

JESUS AND THE BIBLE

Jesus' view of the Bible is of particular interest to evangelicals, since He is held to be God Incarnate (see volume 2), and, hence, whatever He affirms has divine authority. Thus whatever Jesus taught about the Bible is the last word on the topic.

Granting that God exists (see chapter 2) and that miracles are possible (see chapter 3), even non-evangelicals are hard-pressed to avoid the conclusion that Jesus speaks with divine authority—at least if one accepts the authenticity of the Gospel accounts (see chapter 26). If the Gospels present accurately what Jesus taught, and if what He taught was confirmed by miracles to have divine authority (cf. John 3:2; Acts 2:22; Heb. 2:3–4), then what Jesus taught about the origin and nature of Scripture is divinely authoritative.

WHAT JESUS TAUGHT ABOUT THE OLD TESTAMENT

Since the New Testament was not yet written, Jesus' words apply directly only to the Old Testament. However, since Jesus made certain promises to the apostles about New Testament truth, and since the apostolic writings were considered on a par with the Old Testament, then what Jesus taught about the divine authority of the Old Testament applies indirectly to the New Testament as well (see below).

Jesus Affirmed Its Divine Authority

Over and over Jesus declared, "*It is written*" (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). He instructed, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). Jesus even appealed to Scripture as the highest authority by which Satan can be rebuked: "Away from me, Satan! For *it is written*: Worship the Lord thy God, and serve him only" (Matt. 4:10).

Jesus Affirmed Its Imperishability

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (Matt. 5:17–18).

Jesus Asserted Its Unbreakability

"If he called them 'gods,' to whom the word of God came—and *the Scripture cannot be broken* ..." (John 10:35). (This is the equivalent of claiming that the Bible is infallible.)

Jesus Declared Its Ultimate Supremacy

The Bible is exalted above all human instruction. Jesus said to the Jewish leaders, “Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ... Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition” (Matt. 15:3, 6).

Jesus Affirmed Its Factual Inerrancy

“Jesus replied, ‘You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God’ ” (Matt. 22:29). Again, Jesus said to the Father, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). In brief, the Bible is wholly true, without any error.

Jesus Insisted on Its Historical Reliability

Jesus even affirmed highly disputed passages, such as the Flood of Noah’s time and Jonah and the great fish, as historically true. “*For [just] as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*” (Matt. 12:40; cf. 16:4). Further, “as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark” (Matt. 24:37–38; cf. 10:15; 12:42; 19:4–6).

Jesus Affirmed Its Scientific Accuracy

Even on the highly disputed matter of the origin of the world and of humankind, Jesus insisted on the truthfulness of Scripture. He referred to the creation of the universe, saying, “Those will be days of distress un-equaled from *the beginning, when God created the world*, until now—and never to be equaled again” (Mark 13:19).

Jesus also affirmed the creation of Adam and Eve, saying, “Haven’t you read ... that *at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’* and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?’” (Matt. 19:4–5). He added elsewhere, “I have spoken to you of *earthly things* and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?” (John 3:12).

The authority of the Bible is confirmed by the authority of Jesus; if He is the Son of God, then the Bible is the Word of God. Indeed, even if Jesus is only a prophet of God, the Bible is the Word of God. Only if one rejects the divine authority of Christ can he consistently reject the divine authority of the Scriptures, for if Jesus is telling the truth, then it is true that the Bible is God’s Word.

JESUS AND THE NEW TESTAMENT AUTHORS AFFIRMED THE SCOPE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Jesus affirmed the authority of the whole Jewish Old Testament, which is the same as the Protestant Old Testament (of thirty-nine books), although the books are numbered and ordered differently (see chapter 28). This affirmation is evident from several truths.

Jesus Used Phrases That Encompass the Whole Old Testament

Jesus employed several terms that refer to the Old Testament as a whole; three in particular come to mind. *First*, “*law and the prophets*” or its equivalent (e.g., “Moses and all the Prophets”) is employed about a dozen times in the New Testament. Jesus’ use of it clearly refers to the whole Old Testament (Luke 24:27; cf. 24:44).

Second, the term “the Scriptures” is utilized by Jesus and other New Testament writers to refer to the whole Old Testament. Two cases in point are found in John (5:39; 10:35).

Third, Jesus used a phrase equivalent to our “from Genesis to Revelation” to refer to the entire Old Testament: “And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, *from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar*” (Matt. 23:35).

Jesus Referred to Most of the Individual Books of the Old Testament

According to the Jewish numbering of the Old Testament there were twenty-two (or twenty-four) books, depending on whether Ruth was considered part of Judges and Lamentations part of Jeremiah. Of the twenty-two books, Jesus and His disciples, who wrote the New Testament, referred to eighteen (see Geisler and Nix, *GIB*, chapter 4).

Jesus Referred to the Old Testament as a Whole

Jesus indicated that the whole Old Testament is the Word of God in phrases like “the Law and the Prophets” (the entire Old Testament canon): “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17). Also, “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in *all the Scriptures* concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Once He referred to all the books from Genesis to 2 Chronicles (the last book in the Jewish listing of the Old Testament): “And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah” (Matt. 23:35). This is the equivalent of our phrase, “from Genesis to Malachi.”

Jesus Promised the Divine Authority of the New Testament

Not only did Jesus confirm the Old Testament to be the Word of God, He also promised the same for the New Testament, affirming that the Holy Spirit would teach the apostles “all things” and lead them into “all truth.” He announced, “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26). He added, “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13).

The Apostles Claimed This Divine Authority for Their Words

Jesus’ handpicked apostles understood His claims and their role in fulfilling them, for they too claimed to speak with the authority of God, as is evident from the claims made in their books. Paul declared, “The gospel I preached is not something that man made up. *I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ*” (Gal. 1:11–12). In 1 Corinthians he added, “*What I am writing to you is the Lord’s command*” (1 Cor. 14:37).

John claimed, “That which was from the beginning, *which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes*, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life” (1 John 1:1). Hence, he insisted, “*We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood*” (1 John 4:6).

Peter insisted that what he wrote was from God, just like the Old Testament prophets: “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, *but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit*” (2 Peter 1:20–21). He added, “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, *but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. . . . We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain*” (2 Peter 1:16, 18).

Paul Cited the Gospels

Paul cited the words of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke (10:7; cf. Matt. 10:10), calling them “Scripture” right alongside the Old Testament: “The Scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages’ ” (1 Tim. 5:18).

Peter Acknowledged Paul’s Letters As Scripture

Peter wrote, “Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. *His letters* contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the *other Scriptures*, to their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:15–16, emphasis added).

The New Testament Is the Only Authentic Record of Apostolic Teaching

There are few other sources that even claim to record apostolic teaching not found in the New Testament, and these are apocryphal (see chapter 28), being composed by non-apostles a century or more after the time of Christ. The only historically reliable (see chapter 25) first-century record of what Jesus and His apostles taught is found in the New Testament.

So the New Testament too is confirmed to be the Word of God. Therefore, the Old Testament was directly confirmed by Jesus to have divine authority, and the New Testament was indirectly confirmed to have the same. Thus, the whole Bible, Old and New Testaments, is confirmed by Christ to be the Word of the Living God.

CHRIST AND THE CRITICS

To the everlasting embarrassment of Bible critics, at least those who claim to be followers of Christ, Jesus affirmed exactly the opposite of what much of negative “higher criticism” teaches. The following are a crucial sampling of the topics on which there is a clash between Christ and His detractors.

Jesus Affirmed that Daniel Was a Prophet, Not a Mere Historian

Many critics insist that Daniel was a historian, not a predictive prophet, who wrote around 165 B.C.—*after* the events he announced about Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome (Dan. 2, 7). Jesus, however, claimed that Daniel was a prophet who predicted things in advance, saying, “So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through *the prophet Daniel*—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains” (Matt. 24:15–16). Jesus went on to give a detailed prediction about the destruction of Jerusalem almost four decades in advance.

Jesus Confirmed That God Created Adam and Eve

Most Bible critics believe that the first human being evolved from lower forms of life. But in response to a question on the relationship between a husband and a wife, Jesus established the basis for the marriage of the first couple, whom He said were created by God: “Haven’t you read ... that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?’” (Matt. 19:4–5).

Jesus Affirmed That Jonah Was Swallowed by a Great Fish

Many critics deny the story of Jonah and the fish, calling it a myth. Jesus, however, took it as literally true, comparing it with His own literal death and resurrection: “For *as Jonah was* three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:40).

Jesus Verified That the World Was Drowned by a Flood

Old Testament critics have long denied the historicity of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, especially that of Noah’s Flood. However, Jesus affirmed it as true, comparing it with His own literal second coming: “*As it was* in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man” (Matt. 24:37–39).

Jesus Maintained That There Was One Isaiah, Not Two

Old Testament critics have long held that there were at least two prophets named Isaiah, the first who wrote chapters 1–39 and the second who wrote chapters 40–66. One reason prompting this is the disbelief the critics have regarding miracles (see chapter 3). Since Isaiah refers to King Cyrus, who was not born until long after the first section of Isaiah was written, skeptics, on purely natural grounds, feel it necessary to postdate the second section after the time of Cyrus to account for the mention of his name.

However, Jesus quoted from both sections of Isaiah, referring them to one prophet. In Luke 4:17–20 Jesus cites Isaiah 61:1–2 and in Mark 7:6 He quotes Isaiah 29:13. What is more, one disciple whom Jesus taught cites from both sections of Isaiah in the same passage, referring both quotes to one and the same prophet named Isaiah (John 12:37–41; cf. Isa. 6:10; 53:1).

Jesus Confirmed David Wrote Psalms Ascribed to Him

Most Old Testament critics deny that David wrote the seventy-plus psalms attributed to him, claiming that he wrote few, if any. Yet Jesus cites one of the disputed psalms (Ps. 110:1) and attributes it to King David, asking the Jewish leaders, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? For he says, “ ‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.’ ” If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how then can he be his son?” (Matt. 22:43–45).

Jesus and His Disciples Affirmed Many Other Old Testament Persons and Events

The most disputed sections of the Old Testament were personally validated by Christ and His disciples—whom He taught. Of these sections, some of which are mentioned above, they affirmed something in every one of the most disputed chapters in the Old Testament (Gen. 1–22):

1. Creation of the universe (Gen. 1 →John 1:3; Col. 1:16).
2. Creation of Adam and Eve (Gen. 1–2 →1 Tim. 2:13–14).
3. Marriage of Adam and Eve (Gen. 2 →1 Tim. 2:13).
4. Temptation of the woman (Gen. 3 →1 Tim. 2:14).
5. Disobedience of Adam (Gen. 3 →Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:22).
6. Sacrifices of Abel and Cain (Gen. 4 →Heb. 11:4).
7. Murder of Abel by Cain (Gen. 4 →1 John 3:12).
8. Birth of Seth (Gen. 4 →Luke 3:38).
9. Translation of Enoch (Gen. 5 →Heb. 11:5).
10. Marriage before the Flood (Gen. 6 →Luke 17:27).
11. The Flood and destruction of man (Gen. 7 →Matt. 24:39).
12. Preservation of Noah and his family (Gen. 8–9 →2 Peter 2:5).
13. Genealogy of Shem (Gen. 10 →Luke 3:35–36).
14. Birth of Abraham (Gen. 11 →Luke 3:34).
15. Call of Abraham (Gen. 12–13 →Heb. 11:8).
16. Tithes to Melchizedek (Gen. 14 →Heb. 7:1–3).
17. Justification of Abraham (Gen. 15 →Rom. 4:3).
18. Ishmael (Gen. 16 →Gal. 4:21–26).
19. Promise of Isaac (Gen. 17 →Heb. 11:18).
20. Lot and Sodom (Gen. 18–19 →Luke 17:29).
21. Abraham’s sojourn in the Land (Gen 20 →Heb. 11:9).
22. Birth of Isaac (Gen. 21 →Acts 7:8).
23. Offering of Isaac (Gen. 22 →Heb. 11:17).¹
24. The burning bush (Ex. 3:2–6 →Luke 20:37).
25. Exodus through the Red Sea (Ex. 14:22 →1 Cor. 10:1–2).
26. Provision of water and manna (Ex. 16:4; 17:6 →1 Cor. 10:3–5).
27. Lifting up the serpent in the wilderness (Num. 21:9 →John 3:14).

¹ The following are a representative sample of major events in the rest of the Old Testament that are cited as authentic by Jesus or His disciples in the New Testament.

28. Fall of Jericho (Joshua 6:12–25 →Heb. 11:30).
29. Miracles of Elijah (1 Kings 17:1, 18:1 →James 5:17–18).
30. Jonah in the great fish (Jonah 2 →Matt. 12:40).
31. Three Hebrew youths in the furnace (Dan. 3 →Heb. 11:34).
32. Daniel in the lion’s den (Dan. 6 →Heb. 11:33).
33. Slaying of Zechariah (2 Chron. 24:20–22 →Matt. 23:35).

In light of the evidence, the choice is clear: Christ or the critics? What Jesus affirms, they deny. But if Jesus is the Son of God, then the Bible is the Word of God, including what it says about these authors and events. And if the Bible is not the Word of God, then Christ is not the Son of God. The two Words of God, the Living and the written, are tied together.

A RESPONSE TO THE CRITICAL THEORIES

In addition to denying the historicity of the Gospel accounts (see chapter 26), critics have proposed two basic ways to avoid the logic of the above argument. Some embrace the accommodation theory and others hold to the limitation theory.

Arguments for the Accommodation Theory

As shown above, Jesus expressed a high view of Scripture in the New Testament, including its divine authority (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10), imperishability (Matt. 5:17–18), inspiration (Matt. 22:43), unbreakability (John 10:35), status as the Word of God (John 10:34–35), supremacy (Matt. 15:3, 6), inerrancy (Matt. 22:29; John 17:17), historical reliability (Matt. 24:37–38; Matt. 12:40), and scientific accuracy (Matt. 19:4–5).

In order to avoid the conclusion that Jesus was actually affirming all this to be true, some negative critics insist that He was merely accommodating Himself to the accepted Jewish belief of the day. Allegedly, since His primary concern was spiritual, Jesus avoided any attempt to debunk their false views; rather, He merely overlooked them and used them as a starting point to convey His own spiritual and moral message. This “accommodation theory,” stemming from Johann Semler (see chapter 19), is seriously flawed for several reasons.

Accommodation to Error Is Contrary to the Pattern of Jesus’ Life

Everything that is known about Jesus’ life and teaching reveals that He never accommodated what He knew to be true to the false teaching of the day. Indeed, He did just the opposite.

First, Jesus rebuked those who accepted Jewish teaching that contradicted the Bible, declaring, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ... Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition” (Matt. 15:3, 6).

Second, Jesus often set His word against false views about the Bible. For instance, in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus affirmed emphatically, “*You have heard* that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ *But I tell you* that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (Matt. 5:21–22). This, or the similar formula of “It has been said.... But I say unto you ...” is repeated over and over in subsequent verses (cf. Matt. 5:23–48).

Third, Jesus rebuked Nicodemus, saying, “*You are Israel’s teacher ... and do you not understand these things?*” (John 3:10). This is far from accommodation to his false views.

Fourth, speaking specifically about their erroneous view of Scripture, Jesus told the Sadducees bluntly that they were mistaken: “*You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God*” (Matt. 22:29).

Fifth, Jesus’ words of denunciation to the Pharisees were scarcely accommodating: “*Woe to you, blind guides! ... Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! ... You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! ... Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! ... You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?*” (Matt. 23:16–33).

Sixth, Jesus did not accommodate false beliefs and practices in the temple. The Bible says, “*So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, ‘Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!’*” (John 2:15–16).

Seventh, Jesus often spoke specifically about the authorship of portions of the Old Testament. Again, He attributed Psalm 110 to David (Matt. 22:43), and He ascribed Deuteronomy to Moses (Matt. 19:8). He even made specific reference to the origin of circumcision, correcting a false belief: “*Moses gave you circumcision (though actually it did not come from Moses, but from the patriarchs).*” As William Caven observed, “*This is not the style of one who does not wish his words to be taken strictly!*” (“TCOT” in *TF*, 225).

Eighth, even Jesus’ enemies recognized that He did not compromise. Testing Him, the Pharisees said to Him, “*Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are*” (Matt. 22:16).

The facts are that there is nothing in the Gospel record to indicate that Jesus was an accommodator to accepted error on any topic. He even rebuked Nicodemus for not understanding empirical things, saying, “*I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?*” (John 3:12).

Accommodation to Error Is Contrary to Jesus’ Character

Even from a purely human standpoint, Jesus was known as a man of high moral character. His closest friends found Him impeccable (1 John 3:3, 4:17; 1 Peter 1:19), and the crowds were amazed at His teaching “*because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law*” (Matt. 7:29).

Pilate examined Jesus and declared, “*I find no basis for a charge against this man*” (Luke 23:4). The Roman soldier crucifying Jesus exclaimed, “*Surely this was a righteous man*” (Luke 23:47). Even unbelievers have paid high tribute to Christ. Ernest Renan (1823–1892), the famous French infidel, declared about Jesus: “*His perfect idealism is the highest rule of the unblemished and virtuous life*” (*LJ*, 383). He also wrote, “*Let us place, then, the person of Jesus at the highest summit of human greatness*” (*ibid.*, 386) and “*Jesus remains an inexhaustible principle of moral regeneration for humanity*” (*ibid.*, 388).

From a biblical point of view, Jesus was the Son of God (see “*C, DO*” in Geisler, *BECA*) and, as such, He could not deceive, for “*God ... does not lie*” (Titus 1:2). Indeed, “*it is impossible for God to lie*” (Heb. 6:18); His “*word is truth*” (John 17:17); God is true “*and every man a liar*” (Rom. 3:4). So whatever divine self-limitation is necessary in order to communicate with human beings, there is no error involved. Error is contrary to His very nature.

An Objection Answered

Admittedly, God adapted to human limitations in order to communicate with us. Indeed, Jesus, who was God, was also a human being (see volume 2), and as a human being He was limited in His knowledge. This is borne out by several passages of Scripture; for instance, as a child “he grew in wisdom” (Luke 2:52). Even as an adult He had certain limitations on His knowledge. According to Matthew, Jesus did not know what was on the fig tree before He got to it (Matt. 21:19). Jesus Himself said He did not know the time of His second coming: “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, *nor the Son*, but only the Father” (Matt. 24:36, emphasis added).

However, despite the limitations on Jesus’ human knowledge, we know that He never erred for two basic reasons. *First*, limits on understanding are different from misunderstanding. The fact that He did not know some things does not mean He was wrong in what He did know. It is one thing to say Jesus did not know as a man the JEPD theory² of the authorship of the law (see chapter 19). But it is quite another to say Jesus was wrong when He affirmed that David wrote Psalm 110 (Matt. 22:43) or that Moses wrote the law (Luke 24:27; John 7:19, 23) or that Daniel wrote the prophecy attributed to him in Matthew 24:15. In short, Jesus’ limitations on things He did not know as a man did not hinder Him from affirming truly the things He did know.

Second, what Jesus did know and teach He affirmed with divine authority. This is evident for many reasons. For one thing, Jesus said to His disciples: “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:18–20). Further, He affirmed many things He taught with emphasis. In the gospel of John, Jesus said twenty-five times “*Truly, truly ...*” (John 3:3, 5, 11 RSV). Indeed, He claimed His words were on the level of God’s, declaring, “*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away*” (Matt. 24:35). What is more, Jesus taught only what the Father told Him to teach: “*I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me*” (John 8:28). He added, “By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me” (John 5:30). So to charge Jesus with error is to charge God the Father with error.

Conclusion Regarding the Accommodation Theory

There is no evidence that Jesus ever accommodated Himself to human error in anything He taught. Nor is there any indication that His self-limitation in the Incarnation necessitated any error. He never taught anything false in the areas in which the Incarnation limited Him as a man, and what He did teach, He taught with the authority of the Father, having all authority in heaven and earth.

Arguments for the Limitation Theory

² J (Jehovah), E (Elohim), P (Priestly), D (Deuteronomy) is the abbreviation given for the view, springing from Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) and other OT critics, that claims Moses did not write the first five books of the Bible but at least four different authors did, each being characterized by the name of God (J and E) or the kind of literature, whether priestly (P) or legal (D).

Another critical hypothesis aimed at undermining the above argument that Jesus affirmed the Bible to be the Word of God is the limitation theory. According to this view, Jesus was so limited in His human knowledge that it did not extend to matters such as the authority and authenticity of the Old Testament, and thus He was not really affirming these issues. Rather, His ministry was limited only to spiritual or moral matters, and He affirmed nothing about historical, scientific, or critical matters.

There are two main pillars in the argument for the limitation theory: the humanity of Christ and the kenosis theory.

The Argument That the Humanity of Christ Reveals His Knowledge Was Limited

Jesus was clearly human. The Bible reveals this in many ways (see “Christ, Humanity of” in Geisler, *BECA*): Jesus had a human ancestry (Matt. 1:20–25; Luke 2:1–7); a human conception (Matt. 1:20);* a human birth (Luke 2:4–7; cf. Luke 1:26–27; Gal. 4:4); a human childhood (Luke 2:21–22, 40); normal human growth (Luke 2:52); human hunger (Luke 4:2); human thirst (John 4:6–7); human fatigue (Mark 6:31); human emotions (John 11:33, 35; John 2:15); human sense of humor (Matt. 23:24); human language, culture, and national origin (Matt. 1:1; John 4:5–9); human flesh and blood (Heb. 2:14); human death (1 Cor. 15:3; Matt. 16:21; Rom. 5:8); human pain (Matt. 27:34, 46; Matt. 26:38; Luke 22:44; Heb. 5:7); and human temptation (Matt. 4:1f.; cf. Heb. 4:15). But if Jesus was truly human in every respect, then why could He not experience human error? Why could not Jesus have been wrong about many of the things He believed, so long as they did not hinder His overall redemptive mission?

The Argument That in the Incarnation Christ Emptied Himself of Omniscience

Further, some critics have argued that in His incarnation Jesus “emptied himself of” omniscience. He was ignorant, allegedly, of the time of His second coming, for He Himself said, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32). Again, neither did He know whether there were figs on the tree (Mark 11:13). Luke informs us that Jesus “increased in wisdom” as other humans do (Luke 2:52), and asked many questions that revealed His ignorance of the answers (Mark 5:9, 30; 6:38; John 14:9). This being the case, perhaps Jesus was ignorant of the origin of the Old Testament and of the historical truth of the events in it.

Response to the Arguments for the Limitation View

The limitation theory is faulty at the core. Both arguments in favor of it are mistaken, and each ignores a very important point about Christ.

Jesus Was Also God

While it is true that Jesus was God (see volume 2), it is also true that He was man. That is, one and the same person was both God and man at the same time. This means that if the human person Christ had sinned or erred, then the one and the same person that was God would have sinned or erred as well. This is why the Bible is careful to say “we have one who has been

* That is, He was conceived in the womb of a human being, albeit by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20–23).

tempted in every way, just as we are—*yet was without sin*” (Heb. 4:15). He was human enough to be tired and tempted but not to be sinful (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 John 3:3).

Likewise, if a sin attributed to Christ must also be attributed to God who cannot sin (Hab. 1:13; Heb. 6:18), then an error attributed to Him would have to be attributed to God as well—one and the same person who is Christ is also God. Thus, it is not possible that error can be attributed to Christ, whether as man or as God, since there is only one and the same person in Christ, who is both God and man.

Jesus Never Emptied Himself of Deity

The so-called kenosis theory (that Jesus emptied Himself of deity when He became man) is biblically and theologically unfounded, for many reasons.

First, this is not what the text affirms in Philippians 2, which claims only that He emptied Himself of His divine prerogatives (not of His deity) by humbling Himself to become a human being (Phil. 2:5–8).

Second, when He emptied Himself He was still in the “form” (essence) of God, for if the same word “form” as applied to a servant means He was a servant (Phil. 2:7), then when applied to God it means He was God (Phil. 2:6). Indeed, this is precisely what John 1:1 declares, viz., “the Word was God” (cf. Col. 2:9).

Third, while on earth in human form Jesus claimed to be God (Mark 2:10; John 8:58; 10:35–36; John 17:1–6).

Fourth, Jesus accepted the attribution of deity given Him by others (Matt. 16:16; John 20:28), as well as worship due only to God (Matt. 28:17; John 9:38).

When Christ became man He never ceased being God. *The Incarnation was not the subtraction of deity; it was the addition of humanity.* Thus, had Jesus sinned or erred when on earth as a man, He would have simultaneously sinned or erred as God, for Jesus was one and the same person with the Second Person of the Godhead (see volume 2, part 1).

Criticism of the Limitation Theory

The limitation theory is much more plausible and potentially damaging to the case for the authority of the Old Testament than is the accommodation theory discussed above. Let us examine the evidence carefully.

Since the orthodox doctrine of Christ acknowledges that He was fully human, there is no problem in admitting that Jesus was ignorant of many things as a man. As God, of course, Jesus was infinite in knowledge and knew all things (Ps. 147:5). But *Christ has two natures*: one infinite or unlimited in knowledge, the other finite or limited in knowledge. Could it be that Jesus did not really err in what He taught about the Old Testament but that He simply was so limited as a human being that His knowledge and authority did not extend into those areas? The evidence in the New Testament records demands an emphatically negative answer to this question for many reasons.

Jesus Had a Supernormal Knowledge Even in His Human State

Even in His human state, Christ possessed supernormal if not supernatural knowledge of many things. He saw Nathaniel under the fig tree, although He was not within visual distance (John 1:48). Jesus amazed the woman of Samaria with the information He knew about her private life (John 4:18–19). He knew who would betray Him in advance (John 6:64) and “all that

would befall him” in Jerusalem (John 18:4). He knew about Lazarus’s death before He was told (John 11:14) and of His crucifixion and resurrection before it occurred (Mark 8:31; 9:31). He likewise had superhuman knowledge of the location of fish (Luke 5:4–9).

There is no indication from the Gospel record that Jesus’ finitude deterred His ministry or teaching. Whatever the limitations to His knowledge, it was still vastly beyond that of normal men and completely adequate for His mission and doctrinal teaching.

Christ Possessed Complete and Final Authority for Whatever He Taught

One thing is crystal clear: Christ claimed that whatever He taught came from God with absolute and final authority: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matt. 24:35). Jesus believed and proclaimed, “All things have been committed to me by my Father” (Matt. 11:27). When Jesus commissioned His disciples, He claimed, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given me. Therefore go and make disciples ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:18–20).

Elsewhere Jesus claimed that the very destiny of humanity hinged on His words (Matt. 7:24–27) and that His words would judge us in the last day (John 12:48). The emphatic “truly, truly” is found more than two dozen times in John alone (RSV), and in Matthew Jesus declared that not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law He came to fulfill (Matt. 5:18). Jesus then placed His own words on the level of the law (Matt. 5:21f.) and claimed that His words bring eternal life (John 5:24), vowing that all His teaching came from the Father (John 8:26–28). Furthermore, as we have seen, despite the fact that He was a man on earth, Christ accepted the acclaims of deity and allowed men to worship Him on many occasions (cf. Matt. 28:17; John 9:38).

Conclusion Regarding the Limitation Theory

In view of the foregoing evidence, the only reasonable conclusion is that Jesus’ teachings are possessed of divine authority. Despite the necessary limitations involved in a human incarnation, there is no error or misunderstanding in what Christ taught. Whatever limits there were in the *extent* of Jesus’ knowledge, there were no limits to the *truthfulness* of His teachings. Just as Jesus was fully human and yet His *moral* character was without flaw (Heb. 4:15), likewise, He was finite in human knowledge and yet without *factual* error in His teaching (John 8:40, 46). In summation, whatever Jesus taught came from God. Hence, if Jesus taught the divine authority and historical authenticity of the Old Testament, then His teaching is the truth of God.

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