

BIBLICAL INERRANCY: THE LAST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

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The Evangelical Theological Society was founded with just a single item as its doctrinal statement: "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs." It was not felt necessary to spell out further any additional doctrines, since they follow from this basic principle of authority.

The Society did not intend that this would be the only or even the sole doctrine discussed within its circles. Nevertheless the doctrine of Scripture, and specifically the inerrancy of Scripture, has come in for more attention than any other single area of theology during the twenty-five years of existence of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* and its predecessor, the *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*. An examination of the contents of *JETS* and *BETS* reveals that inerrancy and related topics have received a great deal of attention. This is appropriate, for the authority of Scripture has been under considerable debate during this period of time. Inerrancy serves as an "index" doctrine, much as did the virgin birth when the deity of Christ was at the forefront of theological discussion. In the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early portion of the twentieth century, some theologians subscribed to the "divinity of Christ" but meant by that only that he was divine in a sense different from other humans in degree and not in kind. Someone who could subscribe to belief in the virgin birth, however, obviously held to a qualitatively unique deity of Christ. Similarly most Christian theologians today would in some sense declare that they believe in the authority of the Bible, but some mean that its authority is of the same type as writings by great sages within society. The inerrancy of the Bible carries with it the ideas of the unique and thorough inspiration and authority of the sacred Book.

The quarter-century of discussion has not been mere repetition and rehashing of the same matters, however. It is my contention that there has been genuine advance in the understanding of the doctrine during this period. In this article I shall attempt to survey that progress in several areas.

I. HISTORY

There has been progress in the understanding of inerrancy from an historical perspective. By this I do not mean history as it relates to the issue of the historical dependability of the Biblical text. Rather, I am referring to the study of the history of Christianity as that affects our understanding of the doctrine of inerrancy. This has shown itself in two ways.

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The study of history has first related to the issue of whether inerrancy has historically been held by the Christian Church. At times it has been popular to consider inerrancy as something of a theological innovation—an invention of the twentieth century—and therefore an excessive refinement of belief not found in historic orthodoxy. Others, however, such as Kirsopp Lake acknowledged that this was not an innovation but the traditional position of the Church:

It is a mistake often made by educated persons who happen to have but little knowledge of historical theology to suppose that fundamentalism is a new and strange form of thought. It is nothing of the kind; it is the partial and uneducated survival of a theology which was once universally held by all Christians. How many were there, for instance, in Christian churches in the eighteenth century who doubted the infallible inspiration of all Scripture? A few, perhaps, but very few. No, the fundamentalist may be wrong; I think that he is. But it is we who have departed from the tradition, not he; and I am sorry for the fate of anyone who tries to argue with a fundamentalist on the basis of authority. The Bible and the *corpus theologicum* of the Church are on the fundamentalist side.¹

In the last decade, however, this topic has come in for renewed attention. Thus Jack Rogers and Donald McKim contend that historically the position of the Church has been that the Bible is infallible in its teachings on matters of faith and practice but not inerrant in issues of fact—specifically history, geography and science. According to this thesis, the belief in factual inerrancy arose in the thought of the seventeenth-century Swiss theologian Francis Turretin and was most fully developed in the nineteenth-century Princeton Seminary theology. These developments represent the doing of theology in an Aristotelian rather than a Platonic model, placing authority in the words of Scripture rather than in the person of Christ.²

More recently John D. Woodbridge has written an extensive critique of the Rogers-McKim proposal. He faults them both on methodological procedures and substantive conclusions.³ Factual inerrancy is not a recent construction, Woodbridge argues.⁴ Rather, it has had a long tradition. While the argument is much too extended to summarize here, it does appear that Woodbridge has established well the heritage of the factual inerrancy position.

Two observations need to be made. One is that the truth of a doctrine does not necessarily depend on its antiquity. It is quite possible for a doctrine based on Scripture not to be held explicitly for some time and yet to be true. Thus the contention by many evangelicals that the “days” of creation in Genesis 1 are not twenty-four-hour calendar days but extended periods of time does not depend on this having been held throughout the history of the Church (although there may have been precursors of the modern view). There is a tendency, however, to look with a certain amount of suspicion on novel ideas, since heresies were at some

¹K. Lake, *The Religion of Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Boston: Houghton, 1926) 61.

²J. Rogers and D. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper, 1979) 279-281, 289-290, 333-334.

³J. D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 23-30.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 31 ff.

point departures from the standard position.

The other point to be observed is that the historical substantiation of a view throws a heavy burden on hermeneutics. It is one thing to establish that Augustine believed that the Bible did not err in factual matters, such as history and science. But Augustine sometimes used a less literal interpretation to alleviate apparent difficulties in Biblical references.

The second use of the historical method is as a means of assessment of one's view of Scripture. In many areas of theology, apparently new views on a given doctrine are not actually new. They are simply new forms of old views. We can therefore assess the effects of a particular perspective by examining where it has led in its development. Thus one may ask of the Briggs case at Union Seminary, or of Henry Preserved Smith's view of Scripture, "What was the eventual effect on Biblical authority—and other doctrines—of denying the inerrancy of the Bible?" To some extent, Harold Lindsell in *The Battle for the Bible* attempts to do this in the case studies that constitute the middle section of the book.⁵ Richard Quebedeaux suggests that Fuller Seminary's position of limited inerrancy has not been the end of the problem. He notes what he considers to be further development within the doctrine of the authority of the Bible. Paul Jewett's interpretation of Paul's teaching on the role of women seems to Quebedeaux to challenge even limited inerrancy.⁶ It is likely that we will see further application of historical study to earlier as well as recent Church history in an attempt to determine what the logical implications of denial of factual inerrancy are for other areas of doctrine.

II. PHILOSOPHY

There has been a growing awareness among evangelicals that logically prior to the understanding of Scripture and its statements is a set of presuppositions affecting what is meant by any of those statements, and even what is to be understood by an assertion such as "The Bible is inerrant." There is the realization that a theological construction is based on, and expressed in terms of, certain philosophical conceptions.

One primary example of this has been the contention by Rogers that the "Old Princeton" school of Biblical interpretation was formulated by Scottish Common Sense Realism.⁷ He does not indicate an awareness of an equally specific understanding of his own philosophical presuppositions, merely identifying himself with the more Platonic versus the Aristotelian tradition. Norman Geisler has traced some of these in a chapter on "Philosophical Presuppositions of Biblical

⁵H. Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 72-121. Richard Lovelace, while expressing reservations with Lindsell's thesis, nevertheless notes instances in which there seems to have been a logical progression from an abandonment of inerrancy to surrender or modification of other doctrines; "Inerrancy: Some Historical Perspectives," *Inerrancy and Common Sense* (ed. R. Nicole and J. R. Michaels; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 26-36.

⁶R. Quebedeaux, *The Worldly Evangelicals* (San Francisco: Harper, 1978) 87-89, 124.

⁷J. Rogers, "The Church Doctrine of Biblical Authority," *Biblical Authority* (ed. J. Rogers; Waco: Word, 1977) 39-41.

Errancy"⁸ and edited a volume containing several chapters dealing with various schools of philosophy bearing on this issue.⁹

In particular there has been a growing awareness that the issue of inerrancy depends to a considerable extent on the theory of truth that one adopts. When one speaks of the Bible infallibly accomplishing the purpose for which it was written, this frequently indicates a functionalist or pragmatist view of truth as contrasted with the correspondence view of truth found in the stricter view of factual inerrancy.¹⁰

One area that has perhaps not had sufficient specific development in relationship to inerrancy is analytical philosophy or linguistic analysis. Yet here as well there have been some efforts to apply this methodology. One such effort consists of a modification of the verificational principle of logical positivism. According to that principle, the meaning of a synthetic statement (one in which the predicate adds something not present in the subject) is the set of sense data that would verify or falsify it. While the criterion of sense data has been seen to be too narrow, it is nonetheless valid to observe that if nothing counts against the truth of a statement, nothing really counts for it either. So the maintenance of a distinction between infallible, revealed, salvific material and fallible, empirical, historical and scientific data becomes quite artificial. If those parts of the Bible that can in principle be checked by empirical investigation are shown to contain error, on what basis does one maintain that the doctrinal, nonempirical matters are infallible? There is no means of refuting them but also, therefore, nothing that really confirms them.¹¹ A friendly critic of evangelicalism, William Hordern, posed the dilemma this way:

To both the fundamentalist and the nonconservative, it often seems that the new conservative is trying to say, "The Bible is inerrant, but of course this does not mean that it is without errors."¹²

One of the major contributions made by philosophical methodology has been in the recognition of the role that presuppositions play even in the exegesis of Scripture. One of these was the commonly accepted distinction between the Hebrew and Greek mentalities. According to the view commonly held within the Biblical theology movement, the Greek mind was more speculative and oriented toward metaphysics while the Hebrew mind was much more concrete in its thinking. The view of truth in the Greek framework was that of correspondence with reality, whereas the Hebrews were more interested in truth as a personal matter. On this scheme, Hebrew thought was the more Biblical. Even though the NT was written in Greek, Hebrew categories underlay it. The Greek way of thinking represented a foreign influence, found at times even within the NT and

⁸N. Geisler, "Philosophical Presuppositions of Biblical Errancy," *Inerrancy* (ed. N. Geisler; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 307-334.

⁹N. Geisler, ed., *Biblical Errancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981).

¹⁰E.g. J. S. Feinberg, "Truth: Relationship of Theories of Truth to Hermeneutics," paper presented at Summit II of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, Chicago, Illinois, November 10-13, 1982.

¹¹J. W. Montgomery, "Inspiration and Inerrancy: A New Departure," *BETS* 8/2 (1965) 45-75.

¹²W. Hordern, *New Directions in Theology Today. Vol. I: Introduction* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) 83.

certainly strongly affecting later theological reflection.¹³ According to this interpretation the question of inerrancy was seen as essentially a Greek type of question. Thus when we ask about error the Hebrew conception would be that which leads us astray from the will of God or the knowledge of his truth.¹⁴

This neat dichotomy between Greek and Hebrew ways of thinking has been vigorously challenged, however. In particular James Barr has disputed the idea that there is a sharp distinction between the two. Rather, he has examined the very nature of the two languages and concluded that the contrast has been overstated. This means that the Hebrews were more concerned with questions of factual correctness than they have sometimes been credited with being. It also means that there is not quite the problem of difference between the two Testaments, at times approaching contradiction, that has at times been feared and that seems to militate against the concept of inerrancy.¹⁵

In particular a sensitivity to the philosophical presuppositions of Biblical interpretation has revealed that the expectation of harmony or of disharmony may well influence what is found. Thus emphasis has often been placed on the differences found among the parallel gospel accounts or in the parallels in Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. Attempts to reconcile these difficult passages are then regarded as "rationalism." As theologians and Biblical exegetes have become more familiar with the motifs of existentialism, however, it has become apparent that underlying such objections is the common existentialist emphasis on the paradoxicality of reality, the absurdity of the universe, and the impossibility of capturing reality within the hard and tight categories of logic.¹⁶ When, on the other hand, one looks for agreement and interprets the difficulties in the light of this, the problems are often considerably less severe. As one of my colleagues in NT puts it, "Let's emphasize the 95% of the gospel material where there is agreement rather than the 5% where there are apparent differences." To object to this procedure on the basis that this is not the Hebrew way of thinking is now seen to represent an eisegetical reading back of twentieth-century existentialism, imposing it on the Hebrew mentality.

III. THEOLOGY

Because theology is "organic," the nature of a doctrinal conclusion in one area will affect the construction of another doctrine. It is not uncommon to note that the idea of the nature of God as truthful and omniscient affects the understanding of what the inspired Bible would be.¹⁷ Similarly the conception of the relationship of God to the created order, including humanity, has an effect on the antecedent understanding of what revelation and inspiration of the Bible involve. A more immanent view of God's working therefore places more emphasis on the human part

¹³B. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 44-47.

¹⁴D. Hubbard, "The Current Tensions: Is There a Way Out?," *Biblical Authority* (ed. Rogers) 168.

¹⁵J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) 161-205.

¹⁶E. H. Nygren, "Existentialism: Kierkegaard," *Biblical Errancy* (ed. Geisler) 124-129.

¹⁷P. D. Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," *Inerrancy* (ed. Geisler) 285.

in the production of Scripture. A more transcendent approach will see inspiration as a more unique and miraculous occurrence.¹⁸

One of the other developments has been a search for a different paradigm for the doing of theology, other than the traditional evangelical or orthodox paradigm. Some evangelicals have shown particular interest in the theology of Karl Barth as a model for doing theology. Bernard Ramm, for instance, has indicated that he finds the thought of Barth to be the most adequate response to the Enlightenment and has engaged in a defense of Barth against some of the charges brought against him by his critics. One of the features of Barth's theology is that his view of revelation does not depend on an inerrant Scripture. So inerrancy becomes an unnecessary and perhaps even a distracting consideration.¹⁹

IV. CRITICISM

Two apparently opposed or competitive factors have been at work in the ETS in the past quarter-century. There has been a growing interest in certain methods of critical Biblical study. As more and more Biblical scholars within the Society took advanced degrees in institutions in which Biblical criticism was the standard procedure, more of them in evangelical schools were adapting those methodologies to their own study of the Bible.

This has provided potential for some tension to arise. In an earlier period, Biblical criticism (other than textual or "lower" criticism) represented a destructive and even unbelieving approach to the Bible. Consequently some have felt that even moderate forms of form and redaction criticism must be rejected.²⁰ Others, however, maintain that such methodologies can be used in a fashion compatible with evangelical assumptions regarding the Bible's nature. In particular redaction criticism is increasingly being utilized by students of the gospels.²¹ This has yielded certain benefits. It has made us aware of the amount of selection and adaptation of the gospel tradition engaged in by the evangelists. It has pointed out to us that they were not mere transmitters of the tradition but were actually interpreters, doing for their audiences what expository preachers attempt to do today: to explain the material in a way faithful to what Jesus said, but to apply it to the distinctive situation in which they are ministering.

Consequently it has been necessary to define the concept of inerrancy of the Bible in the light of these insights into its nature. While the fact of inerrancy is deduced from the Bible's own view of itself, the nature of that inerrancy is now understood in view of what these writers were evidently doing. Paul Feinberg has

¹⁸M. Erickson, "Immanence, Transcendence, and the Doctrine of Scripture," *The Living and Active Word of God: Essays in Honor of Samuel J. Schultz* (ed. M. Inch and R. Youngblood; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, forthcoming) 193-205.

¹⁹B. Ramm, *After Fundamentalism* (New York: Harper, 1982).

²⁰J. W. Montgomery, "Why Has God Incarnate Suddenly Become Mythical?," *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* (ed. K. S. Kantzer and S. N. Gundry; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 57-65.

²¹E. G. Osborne, "The Evangelical and Redaction Criticism: Critique and Methodology," *JETS* 22/4 (1979) 305-322.

pointed out that this does not require verbal exactness, identical ordering of accounts, or the possession of the exact words spoken by Jesus.²²

All of this means that we have grown in our understanding of the nature of Scripture and that our insight into what its inerrancy means has therefore also grown as well. Biblical inspiration is now seen as more involved and inerrancy as more complex than has sometimes been thought.

V. HERMENEUTICS

In the past few years, the emphasis in the ETS has been shifting from statements about the nature of Scripture (i.e., that it is free from error) to inquiries about what it actually says and means. Thus the second summit of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, an organization with close ties to the ETS, concentrated on the issues of the nature and procedures of hermeneutics. The result has been the discovery that what have sometimes been thought to be disputes over whether the Bible was inerrant were actually disputes over the interpretation of the Bible. For example, the question of the relationship of some of the details of Genesis 1 to geology may not be a matter of whether one believes the Bible is free from error, so much as it is a question of what one understands the nature of the material in this part of the Bible to be.²³ The recognition of the differing genres of Scripture has focused attention on the need for careful examination and interpretation of the writings it contains.

Recent work in hermeneutics has broadened the scope of that discipline. Whereas at an earlier time hermeneutics was sometimes understood simply as a set of techniques or even rules for extracting the correct meaning from the text, it is now understood much more broadly. Now it is seen as involving the means of bridging the temporal and cultural gap between the Biblical situation and time and the one in which we currently find ourselves.²⁴

In the process of refining hermeneutics as a science, attention has been focused by the so-called "new hermeneutic" on the locus of truth and meaning. The "new hermeneutic" has followed the lead of Rudolf Bultmann in concerning itself with truth as personal. For Bultmann, in keeping with a distinction that goes all the way back to Martin Kähler in the late nineteenth century,²⁵ emphasis is to be placed on the Bible not as *Historie* but as *Geschichte*. The former is the events that actually occurred. The latter relates to the impact made on Jesus' disciples, for example, by his works and deeds. Thus the meaning of a passage is less in terms of what the writer intended to assert than of what effect is produced in the individual reader.²⁶

²²P. Feinberg, "Meaning" 301.

²³E.g. R. Youngblood, *How It All Began* (Ventura: Gospel Light, 1980) 25-28.

²⁴A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 10-17.

²⁵M. Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (ed. C. E. Braaten; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964).

²⁶R. Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," *Kerygma and Myth* (ed. H. Bartsch; New York: Harper, 1961), 1. 10.

If this is the understanding of meaning, then of course inerrancy is an irrelevant concept, for meaning has become a subjective matter varying from one person to the next. This in turn goes back to Søren Kierkegaard's dictum that "subjectivity is the truth." Evangelicals have insisted that the meaning of Biblical revelation is objective, that the meaning of Scripture is what the author intended to affirm. There has been particularly strong interest in E. D. Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation*.²⁷ As a result the estimation of the importance of the doctrine of inerrancy has been heightened.

VI. ARCHAEOLOGY

There has always been an interest in archaeology within the ETS and its sister society, the Near East Archaeological Society. The period that we are considering has been a period of significant archaeological discoveries and of continued growth in our understanding of the Bible. Most archaeologists declare regularly that the aim of archaeology is to illuminate the meaning of the Bible, not to defend its truth. Nevertheless this has been a period of additional confirmation of the truth of the Bible. Kenneth Kitchen, for example, writes that

the comparative material from the Ancient Near East is tending to agree with the extant structure of Old Testament documents as actually transmitted to us, rather than with the reconstructions of nineteenth-century Old Testament scholarship—or with its twentieth-century prolongation and developments to the present day.²⁸

Thus in many ways the believer in Biblical inerrancy finds the maintaining of that conviction less difficult today than it was a quarter-century ago.

To sum up: When *BETS* began publication twenty-five years ago, I had not yet begun doctoral studies. During this intervening period of time I, like many other members of the Society, have wrestled with complex and troublesome questions in connection with the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy. For me it has been a time of enriched understanding of what inerrancy really means and, beyond that, a deepened conviction of the importance and truth of this doctrine. And in that I believe that I share the experience of the Society as a whole.

²⁷E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

²⁸K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity, 1966) 25.