

Was Jesus Wrong? Peter Enns Says, “Yes”

by Tim Chaffey and Roger Patterson, AiG–U.S.

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Answers in Genesis, along with its founder and president, Ken Ham, has been the target of many recent attacks from within the church and without. We have received a great deal of criticism because Ken has spoken and written against the teachings of Dr. Peter Enns, who recently worked as Senior Fellow of Biblical Studies with BioLogos.

We have frequently warned about the dangers of forcing man’s fallible ideas into the text of Scripture because it unlocks a door of compromise that will inevitably be pushed open further by the next generation. This can be traced throughout church history in many areas. When it comes to the age-of-the-earth controversy, the various harmonistic views developed from a quasi-literal interpretation of much of Genesis 1 ([the gap theory](#)) to modern views which have completely reclassified the text ([the framework hypothesis](#)) so that people can believe whatever they want about origins while claiming they are being “faithful” to the Bible.

While liberal theologians have long bought into theistic evolution, many conservative Christians have flirted with the idea of long ages (and some have bought into it), but they have almost universally rejected any notion that the first man was not a special creation of God. In the past few years, however, a handful of books from ostensibly conservative Christians has challenged the traditional interpretation that God created man from the dust of the ground. Instead, these authors have argued for some eclectic blend of creation and evolution when it comes to mankind’s origin.

We have consistently challenged the church to reject any attempt to reinterpret Genesis because of the dangerous hermeneutical precedent this sets. That is, if we desire to reinterpret (i.e., reject) certain parts of God’s Word because of man’s fallible opinions about the past that are based on anti-supernatural presuppositions, then at what point do we stop reinterpreting the Bible? If Genesis should be reinterpreted to accommodate the billions of years and evolution proposed by the majority of scientists, should we not also reinterpret other sections of Scripture that are at odds with the majority of scientists, such as the Virgin Birth, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ?

“Oh, come on, that will never happen,” some Christians might protest. We’ve been told this time and time again by Christians who think AiG has made a proverbial mountain out of a molehill or committed the slippery slope fallacy. Well, that door of compromise has now been opened to such an extent that the gospel itself is under attack. [In his recent book](#), intended to provide a rationale for rethinking Christianity in light of the claims of current evolutionary theories,¹ Dr. Peter Enns promotes the idea that Adam and Eve were not real, historical people. To bolster this claim, Enns relies on the [discredited documentary hypothesis](#) to say that the Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible) was not written until after the Babylonian exile. Moses didn’t write them, but instead it was some scribe or group of scribes that compiled oral and written traditions and stuck them together. Despite a wealth of biblical and historical evidence to the contrary, Enns portrays this idea as a given, accepted by any scholar worth his or her salt. In a footnote in his new book, Dr. Enns addressed one of the objections to this view—Jesus said that Moses wrote about Him.

Although treating this issue fully would take us far afield, I should mention at least a common line of defense for Mosaic authorship: Jesus seems to attribute authorship of the Pentateuch to Moses (e.g., [John 5:46–47](#)). I do not think, however, that this presents a clear counterpoint, mainly because even the most ardent defenders of Mosaic authorship today acknowledge that some of the Pentateuch reflects updating, but taken at face value this is not a position that Jesus seems to leave room for. But more important, I do not think that Jesus’s status as the incarnate Son of God requires that statements such as [John 5:46–47](#) be understood as binding historical judgments of authorship. Rather, Jesus here reflects the tradition that he himself inherited as a first-century Jew and that his hearers assumed to be the case.²

Before looking at the disastrous conclusions that follow from such a belief, let’s read the passage in question.

“Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you—Moses, in whom you trust. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?” ([John 5:46–47](#))

Jesus didn't just *seem* to attribute authorship of the Pentateuch to Moses, He clearly affirmed in this passage that Moses wrote at least some of it. Earlier in the confrontation, Jesus told the Jews that they searched the Scriptures because in them they thought they had eternal life, but Jesus said that the Scriptures testify of Him, and that the people needed to come to Him for eternal life. Then He narrowed it down to a particular section of the Old Testament. The Jews divided their Scriptures into two (sometimes three) sections: the Law and the Prophets (see [Luke 24:27](#); sometimes the Prophets were divided into the Prophets and the Writings). So by referring to Moses, it appears that Jesus was attributing Mosaic authorship to the first five books of the Bible.

Since Jesus said Moses wrote about Him, that settles the issue. "Not so fast," says Enns, who offered two arguments in response to this claim. First, Enns stated that "even the most ardent defenders of Mosaic authorship today acknowledge that some of the Pentateuch reflects updating, but taken at face value this is not a position that Jesus seems to leave room for." It is true that some portions of the Pentateuch reflect updating. For example, Deuteronomy 34 was almost certainly not written by Moses, since it is the account of his death. It may very well have been [recorded by Joshua](#).³ Enns apparently appeals to a straw man argument here in claiming that all who disagree with his view are hyper-literalists, when he states that Jesus did not leave room for any updating. Enns implies that when Jesus called Moses the author, it must be understood that every letter was penned by Moses himself or else Moses could not truly be called the author. Candidly, this is simply an absurd contention. Authors today have editors who contribute to and revise their work, but this does not cause anyone to deny authorship to the person who wrote the majority of the text. The Apostle Paul had others write for him, but this does not mean Paul wasn't the author.

Enns acknowledges that this is not his strongest argument. His more important claim is that Jesus wasn't really making an authoritative historical statement about Mosaic authorship.⁴ "Rather, Jesus here reflects the tradition that he himself inherited as a first-century Jew and that his hearers assumed to be the case." Please read that statement again and try to understand the seriousness of this charge. According to Dr. Peter Enns, Jesus wrongly attributed the writing of the Pentateuch to Moses because He accepted an erroneous tradition of His day.

The idea advanced by Dr. Enns here is known as the accommodation theory and was first advanced in the eighteenth century by Johann Semler, the father of German rationalism. The accommodation theory is very popular among liberal theologians and basically asserts that Jesus accommodated (accepted and taught) the various ideas of His day, even if they were wrong.⁵ Allegedly, since Jesus was primarily concerned with spiritual matters, He didn't bother to correct some of their false historical or scientific beliefs because doing so might have distracted from His real message.

There are many problems with this type of thinking. First, Jesus routinely rebuked people who held beliefs contrary to Scripture and corrected those who were in error. He specifically told the Sadducees, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God" ([Matthew 22:29](#)). This is hardly accommodating someone's errors. Furthermore, Jesus often reacted strongly to accepted practices that were contrary to the Word of God. He drove the moneychangers out of the temple ([John 2:15-16](#)) and excoriated the scribes and Pharisees ([Matthew 23:16-33](#)). If Jesus simply accommodated the errors of His time, He would never have done these things.

Those who promote the accommodation theory emphasize that Jesus said not even He knew the timing of His return: "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only" ([Matthew 24:36](#)). However, one scholar correctly pointed out, "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."⁶ We can be certain that when Jesus affirmed something to be true, He knew it was true, and He spoke with absolute authority. Jesus never accommodated the erroneous thinking of His day. He always spoke the truth, the full truth, and nothing but the truth.

So what's the big deal if Jesus accommodated the errors of His day? Well, if Jesus taught error, then He would have lied to His listeners, in which case He would have been a sinner. If He unwittingly taught error, then He would have misled His followers, making Him a false teacher. Either option leaves us with a Jesus who is sinful and less than God. If Jesus had sinned, then He could not have been the spotless Lamb who appeased God's wrath by His sacrificial death on the Cross, because He would have needed to die for His own sins. If Jesus did not die for our sins, then we are still in our sins and are headed for an eternity in the lake of fire.

Did Jesus really say Moses wrote about Him? Consider His words in the following verses:

He said to them, “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.” ([Matthew 19:8](#); cf. [Deuteronomy 24:1–4](#))

“But go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as a testimony to them, just as Moses commanded.” ([Luke 5:14](#); cf. [Leviticus 14:2–32](#))

“Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’” ([Luke 16:29](#))

“But even Moses showed in the burning bush passage that the dead are raised, when he called the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’” ([Luke 20:37](#); cf. [Exodus 3:1–6](#))

Then He said to them, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.” ([Luke 24:44](#))

“Did not Moses give you the law, yet none of you keeps the law? Why do you seek to kill Me? ... I did one work, and you all marvel. Moses therefore gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath, so that the law of Moses should not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath?” ([John 7:19, 21–23](#); cf. [Exodus 24:3](#); [Genesis 17:9–14](#))

And just in case you aren’t convinced yet that the absolute truthfulness of Jesus is essential, think carefully about these words Jesus spoke to the Jews.

“When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things. And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him” ([John 8:28–29](#)).

Since Jesus only spoke the words the Father taught Him, then to say that Jesus accommodated the errors of His day is to also claim that God the Father made these same mistakes. It may sound unkind to say it, but the accommodation view promoted by Dr. Enns is heresy. It charges our precious Savior with error and accuses the Father of instructing the Son to teach error.

We have previously claimed that [Dr. Enns has a low view of Scripture](#). Well, that low view of Scripture logically leads to a low view of the Savior. In both [Hebrews 6:18](#) and [Titus 1:2](#) we are given a clear statement—God cannot lie! To assert that Jesus knowingly told His hearers falsehoods or affirmed something that He knew was false can only be called a lie. To rightly understand the nature of the Scriptures and their inerrancy and infallibility, we must clearly connect these ideas with the character of God. Since God cannot lie, neither can His Scriptures. As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus would not mislead anyone, even though He was a first-century Jew. To suggest that Jesus would lie, even if you try to call it an “accommodation,” is to deny the deity of Christ.

This is not a side issue. This is not a “can’t we all just get along” dispute. This is a false teaching that strikes right at the heart of the gospel, and it should never be accepted by those who claim to love Jesus Christ. This problem has been addressed by many writers since its introduction in the eighteenth century. The basic problems with the accommodation view have been described in detail and we will summarize them here.⁷ To accept accommodationism means that God is not able to use language in a way that perfectly communicates the meaning without embracing falsehoods. Wayne Grudem states succinctly that to embrace accommodation “essentially denies God’s effective lordship over human language.”⁸ Secondly, as noted above, to say that God has communicated using a falsehood denies His moral character as described in [Numbers 23:19](#), [Titus 1:2](#), and [Hebrews 6:18](#). Further, since we are to be imitators of God and His moral character (cf., [Leviticus 11:44](#); [Ephesians 5:1](#); [1 Corinthians 11:1](#), etc.), then if God misled people, shouldn’t we also use intentionally misleading or false ideas to communicate? All of these ideas are contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture and deny the holiness of God.

We pray that Dr. Enns and others who hold this view will recognize the seriousness of this error and repent, and we ask you to pray to that end as well. Even his single footnote has exposed how the church desperately needs to stop thinking they can innocuously incorporate secular philosophies with God’s Word (and even, wittingly or unwittingly, undermine the deity of Christ along the way). Christians need to take an absolute and uncompromising stand on the Word of God as our ultimate source for doctrine.

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Endnotes

1. It is important to note that the evolutionary ideas endorsed by Dr. Enns and others extend beyond the common notion of biological evolution. Biological evolution is dependent on the time and processes involved in the geological evolution of the earth. The formation of the earth is based on the nebular hypothesis as an extension of the Big Bang cosmology that demands the universe is 14 billion years old. These three areas, cosmological, geological, and biological, are impossible to divorce if one embraces the mainstream scientific consensus. The result is that the current scientific understanding becomes the authority when considering the origin of the universe, the earth, and the life on it—including humans made in the image of God. [Back](#)
2. Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn't Say about Human Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), p. 153. [Back](#)
3. Of course, it is possible that God enabled Moses to prophetically write about his own death, but the easiest and most likely solution to this alleged dilemma is to propose that Joshua or another person wrote the chapter after Moses died. Another example of this “updating” is found in the phrase “to this day.” Several times these words appear with a place name or a custom ([Genesis 22:14](#), [26:13](#), [32:32](#), [35:20](#), [47:26](#)), indicating that the place name or custom was still in effect in the time the book was written or compiled. This does not in any way provide a strong argument against Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. First, one of the popular explanations for the authorship of Genesis is that it originally consisted of several eyewitness records from some of the key figures in the book (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, etc.), but was eventually compiled and edited by Moses. If this is accurate, then the words “to this day” simply reflect the words of Moses who told his readers that a place name or custom established in Genesis was still in use in his day. The fact that the words “to this day” are not used in the same manner in the other books of the Pentateuch supports this idea. Second, if God revealed the content of Genesis to Moses, it does not negate the possibility of Moses inserting these updates. Third, even if these updates were added long after Moses, it would not negate Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch as a whole. [Back](#)
4. This is not a new claim for Enns. He raised similar notions in a 2002 article: Peter Enns, “William Henry Green and the Authorship of the Pentateuch: Some Historical Considerations,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Volume 45 (September 2002). [Back](#)
5. A related heresy is known as the limitation theory. This view focuses on apparent limitations Jesus had because of His humanity. Since He became hungry, thirsty, and tired, then why couldn't He be limited in His understanding and be wrong about many things as long as they weren't directly related to His work of redemption? This view neglects the truth that Jesus was (and is) also God, and God cannot make a mistake. It also fails to account for the many instances where Jesus was able to know the thoughts of those He was addressing (e.g., [Matthew 9:4](#), [12:25](#); [John 2:24–25](#)), which is a strong argument for His divinity. [Back](#)
6. Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume One* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, 2002), p. 276. [Back](#)
7. The following is a brief list of articles and books that address the accommodation theory: Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume One*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, 2002), pp. 274–280; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1994), pp. 97–100; “Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy,” Article XV, see Grudem, p. 1206; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Volume I*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 153–188; John W. Wenham, “Christ's View of Scripture” in Norman L. Geisler, editor, *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1979), p. 14; G.K. Beale critiqued Enns's particular understanding of the accommodation view in a review of an earlier work by Peter Enns entitled *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2005). This review appeared in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (June 2006) and was followed by a response from Enns. Beale included his review, a summary of the response by Enns, and a critique of that response in his book, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2008). [Back](#)
8. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 97. [Back](#)