

A Gift From Heaven

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Is the Bible Fallible?

Is the Bible a book full of mistakes? Is the Bible fallible?

The Bible was written by human beings, and human beings make mistakes. They have shortcomings. Nowadays many theologians claim that those human beings and their shortcomings play a role in what the Bible says. The authors of the Bible supposedly spoke in a human, and therefore, fallible way about God. Are there really mistakes in the Bible? Is it true that you can look at the Bible as just another human document?

Is the Bible a Fairy Tale?

Some people think that the Bible came to us through authors who invented and contrived revelations and experiences from God. Supposedly, each of the authors with his own motives and according to his own insights and prejudices, wrote down these experiences and passed them on to the next generation. That generation worked with them in its own way, explained and reinterpreted them anew, and handed down their own experiences.

If this is true, then we have to reckon with human mistakes in the Bible. From this perspective the Bible can only be a fallible book, a book in which the different authors contradict each other. It all raises the question: what is really true in the Word of God?

In the opening chapters of the Bible we can read about the creation of the world, man and the fall. Many people say that this did not really happen. They even claim that the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis are only folk tales; true historiography only starts with Abraham. According to them, even when you deal with purely historical events, the Bible is not reliable. The authors of the Bible, they say, made many mistakes. They handed down their own ideas as if they were God's thoughts. The Old Testament authors, for example, started with an antiquated view of the world. *Ex. 20:4* is said to be proof of that antiquated view of the world. Exodus describes the earth as a plain with the primordial sea underneath and a dome, the firmament, on top. How can modern man take this representation seriously?

Many more examples can be given as to why modern man regards the Bible as a fairy tale rather than the Word of God. Suffice it to say the Bible is, to them, a fallible, human book. What it tells you may be instructive, but it is not really accurate.

Jesus about the Bible

Still it should be noted that Jesus never spoke about the Bible in this way. He read and was acquainted with the same Old Testament as we are. In addition, He accepted all of the Old Testament as the Word of God (*Matt. 8:4*). He often quoted from the Old Testament or mentioned the name of one of its authors (*Matt. 15:7*). According to Him these authors spoke with authority. Hence Christ says, "It is written..." or "Scripture says..." (*Matt. 4:4; 21:42*) For Jesus there was no contradiction between God as the author of the Bible and man as His instrument. When Jesus quoted from the Old Testament, He quoted the words of the authors as God's Words. Christ respected the Bible as the Word of God. That is why He says, "You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me..." (*John 5:39*) Jesus thought of the entire Old Testament when He said, "thy Word is truth." (*John 17:17*) Jesus and His apostles were never critical of the contents of the Old Testament. They accepted them completely and without any reservations the historical parts, too!

Does the Sun Set?

As for the criticism launched at the accuracy of the Bible, it is not justified. Jesus clearly accepted the first chapters of Genesis as true history. He says, "Have you not read that He who made them from the beginning made them male and female ... ?" (*Matt. 19:4*) Paul says that just as sin came into the world through one man, likewise the world was saved by one man (*Rom. 5:12-15*). Whoever does not acknowledge the existence of Adam calls into question the existence and work of Jesus, the second Adam (*1 Cor. 15:45*).

The authors of the Bible do not propagate their own ideas and notions. It is God who speaks through them. That also goes for the so-called antiquated view of the world. God is such a skillful author that He wrote the Bible in such a way that it explains itself. Let us consider that for a moment.

"And God spoke all these words, saying, 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth, or in the waters beneath the earth.'" (*Ex. 20:1-4*).

This is the antiquated view of the world. Later on God has Moses say the same:

"Therefore take good heed to yourselves. Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a graven image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. And beware lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and worship them and serve them." (*Deut. 4:15-19*)

In this quotation it becomes clear what is meant by the expression "heaven above, the earth beneath and the water under the earth". It simply deals with the universe and its stars, the earth, and the water which is naturally below the earth.

In the Bible, God uses the everyday language of His people. The Biblical use of language can be compared to our own way of speaking. In our everyday speech, we too say things which do not always agree with physical reality: the sun rises, the sun sets. We too speak and write about the sky above and the water that is under the earth.

Take the following example from the New Testament. When it says that the sailors, after the shipwreck, suspected that land was "approaching", they of course did not think that the ship was lying idle and the land was moving towards them (*Acts 27:27*).

The Bible does not speak in scientific terms. And that is a good thing, for it is a book for man, written in the language of ordinary people. Since the Bible uses the everyday speech of the people of those days, it may contain some unscientific statements, but that does not mean the Bible is fallible. It means that you have to study the text a little more.

Reliable

After the preceding paragraphs, it should be clear that many so-called mistakes in the Bible can be refuted by the Bible itself. "No prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but man moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." (*2 Pet. 1:21*) This is true for both the Old and New Testaments

The Bible is the reliable Word of God. You should not doubt that. You should accept that the Word of God was spoken by God and reliably passed on to us by those who heard it (*Heb. 2:3; 1 Thess. 2:13*). The Bible does not provide any legitimate grounds for calling it a fallible tradition, which has to be stripped of its "human factor". It calls on you to accept and believe its teachings. It is the book of life sent to you by the God of Life.

The Apostles' Creed

- I.** 1. I believe in God the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth.
 - II.** 2. I believe in Jesus Christ,
His only begotten Son, our Lord;
3. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
4. born of the virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell.
5. On the third day He arose from the dead;
6. He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God
the Father almighty;
7. from there He will come to judge the living and the dead.
 - III.** 8. I believe in the Holy Spirit;
9. I believe a holy catholic church, the communion of saints;
10. the forgiveness of sins;
11. the resurrection of the body;
12. and the life everlasting.
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The above passage is the Apostles' Creed. In its twelve articles a brief summary of the entire Bible is given. Of course, anyone may make his own summary of the Bible, but these twelve articles form a very important summary. They have been accepted for centuries as an official doctrinal standard of the church. Such doctrinal standards are called creeds or confessions and are of great help to all believers.

It is called the Apostles' Creed because it summarizes what the apostles taught, and it is the earliest written confession known to us. The origin of this confession dates back to the beginning of the 2nd century A.D. It is not known who wrote it or where it originated, but since the beginning of the 5th century this confession has been widely used by the church.

The creed is subdivided into 12 articles, which can be grouped into 3 main parts as you can see above. In what follows we will discuss the articles of this creed.

We Do Not Understand God

Article 1

Over the centuries people have increased their understanding a great deal. Particularly during the last century, our knowledge of nature and many other areas has grown enormously. Scientists have made tremendous and sometimes even startling advances, for instance, concerning their knowledge of the human body. Nevertheless, there are limits to man's knowledge and capabilities, especially when it comes to his spiritual existence. What man understands himself completely? If man's intellect is already limited with regards to his own mind, how much more will his understanding be limited when God is the object of his investigation?

The Limits of Our Understanding

If we were able to understand God it would mean that we are above Him or, at least, His equal. However, the Bible says that God is highly exalted above men (*Ps. 115:3*). We cannot comprehend Him. It is for this very reason that men have made their own gods which they can understand. Worshipping what you have made yourself reverses the order. *Psalm 115* clearly indicates the difference between God and idols. God is our Creator and, therefore, highly exalted above us. We can only know and understand God insofar as He reveals Himself in His creative work and the Bible. God's self-revelation gives us reliable knowledge, but not complete knowledge.

God reveals Himself in human language. He shows us who He is in plain, comprehensible words. Although that is very helpful for us, it is a limitation at the same time. The limits of human language coincide with the limits of man's understanding. That means some things are confusing to us because our language cannot adequately describe them.

Whatever God has not revealed about Himself, He deems unnecessary for us to know. What He has revealed is of the utmost importance. We have to reverently consider and, above all, faithfully accept everything the Bible tells us about God. God gives us the information about Himself in His Word. Even though we cannot understand Him, He wants us to know precisely where we stand with Him and what He asks of us. God seeks a relationship with man, and all the things He reveals about Himself are building blocks for that relationship.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

A very important point that God reveals about Himself can be found in Deuteronomy. "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one Lord" (*Deut. 6:4*). That means that there is only one God, the Lord, who has revealed Himself to Israel as Yahweh, LORD. But while Deuteronomy speaks of one God, does the Bible not speak of three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? (*Matt. 28:19*) Perhaps you have heard of the term "Triune God". This term means that God is three in one. But how can you reconcile something like that?

First of all, we should realize that God has revealed Himself in this way in Scripture and, therefore, we must obediently accept it. We have to believe in God as the Triune God.

Confessing God as Triune is not just a mathematical mystery. The Bible does not tell you that three equals one or one equals three. Mysteries such as these do not contradict logic but transcend it. The human intellect, because it has been created by God, cannot

fathom or understand the Creator. God tells us who He is in the Bible. If we wish to confess what the Bible says about Him we will have to use the following words: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

The Bible about the Triune God

However incomprehensible this may be to us, the Bible is nevertheless very clear on God's being. Let us consider some examples.

The Bible ascribes the same divine names to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They are all called God (*Isa. 9:6; John 1:1,14; 20:28; Acts 5:3,4*).

The Bible also ascribes the same divine characteristics to the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. The Son is eternal and all-knowing as is the Father. The Holy Spirit and the Father are both omnipresent (*John 21:17; Ps. 139:7*).

The Bible ascribes divine works to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Not only the Father, but also the Son and the Holy Spirit were involved in creation (*Heb. 1:2; Gen. 1:2*).

Finally, the Bible says that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have a right to divine honour. One example of this is that we are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (*Matt. 28:19*). *Matt. 28:19* is quite often cited as a proof text for the Trinity because all three Persons of the Trinity are mentioned together. However, there are more.

"And behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased' " (*Matt. 3:16,17*). Also in this text there is a clear reference to all three persons of the Trinity.

Although we cannot fathom the idea of the Trinity itself we do know about certain characteristics of the Trinity. The Triune God is filled with eternal life. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit love each other. God, therefore, loves Himself and does not need human beings to serve Him. He gave them life, breath, and everything else in the first place, so why should He need their service? (*Acts 17:24,25*) Nevertheless, this Triune God, in His incomprehensible love, has given His Son to redeem the world from sin.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (*John 3:16*).

The Miracle of the Covenant

Genesis 15-17

What is faith? This is a very simple question, but it often receives an incorrect answer. Faith is simply trust in God and His promises. It means going the way which He has commanded us to go. Sometimes God does not fulfill His promises as quickly as we expect. Then doubts may arise, and we may start wondering whether God will really come through for us. It is our human nature to want to have an anchor, someone we can rely on under all circumstances.

Trust in His Word

Abram had troubles with God's promises as well. He had already been living as a stranger in Canaan for many years. He was almost a hundred years old now, and Sarai was approaching ninety. Yet, after all those years they did not have any offspring. It was understandable, then, that Abram and Sarai began to doubt God's promise of a large nation of descendants. Abram thought that one of his slaves would be the heir. Sarai also thought that way. But God would not let it happen that way. He continued to visit and speak to His two elderly children. Time and again, God repeated His promise to Abram, elaborating a bit more on every occasion. One thing had to become clear to Abram and Sarai: what was impossible with man was possible with God.

Abram did not have a Bible as we do, instead he sought contact with God through prayer. He "called on the name of the LORD." (*Gen. 12:8*) This "calling upon the name of God" was the same as the public worship services we have today. God Himself saw to it that Abram kept believing His promises even without a Bible. God had promised Abram two things: descendants and land for those descendants to live in. And Abram was sure to receive both.

A Covenant between God and Man

God did not give Abram only words of promise. He also gave him a sign. One night as Abram was gazing into heaven at the twinkling stars, God asked him to do the impossible and count each star (*Gen. 15:5*). Before he could even begin, God continued by explaining His unusual request. "So shall your descendants be" (*Gen. 15:5*). Then Abram believed his God. The God, who let the countless stars shine every night, would certainly be able to make his descendants numerous.

Abram also had trouble with God's promise that he would gain possession of the entire land of Canaan. As the special sign of this promise, God made a covenant with Abram. It was a unique event. First, Abram had to make the preparations for this unique occasion himself. He had to kill three animals and two birds, cut them in half, and put the halves across from each other so that there was a path between them. This was a customary ritual in those days. Whoever walked between the slaughtered animals signified that what had been done to those animals could also be done to him, if he did not abide by the covenant or agreement. But when this unique covenant was made God did not walk between the animal pieces together with Abram. In a vision at night, Abram saw a fiery torch go between them (*Gen. 15:17*). God had gone through Himself. Abram did not go. He was simply the receiving party since he did not have anything to offer.

In such a way God confirmed His promises to Abram. He confirmed His promise of descendants with the stars and His promise of land with a fiery torch. God proved, beyond any doubt, that He was earnest about His promises.

God Almighty

Twenty-five years in Canaan, and still there was no offspring! By human standards Abram and Sarai, old as they were, would not be able to have any children. Why then did God delay so long in fulfilling this promise? Because Abram and Sarai, in defiance of all human calculations, had to learn to keep faith in God the Lord.

"I am God, the Almighty!" Abram already knew God as the most High, the Creator of heaven and earth. Now, God also teaches Abram that He has the power to do anything He wants. God is certain about Abram's future; Abram should be certain about God's promises.

So God continues to reassure Abram and Sarai. This time He gives them new names. They are called Abraham and Sarah. These new names, given by God, have a symbolic meaning. They indicate a change in position. Giving a new name to accompany a change in position was quite customary at the time. Joseph's name changed to Zaphanath-paneah when he became the viceroy of Egypt (*Gen. 41:45*). Daniel received the name Belshazzar when he was taken on by the king of Babylon (*Dan. 1:7*).

Likewise, when God gives a new name, the receiver is put in an entirely different position. He gets a new task and starts, as it were, a new life in the service of God. Jacob became Israel, and Hoshea became Joshua (*Gen. 32:28; Num. 13:16*).

Abram became Abraham, and Sarai became Sarah. The new names, which God gave them, indicated that they were being prepared for entering His service. Something radically new would take place. Abram, without a son, would become Abraham, the father of many nations (*Gen. 17:5*). And Sarai, the barren woman, would become Sarah, the mother of kings of people (*Gen. 17:15,16*).

Slowly, God was bringing them to the point where they would unconditionally believe and trust Him.

God's Demand

Even as holy as God is He had mercy on sinful, unholy man. The covenant made deliverance from sin possible; it enabled Abraham to begin a new life through faith. It was God who stated that. "I will be your God," He said to Abraham. Now Abraham and his descendants would have to say "yes" to God, by acknowledging Him, by believing Him and His Word, and by living according to His will. God also instituted a sign for His covenant which Abraham had to practice: circumcision. "You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations" (*Gen. 17:11,12*).

Circumcision was a very small operation on the male sexual organ. A piece of skin, the foreskin, was cut away. However, it was the sign of a very big covenant and had to be treated with a great deal of respect.

God Threatens

To show their acceptance of God's covenant, Abraham and his descendants had to circumcise their sons when they were eight days old. Whoever did not do so would be punished by God. The uncircumcised had to be removed because the covenant had been broken (*Gen. 17:14*). It all sounds very harsh, but Abraham had to realize that being in covenant with God was a very serious business and nothing less than total obedience would do.

The Covenant Today

The covenant God made with Abraham is still valid today. Just as God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants in the days of the Old Testament, He makes one with present-day believers and their children. And the sign of that new covenant is baptism. The promise of descendants and land to Abraham was not just made to give an old couple some warmth and joy, or to give a nomad some security and peace in his old age. The covenant had a much deeper meaning. Out of Abraham's descendants, Jesus Christ, the Messiah, would be born in the promised land. Circumcision, the sign of the covenant, also pointed to that future. Redemption was necessary, and the Messiah would come to bring it.

In the new covenant, God promises forgiveness of sins and everlasting life. Baptism replaces circumcision as the sign of the covenant. This sign does not look forward to the Messiah, but helps us to remember His work. There is no need for a bloody

ceremony anymore. Jesus' blood, shed on the cross, was sufficient for all. The water of baptism signifies the washing away, or remission, of all sins (*Acts 2:38*).

In the Old Testament God made His covenant exclusively with Israel. Now, in the days of the New Covenant, the promise applies to the believers of all nations (*Rom. 4:18-25; Gal 3:6-9*). Abraham was promised the land of Canaan, but the believers of the new covenant are promised another land, a new heaven and a new earth (*Heb. 11:8-16*).

Questions 7

Is the Bible Fallible?

1. The earth goes around the sun. Nevertheless, Joshua exclaims, "Sun, stand, thou still!" (*Josh. 10:12,13*) Is this proof that the Bible is unreliable? Give reasons.
2. Explain in your own words what it says in *2 Pet. 1:20,21* about the reliability of God's Word.
3. Why is it so important to consider the Bible reliable?

We Do Not Understand God

1. Explain how *Matt. 3:16,17* speaks about the Triune God.
2. The Gospel of John often mentions that Jesus is the Son of God and, therefore, God Himself. Show this from *John 1:1,14*, *John 10:30-38* and *John 20:26-29*.
3. What does it say in *Romans 11:33-36* about the extent of our knowledge of God?

The Miracle of the Covenant

1. A covenant is an agreement between two parties in which promises and obligations are spelled out. What was the sign of the covenant between God and Abram? What did God promise Abram? What did Abram have to do in return?
2. God also wants to make a covenant with believers and their children. What is the sign of this covenant? What does God promise now? (see the lesson) What do we have to do in return?
3. When baby boys were eight days old, they had to be circumcised to show that they were included in the covenant (*Gen 17:12*). Does this say anything about infant baptism?