

# Proof that Christianity is wrong to imagine an error-free Bible

Excerpts from the Gifford Lectures Brand Blanshard

<https://www.giffordlectures.org/books/reason-and-belief>

For the religious liberal, the battle over the inerrancy of Scripture was fought and settled long ago. The value of the Bible lies for him in the expression it gives—an authentic and at best very moving expression—to the moral and religious experience of a greatly gifted people. He knows that the attempt to make of the Bible a document dictated, in Donne's phrase, to 'the secretaries of the Holy Ghost', and therefore errorless in every detail, is a blunder calculated to alienate all thoughtful men. This teaching is sometimes regarded as the almost exclusive property of Protestant fundamentalists. On the contrary, it is in substance the position of the largest and most powerful of Christian churches. This teaching is not nowadays much stressed, and many members of the Catholic church are unaware of it, or even deny it, but they do so at their peril. It is not merely the teaching of the greatest of church philosophers, St Thomas, whose opinion is weighty, though of course fallible; it is a belief that has been made mandatory for all Catholics by the official pronouncements of the highest authority.

## THE CLAIM TO A SCRIPTURE INSPIRED THROUGHOUT

The ecumenical Council of Trent decreed with Papal approval that 'if anyone receive not as sacred and canonical the said books entire and with all their parts as they have been used to be read in the Catholic church, and as they are contained in the Old Latin Vulgate edition... let him be anathema'. Nor is anyone at liberty to take one part as more reliable than another; the Council declared that it 'accepts and venerates all the books of the Old and New Testaments, since one God is the author of both, with equal piety and reverence'. This position was reaffirmed by the Vatican Council of 1870. Leo XIII committed the church to it in unequivocal terms. 'All the books which the Church receives as sacred and canonical are written wholly and entirely, with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Ghost; and so far is it from being possible that any error can coexist with inspiration, that inspiration is not only essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God himself, the supreme truth, can utter that which is not true.'

The position was reiterated by Benedict XV in *Spiritus Paraclitus* of 1920. It was emphatically reaffirmed by Vatican Council II.

'Holy Mother Church, relying on the belief of the apostles, holds that the books of both the Old and New Testament in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because, having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit... they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself.... Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings....'

I wish to say that the Vatican declares that God inspired in scripture what is necessary for our salvation. That can be taken as restrictive or descriptive. Or both. Some say it is the case that all the truth we need is in the Bible or is restricted to it. Others say it is descriptive in the sense that it is noted the Bible just happens to have all the truths. Neither idea justifies cherry picking the Bible. A restrictive or descriptive Bible can be infallible and indeed should be.

## SCRIPTURAL INCONSISTENCIES

Now this position is untenable. It requires Catholics to accept as true statements that cannot be true, because they contradict other statements held equally to be true.

Let us take first a random sampling of such contradictions, factual, moral and religious. In 2 Samuel 24:9, we read that there were 800,000 men in Israel who drew the sword; in 1 Chronicles 21:5, the figure is given as 1,100,000. In 2 Samuel 6:23, we read that 'Michal, the daughter of Saul, had no child unto the day of her death'. Fifteen chapters later in the same book we find a reference to 'the five sons of Michal, the daughter of Saul' (21:8). In 1 Kings 9:28, we are told that gold was brought from Ophir to the value of 420 talents; in 2 Chronicles 8:18, the same gold has the value of 450 talents. In 1 Kings 7:15, the twin pillars of Solomon's temple have a height of eighteen cubits; in 2 Chronicles 3:15, the same pillars have a

height of thirty-five cubits.

In 1 Samuel 15:29, we read that 'the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent'. A few verses later in the same chapter we read, 'the Lord repented that he had made Saul king over Israel'.

Matthew gives a genealogy of Jesus which represents him as descended from David through Solomon. Luke supplies another genealogy which represents him as descended from another son, Nathan. Matthew has forty-one generations from Abraham to Jesus; Luke has fifty-six. Neither genealogy, if true, accords with the church teaching that Jesus has no human father at all. In Mark and Luke, Jesus lays down an absolute prohibition of divorce; in two passages in Matthew he declines to apply this prohibition to the innocent party where the other has been guilty of adultery. In the account of Paul's conversion in Acts 9:3–7, those who were with him are declared to have 'stood amazed, hearing indeed a voice, but seeing no man'. In the account of the same event in Acts 22:6–10, 'they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me'. All four of the gospels tell the story of the resurrection, but they differ as to the number of angels seen, the places where they were seen, the number of visitors to the tomb, and the times at which the visits were made.

## THE CRUCIAL CASE OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

How is he [Kierkegaard] to show that our natural faculties do break down in morals? The most effective way would be to show that our clearest moral judgement may stand in radical conflict with the divine will. Can any case of such conflict be cited? Yes; we find it in Scripture itself. The most revolting act of which a human being is capable is to destroy his own flesh and blood. In the book of Genesis we find Abraham commanded by God to do just this, to take his only son, the son of his old age on whom the joy and hope of his life were concentrated, to the summit of Mount Moriah, to bind him, cut his throat, and use his body as a burnt offering. Anthropologists who have studied this legend have considered that it is probably a relic of the custom of human sacrifice which once held in many parts of the world, and apparently even in the prehistoric past of the Hebrew people. However that may be, Kierkegaard takes it in all historic and symbolic seriousness. Is it not the point of this story, which is clearly inspired, that it was Abraham's duty, and may at any moment be ours, to trample down the affections of the natural man and all his nicely calculated goods and evils? Kierkegaard's answer is an emphatic Yes.

In his essay on Fear and Trembling he goes into the matter with gusto and in detail. After a 'Preliminary Expectoration', as he calls it, in which he spews philosophy, ethics, and even reflective theology out of his mouth as incompetent to deal with the case, he goes on to consider what is implied in the command to Abraham. There have been cases in history and literature in which a father's killing of a child may in some degree be reconciled with our moral sense. Brutus ordered the execution of his sons, but they were, after all, guilty of treason, and does not a general's duty to the state take precedence of his own affections? Jephthah made a grateful vow to Heaven to offer as a sacrifice the first person he met on his return from victory, and if this happened to be his daughter, he would nonetheless be breaking a sacred oath by sparing her. If Agamemnon kills Iphigenia, it is to appease the wrath of Artemis, who holds the power of destruction over his fleet and army. These are not, therefore, pure cases of 'the teleological suspension of the ethical'; in all of them the killing of the child is dreadful, but it is not entirely pointless. The great thing about the act demanded of Abraham was that it was pointless absolutely. Isaac was wholly innocent; Abraham loved him beyond anyone else in the world; no conceivable good to anyone could be anticipated from killing him. It was an act in which every human consideration was lined up on one side and on the other nothing at all but the command from on high to kill. Abraham bowed to it and drew his knife. The fact that at the last moment he was relieved of the need to strike is irrelevant in appraising him. Whether he actually killed or not, he showed that he possessed the one thing needful, namely the readiness to kill.

For Kierkegaard this makes him the perfect knight of faith. 'Venerable Father Abraham! Second Father of the human race!... thou who first didst know that highest passion, the holy, pure and humble expression of the divine madness....'<sup>90</sup> Abraham is 'great by reason of his wisdom whose secret is foolishness, great by reason of his hope whose form is madness, great by reason of the love which is hatred of oneself.'<sup>91</sup> He surrendered himself to the 'paradox which is capable of transforming a murder into a holy act well-pleasing to God.'<sup>92</sup> '... Abraham believed and did not doubt, he believed the preposterous.'<sup>93</sup> 'He believed by virtue of the absurd; for all human reckoning had long since ceased to function.'<sup>94</sup> He was called upon to renounce the moral for the religious, the finite for the infinite. 'This is... clear to the knight of faith, so the only thing that can save him is the absurd, and this he grasps by faith.'<sup>95</sup> Here is the meaning of that most deceptive phrase, 'the teleological suspension of the ethical'. 'Teleological' means 'for an end', but what Kierkegaard is praising here is the abandonment of all thought of ends and the doing of something that from every human point of view is productive of nothing but evil. 'As soon as the will begins to look right and left for results, the individual begins to become immoral.'<sup>96</sup>

CONCLUSION 'The love of truth', said Housman, 'is the faintest of human passions'. My comment is that this is sadly evinced by the nonsense about the Bible. I will let Blanshard tell us why "belief" in the Bible is bolstered up and maintained by too many despite the clear fact that it is no more from God than Lady Chatterley's Lover was: "A - change has been taking place in the relation conceived to hold between religion and morality. Much of the reluctance to abandon a supernaturalist theology has sprung from the conviction that it is a necessary support for morals; and, as Mill said, 'It is a

most painful position to a conscientious and cultivated mind, to be drawn in contrary directions by the two noblest of all objects of pursuit, truth, and the general good'. But with the decline of supernaturalism, the dependence of morals on theology is coming to be seen as the reverse of the truth, in that it bases the more certain upon the less. Men are far more confident of the wrong of stealing or killing than they are even of such central dogmas as the incarnation, the atonement, or the Trinity, so that if dogma is necessarily linked to morals, it would be more likely to involve morality in its own uncertainty than to give it additional strength. Non-sectarian moralists, though deeply divided on many issues, are now generally agreed that moral obligation is independent of theological belief and is equally binding on atheist and devotee." At least people seem to be learning...