

“They Contain Factual, Moral And Theological Errors”

Objection: “Since all inspired books were written under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Who cannot deceive nor be deceived, His inspired writings cannot contain errors. Yet, the Deuterocanon contains many historical and factual errors. For example, the book of Judith calls Nebuchadnezzar the king of the Assyrians (Judith 1:7) when we know from the Book of Daniel that he was the King of the Babylonians (Daniel 4:4-6). They also contain moral errors such as Judith asking God for His help with deceiving her enemies (Judith 9:10-13). Since Scripture is inerrant and the disputed books certainly contain errors, they cannot be counted among the books of the Old Testament.”

Answer: It may surprise some to find that this objection commits the fallacy of begging the question. It is not easily detected unless the reader is familiar with the problem surrounding biblical inerrancy. As the Protestant theologian Harold O.J. Brown explains:

“Any alert reader of Scripture will become aware of problems in the text, although many apparent discrepancies or possible errors disappear under open-minded scrutiny. Even after careful study, however, some problems remain. The debate over inerrancy frequently comes down to choosing whether to tolerate some problems as ‘unanswered questions’ or to transfer them to the category of ‘demonstrated errors.’ Often that decision reflects one’s *initial attitude* towards Scripture and towards critical methods. If Scripture is accepted as the Word of God, and ‘the standard that sets the standard,’ one will be reluctant to charge it with error -- since to do so one must have some other, perhaps higher, norm by which to evaluate Scripture. Historically, doubt about inerrancy followed rather than produced the conviction that the Bible is merely a fallible human book. Hence, one should consider the possibility that recognition of an error in Scripture is a *logical consequence of an earlier decision* to judge the Bible rather than let the Bible be the norm for all judgments.”¹

In other words, the determination of inspiration must come *before* one can state whether a difficulty is a “demonstrated” or only an “apparent” error. The objection above does the opposite. It assumes at the outset that the disputed books are not inspired Scripture and then considers all difficulties to be “demonstrated errors,” thereby “proving” that the text cannot be inspired. But as Dr. Brown has pointed out, the determination of whether a difficulty is a true error or only an apparent error is a *consequence* of one’s attitude as to whether a text is from God or from man. Thus, the objector commits the logical fallacy of begging the question.

Atheists make a similar argument against the Bible as a whole. Convinced that the Bible is solely a human product, the Atheists will argue that the presence of “errors” proves that the Bible is not the inspired word of God. Therefore, the mere presence of difficulties cannot be used to determine whether a given book is inspired or not. That determination must be made first.²

The objector still may say, “But calling Nebuchadnezzar the king of the Assyrians is obviously an error.” Is it? What if we are misreading Judith then the error isn’t with Judith is it with ourselves. For example, maybe the author intentionally substituted Nebuchadnezzar’s name for the real name on purpose (whatever

¹ Harold O. J. Brown, *The Origin of the Bible*, ed, Philip Wesley Comfort, (Wheaton Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), 44-45 (emphasis mine)

² “Reuss, who was a distinguished member of the Reformed Church, does not disguise his disapproval of the suicidal method thus employed...He gives a number of instances of the puerile and hapless arguments offered by these dangerous champions, in which they forgot how the supposed absurdities in the Apocryphal books might be so easily matched from the Canonical ones.” Quoting Ruess Howorth continues, “the scoffs thrown at the little fish of Tobit will sooner or later destroy Jonah’s whale” (Howorth, “The Bible Canon Among The Later Reformers,” *JTS* 10 (Jan. 1909) 222-223). Given the current state of affairs in certain quarters of critical biblical studies, Ruess’s words seem to be nothing less than prophetic.

that may be). Then the “error” doesn’t exist. Another possibility would be that the copies that we have of Judith have been corrupted and the inspired original had some other name. The Judith manuscript tradition is fairly weak. If this were the case, then the error is with our copies and not with Judith. It is also possible that we are interpreting Judith wrongly. Perhaps Judith wasn’t meant to be a historical narrative, but rather as Martin Luther understood it, to be a holy allegory of Christ and his Church. If this is true, then the error lies in our interpretation and not Judith. Immediately, opponents of the Deuterocanon would retort, “You’re trying to explain away the obvious! Judith has erred.” The Catholic is doing nothing of the sort. Having already come to the conviction that Judith is Scripture, the Catholic is trying to resolve a difficulty between the inspired texts. The Protestant objecting, being convinced that Judith is not Scripture, sees this as an error unworthy of being harmonized.

If the objector is tenacious, he may press the Catholic to come up with an parallel example in the protocanonical Scripture. Of course, no example will satisfy the Protestant objector since the only *comparable* example in the Protocanon would be a real error (since he believes Judith to contain errors). A Catholic who attempts to provide an example would play the Atheist taking pot shots as the New Testament.

Instead of giving a “parallel” example, I will tell a short story about a young man I met on the Internet. He once was a “Bible-believing” Christian until he saw an “obvious error” in Matthew 1:17. Matthew wrote that there were fourteen generations between Abraham to David, David to the Exile and the Exile to Christ. The Atheist claimed that there were only thirteen generations listed by Matthew between the Exile and Jesus. I explained to him the various ways one could resolve this difficulty, but he kept repeating, “Can’t you count! It’s so obvious. There are only thirteen generations! Matthew made a mistake!” For me, the resolutions offered more than sufficed to solve this difficulty because I have already come to the conviction that Matthew is inspired. For the Atheist, my explanations were a futile attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable. What really needed to be discussed is whether Matthew is inspired and not whether errors exist in Matthew. The same is true for accusations brought against the Deuterocanon.

As a final note, my conviction on biblical inerrancy is not based upon my own intellectual prowess to solve difficulties. My conviction rests on the one who inspired the text. To state that I can determine what is and is not inspired based upon my assessment of the text is to place ones intellect over the word of God. What needs to occur is that once my intellect is satisfied that a book is inspired the question of presence of errors is already been decided in the negative.

Objection #2: “The Deuterocanon must be rejected because they contain theological errors such as the belief in prayer for the dead (2 Maccabees 12:43-45) and doing good works to atonement for sins (Tobit 12:9).”

Answer: This objection also begs the question. If one were to ask a Protestant what is the final source of authority for Christian doctrine? He or she will not doubt retort, “The Scriptures!”³ If, however, the Scripture determines doctrine, how can doctrine be used to determine what is Scripture? The only way to make this argument work is to presuppose a set of doctrines and reject those books that don’t agree with it. This of course is not honest. It would be as if a person agreed to have a case heard by the Supreme Court, but only after first throwing off any judge that would rule against the case. At that point, the court would no longer an arbiter and the trial would no longer be a trial.

Unfortunately, not a few groups attempted to adjust the canon of Scripture to fit their preconceived beliefs, and by doing so they have their theology above the word of God. For example, the Gnostics believed that Our Lord handed on special revelation that was to be taught only to the initiated. Hence, in addition to the canonical Scriptures, the Gnostics also accepted other writings that supported their strange beliefs. In the second century, a man named Marcion formed a sect (or subgroup) of the Gnostics and argued that there

³ *Sola Scriptura* – Latin for “Scripture Alone.” There are a number of beliefs that fall under the umbrella term of *Sola Scriptura*. By and large, the doctrine teaches that the Bible is the sole and exclusive source of infallible truth for the Christian.

were two gods: the evil god of the Old Testament who created the material universe and the good god of the New Testament who created the spiritual universe. The Marcionites approved the letters of St. Paul that seemed to be very much against the Old Testament religious system and rejected the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John because they seemed to have a positive view of Judaism. Another group called the Ebionites were Jewish Christians who believed that circumcision and practice the Jewish Law is required of all Christians. They rejected the writings of St. Paul while accepting only the Gospel of Matthew (and perhaps also the apocryphal Gospel to the Hebrews).⁴ In all these cases, the preconceived theological viewpoint was used to determine the size of each group's Bible. Something similar is going on here with our objection #2.

Something similar was at work during the Reformation. Bruce M. Metzger suggests that the Protestant Reformers were first led to reject the disputed books because they taught Catholic doctrine:

“The central aim of the Protestant Reformers was the examination and correction of current ecclesiastical practices and doctrines in the light of the Bible. In the controversies which emerged they soon perceived the need to be certain which books were authoritative for the establishment of doctrine and which were not. It appears that Luther was first led to disparage the books of the Apocrypha when his opponents appealed to passages in them as proof for the doctrines of Purgatory and of the efficacy of prayers and Masses for the dead (II Macc. 12:43-45). Likewise the emphasis that certain Apocryphal books lay upon merit acquired through good works (Tobit 12:9; Ecclus. 3:30; II Esdras 8:33; 13:46, etc.) was naturally distasteful to him.”⁵

Metzger illustrates how fundamental the question of the canon truly is. If 2 Maccabees and the other books are divinely inspired (and therefore canonical Scripture), then their teaching is Scriptural doctrine and it is to be believed by all Christians. If, on the other hand, they are not Scripture, they are only as authoritative as any human writing. It was because the disputed books were used to oppose the doctrine of Faith Alone that the Protestant Reformers were first led to disparage certain books of Scripture.⁶

As with Objection #1, the question isn't whether or not the Deuterocanon is theologically erroneous, but whether or not these books are inspired Scripture. Otherwise, one's own personal theological beliefs determine what are inspired Scriptures and not the other way around.

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⁴ See Epiphanius' Panarion, 95

⁵ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), 181

⁶ The Protestant Scholar, Edward Reuss in his book, *History of the Canon of the Holy Scriptures in the Christian Church* (Edinburgh, 1890), 323, admits as much. However, Reuss argues that this is far from a violation of logic since “logic gives precedence to the truth itself, over the witness that attests to it.” The Scriptures, however, are not mere witnesses to a doctrinal point; they are very material from which the doctrinal points are derived. See “Why Protestant Bibles Are Smaller, Sola Scriptura and the Problem of the Canon,” XXX