FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

BIBLIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Word of God

UNIT 3: THE INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE

Lesson 9

OBJECTIONS TO INERRANCY AND THEIR ANSWERS

Facing the Hard Questions Honestly

Key Texts: Psalm 119:89; Isaiah 40:8

> *"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."*
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> **2 Timothy 3:16–17, NASB 1995**

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Introduction

Lessons 7 and 8 established the doctrine of inerrancy on its theological foundations and defended the inseparability of infallibility and inerrancy against the neo-evangelical attempt to drive a wedge between them. We have seen that inerrancy follows necessarily from the character of the God who breathed out Scripture, that it extends to all that Scripture affirms across every subject it addresses, and that the attempt to restrict biblical authority to matters of faith and practice while conceding errors in history and science produces a theological incoherence that has nowhere in history remained stable.

Now we must engage the objections directly. The case for inerrancy is not complete until it has faced the hard questions honestly. Critics of inerrancy do not typically rest their case on abstract philosophical arguments; they point to specific passages, specific apparent contradictions, specific features of the text that they argue constitute genuine errors. These are not merely academic puzzles; they are the questions that believers in our pews encounter, that our children face in college classrooms, and that our neighbors raise when the conversation turns to the reliability of the Bible.

This lesson does not promise to resolve every difficulty. The honest truth is that some alleged discrepancies have not yet yielded a fully satisfying resolution, and intellectual integrity requires us to acknowledge that. But the lesson will do something more important than promising easy answers: it will equip you with principles for engaging these difficulties faithfully, drawn from the nature of ancient historiography, the conventions of ancient citation, the discipline of textual criticism, and the theology of a God whose Word stands forever. And it will offer a pastoral framework for living with unanswered questions while maintaining a settled and joyful confidence in the inerrant Word.

The inerrancy of Scripture does not depend on our ability to answer every objection. It depends on the character of the God who breathed it out. Our inability to resolve a particular difficulty reflects the limits of our knowledge, not the limits of God's truthfulness. With that conviction in place, we can engage the hard questions without anxiety and often find, to our delight, that the questions are considerably less formidable than their critics suggest.

I. ALLEGED CONTRADICTIONS: PRINCIPLES FOR HARMONIZATION AND THE HUMILITY OF DEFERRED ANSWERS

The charge of contradiction is the most common and most emotionally potent objection to inerrancy. When two biblical passages appear to make incompatible claims about the same event or person, the critic concludes that at least one of them must be false, and therefore that the Bible contains errors. The inerrantist must engage this charge with both intellectual rigor and honest humility.

A. The Logic of Alleged Contradictions

It is important to be precise about what an alleged contradiction actually proves. A contradiction between two statements A and B exists only if A and B cannot both be true at the same time and in the same sense. Two statements that appear to conflict may not actually contradict each other if they are describing different aspects of the same event, using different but compatible counting methods, employing different literary conventions, or speaking with different degrees of specificity. The appearance of conflict does not establish the reality of contradiction.

Before concluding that a genuine contradiction exists in the biblical text, the careful interpreter must ask several questions. Are both passages speaking about exactly the same event, person, or quantity? Are both using the same literary conventions and standards of precision? Is there any plausible explanation, consistent with ancient historiographical practice, that would make both statements simultaneously true? Has all available historical and archaeological evidence been brought to bear? Only after these questions have been thoroughly explored and no satisfactory resolution has been found can an apparent contradiction be treated as a genuine one. And even then, the epistemically humble response is not to conclude that Scripture has erred but to recognize that our current knowledge may be insufficient for a resolution that further study will provide.

B. Principles for Harmonization

Proper harmonization is not the desperate special pleading of someone trying to defend an indefensible position. It is the natural and appropriate interpretive response to an inerrant text. When two inerrant witnesses to the same event give accounts that appear to differ, the right response is not to declare one of them wrong but to seek the explanation that makes both accounts accurate. The following principles guide responsible harmonization:

1. Distinguish the author's assertion from the author's accommodation. The biblical authors wrote in the literary conventions of their own time and culture. Round numbers, approximations, and observational descriptions of the natural world are not errors; they are features of ordinary human communication that are fully consistent with inerrancy.

2. Consider the possibility of different perspectives on the same event. Parallel accounts of the same event may present different details because each author selected and arranged material to serve his particular theological and rhetorical purpose. Selectivity is not falsification; it is the normal practice of every historian in every era.

3. Recognize that silence is not contradiction. If one account mentions a detail that another omits, the omission does not constitute a denial. Matthew's account of an event may include details that Mark omits; this is not a contradiction but the natural result of each author's selective presentation.

4. Apply the benefit of the doubt that any inerrant document deserves. A judge who receives two witness statements that appear to conflict does not immediately conclude that one witness is lying; she looks for the explanation that makes both statements truthful. The inerrant Scripture deserves at least the same benefit of the doubt.

C. The Humility of Deferred Answers

Some apparent difficulties in Scripture have not yet been satisfactorily resolved, and intellectual honesty requires acknowledging this. The history of biblical scholarship, however, counsels patience rather than concession. Case after case that once appeared intractable has been resolved by subsequent archaeological discovery, philological insight, or improved understanding of ancient literary conventions. The Tel Dan inscription, the Pilate Stone, the existence of the Hittites, and the historicity of Belshazzar as a co-regent were each once cited as biblical errors by critics who lacked the historical evidence that subsequent discovery provided.

The posture of epistemological humility says: "I do not yet have a satisfying explanation for this difficulty, but I have good reasons, rooted in the character of God and the track record of the text, to believe that a resolution exists even if I cannot currently articulate it." This is not intellectual cowardice; it is the rational response of a finite interpreter engaging a text whose Author is omniscient. The absence of a currently available answer is not evidence of an error in the text; it is evidence of a gap in our knowledge.

II. THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM: HOW THE GOSPELS RELATE TO ONE ANOTHER WITHOUT ERROR

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) share substantial amounts of common material, often in strikingly similar wording, order, and detail. They also differ from one another in significant ways: in the order of events, in the inclusion or omission of specific details, in the precise wording of sayings attributed to Jesus, and in the theological emphasis of their presentations. These similarities and differences together constitute what scholars call the Synoptic Problem, and they have generated an enormous body of scholarly discussion about the literary relationship among the three Gospels.

For the doctrine of inerrancy, the critical question is not which Gospel was written first or what sources the evangelists used. The critical question is whether the differences among the Synoptics constitute genuine errors or whether they are consistent with the inerrancy of all three accounts. The answer is the latter, and the key is understanding how ancient historical writing actually worked.

A. Ancient Historiography and the Standard of Accuracy

Modern historical writing aims at verbatim precision in quotation and strict chronological sequencing. Ancient historical writing did not hold itself to these standards, not because ancient historians were less honest but

because they operated under different literary conventions that were well understood by their audiences. Ancient biographers and historians regularly paraphrased speeches rather than quoting them verbatim, arranged events thematically rather than strictly chronologically, compressed multiple events into single narrative sequences, and adapted earlier sources to serve their own rhetorical and theological purposes. None of these practices constituted dishonesty by ancient standards; they were the accepted conventions of the genre.

The Gospel writers were writing in accordance with the conventions of ancient biographical and historical writing. When Matthew records a saying of Jesus in slightly different words than Luke, neither account is erroneous; both accurately represent what Jesus said in the form that best serves each author's theological and rhetorical purposes. When Luke presents events in a different order than Matthew, neither account is mistaken; each author has arranged his material in the order that best serves his narrative strategy. The standards by which we must evaluate the Gospels are the standards of ancient biographical writing, and by those standards the Gospels are remarkably accurate.

B. Specific Examples

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) and the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17–49) present similar but not identical teaching. Some scholars treat this as a contradiction; others recognize that Jesus, like any traveling teacher, would have taught similar material to different audiences on different occasions, and that Matthew and Luke have each recorded a distinct but thematically related discourse. A third possibility is that both are presenting the same discourse with each author selecting and adapting the material for his audience. None of these explanations requires either account to be false.

The accounts of Peter's denials, the cleansing of the Temple, the healing of the Centurion's servant, and the sequence of events surrounding the resurrection all present differences that critics point to as contradictions. In each case, careful attention to ancient literary conventions, the distinct theological purposes of each evangelist, and the flexibility of ancient biographical writing provides a plausible and often compelling harmonization. The Gospels are not four attempts to tell the same story with identical detail; they are four distinct, purposive, theologically shaped witnesses to the same life, death, and resurrection, and their differences reflect the richness of that witness rather than its unreliability.

III. NUMERICAL DISCREPANCIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Some of the most frequently cited alleged errors in Scripture involve numerical discrepancies between parallel accounts in the Old Testament, particularly between Samuel-Kings and Chronicles and between different census figures. The most often cited example is the census figure of 2 Samuel 24:9 versus 1 Chronicles 21:5:

2 Samuel 24:9: "Joab reported to the king the number of the registration of the people: in Israel there were 800,000 valiant men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were 500,000 men."

1 Chronicles 21:5: "Joab gave the number of the registration of all Israel to David: in all Israel there were 1,100,000 men who drew the sword; and Judah was 470,000 men who drew the sword."

The figures differ: Samuel gives 800,000 for Israel and 500,000 for Judah; Chronicles gives 1,100,000 for Israel and 470,000 for Judah. Are these contradictory errors?

Several explanations have been proposed, each of which has scholarly support. One is that the two accounts are counting different populations: Samuel may be counting only certain categories of fighting men while Chronicles counts a broader or differently defined population. Another is that Samuel's 800,000 excludes the standing army of 288,000 already stationed throughout Israel (mentioned in 1 Chronicles 27), while Chronicles' 1,100,000 includes them. The difference in the Judah figures (500,000 vs. 470,000) may reflect a similar distinction between the regular army and additional units, or may reflect the use of round numbers by one or both authors.

None of these explanations is forced or implausible; each reflects a plausible reconstruction of how two authors, writing about the same census from slightly different perspectives and with different counting conventions, could accurately report different but compatible figures. The difficulty is real, and a fully satisfying resolution has not achieved universal scholarly consensus, but the existence of plausible explanations is sufficient to prevent the conclusion that a genuine error has been demonstrated. The inerrantist's position is not that these difficulties are trivial but that they do not rise to the level of proven contradictions.

The same analysis applies to other numerical discrepancies in the Old Testament: the regnal years of the Israelite and Judahite kings (which are reconciled by accounting for co-regencies, different calendar systems, and different methods of counting the first year of a reign), the population figures of the census in Numbers versus those in Exodus, and various figures in the parallel accounts of Kings and Chronicles. In each case, the apparent discrepancy has one or more plausible resolutions when the full range of ancient counting conventions and historiographical practices is brought to bear.

IV. QUOTATION PRACTICES IN THE ANCIENT WORLD: PARAPHRASE, TELESCOPING, AND INTERPRETIVE CITATION

A large class of apparent errors in the New Testament involves the way the apostolic writers quote or allude to the Old Testament. Critics frequently note that New Testament citations of the Old Testament do not always reproduce the original wording exactly. They sometimes follow the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) rather than the Hebrew text, sometimes combine multiple passages without indicating the combination, and sometimes adapt wording to fit a new context. Are these discrepancies between citation and original errors?

The answer requires understanding how quotation functioned in the ancient world, a world without quotation marks, without the scholarly apparatus of modern academic citation, and with different expectations about what it meant to cite an earlier source faithfully.

A. The Ancient Standard of Faithful Citation

In the ancient world, faithful citation did not mean verbatim reproduction. Ancient writers, including the most careful and conscientious historians, regularly paraphrased their sources rather than quoting them word for word.

The goal was to capture the meaning and substance of the source accurately, not to reproduce its precise wording. This was true of historians like Thucydides and Josephus, of philosophers like Philo, and of rabbinic interpreters of Scripture. The New Testament writers were operating within this cultural and literary context, and their citation practices must be evaluated by its standards.

When Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:23 following the Septuagint's rendering ("virgin" for the Hebrew 'almah) rather than the more ambiguous Hebrew term, he is not making an error; he is following the authoritative Greek translation of his audience and making a legitimate interpretive decision about the meaning of the original Hebrew. When the author of Hebrews in Hebrews 10:5–7 quotes Psalm 40:6–8 in a form that differs from the Hebrew Masoretic text, he is working from the Septuagint and applying the psalm's meaning to the work of Christ in a way fully consistent with its original theological intent. These are not errors; they are the Spirit-superintended application of ancient Scripture to its fulfillment in Christ.

B. Telescoping

Telescoping is the practice of compressing a sequence of events into a single narrative without explicit indication of the time gap between them. It is a standard and entirely legitimate feature of ancient historical writing. When Matthew's account of the temptation of Jesus moves directly from the temptation in the wilderness to the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry, he is not claiming that no time elapsed between them; he is telescoping a sequence of events into a compressed narrative form. When an evangelist moves directly from one healing account to another without specifying how much time intervened, he is employing the normal conventions of ancient biographical writing.

Critics who treat telescoping as an error are applying a modern standard of narrative precision to ancient texts that neither claimed nor observed that standard. The ancient reader understood telescoping; it was part of the literary air he breathed. Evaluating the Gospels by the standards of a modern journalistic account is like criticizing an ancient map for failing to achieve satellite-image accuracy.

C. Combining Texts

The New Testament authors sometimes combine or weave together multiple Old Testament texts into a single citation or allusion, without flagging the combination for the reader. Mark 1:2–3, for example, introduces a quotation with the phrase "as it is written in Isaiah the prophet" but then cites both Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. Matthew 27:9–10 attributes a quotation primarily to Jeremiah that draws on both Zechariah 11:12–13 and Jeremiah 32:6–9.

These practices reflect the ancient technique of conflation (weaving together related texts to create a composite citation that captures a theological theme), and they were well understood by ancient audiences familiar with the scriptural tradition. They are not errors in citation; they are the Spirit-guided application of the typological and prophetic unity of Scripture to its fulfillment in Christ. To read them as errors is to misread the literary and hermeneutical conventions within which they operate.

V. INERRANCY AND TEXTUAL CRITICISM: THE AUTOGRAPHS VS. THE COPIES

A distinct class of objection to inerrancy comes not from alleged contradictions within the biblical text but from the history of the text's transmission. Inerrancy applies to the original autographs, the manuscripts as produced by the inspired human authors. But we no longer possess the autographs. We possess thousands of copies of the original text, made across many centuries, and those copies contain differences from one another. Does the existence of these textual variants undermine the doctrine of inerrancy?

A. The Science of Textual Criticism

Textual criticism is the academic discipline concerned with recovering the original wording of an ancient document from the manuscript tradition. For the New Testament, textual critics have at their disposal over 5,800 Greek manuscripts, supplemented by thousands of manuscripts in early translations (Latin, Syriac, Coptic) and by extensive quotation of the New Testament in the writings of the early church fathers. No other ancient document comes remotely close to this level of manuscript attestation.

The discipline has developed rigorous principles for evaluating manuscripts and identifying copying errors. When manuscripts differ from one another, textual critics examine internal evidence (which reading best explains how the others arose, which is more consistent with the author's style and usage) and external evidence (which manuscripts are older, which manuscript families are most reliable) to determine which reading most probably represents the original. The result of this careful, centuries-long discipline is a reconstructed text of the New Testament that scholars have extraordinarily high confidence represents what the original autographs said.

B. The Significance of the Variants

The existence of approximately 400,000 variants across the New Testament manuscript tradition sounds alarming until the nature of those variants is examined. The vast majority are trivial: differences in spelling, variations in word order (which do not affect meaning in a highly inflected language like Greek), the presence or absence of a definite article, the substitution of a synonym. Of the variants that are meaningful enough to be translated differently in any English version, an even smaller percentage affect the sense of the text in any significant way. And of those, none affect any essential doctrine of the Christian faith.

As Warfield and more recently Daniel Wallace have demonstrated, the New Testament text is far better preserved and far more reliably reconstructed than any other document from the ancient world. We can say with very high confidence that our critical editions of the Greek New Testament represent what the original authors wrote. The existence of variants does not undermine inerrancy; it is precisely what we would expect from a text that was copied by hand thousands of times across many centuries and cultures, and the science of textual criticism gives us excellent tools for recovering the original from among those copies.

The same analysis applies, with appropriate adjustments, to the Old Testament. The Masoretic text tradition, carefully preserved by Jewish scribal guilds, is remarkably reliable. That reliability was dramatically confirmed by the Dead Sea Scrolls (discovered 1947–56), which demonstrated that the text of the Hebrew Bible had been transmitted with extraordinary fidelity across a period of approximately 1,000 years.

VI. THE BART EHRMAN OBJECTION: DO TEXTUAL VARIANTS UNDERMINE INERRANCY?

The most influential popular-level challenge to biblical inerrancy in recent decades has come from Bart Ehrman, a former evangelical who is now a distinguished New Testament scholar at the University of North Carolina. Ehrman's 2005 book Misquoting Jesus brought the academic discussion of textual variants to a wide popular audience with the argument that, since the manuscripts we possess differ from one another and since we no longer have the original autographs, we cannot know what the New Testament originally said, and therefore the doctrine of inerrancy is irrelevant even if it were true.

A. Assessing the Objection

Ehrman's argument depends on a significant overstatement of the uncertainty created by textual variants. As his former mentor Bruce Metzger, widely regarded as the greatest New Testament textual critic of the twentieth century, maintained throughout his career, the textual tradition of the New Testament is so extensive and so carefully studied that scholars can reconstruct the original text with very high confidence. Ehrman himself acknowledged in a debate with Metzger that the essential message of the New Testament is not in doubt; what is at stake in the variants are matters of detail, not matters of substance.

The claim that we cannot know what the New Testament originally said is a dramatic overstatement that Ehrman's own scholarly work does not actually sustain. His critical edition of the Greek New Testament (co-authored with Bruce Metzger) is itself a confident reconstruction of the original text, made possible by the very discipline of textual criticism that Ehrman invokes as evidence of uncertainty. The existence of variants is the starting point of textual criticism, not its refutation.

B. The Inerrancy Claim Properly Understood

There is also a category confusion in Ehrman's objection. The doctrine of inerrancy has always applied to the autographs, not to every subsequent copy. Evangelical theologians have never claimed that every handwritten copy of the New Testament is without error; the doctrine is explicitly limited to the original documents produced by the inspired authors. The existence of copying errors in the manuscript tradition is entirely consistent with inerrancy, as the Chicago Statement explicitly acknowledges.

Ehrman's objection, properly analyzed, shows that inerrancy does not apply to copies, which is precisely what inerrantists have always said. What his argument does not show is that the original autographs contained errors, or that we cannot recover the content of those autographs with sufficient reliability to ground a confident confidence in the biblical text. The textual tradition of the New Testament is robust enough to sustain that confidence, and textual criticism is the tool that enables us to exercise it responsibly.

VII. THE PASTORAL RESPONSE: LIVING WITH UNANSWERED QUESTIONS WHILE TRUSTING THE GOD WHO HAS SPOKEN

This lesson has engaged specific objections to inerrancy and demonstrated that they are either resolvable through careful attention to ancient literary conventions or manageable through epistemological humility about the limits of current knowledge. But there is a pastoral dimension to the inerrancy question that no amount of apologetics can fully address: What do we do when we encounter a difficulty in Scripture that we cannot currently resolve, and when that difficulty is causing real spiritual distress?

The pastoral response to unresolved difficulties in Scripture rests on three convictions.

A. The Character of God Provides the Ground for Trust

Our confidence in the inerrancy of Scripture does not ultimately rest on our ability to resolve every alleged contradiction. It rests on the character of the God who breathed it out. "Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven" (Psalm 119:89, NASB 1995). The permanence and reliability of God's Word is grounded not in our ability to defend it but in the nature of the One who gave it. A finite interpreter's inability to resolve a particular difficulty in an infinite God's Book says more about the finitude of the interpreter than about the reliability of the Book.

Isaiah 40:8, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever," is not merely a promise about the physical preservation of a text. It is a declaration about the indestructible reliability of God's communication. The Word that stands forever is a Word that is forever true. Difficulties in our understanding of that Word do not shake its standing; they reveal the distance between our understanding and its Author's.

B. The Track Record of the Text Counsels Patience

The history of biblical criticism is, in significant measure, a history of alleged errors that turned out not to be errors. The existence of the Hittites, doubted by critics in the nineteenth century, was confirmed by archaeological discovery. The historicity of Belshazzar as a co-regent of Babylon, doubted on the basis of extra-biblical records that mentioned only Nabonidus, was confirmed when cuneiform tablets revealed Belshazzar's actual role. The specific pool of Bethesda in John 5, doubted as legendary, was excavated in Jerusalem and found to match the Gospel's description precisely. The Pool of Siloam in John 9, similarly doubted, was identified archaeologically in 2004.

This track record does not prove that every currently unresolved difficulty will be resolved in the same way. But it does establish a pattern: the text is remarkably robust under historical investigation, and many of the most confident pronouncements of biblical error have been quietly revised in the light of new evidence. The believer who exercises patience with currently unresolved difficulties is not being credulous; he is being rational, reasoning from the track record of a text that has consistently vindicated itself when the relevant evidence became available.

C. Unresolved Questions Are Not Unbelief

One of the most important pastoral points in this discussion is the distinction between unresolved questions and unbelief. A Christian who encounters a difficulty in Scripture that she cannot currently explain is not thereby obligated to abandon her confidence in inerrancy. She is obligated to continue studying, to remain open to new information, to hold her conclusion with appropriate tentativeness, and to trust the God who cannot lie even when His Word contains passages she does not yet fully understand.

The great saints of Scripture were not people who had no questions; they were people who brought their questions to God rather than using them as reasons to walk away from Him. The psalmist cries out in apparent confusion and theological distress and yet affirms, "Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven" (Psalm 119:89). Job challenges God directly and demands an answer, and God honors him for his honest engagement rather than condemning him for his questions. The disciple who says "I do not yet understand this, but I trust the One who gave it" is expressing not intellectual weakness but theological maturity, the maturity of one who has learned to distinguish between the limits of his knowledge and the limits of God's truth.

Key Texts (NASB 1995)

> *"Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven."*
> **Psalm 119:89**

> *"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever."*
> **Isaiah 40:8**

> *"The words of the LORD are pure words; as silver tried in a furnace on the earth, refined seven times."*
> **Psalm 12:6**

Theological Terms and Definitions

Harmonization	The interpretive practice of finding a coherent explanation for apparent discrepancies between parallel biblical accounts. Proper harmonization does not force artificial resolutions onto the text but seeks explanations consistent with the literary conventions, historical context, and authorial intentions of each account. It operates on the premise that apparent contradictions in an inerrant text are apparent rather than real, and that patient study will often (though not always immediately) yield a satisfactory resolution.
The Synoptic Problem	The scholarly question of the literary relationship among the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), which share substantial amounts of common material, often in strikingly similar wording and order. Various theories have been proposed (Markan priority, Q source, Matthean priority) to explain the relationship. For the inerrancy debate, the key issue is whether the differences among the Synoptics constitute errors or reflect the legitimate selectivity and theological shaping characteristic of ancient historical writing.
Textual Criticism	The academic discipline concerned with recovering the original wording of ancient documents from the manuscript tradition. For the New Testament, textual critics compare over 5,800 Greek manuscripts, along with early translations and patristic citations, to identify and correct copying errors and establish the text of the original autographs. Textual criticism serves inerrancy by demonstrating that the original text can be recovered with extraordinary reliability from the extant manuscript tradition.
Textual Variants	Differences in wording among manuscripts of the same document, arising from copying errors, scribal corrections, or intentional revisions. The New Testament manuscript tradition contains an estimated 400,000 variants across its 5,800+ manuscripts; however, the vast majority are trivial (spelling differences, word order variations), and no essential Christian doctrine depends on any textually disputed passage. The existence of variants does not undermine inerrancy, which applies to the autographs, not to subsequent copies.
Telescoping	A literary technique in ancient historical writing whereby two or more events are compressed into a single narrative sequence without explicit indication of the time gap between them. Telescoping is a standard feature of ancient historiography, not an error. When the Gospel writers present events in compressed form, they are employing normal ancient narrative convention, not distorting history.
Interpretive Citation	The ancient practice of quoting an earlier text in a form that brings out its meaning or application for a new context, rather than reproducing it verbatim. The New Testament authors frequently cite the Old Testament in interpretive form (adapting wording, combining texts, or following the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew) in ways that are entirely consistent with ancient citation conventions and with the doctrine of inerrancy.
Deferred Answers	The intellectually honest posture of acknowledging that some apparent discrepancies in Scripture have not yet been satisfactorily resolved, while maintaining confidence in inerrancy on the grounds that the God who cannot lie has not breathed out contradictions. The history of biblical scholarship demonstrates that many apparently intractable difficulties have been resolved by subsequent research; the existence of currently unresolved difficulties does not constitute proof of error.
The Bart Ehrman Objection	The argument, popularized by New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, that the existence of textual variants in the manuscript tradition demonstrates that we do not possess the original wording of the New Testament and therefore cannot know what the inspired autographs said. This argument misunderstands both the nature of textual criticism and the doctrine of

	inerrancy. Textual criticism can recover the original text with extraordinary reliability, and inerrancy applies to the autographs, not to the accuracy of every individual copy.
Co-Regency	A period in which two monarchs rule simultaneously, typically a reigning king and his designated successor. Co-regencies explain many of the apparent chronological discrepancies in the parallel accounts of the Israelite and Judahite monarchies in Kings and Chronicles, since different authors may count the same years differently depending on whether they include or exclude the co-regency period in their calculations.
Epistemological Humility	The virtue of acknowledging the limits of one's own knowledge and the possibility that one's current understanding may be incomplete or mistaken. Applied to difficult passages of Scripture, epistemological humility means recognizing that an apparent error may reflect a gap in our knowledge of ancient history, language, or culture rather than an actual error in the inspired text. It is the appropriate posture of a finite interpreter engaging an inerrant text.

Practical Application

A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that the existence of unresolved difficulties in Scripture is not evidence of error in the text but evidence of the limits of our current knowledge. This conviction is not anti-intellectual; it is the rational conclusion of a careful analysis of the track record of biblical scholarship, the nature of ancient literary conventions, and the character of the God who breathed out a Word that stands forever. The believer who has worked through the material of this lesson is in a position to engage the objections to inerrancy with intellectual confidence, not because he has resolved every difficulty but because he understands why the existence of difficulties does not constitute proof of error.

We must also believe that the disciplines of textual criticism, ancient historiography, and biblical archaeology are friends of inerrancy rather than its enemies. The more we understand about how ancient authors wrote, cited, and transmitted their sources, the more we see that the features of the biblical text that critics point to as errors are in fact entirely consistent with the literary conventions of the ancient world. Inerrancy is not a doctrine that requires us to ignore the humanity of Scripture; it is a doctrine that is confirmed by a proper understanding of that humanity.

B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

The doctrine of inerrancy, properly understood, should produce in us not defensive anxiety but settled confidence. We do not need to be afraid of hard questions. We do not need to deflect or dismiss the objections that critics raise. We can engage them directly, honestly, and with intellectual generosity, because we are standing on ground that does not shift. “Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven.” The Word that is settled in heaven is not threatened by the questions raised from earth.

At the same time, let this lesson cultivate in you a genuine humility: not the false humility that retreats from conviction, but the authentic humility of a finite creature who knows that his understanding is always partial and always growing. There are passages in Scripture that you do not yet fully understand. There are difficulties that you cannot yet resolve. Hold them with patience and with prayer, trusting the God who gave you the questions to also, in His time and wisdom, give you the answers.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

1. Learn the principles. Master the basic principles of harmonization, ancient literary conventions, and textual criticism well enough to apply them when you encounter an alleged contradiction. You do not need a PhD in biblical studies; you need a working understanding of why apparent discrepancies are often apparent rather than real, and the intellectual honesty to apply that understanding consistently.

2. Invest in good resources. There are excellent scholarly resources specifically designed to address the most frequently cited alleged errors in Scripture, including works by Gleason Archer, Norman Geisler, and Craig Blomberg. Build a small library of such resources so that when a specific difficulty arises in your study or in your conversations, you have tools for engaging it.

3. Model honest engagement. When someone raises a difficult passage with you, resist the temptation either to dismiss the difficulty as if it were trivial or to abandon your confidence in inerrancy as if the difficulty were decisive.

Model the honest, patient, intellectually serious engagement that the doctrine of inerrancy calls for: "That's a real difficulty, and I don't have a fully satisfying answer right now. Here are some factors that are relevant… Let me study this further and get back to you."

4. Trust the track record. When you encounter a difficulty you cannot currently resolve, remind yourself of the track record: the Hittites, Belshazzar, the Pool of Bethesda, the Pool of Siloam, and dozens of other cases where the Bible was vindicated by archaeological and historical discovery. The text has earned the benefit of the doubt.

5. Distinguish between your understanding and the text's truthfulness. Make it a discipline of your mind to maintain the distinction between "I do not yet understand this" and "this is an error." They are not the same statement, and conflating them leads to a false humility that is actually a failure of trust in the God who cannot lie.

D. *For Every Season of Life*

For the student facing objections to inerrancy in the classroom: You will hear confident assertions from professors that the Bible is full of contradictions, that the Gospels cannot be reconciled, that the Old Testament numbers are wildly unreliable. Do not be shaken before you have investigated. The majority of the alleged errors your professors cite have been addressed in the scholarly literature, often convincingly. Do the work. Read the evangelical responses. And remember: the confidence of the objector is not the same as the correctness of the objection.

For the believer who has been quietly troubled by a specific difficulty in Scripture: You are not alone, and your trouble is not a sign of weak faith. The most faithful readers of Scripture across the centuries have encountered passages that puzzled them. Bring your difficulty to Scripture itself, to trusted teachers, to the scholarly resources that exist precisely for this purpose. And while you study, rest in Psalm 119:89: the Word of God is settled in heaven, whether or not your understanding of it is currently settled in your mind.

For the pastor or teacher fielding questions from a congregation: The questions your people bring about alleged biblical errors are not signs of faithlessness; they are signs that they are reading carefully and thinking seriously. Honor those questions with serious engagement. Build a culture in your church where hard questions are welcomed rather than suppressed, where intellectual honesty is valued rather than feared, and where the settled confidence of inerrancy is demonstrated not by avoiding difficulties but by engaging them faithfully. A congregation that has seen its pastor grapple honestly with hard texts will be far better equipped to maintain its confidence in the Word when the objections come from outside.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Has a specific alleged contradiction or error in the Bible ever troubled you personally? What was it? Have you found a satisfying resolution, or is it still an open question for you? Share as you feel comfortable.

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read Psalm 119:89. What does the psalmist say about the status of God's word? In what sense is God's word "settled in heaven," and what does this claim mean for our confidence in the biblical text when we encounter difficulties?
3. Read Isaiah 40:6–8. What contrast does Isaiah draw, and what does he say will endure? How does this declaration about the permanence of God's word relate to the specific question of whether that word can contain error?
4. Compare 2 Samuel 24:9 with 1 Chronicles 21:5. What specific differences do you observe? Based on the principles in Section III, what are the most plausible explanations for these differences?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

5. The lesson argues that the ancient standard of faithful citation did not require verbatim reproduction. How does this change your evaluation of the New Testament's use of the Old Testament? Give a specific example of a New Testament citation that looks problematic under a modern standard of citation but is legitimate under the ancient standard.
6. Explain the Bart Ehrman objection in your own words. Then explain the two main responses the lesson offers: first, the overstated nature of the uncertainty created by variants; and second, the category confusion in applying Ehrman's objection to inerrancy.
7. What is the distinction between harmonization and forced harmonization? How can a defender of inerrancy practice the former while honestly acknowledging when they are approaching the latter?
8. The lesson argues that the track record of biblical scholarship (the Hittites, Belshazzar, the Pool of Bethesda, and others) provides rational grounds for patient confidence in currently unresolved difficulties. Is this a strong argument or a weak one? What are its limits?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

9. The lesson distinguishes between "I do not yet understand this" and "this is an error." Why is this distinction so important, both intellectually and spiritually? Can you think of a time in your own experience when you made the second statement when you should only have been making the first?
10. How would you respond to a college student who comes home having been told by a professor that "the Gospels are full of contradictions"? What specific resources or arguments would you point them to? What would be your most important pastoral concern in that conversation?
11. The lesson argues that a congregation that has seen its pastor grapple honestly with hard texts will be better equipped to maintain confidence in the Word. What does honest pastoral engagement with difficult texts look like from the pulpit? Are there ways your own church could do this better?

12. This lesson concludes Unit 3 on the inerrancy of Scripture. Looking back over Lessons 7, 8, and 9, what single conviction has been most deepened or sharpened for you? How will it change the way you handle the Bible, engage objections, or teach others?

Prayer Focus

Spend time in prayer as a group, thanking God that His Word is settled in heaven and that the difficulties we encounter are in our understanding, not in His truth. Thank Him for the track record of a text that has vindicated itself again and again under the most rigorous historical and archaeological investigation. Ask the Lord to give you the intellectual courage to engage hard questions honestly, the patience to hold unresolved difficulties without panic, and the settled confidence of those who know that the Word of the God who cannot lie stands forever. Pray for believers in your congregation who are quietly troubled by questions about biblical reliability. Ask that the Spirit would give them wisdom, that they would find the resources they need, and that their questions would become the occasion of a deeper and more informed faith rather than the pathway to doubt.

This lesson concludes Unit 3: The Inerrancy of Scripture. In three lessons, we have defined inerrancy with precision (Lesson 7), defended the inseparability of infallibility and inerrancy and traced the consequences of their separation (Lesson 8), and engaged the most significant objections to inerrancy with honesty and intellectual rigor (Lesson 9). In Unit 4, we turn from the truthfulness of Scripture to its authority, examining the great Reformation principle of Sola Scriptura and its implications for the life of the church.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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