regarding Mosaic authorship and offer a response that argues for the integrity of the Bible.

Origins Of The Documentary Hypothesis

For almost two thousand years Christians accepted Mosaic authorship of the first five books of the Bible. That's not to say that some didn't acknowledge problems with the text. Many had noted what seemed to be two separate creation stories in Genesis, as well as the problem of Moses recording his own death in Deuteronomy 34.

In 1753, a French physician named Jean Astruc began the modern study of source or literary analysis by writing a commentary on the book of Genesis.^{2} He noted that the first chapter of Genesis refers to God as Elohim, while the second chapter uses mostly Jehovah or Yahweh. Astruc believed that Moses must have used two different sources in writing Genesis, each having different names for God, and that the Elohim source was the older. This established the first principle of what would become known as the documentary hypothesis, the assumption that different divine names must mean different authors or sources. In 1780 Johann Eichhorn took this theory and ran with it. He applied the idea of two sources to the rest of Genesis, Exodus, and finally to most of the Pentateuch. He eventually gave up on the view of Mosaic authorship as well.

The next step came in 1805, when Wilhem De Wette argued that none of the Pentateuch was written before David. He established the "D" document standing for Deuteronomy, which he believed was written as propaganda to support political and religious unification in Jerusalem during the reign of king Josiah around 621 B.C. We now have three source documents: J, E, and D. Although others in the late 1700's and early 1800's found as many as thirty-nine fragments in Genesis alone, the final, "P" or Priestly document of the current theory was added by Hermann Hupfeld in 1853. He believed that the E source should be split in two, the later becoming the new P document.

The name most associated with the documentary hypothesis is Julius Wellhausen. His publications in the late 1870's didn't add much new information to the theory, but rather argued for it from a Darwinistic perspective. Wellhausen claimed that the J, E, D, P sequence followed the development from primitive animism towards the more sophisticated monotheism that would be expected as the Jewish culture and religion evolved. The impact of this connection was immediate and powerful.

Even though both liberal and conservative scholars removed much of the foundation of the documentary hypothesis in the twentieth century, the idea remains entrenched. As Gleason Archer states, "For want of a better theory . . . most non-conservative institutions continue to teach the Wellhausian theory, at least in its general outlines, as if nothing had happened in Old Testament scholarship since the year 1880."^{3}

Problems With The Documentary Hypothesis

Let's now look at the problems with this theory.

First, it should be mentioned that conservative experts did not sit idly by as this theory developed and spread. In the late 1800's Princeton Seminary scholars Joseph Alexander and William Green "subjected the documentarian school to devastating criticism which has never been successfully rebutted by those of liberal persuasion," according to Gleason Archer.^{4} In Germany, Ernst

Wilhem Hengstenberg ably defended the Mosaic authorship of all five books of the Pentateuch. His 1847 book *The Genuineness of the Pentateuch* did much to encourage conservative thinking.

It should also be noted that the Wellhausen theory found what it was looking for. The theory grew out of a movement to find rationalistic, natural explanations for the biblical text. Once one assumes that supernatural revelation cannot occur any other explanation must take precedent. The late dates and various authors assigned to the books allow for purely naturalistic sources. This is a textbook case of question begging. The underlying premise, that there can be no such thing as supernatural revelation, resulted in the conclusion that the Bible is not a supernaturally revealed document.{5}

Another problem with the theory is that it assumes that "Hebrew authors differ from any other writers known in the history of literature in that they alone were incapable of using more than one name for God," or for that matter, more than one style of writing.{6} It is interesting that the Qur'an (Koran) uses multiple names for God, but few question that Muhammad was its sole author. Regarding the various writing styles, it would be like arguing that C. S. Lewis could not possibly have written children's stories, literary critiques, science fiction, and allegorical satire; and insisting that numerous sources must have been involved. Educated as an Egyptian prince, Moses would have been exposed to many writing styles that were available during that period.

Another bias is evident in how critics regard the biblical data as unreliable and suspect, despite its old age even by their own dating methods. The tendency is to disregard the biblical content immediately when a non-biblical source disagrees with it, even when the biblical document is older. In the words of one conservative Old Testament scholar:

It makes no difference how many biblical notices, rejected as unhistorical by nineteenth-century pundits, have been confirmed by later archaeological evidence (such as the historicity of Belshazzar, the Hittites, and the Horites), the same attitude of skeptical prejudice toward the Bible has persisted, without any justification.{7}

In the next section we will continue to offer arguments against the documentary hypothesis and for the Mosaic authorship of the first five books of the Bible.

A Conservative Approach

Despite what Gleason Archer calls "The overwhelming contrary evidence from Genesis to Malachi," advocates of the Wellhausen theory cling to its most fundamental principle: that the religion of the Jews evolved from primitive animism to a more sophisticated monotheism.{8}

But their unsupported assumptions don't stop there. Modern scholars assume that Hebrew writers never used the repetition of ideas or occurrences even though authors in other ancient Semitic languages did so. They also assume that they can scientifically date the texts, even though they have no other ancient Hebrew writings to compare them with. Documentary scholars have felt free to amend the text by substituting more common words for rare or unusual words that they do not understand or do not expect to see in a given context.{9} Although it claims to be scientific, the documentary hypothesis is anything but neutral.

What are the arguments for Mosaic authorship? First, there are numerous passages in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy that point to Moses as author. For instance, Exodus 34:27 says, "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.'" In fact, there are references throughout the Old Testament (Joshua, 1 & 2 Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, and Malachi) that claim that Moses wrote the Pentateuch.

New Testament writers assumed that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible as well. In Matthew 19:8 Jesus refers to laws regarding marriage in Deuteronomy and credits Moses with writing them. In John 7:19 Jesus says, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me." In Romans 10:5 Paul states that Moses wrote the law. It would be hard not to attribute either deception or error to Christ and the apostles if Moses did not write the Pentateuch.

There are many other internal evidences that point to Mosaic authorship. The writer of Exodus gives eyewitness details of the event that only a participant would know about. The author of Genesis and Exodus also portrays remarkable knowledge of Egyptian names and places. This knowledge is evident even in the style of writing used. One scholar has noted that the writer used "a large number of idioms and terms of speech, which are characteristically Egyptian in origin, even though translated into Hebrew." {10}

Having received training in the most advanced literate culture of the day as well as having access to the Jewish oral tradition make Moses a remarkably able and likely candidate for God to use in documenting the founding of the Jewish nation.

Summary

Now let's consider the current state of Old Testament studies.

Since 1670, when the Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1631-1677) suggested that Ezra might have authored the Pentateuch, source criticism has grown to such an extent that it has successfully removed serious consideration of Mosaic authorship for many scholars. However, the twentieth century has seen the pillars supporting the Wellhausen theory, also known as the documentary hypothesis, weakened or removed. The result has been the uncomfortable reliance by many scholars on a system of literary criticism that no longer has a firm foundation. As one Old Testament scholar has written:

Wellhausen's arguments complemented each other nicely, and offered what seemed to be a solid foundation upon which to build the house of biblical criticism. Since then, however, both the evidence and the arguments supporting the structure have been called into question and, to some extent, even rejected. Yet biblical scholarship, while admitting that the grounds have crumbled away, nevertheless continues to adhere to the conclusions. {11}

Beginning at the turn of the century, scholars have challenged the divine-names criterion for determining authorship. W. F. Albright, who remained within the documentary camp, called the minute analysis of the Pentateuch after Wellhausen "absurd" and "irrational." {12} Hermann Gunkel, who introduced a new type of criticism called form criticism, came to the conclusion that "we really know nothing for certain about these hypothetical documents of the Graf-

Wellhausen hypothesis." {13} In other words, he refused to accept the numerous authors for the Pentateuch, particularly the J, E, and P sources, that had been speculated about by scholars for decades. There are too many critics to mention by name, but the cumulative effect has been substantial.

Where does this leave us today? In one sense it has left the scholarly community in search for new foundations. But even for those who reject the possibility of supernatural revelation, the evidence from archeology, the Dead Sea scrolls found at Qumran, and information about the languages of the ancient orient are making dependence on the Wellhausen theory inexcusable.

There is a trend among scholars to view the Pentateuch as a literary unit again. Scholars are admitting that the way the books use common words, phrases and motifs, parallel narrative structure, and deliberate theological arrangement of literary units for teaching and memorization support viewing the five books as a literary whole. {14} If this becomes the accepted view, Mosaic authorship can again be entertained.

Notes

1. Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding The Old Testament*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 37.
2. Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1975), 81.
3. Ibid., 88.
4. Ibid., 85.
5. Ibid., 105.
6. Ibid., 106.
7. Ibid., 107.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 108.
10. Ibid., 113.
11. R. K. Harrison, *Introduction To The Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 81.
12. Archer, 94.
13. Ibid., 95.
14. Andrew Hill & John H. Walton, *A Survey Of The Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 81.

<http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/moses.html> -- Accessed Dec. 20, 2006

2. SCRIPTURE

We have established that the Scripture is the ultimate authority in the Christian system, and that our knowledge of God depends on it. Therefore, it is appropriate to begin the study of theology by examining the attributes of Scripture.

THE NATURE OF SCRIPTURE

We must emphasize the verbal or propositional nature of biblical revelation. At a time when many deprecate the value of words in favor of images and feelings, we must note that God chose to reveal himself through the words of human language. Verbal communication is an adequate means of conveying information from and about God. This not only affirms the value of Scripture as a meaningful divine revelation, but it also affirms the value of preaching and writing as ways to communicate the mind of God as set forth in the Bible.

The very nature of the Bible as a propositional revelation testifies against the popular notions that human language is inadequate to speak about God, that images are superior to words, that music is of greater value than preaching, or that religious experiences can teach a person more about divine things than doctrinal studies.

Some argue that the Bible speaks in a language that produces vivid images in the mind of the reader. However, this is only a description of the reaction of some readers; other readers may not respond the same way to the same passages, although they may grasp the same information from them. So this does not count against the use of words as the best form of theological communication.

If images are superior, then why does the Bible not contain any drawings? Would not their inclusion be a way to ensure that no one forms the wrong mental pictures, if images are indeed an essential element in theological communication? Even if images are important in theological communication, the fact that God chose to use word images instead of actual drawings implies that words are sufficient, if not superior. But besides word images, the Scripture also uses words to discuss the things of God in abstract terms, not associated with any images.

A picture is not worth more than a thousand words. Suppose we present a drawing of Christ's crucifixion to a person with no Christian background. Without any verbal explanation, it would be impossible for him to ascertain the reason for his crucifixion and the significance it has for mankind. The picture itself shows no relationship between the event to anything spiritual or divine. The picture does not show whether the event was historical or fictional. The person looking at the drawing would not know if the one being put to death was guilty of any crime, and there would be no way of knowing the words he spoke while on the cross. Unless there are at least several hundred words explaining the

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picture, the image itself carries no theological meaning. But once there are that many words to explain it, one would hardly need the picture.

The view that extols music over verbal communication suffers the same criticisms. It is impossible to derive any religious meaning from music if it is performed without words. It is true that the Book of Psalms consists of a large collection of songs, providing us with a rich heritage for worship, reflection, and doctrine. However, the original tunes do not accompany the words of the psalms; no musical notation accompanies any of the songs in the Bible. In the mind of God, the value of the biblical psalms is in the words and not the tunes. Although music plays a role in Christian worship, its importance does not approach that of the words of Scripture or the ministry of preaching.

As for religious experiences, even a vision of Christ is not worth more than a thousand words from Scripture. One cannot test the validity of a religious experience, be it a healing miracle or an angelic visitation, without knowledge of the Scripture. The most spectacular supernatural encounters are void of meaning without verbal communication to inform the mind.

The entire Exodus episode could not have occurred if God had remained silent when he appeared to Moses through the burning bush. As Jesus appeared in a bright light on the road to Damascus, what if he had refused to answer when Saul of Tarsus asked him, "Who are you, Lord?" The only reason Saul realized who was speaking to him was because Jesus answered with the words, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:3-6). Religious experiences are meaningless unless accompanied by verbal communication carrying intellectual content.

Another erroneous perception regarding the nature of the Bible is to regard the Scripture as a mere record of revelatory discourses and events, rather than God's revelation in itself.

The person of Christ, his actions, and his miracles revealed the mind of God, but it is a mistake to think that the Bible is merely a written account of them. The words of the Bible themselves constitute God's revelation to us, and not only the events to which they refer.

Some fear that a strong devotion to Scripture implies prizing the record of a revelatory event more than the event itself. But if the Scripture possesses the status of divine revelation, then this concern is without warrant. Paul explains that "All *Scripture* is Godbreathed"

(2 Timothy 3:16). Scripture itself was breathed out by God. Although the events that the Bible records may be revelatory, the only objective divine revelation with which we have direct contact is the Bible.

Since the high view of Scripture we advocate here is the only one that the Bible itself affirms, Christians must reject every proposed doctrine of Scripture that compromises our access to the infallible revelation of God. Holding to a lower view of Scripture destroys revelation as one's ultimate authority, and it is then impossible to overcome the resulting problem of epistemology.¹

¹ See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions*.

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As long as one denies that Scripture is divine revelation in itself, it remains "just a book," and one hesitates to give it complete reverence, as if it is possible to excessively adore it. There are so-called Christian ministers who urge believers to look to "the Lord of the book, not the book of the Lord," or something to this effect. But since the words of Scripture were breathed out by God, and those words are our only objective and explicit revelation from God, it is impossible to look to the Lord without looking to his book. Since the words of Scripture are the very words of God, one is looking to the Lord only to the extent that he is looking to the words of the Bible. Our contact with God is through the words of Scripture. Proverbs 22:17-21 indicates that to trust the Lord is to trust his words:

Pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise; *apply your heart to what I teach*, for it is pleasing when you keep them in your heart and have all of them ready on your lips. *So that your trust may be in the LORD*, I teach you today, even you. Have I not written thirty sayings for you, sayings of counsel and knowledge, *teaching you true and reliable words*, so that you can give sound answers to him who sent you?

God rules his church through the Bible; therefore, our attitude toward it reflects our attitude toward God. No one who loves God does not love his words just as much. Those who claim to love him ought to demonstrate it by a zealous obsession with his words:

Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long...How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

(Psalm 119:97, 103)

The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. (Psalm 19:9-10)

A person loves God only to the extent that he loves the Scripture. There may be other indications of one's love for God, but love for his word is a necessary element, by which all other aspects of one's spiritual life are measured.

THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE

The Bible is the verbal or propositional revelation of God. It is God speaking to us. It is the voice of God itself. The very nature of the Bible indicates that verbal communication is the best way to convey divine revelation. No other way of knowing God is superior to studying the Scripture, and no source of information about God is more precise, accurate, and comprehensive.

The apostle Paul says:

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All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

All the words of the Bible were breathed out by God.² Everything that can be called Scripture was breathed out by God. That the Scripture is "God-breathed" refers to its divine origin. All of Scripture proceeds from God; therefore, we rightly call the Bible, "the word of God." This is the doctrine of DIVINE INSPIRATION.

The content of Scripture consists of the entire Old and New Testaments, sixty-six documents in total, functioning as an organic whole. The apostle Peter gives explicit endorsement to Paul's writings, recognizing their status as inspired Scripture:

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do *the other Scriptures*, to their own destruction. (2 Peter 3:15-16)

Peter explains that the men who wrote Scripture were "carried along by the Holy Spirit," so that no part of it "had its origin in the will of man," or by "the prophet's own interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

The Bible is an exact verbal revelation from God, so much so that Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, 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" (Matthew 5:18). God exercised such precise control over the Bible's production that its content, to the very letter, is what he desired to set in writing.

This high view of scriptural inspiration does not imply dictation. God did not dictate his word to the prophets and apostles as an employer would dictate his letters to a secretary. At first one may tend to think that dictation would be the highest form of inspiration, but this is not so. An employer may dictate his words to the secretary, but he has no control over the daily details of the latter's life – whether past, present, or future – and still less does he have power over the secretary's thoughts.

In contrast, the Bible teaches that God exercises total and precise control over every detail of his creation, to the extent that even the thoughts of men are under his control.³

² The word translated "given by inspiration of God" (KJV) or "inspired by God" (NASB) is *theopneustos*. It means expiration (to breath out) rather than inspiration (to breath in), thus the "God-breathed" in the NIV. Although "inspiration" is an acceptable theological term referring to the divine origin of Scripture, and as such remains useful, it fails to convey the literal meaning of *theopneustos*.

³ The Bible denies that man has "free will." Although the will of man exists as a function of the mind, it is not "free" in the sense that it can function independently from God's control. I will take up this topic later in this book.

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This is true of every individual, including the biblical writers. God so ordained, directed, and controlled the lives and thoughts⁴ of his chosen instruments, that when the time

came, their personalities and backgrounds were perfectly suited for writing those portions of Scripture God had assigned to them:⁵

The LORD said to him, "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say." (Exodus 4:11-12)

The word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." ...Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth." (Jeremiah 1:4-5, 9)

I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ...But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles...(Galatians 1:11-12, 15-16)

Then, at the time of writing, the Spirit of God superintended the process so that the content of Scripture was beyond what the writers' natural intelligence could conceive.⁶

The product was the verbal revelation of God, and it was to the very letter what he desired to set in writing. God did not *find* the right people to write Scripture; he *made* the right people to write it, and then superintended the writing process.⁷

Therefore, the inspiration of Scripture does not refer only to the times when the Holy Spirit exercised special control over the biblical writers, although that indeed happened, but the preparation began before the creation of the world. The theory of dictation, which the Bible does not teach, is in comparison a lower view of inspiration, ascribing to God less control over the process.

This view of inspiration explains the so-called "human element" evident in Scripture. The biblical documents reflect the various social, economic, and intellectual backgrounds of the authors, their different personalities, and their unique vocabularies and literary styles.

This phenomenon is what one would expect given the biblical view of inspiration, in

⁴ God determines every detail of a person's life – his ancestry, wealth, intelligence, education, personality, life span, geographical location, etc. Later sections of this book discuss the sovereignty of God.

⁵ God's precise control over men does not apply only to the prophets and apostles, but to every person (even the reprobate). However, God specifically ordered the lives of the biblical writers to the end that they may be prepared to write Scripture when the time came.

⁶ Scripture exceeds what human beings could produce without divine inspiration, but it is not beyond the ability of human beings to read and understand.

⁷ Some call this position ORGANIC INSPIRATION, but others consider the term ambiguous or misleading.

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which God exercised total control over the writers' lives, and not only the writing process. The "human element" of Scripture, therefore, does not damage the doctrine of inspiration, but is consistent with and explained by it.

THE UNITY OF SCRIPTURE

The inspiration of Scripture implies the unity of Scripture. That the words of Scripture proceeded from a single divine mind implies that the Bible should exhibit a perfect coherence. This is what we find in the Bible. Although the distinct personality of each biblical writer is evident, the content of the whole Bible exhibits a unity and design that betrays a single divine author. Internal consistency characterizes the various scriptural documents, so that one part does not contradict another.

Jesus assumes the coherence of Scripture as he responds to the following temptation from Satan:

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (Matthew 4:5-7)

Satan encourages Jesus to jump from the temple by citing Psalm 91:11-12. Jesus counters with Deuteronomy 6:16, implying that Satan's use of the passage contradicts the instruction from Deuteronomy, and therefore it is a misapplication. When one understands or applies a passage of Scripture in a manner that contradicts another passage, he mishandles the text. Christ's argument here assumes the unity of Scripture, and even the devil does not challenge it.

On another occasion, as Jesus deals with the Pharisees, his challenge to them assumes the unity of Scripture and the law of noncontradiction:

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied. He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, 'The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.' If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions. (Matthew 22:41-46)

Since David was "speaking by the Spirit," he could not have erred. But if Christ was to be a descendent of David, how could he be his Lord at the same time? That this poses a problem in the first place means that both Jesus and his audience assume the unity of Scripture and the law of noncontradiction. If they acknowledge that the Scripture

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contradicts itself, or that one can affirm two contradictory propositions, then Jesus would not be making a meaningful point at all. The answer here is that the Messiah is to be both divine and human, and therefore both "Lord" and "son" to David.

But it is popular to encourage a tolerance toward contradictions in theology. Alister McGrath writes in his *Understanding Doctrine*:

The fact that something is paradoxical and even self-contradictory does not invalidate it... Those of us who have worked in the scientific field are only too aware of the sheer complexity and mysteriousness of reality. The events lying behind the rise of quantum theory, the difficulties of using models in scientific explanation – to name but two factors which I can remember particularly clearly from my own period as a natural scientist – point to the inevitability of paradox and contradiction in any except the most superficial engagement with reality...⁸

This is nonsense. Granting that McGrath knows science well enough to speak on the subject,⁹ this is a testimony against science, and not an argument for tolerating contradictions in theology. He assumes the reliability of science and judges all other disciplines by it. To paraphrase him, if there are contradictions in science, then contradictions must be acceptable, and one must tolerate them when it comes to

theological reflection as well.

However, one reason to reject the reliability of science is precisely because it often contradicts itself. Science is a pragmatic discipline, useful for manipulating nature and advancing technology, but it cannot discover anything about reality. Knowledge about reality only comes from valid deductions from biblical revelation, and never from scientific or empirical methods.¹⁰ McGrath gives no argument for us to ignore or tolerate the contradictions in science; he just assumes the reliability of science despite the contradictions. But he gives no justification for doing this.

What makes science the ultimate standard by which we must judge all other disciplines? What gives science the right to make the rules for all other fields of study? McGrath states that science points "to the inevitability of paradox and contradiction in any except the most superficial engagement with reality." But science is not theology. Beyond "the most superficial engagement with reality" – although I deny the reliability of science even on such a level – science generates contradictions and crumbles, but this does not mean that theology suffers the same fate.

Theology deals with God, who has the right and power to govern all of life and thought. God knows the nature of reality, and communicates it to us through the Bible. Therefore,
⁸ Alister McGrath, *Understanding Doctrine*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990; p. 138.

⁹ He did his doctoral work in the field of molecular biophysics.

¹⁰ See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions*.

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it is theology that makes the rules for science, and a biblical system of theology contains no paradoxes or contradictions.

Any proposition affirming one thing is by necessity also a denial of its opposite. To affirm X is to deny not-X, and to affirm not-X is to deny X. For the sake of simplicity, assume that the opposite of X is Y, so that Y = not-X. Then, to affirm X is to deny Y, and to affirm Y is to deny X. Or, X = not-Y, and Y = not-X. Since to affirm a proposition is to at the same time deny its opposite, to affirm X and Y at the same time is the equivalent of affirming not-Y and not-X. To affirm two contradictory propositions is in reality to deny both. But to affirm both not-Y and not-X is also to affirm X and Y, which again means to deny Y and X. And thus the whole operation becomes meaningless. It is impossible to affirm two contradictory propositions at the same time.

To affirm the proposition, "Adam is a man" (X), is to at the same time deny the contradictory proposition, "Adam is not a man" (Y, or not-X). Likewise, to affirm the proposition, "Adam is not a man" (Y), is to deny the contradictory proposition, "Adam is a man" (X). Now, to affirm both "Adam is a man" (X) and "Adam is not a man" (Y) does nothing more than to deny both propositions in reverse order. That is, it is equivalent to denying "Adam is not a man" (Y) and "Adam is a man" (X). But then this returns to affirming the two propositions in reverse order again. When we affirm both, we deny both; when we deny both, we affirm both. Affirming two contradictory propositions therefore generates no intelligible meaning at all. It is to say nothing.

Assume that divine sovereignty and human freedom are contradictory. Some theologians, claiming that the Bible teaches both, encourage their readers to affirm both. However, if to affirm divine sovereignty is to deny human freedom, and to affirm human freedom is to deny divine sovereignty, then to affirm both only means to reject both divine sovereignty (in the form of an affirmation of human freedom) and human freedom (in the form of an affirmation of divine sovereignty). In this example, since the Bible affirms divine sovereignty and denies human freedom, there is no contradiction – not even an

apparent one.¹¹

On the other hand, when unbelievers allege that the incarnation of Christ entails a contradiction, which is the context for the above passage from McGrath, the Christian does not have the option to deny either the deity or the humanity of Christ. Rather, he must articulate and clarify the doctrine as the Bible teaches it, and show that there is no contradiction. The same applies for the doctrine of the Trinity.

It is futile to say that these doctrines are in perfect harmony in the mind of God, and only appear to be contradictions to human beings. As long as they remain contradictions, whether only in appearance or not, we cannot affirm both of them. And how can one distinguish between a real contradiction from an apparent one? If we must tolerate apparent contradictions, then we must tolerate all contradictions. Since without knowing the resolution, an apparent contradiction appears to be the same as a real one, to *know*

¹¹ See the relevant sections of this book that discuss the incarnation, the Trinity, and divine sovereignty vs. human freedom.

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that a "contradiction" is only so in appearance means that one has already resolved it, and then the term no longer applies.

Scientists and unbelievers may wallow in contradictions, but Christians must not tolerate them. Rather than abandoning the unity of Scripture or the law of noncontradiction as a "defense" against those who accuse biblical doctrines of being contradictory, we must affirm and demonstrate the coherence of these doctrines. On the other hand, Christians should expose the incoherence of non-Christian beliefs, and challenge their adherents to abandon them.

THE INFALLIBILITY OF SCRIPTURE

Biblical infallibility follows by necessity from the inspiration and unity of Scripture. The Bible contains no errors; it is correct in whatever it asserts. Since God does not lie or err, and the Bible is his word, it follows that everything written in it must be true. Jesus says, "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35), and that "It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law" (Luke 16:17).

The INFALLIBILITY of Scripture refers to an inability to err – the Bible *cannot* err.

INERRANCY, on the other hand, emphasizes that the Bible *does not* err. The former refers to the potential, while the latter addresses the actual state of affairs. Strictly speaking, *infallibility* is the stronger word, and it entails inerrancy, but sometimes the two are interchangeable in usage.

It is possible for a person to be fallible, but produces a text that is free from error. People who are capable of making mistakes nonetheless do not constantly err. However, there are those who reject the doctrine of inerrancy but at the same time desire to affirm the perfection of God and the Bible as his word, and as a result maintain the impossible position that the Bible is indeed infallible, but errant. Sometimes what they mean is that the Bible is infallible in one sense, perhaps as it relates to spiritual things, while it contains errors in another sense, perhaps as it relates to historical matters.

However, biblical statements about spiritual things are inseparably bound to biblical statements about history, so that it is impossible to affirm one while rejecting the other. For example, one cannot separate what Scripture says about the resurrection as a historical event and what it says about its spiritual meaning. If the resurrection did not happen as the Bible says it did, what it says about its spiritual significance cannot be true. The challenge to those who reject biblical infallibility and inerrancy is that they have no authoritative epistemological principle by which to judge one part of Scripture to be accurate and another part to be inaccurate. Since Scripture is the only objective source of

information from which the entire Christian system is constructed, one who considers any portion or aspect of Scripture as fallible or errant must reject the whole of Christianity. Again, this is because there is no higher epistemological principle to judge one part of Scripture to be right and another part to be wrong.

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One cannot question or reject the ultimate authority of a system of thought and still claim allegiance to it, since the ultimate authority in any system defines the entire system. Once a person questions or rejects the ultimate authority of a system, he is no longer an adherent of the system, but rather one who adheres to the principle or authority by which he questions or rejects the ultimate authority of the system that he has just left behind. To have an ultimate authority other than the Scripture is to reject the Scripture, since the Bible itself claims infallibility and ultimacy. One who rejects biblical infallibility and inerrancy therefore assumes the intellectual stance of an unbeliever, and must proceed to defend and justify his personal worldview against the believer's arguments for the truth of the Christian faith.

Confusion permeates the present theological climate; therefore, it is best to affirm both biblical infallibility and inerrancy, and explain what we mean by these terms. God is infallible, and since the Bible is his word, it cannot and does not contain any errors. We affirm that the Bible is infallible in every sense of the term, and therefore it must also be inerrant in every sense of the term. The Bible cannot and does not contain any errors, whether it is speaking of spiritual, historical, or other matters. It is correct in all that it affirms.

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

We need to determine the extent of the Bible's authority in order to ascertain the level of control that it ought to have over our lives. The inspiration, unity, and infallibility of Scripture imply that it possesses absolute authority. Since the Scripture is the very word of God, or God speaking, the necessary conclusion is that it carries the authority of God. Therefore, the authority of Scripture is identical to the authority of God.

Biblical writers sometimes refer to God and Scripture as if the two are interchangeable.

As Warfield writes, "God and the Scriptures are brought into such conjunction as to show that in point of directness of authority no distinction was made between them."¹²

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

(Genesis 12:1-3)

The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." (Galatians 3:8)

Then *the LORD* said to Moses, "Get up early in the morning, confront Pharaoh and say to him, 'This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me...But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might

¹² *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, Vol. 1*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 2000 (original: 1932); p. 283.

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show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth..." (Exodus 9:13-16)

For *the Scripture* says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name

might be proclaimed in all the earth." (Romans 9:17)

While the Genesis passage says that it was "the Lord" who spoke to Abraham, Galatians says, "The Scripture foresaw...[The Scripture] announced..." The passage from Exodus states that it was "the Lord" who told Moses what to say to Pharaoh, but Romans says, "the Scripture says to Pharaoh..."

Since God possesses absolute and ultimate authority, the Bible also carries absolute and ultimate authority. Since there is no difference between God speaking and the Bible speaking, there is no difference between obeying God and obeying the Bible. To believe and obey the Bible is to believe and obey God; to disbelieve and disobey the Bible is to disbelieve and disobey God. The Bible is not just an instrument through which God speaks to us; rather, the words of the Bible are the very words that God is speaking – there is no difference. The Bible is God's voice to mankind, and the authority of Scripture is total.

THE NECESSITY OF SCRIPTURE

The Bible is necessary for precise and authoritative information about the things of God. Since theology is central to all of life and thought, Scripture is necessary as a foundation to all of human civilization. Those who reject biblical authority nevertheless continue to assume Christian presuppositions to govern their life and thought, although they refuse to admit this. One task of the Christian apologist is to expose the unbeliever's implicit assumption of biblical premises despite their explicit rejection of them. But to the extent that any worldview consistently excludes biblical premises, it degenerates into skepticism and barbarism.

Biblical infallibility is the only justifiable first principle from which one may deduce information about ultimate issues such as metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics.

Knowledge belonging to subsidiary categories such as politics and mathematics are also limited to propositions deducible from biblical revelation. Without biblical infallibility as the starting point of one's thinking, knowledge is not possible at all; any other first principle fails to justify itself, and so a system that depends on it cannot even begin. For example, without a verbal revelation from God, there is no universal and authoritative reason to forbid murder and theft. The Bible is necessary for all meaningful propositions. Scripture is necessary for defining every Christian concept and activity. It governs every aspect of the spiritual life, including preaching, prayer, worship, and guidance. Scripture is also necessary for salvation to be possible, since the information necessary for salvation is revealed in the Bible, and must be conveyed to the individual for him to receive salvation. Paul writes, "the holy Scriptures...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15).

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An earlier section of this book points out that all men know that the Christian God exists, and that he is the only God. Men are born with this knowledge. Although this knowledge is sufficient to render unbelief culpable, it is insufficient for salvation. One gains knowledge about the work of Christ either directly from Scripture, or indirectly through the preaching or writing of another.

Therefore, the Scripture is necessary for knowledge leading to salvation, instructions leading to spiritual growth, answers to the ultimate questions, and for any knowledge about reality. It is the necessary precondition for all knowledge.

THE CLARITY OF SCRIPTURE

There are two extremes regarding the clarity of Scripture that Christians must avoid. One maintains that the meaning of Scripture is totally obscure to the average person – only an elite and chosen group of individuals may interpret it. The other view claims that the

Scripture is so clear that no part of it is difficult to understand, and that no training in hermeneutics is required to handle the text. By extension, the interpretation of a seasoned theologian is no more reliable than an untrained person's opinion.

The former position closes off the use of Scripture from the general populace, and prevents anyone from challenging the biblical understanding of the established professionals, even when they are mistaken.

The latter position is also dangerous. The Bible is not so easy to understand that every person can interpret it with equal competence. Even the apostle Peter, when referring to the writings of Paul, says, "His letters contain some things that are hard to understand." He warns that "ignorant and unstable people distort" the meaning of Paul's words, "as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16).

Many people would like to think of themselves as competent in important matters such as theology and hermeneutics, but instead of praying for wisdom and studying the Scripture, they assume that they are just as capable as the theologians or their own pastors. This way of thinking invites disaster and confusion. Diligence, training, and divine endowment all contribute to one's ability to interpret and apply the Bible.

Although many passages in the Bible are easy to understand, some of them require extra diligence and special wisdom to accurately interpret. It is possible for a person to read the Scripture and gain from it sufficient understanding and knowledge for salvation, although sometimes one may need help from an instructed believer even for this:

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?"

So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. (Acts 8:30-31)

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It is also possible to learn the basic tenets of the Christian faith just by reading the Bible. But there are passages in the Bible that are, to differing degrees, difficult to understand. In those cases, one may enlist the assistance of ministers and theologians to explain the passages, so as to avoid distorting the word of God.

Nehemiah 8:8 affirms the place of the preaching ministry: "They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read." However, the final authority rests in the words of Scripture themselves, and not in the interpretations of scholars. Scripture is never wrong, although our understanding of and inferences from it may at times be mistaken. This is why every church should train its members in theology, hermeneutics, and logic, so that they may better handle the word of truth.

Therefore, although the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture grants every person the right to read and interpret the Bible, it does not eliminate the need for teachers in the church, but rather affirms their necessity. Paul writes that one ministerial office God has established is that of the teacher, and he has appointed individuals to fulfill such a role (1 Corinthians 12:28). But James warns that not many should be eager to take up such an office: "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1). In another place, Paul writes, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment..." (Romans 12:3).

Those chosen by God to be doctrinal ministers are able to interpret the more difficult passages in Scripture, and can also extract valuable insights that may elude others from the simpler passages as well. Ephesians 4:7-13 refers to this office as one of Christ's gifts to his church, and therefore Christians ought to value and respect those standing in such a

ministry.

We live in a generation in which people despise authority; they detest being told what to do or believe.¹³ Most do not even respect biblical authority, let alone ecclesiastical authority. They consider their opinion just as good as that of the apostles, or at least the theologians or pastors; their religion is democratic, not authoritarian. But Scripture commands believers to obey their leaders: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Hebrews 13:17). Every believer has the right to read the Bible for himself, but this must not translate into illegitimate defiance¹⁴ against the learned teaching of scholars or the authority of church leaders.

¹³ But of course they think this way only because they have been taught to do so.

¹⁴ Since there is no difference between obeying God and obeying Scripture, and since Scripture is our direct contact with the revealed will of God, the immediate object of our allegiance is the Bible (Acts 17:11), by which we may test the teachings and practices of those with learning and authority in the church. Therefore, teachings and practices that deny scriptural doctrines, such as biblical infallibility and Christ's resurrection, constitute sufficient grounds for defying authority. "We must obey God rather than men!" (Acts 5:29).

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THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

Many Christians claim to affirm the sufficiency of Scripture, but their actual thinking and practice deny it. The doctrine affirms that the Bible contains sufficient information for one not only to find salvation in Christ, but afterward to receive instruction and guidance in every aspect of life and thought, either by the explicit statements of Scripture, or by necessary inferences from it.

The Bible contains all that is necessary to construct a comprehensive Christian worldview that enables us to have a true view of reality.¹⁵ The Scripture conveys to us not only the will of God in the general matters of Christian faith and conduct, but by applying biblical precepts, we can also know his will in our specific and personal decisions. Everything that we need to know as Christians is found in the Bible, whether we are functioning at home, work, or church.

Paul writes that the Scripture is not only divine in origin, but that it is also comprehensive in scope:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be *thoroughly* equipped for *every* good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

The necessary implication is that extra-biblical means of guidance such as visions and prophecies are unnecessary, although God may still provide them when he pleases. Problems occur when Christians hold a position that amounts to a denial of the Scripture's sufficiency in providing comprehensive instruction and guidance. Some complain that the Bible lacks specific information one needs to make personal decisions; however, in light of Paul's words, it must be that the fault rests on these individuals, and not that the Bible is insufficient.

Those who deny the sufficiency of Scripture lack the information they need because of their spiritual immaturity and negligence. The Bible is indeed sufficient to guide them, but they neglect to study it. Some also exhibit strong rebellion and impiety. Although the Bible addresses their situations, they refuse to submit to its commands and instructions. Or, they refuse to accept the very method of receiving guidance from Scripture altogether, and demand that God guides them through visions, dreams, and prophecies when he has given them what they need through the Bible.

When God does not grant their illegitimate demands for extra-biblical guidance, some even decide to seek it through forbidden methods, such as astrology, divination, and other occult practices. Their rebellion is such that if God does not provide the desired

¹⁵ See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions*, for a system of apologetics that is consistent with the sufficiency of Scripture. Although it permits the use of extra-biblical arguments for certain purposes, it does not require them; rather, it affirms that the Bible is sufficient for both defense and offense when confronting any non-biblical worldview.

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information in the ways prescribed by them, they are determined to obtain it from the devil.

Knowledge of God's will does not come from extra-biblical guidance, but an intellectual grasp and application of Scripture.¹⁶ The apostle Paul writes:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2)

Christian theology must affirm without reservation the sufficiency of Scripture as a comprehensive source of information, instruction, and guidance. The Bible contains the whole will of God, including the information one needs for salvation, spiritual development, and personal guidance. It contains sufficient information so that, if one were to fully obey it, he would be fulfilling the will of God in every detail of life. But he commits sin to the extent that he fails to obey Scripture. Although our obedience will never attain perfection in this life, it remains that there is no information that we require to live a perfect Christian life that is not already in the Bible.

¹⁶ See Vincent Cheung, "Biblical Guidance and Decision-Making," *Godliness with Contentment*.

<http://www.rmiweb.org/books/theology2003.pdf> Accessed Dec. 20, 2006