

### **3. THE BIBLE CAN BE WRONG**

#### **Biblical authors make mistakes**

Catholics and Protestants believe that the Bible is God's revelation. However, this revelation was not by way of dictation as if a writer wrote what God said to him verbatim. Revelation involves God inspiring the author, and the latter wrote according to his own style and language proficiency. He used some materials collected, wrote in the language he was familiar with, and expressed the message in his preferred style. He based his writings on his understanding of God and the issue at hand, conveying it in a manner that suits the needs of his readers, and included in his writings, the widely accepted knowledge and practices of his time.

The Bible consists of 73 books in total and is divided into the 46 Old Testament books (39 books, for those who rejected the deuterocanonical books) and the 27 New Testament books. Old Testament books contain writings of the experience of God prior to the coming of Christ. The four Gospels witness the life of Christ, while the rest of the New Testament writings testify to the faith of early Christians.

The books were redacted or written by different authors at different times. Any knowledge of science, geography, history, and ethics included therein were that of its human authors. Today's readers might notice that the knowledge of ancient times differs significantly from ours, and much of it might be inaccurate. However, for the people in that era, that knowledge was widely accepted as true.

If one asks, “Can there be errors in the Bible?”, the answer is yes. In fact, some of the information on natural sciences and humanities were later found to be inaccurate or wrong. Similarly, the philosophy, ethics, and theology expressed could also be erroneous. In brief, there are errors in the Bible, and unsurprisingly, they are human errors.

### **Scientific Errors**

When ancient people talked about the universe, they described it according to their astronomical knowledge, which was very limited. They perceived the earth as flat, and it had four ends. Thus, it was not unusual for them to speak of the four corners of the earth (Ezek 7:2; Isa 11:12). They perceived the sky as a dome that contained huge water tanks with gates (Gen 1:7). When the heavenly gates were opened, rain fell. Their knowledge was derived from their observations and speculations. With the advancement of science, those incorrect ideas were debunked. Marine navigators explored and demonstrated that the earth was round, and modern astrologists showed that there were so much more beyond the sky!

In the Book of Genesis, the snake is described as the incarnation of the devil. After tempting Adam and Eve to sin, God pronounced its punishment, “You alone of all the animals must bear this curse: From now on you will crawl on your belly, and you will have to eat dust as long as you live” (Gen 3:14). Depicting the devil as a talking snake is an allegorical way of writing a story. To say that snakes must crawl on the dusty earth as a punishment from God for tempting Eve is obviously a wild conjecture.

The point is, the first few chapters of the Book of Genesis are intended to convey the message that God is the origin and creator of all things, including humankind. The story of the snake and the fall of Adam and Eve is to express the reality of the experience of sin, which involves an internal factor of human pride and greed as well as an external factor of temptation. They are not intended to prescribe any biological facts.

### **Misguided Familial Ethics**

The ethical thinking of ancient people was immature, and their perspectives on family, interpersonal, social, and political relationships were primitive. In family ethics, the ancient Jewish society was chauvinistic. Wives, concubines, and children were considered man's property, and they had the right to use them in any way they deemed fit. However, as they also advocated theocracy, they attributed these ideas to God, claiming them to be His commands. Male chauvinism was clearly shown in the following example: "If a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged, he must pay the bride price for her and marry her" (Exod 22:16). Such an attitude of using money to settle the matter after a girl had been violated is clearly intolerable in our society today.

In Deuteronomy, it is written that suppose a man had a disobedient son who would not obey his parents even after they punished him, his parents were to put him on trial before the leaders of the town where he lived before the men of the city stone him to death (Deut 21:18-21). Furthermore, suppose a man married a girl and found her to be not a virgin, they were to take her out to the entrance of her father's house where the men of her city were to

stone her to death (Deut 22:20-22). Such acts of cruelty are certainly unacceptable to us today!

Then why do these passages appear in the Bible? They are contained in the Books as a matter of fact, showing that such thoughts and behaviours were culturally acceptable to the people of that time. These contents are “descriptive”, not “prescriptive” for Christian readers. They reflect the reality of ancient times and are not behaviours we should follow.

### **Misguided Social Ethics**

On politics and military, the book of Numbers described the war between the Israelites and the Midianites and claimed that the Israelites attacked them as the Lord had commanded Moses. “... they captured the Midianite women and children, took their cattle and their flocks, plundered all their wealth, and burned all their cities and camps, and killed the women and children” (Num 31:15-17). That was how the conflicting tribes behaved towards one another during wars. Yet, having a theocratic mentality, the Israelites attributed those actions to God’s command, rather than their leaders’ command.

It is written in Psalms 137 that the Israelites, who had been sent into exile, hated their enemies and hoped for revenge. The psalmist said, “Happy is the man who pays you back for what you have done to us – who takes your babies and smashes them against a rock.” Such a sentiment of vengeance is un-Christian, and we feel disgusted about it. However, among ancient Jews (and other ancient tribes), such an idea was common.

The revered status of the Prophets of God was exaggerated as expressed in the second book of Kings. When Elisha was on his way to Bethel, some boys came out of a town and made fun of him, shouting, "Get out of here, baldy!" Then two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys into pieces. Instead of lamenting the death of those boys, the passage gives the impression that "all of you deserved to die for ridiculing the Prophet!" While the Prophet should be respected, it is also true that the young lives should be valued.

Other social facts are also described in the biblical books. For example, they accepted the system of slavery and did not judge it as wrong (Ex 21:20-21). They also accepted polygamy. These two systems are, however, not acceptable to us. Today, it is unthinkable for any Christian to advocate slavery or brag about having more than one wife!

Old Testament books contain theological views that are also unacceptable to us. For example, they believed that God was a persecutor and a harsh judge who would not only punish offenders but also go to the extent of punishing their offspring up until the fourth generation (Ex 20:5). This is a serious misunderstanding of God's nature. Jesus taught us very clearly that God is our Heavenly Father whose love and mercy for all is eternal.

### **The Gospel Benchmark**

The above examples illustrate the many erroneous scientific, ethical, and theological ideas contained in the Old Testament writings. Reading those texts, people today usually do not bother too much about the

inaccuracy of scientific and humanistic knowledge, which they know is outdated. However, with regards to moral and theological ideas, people might have the wrong assumption that if they are recorded in the Bible, they could not be wrong. In fact, such an assumption is fallacious because past views on morality and theology could also be wrong.

What standard can we use to judge the correctness of ancient teaching? It is by the standard of Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man. Following his example and teaching, we can correct the ancients' moral and theological views. Let us examine the following examples:

Jesus taught that regardless of gender, race and social status, everyone enjoys the same dignity of being God's children. However, in biblical times, some people were discriminated and marginalised. Jesus, through his actions and preaching, corrected these prejudices. There was a woman who suffered from severe bleeding for twelve years (Luke 8:43-48), and she dared not approach Jesus as people of that era thought that anybody who contacted her would become "unclean" due to her bleeding. So, she secretly touched the edge of Jesus' cloak. Jesus did not reject her. Instead, he praised her for her faith and healed her. Jesus not only restored her physical health but restored her rightful status in society.

Generally, the Jewish hated the Roman soldiers as they were perceived as part of the corrupt forces of the colonial government. The Jews were also proud of their religion and despised the "Gentiles". However, Jesus did not discriminate between races and religions as shown by his

healing of a Roman Centurion's servant (Luke 7:1-10). His actions built a bridge between the two peoples. Furthermore, Jesus befriended and had meals with the tax collectors who were publicly regarded as sinners because they collected taxes on behalf of the Roman Government and were suspected of corruption (Mark 2:15-17). He explained that "sinners" are the people that he came for.

The examples and teachings of Jesus empowered his disciples to practise universal brotherhood and develop the attitude of treating all people justly. Such formation inspires people of later generations to build more just and equitable societies. It gives them the theoretical basis and moral courage to overthrow the system of slavery based on the awareness of equal human dignity and, subsequently, to seek gender and racial equality and the development of political democracy.

## **Conclusion**

The biblical books were written by men with inspiration from God. Being human writings, they contain socio-cultural facts and information of the authors' time, and those ancient knowledge and practices are often incompatible to those of our time. On matters of moral and faith, we should make a clear distinction between the "descriptive contents" and the "prescriptive contents" of the Bible. The descriptive contents merely reflect the social and cultural reality at the time of writing. The prescriptive contents refer to instructions on what we should believe and how we should act. For Christians, disciples of Christ, we have Jesus and his Gospel teaching as the authoritative benchmark for the correct

understanding of ethics and theology. Jesus is the standard by which we judge the appropriateness of any theological thought and moral action.