

DOES THE BIBLE CLAIM TO BE “INERRANT?”

by Barry R. Bickmore

One of the major disagreements Latter-day Saints have with our fundamentalist Protestant neighbors is our attitude toward the authority of the Bible. For the fundamentalists, the Bible is the final religious authority, whereas the LDS look to our prophets for continuing revelation. This is a vital issue, for their belief in the authority of the Bible allows Protestants to claim knowledge of the way to salvation and authority to preach the Gospel, without being able to trace a line of priesthood ordinations back to Christ, or any particular prophetic insight.

The fundamentalist claim to authority rests on two basic assumptions about the Bible. First, it must be assumed that the Bible contains all the information needed for a reader to obtain salvation, in a form readily accessible to correct interpretation. Second, it must be assumed that the Bible is “inerrant” in the sense that it contained no errors of fact when it was written, and has since been supernaturally protected from doctrinally and factually important textual errors due to mistakes (intentional or otherwise) by copyists and translators. Many actually claim the very words chosen by the Biblical authors were supplied directly from God, and hence the text of the Bible is very literally “the Word of God.” If either of these claims turns out to be false, the entire fundamentalist claim to religious authority crumbles.

The LDS disagree with both these assumptions, but in this brief paper only the issue of inerrancy will be treated. In short, we believe that the Bible has not been passed down to us in perfect form. Joseph Smith said, “I believe the Bible as it read when it came from the pen of the original writers. Ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors.”¹ The Book of Mormon prophet Nephi was shown that “many plain and precious things” would be removed from the Bible.² Even in its original form, we do not believe any of the prophetic writings have ever been necessarily free from error. The title page of the Book of Mormon states, “And now, if there

are faults they are the mistakes of men; wherefore, condemn not the things of God.” The scriptures impart knowledge about God, but it is knowledge passed through the filter of imperfect human beings—prophets, scribes, copyists, and translators. It takes continuing revelation from God, through prophets and through individual Saints, to bring the scriptures fully to life, and accomplish their true design—bringing people into personal communion with God.

Unfortunately, our fundamentalist neighbors often interpret the LDS attitude toward the Bible as an attack on that sacred book of scripture. However, President Joseph Fielding Smith explained, “The reason for the Bible’s great influence for good is because it is inspired and contains the word of the Lord delivered to his prophets, who wrote and spoke as they were moved upon by the Holy Ghost, since the world began.”³ He went on,

We are all aware that there are errors in the Bible due to faulty translations and ignorance on the part of translators; but the hand of the Lord has been over this volume of scripture nevertheless, and it is remarkable that it has come down to us in the excellent condition in which we find it.⁴

The message is clear—there are errors that have crept into the Bible, but it is still good enough for God to use it in a powerful way to bring people closer to Him. At least when translated and interpreted properly, the Bible is still amazingly accurate and useful.

A REALISTIC VIEW OF THE BIBLE

The LDS view of the Bible is entirely realistic. William H. Barnes, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at the Southeastern College of the Assemblies of God, notes “the relationship between the divine and human ‘authors’ of scripture has never been easily delineated.” He elaborates, “Today all but the most extreme Jewish and



Christian fundamentalists recognize the complicated and heterogeneous origins of the Bible and that it contains statements that in any other literary work would be considered erroneous."⁵

The early Christians, who were much closer in time and space to the original writers of the Bible, generally recognized that there had been some deletions and corruptions in the text of the Bible. For instance, St. Justin Martyr (ca. 150 A.D.) accused the Jews of having removed certain passages from the Old Testament related to the Christian message:

Here Trypho [the Jew] remarked, 'We ask you first of all to tell us some of the Scriptures which you allege have been completely cancelled.' [Justin quotes some passages which the Jews evidently removed from Esdras and Jeremiah.] 'And again, from the sayings of the same Jeremiah these have been cut out: "The Lord God remembered His dead people of Israel who lay in the graves; and He descended to preach to them His own salvation."⁶

The historian Henri Daniel-Rops quotes Origen (early third century A.D.) saying that even the New Testament texts of his time had been corrupted extensively: "Today the fact is evident, that there are many differences in the manuscripts, either through the negligence of certain copyists, or the perverse audacity of some in correcting the text."⁷

Using circular reasoning, fundamentalists ignore the clear facts of the matter and often make their case by appealing to "what the Bible says about itself." In doing so they usually appeal to various passages that speak of the trustworthiness of the "Word of the Lord," and apply these to the text of the Bible. However, as Professor Barnes noted, it is not always clear where to draw the line between "the Word of the Lord" and its human filters in the scriptural text. On the other hand, one passage the fundamentalists often appeal to does specifically speak of scripture: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."⁸ However, this passage merely states that scripture is inspired, and thus "profitable." It makes no claims about absolute inerrancy.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

The Bible says just the opposite about itself, and specifically claims to have sustained some corruptions. Consider the following passage from the prophet

Jeremiah. "How can you say, 'We are wise, we have the law of the LORD', when scribes with their lying pens have falsified it?"⁹ Now, it seems clear that Jeremiah was accusing the scribes of having intentionally miscopied the scriptures with their "lying pens," and thus the Israelites could not ignore Jeremiah's prophetic counsel on the basis of having "the law of the Lord." The fundamentalist editors of the *NIV Study Bible* dodge the clear meaning of this verse in their text note by applying it to "misinterpreting and manipulating" the law of Moses. However, George Wesley Buchanan, Professor of the New Testament at Wesley Theological Seminary, notes that before the exile (i.e., in Jeremiah's time) the scribes were mainly professional copyists or "officials who had authority to draw up legal documents." "During the Diaspora...in Babylon, scribes became responsible for preserving and interpreting scripture."¹⁰ *Harper's Encyclopedia of Bible Life* also describes the scribal profession before the Exile.

Scribes generally performed a number of duties, all associated in some way with writing. A scribe was one of the king's counselors (1 Chron. 27:32), and he might act much as an American secretary of state (2 Kings 18:18). He collected and recorded tax money for the palace and the Temple (2 Kings 12:10; 22:3-4). He transcribed documents, signed and filed deeds and legal contracts (Jer. 32:10-14), and wrote from dictation (Jer. 36:4).

The scribal profession in Judaism changed with the Exile. By the time of the Second Temple, the scribe had become a recorder and interpreter of the Law (Ezra 7:6, 10).¹¹

While neither recording nor copying the scriptures was the primary scribal function before the Exile, anyone who wanted the sacred texts copied would have had to contract with a scribe, whereas "interpretation" would likely have been accomplished by someone else. Thus, in Jeremiah's time the "lying pens" of the scribes would have been "falsifying" the scriptures by copying them incorrectly, rather than misinterpreting them.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, the Bible makes no claim to absolute inerrancy, and in fact specifically repudiates this notion. With Jeremiah, we exhort all people to listen to the counsel of God's modern prophets, rather than hanging on desperately to idiosyncratic interpretations of the words of dead prophets, which may not have been transmitted with 100% accuracy. The "Word of God" is still being spoken.

FURTHER READING

Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration, Third Edition* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992).

Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism*, translated by Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989).

Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica*, translated by Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1992).

F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments: How We Got our English Bible* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1950).

Howard Clark Kee, *The New Testament in Context: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1984).

Philip W. Comfort, *Early Manuscripts and Modern Translations of the New Testament* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale, 1990).

Bleddyn J. Roberts, *The Old Testament Text and Versions: The Hebrew Text in Transmission and the History of the Ancient Versions* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1951).

L.H. Brockington, *The Hebrew Text of the Old Testament: The Readings Adopted by the Translators of the New English Bible* (Oxford: Oxford & Cambridge Universities, 1973).

Inerrantist treatments of the subject can be found in the following:

D.A. Waite, *Defending the King James Bible: God's Word Kept Intact in English* (Collingswood, New Jersey: Bible for Today Press, 1993).

Floyd McElveen, *God's Word, Final, Infallible and Forever* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Gospel Truths Ministries, 1985).

NOTES

1 Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, edited by Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City; Deseret Book Company, 1976), 327.

2 1 Nephi 13:28.

3 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, volume 3 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 184.

4 *Ibid.*, 191.

5 William H. Barnes, "Inspiration and Inerrancy," *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 304.

6 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 71–72, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 1, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, (Buffalo, New York: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885–1896), 234–235. Note also Origen's assessment of the Old Testament texts available to him: "And in many other of the sacred books I found sometimes more in our copies than in the Hebrew, sometimes less." Origen, *Letter to Africanus* 3, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 4, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, (Buffalo, New York: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885–1896), 386.

7 Henri Daniel-Rops, *L'Eglise des Apotres et des Martyrs*, 313, translated in James L. Barker, *The Divine Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1951), 1:16.

8 2 Timothy 3:16.

9 Jeremiah 8:8 NEB.

10 George Wesley Buchanan, "Scribes," *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 684.

11 Madeleine S. Miller and J. Lane Miller, *Harper's Encyclopedia of Bible Life* (Edison, New Jersey: Castle Books, 1996), 215.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barry R. Bickmore is married to the former Keiko Guay, and they have three children. He holds a Ph.D. in Geological Sciences from Virginia Tech, and is the author of *Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith and Early Christianity*. In the Church he has been a seminary teacher, ward clerk, elder's quorum president, and quorum teacher, among other things.

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