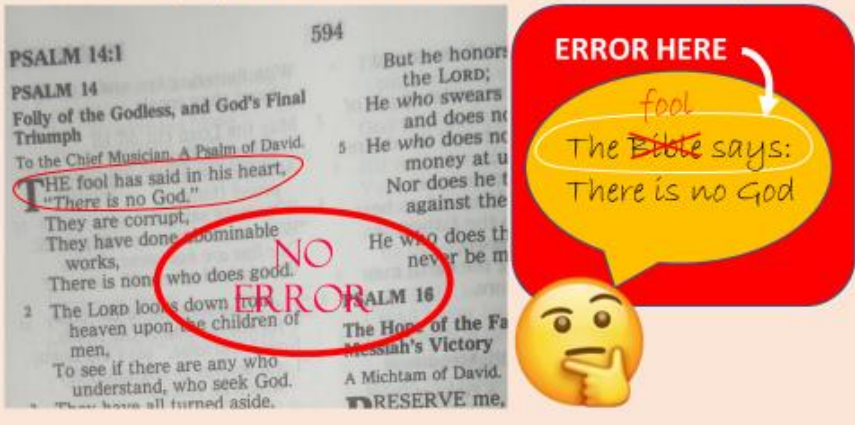


# INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE



Martin Luther said, *"My neighbor and I—in short, all men—may err and deceive, but God's Word cannot err."*<sup>1</sup>

Briefly, "inerrancy" means that the Bible can be trusted. The Psalmist proclaims, *"All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal."* (Ps 119:160)

*"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,"* – 2 Tim 3:16

*"Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things."* – 2 Pet 1:20

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<sup>1</sup> Lutheran Large Catechism IV.57

Unless you disagree that Scripture is God's Word, it would be a big logical leap to say that it is not inerrant and thus imply that God's Word can be errant.

### **Interpreting out of context**

There are understandable reasons why people sometimes hesitate about the inerrancy of Scripture. Let us look at the following doubts:

- (A) "One part of the Bible says one thing; another part, another thing. For example, there are contradictions about the number of loaves and the number of men between the different Gospel accounts about Jesus' feeding of the multitude. Therefore, how can we say that the Bible is inerrant?"
  
- (B) "Sometimes, the Bible says ridiculous things. For example, Ps 137:9 suggests that 'Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.' (NIV) Therefore, how can we trust that Scripture is good for teaching?"

Regarding (A), the different accounts about the number of loaves and men do have a lot of similarities; but on closer study, there are differences in details. I have no need to go into a discussion of the details, as the following verses clearly show that the different accounts on the feeding of the multitude refer to separate events:

*"Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered?" – Mt 16:9-10*

Regarding (B), let us have an appreciation of “two contexts”:

- The first context is that Ps 137 is an imprecatory psalm<sup>2</sup> in which verses 8 and 9 can be read as a single pronouncement of a curse on Israel’s enemy Babylon.<sup>3</sup> The GNB translation may be clearer for comprehension – *“Babylon, you will be destroyed. Happy are those who pay you back for what you have done to us— who take your babies and smash them against a rock.”*
- The second context to appreciate is that blessings and curses are integral components within the justice of our sovereign God, noting relevant passages throughout the Bible including, inter alia, *Gen 12:3, “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”*

A curse is the consequence of sin, and man holds personal responsibility for the harsh aspect of justice since God is not the author of sin. “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.” (Gal 6:7)

God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. (Eze 33:11)

Interpreting Scripture out of context is a common understandable reason for hesitation about inerrancy. “Out of context” can embrace many aspects – such as transporting a divine truth out of its spiritual setting into the domain of science, disregarding the literary forms and genres of the biblical writings when applying meanings, neglecting the historical context of linguistics, etc.

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<sup>2</sup> There are various types of psalms: hymns, lamentations, royal, imprecatory, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Note the cruelty of Babylon to the Israelites indicated in [“The Parable of the Boiling Pot”](#) in [July Vine](#).

Ben Witherington III (An American NT Scholar) said, “A text without a context is just a pretext for what we want it to mean...”

If an interpreter engages in a pretext, it would be wicked indeed. However, there are people who intentionally or inadvertently take a text out of context and they just become confused themselves or they confuse others. The perplexity surrounding preachings on the prosperity gospel is a case in point.

A seemingly correct quotation of Scripture combined with an out-of-context interpretation can lead one to believe that the sovereignty of God is limited geographically to Israel; for, it is stated in the Bible: “Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.” (2 Ki 5:15 partial)

By stretching the misplaced reasoning, this God is only the God of Israel and therefore not of the Gentiles. Truth be told, the words “there is no God ... except in Israel” were spoken by a military commander who received God’s mercy of healing and were a declaration of his conviction that the God he worshipped (Israel’s God) is the only true God. Reading in proper context helps us avoid reading extraneous meanings into what the Bible says.

### **“Bible is inerrant” ≠ “Human interpretations are infallible”**

Are works necessary for salvation? We Lutherans are clear that our salvation is by grace of God through our faith and not by our works. (Eph 2:8-9) However, there are still contrarians who proclaim the necessity of works, in addition to faith, based on their interpretation of James 2:14-26. The apparent contradiction between Ephesians and James is due to errant human interpretation, not because of errant Scripture. Ephesians is referring to what counts as righteousness before God for

salvation while James is referring to our testimony before people. There is no real contradiction. In fact, the Bible is consistent in dispelling the notion of works as the basis of salvation — See Rom 4:5 and Titus 3:5.

### **We cannot possibly understand everything**

At times, I also have issues with parts of Scripture which I do not quite understand. It is good to have clarifications. However, we are bound to encounter difficult passages from time to time that no amount of effort seems possible to clarify 100% what they mean. A great example would be passages in the Book of Revelation. Misinterpretations arise easily when we are not humble to recognise that we cannot be omniscient (all-knowing) and then we force non-existent meanings out of passages with our limited faculties. Again, with human fallibility, we start to see apparent inaccuracies in the Bible due to our confused perceptions of different parts.

A student does not need to know everything related to Science in order to succeed as a scientist. A doctor does not need to be all-knowing about every medical fact in order to be a skilled clinician. A Christian does not need to understand every bit of Scripture in order to be faithful to his calling. For what we individually are (with differences between us), God reveals enough for each of us to thrive on faith rather than on knowledge.

### **Conclusion**

Instead of over-exerting ourselves to apprehend some of the obscure things in the Bible, we can focus more on the plain things that enable us to grow in faith.

*John Lee*