

THE TRUTH WILL OUT: AN HISTORIAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE INERRANCY CONTROVERSY

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For too long, and in too many circles, the debate about the inerrancy of the Scriptures has transpired in what I would call a historical vacuum. By this I mean that the history of the Greek text itself of the NT (and I am limiting myself to the discussion of the inerrancy of the NT), the history of the assembling of the NT canon, and even the history of understanding what phrases like “the Word of God” and the “Scriptures” meant in the NT era have been ignored, or at least neglected. I propose in this presentation to step back, take a deep breath, and talk about these important issues in so far as they affect or even possibly determine how we should approach the issue of the truthfulness and trustworthiness of Scripture, from an historian’s point of view. First, however, I’d like to offer a long quote from J. B. Lightfoot, my Durham forebear and in many ways the mentor and model for my doctor-father C. K. Barrett. This is taken from the Introduction to his 1855 Lenten term lectures at Cambridge on the NT.

Our method of study and the system of interpretation must necessarily be dependent on the view we take of the inspiration of Holy Scripture. It will be so either consciously or unconsciously. . . . Now in an inspired writing there are two elements—the human and the divine or as it is sometimes expressed—the letter and the spirit[,] and the different views held of the doctrine of inspiration depend on the prominence given to one or the other of these elements, and the judgment formed of their mutual relations. Hence it will be seen that no conceivable shade of opinion is excluded, and every attempt at classifying these views must be more or less fallacious. But it will be sufficiently exact for our present purpose roughly to assume a threefold division—in the first of these the divine element being too exclusively considered, in the second this undue prominence being assigned to the human agency, and in the third and only adequate view of inspiration, each of these elements being recognized in its proper sphere, and the two harmoniously combined. The first of these views is irrational, the second is rationalistic, the third alone is in accordance alike with the highest reason and the fullest faith.¹

He goes on to add,

The timidity, which shrinks from the application of modern science or criticism to the interpretation of Holy Scripture, evinces a very unworthy view of its char-

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¹ J. B. Lightfoot, Introduction to his unpublished 1855 lectures on Acts, transcribed and quoted in B. N. Kaye and G. R. Treloar, “J. B. Lightfoot and New Testament Interpretation: An Unpublished Manuscript of 1855,” *Durham University Journal* 82 (July 1990) 160–75, here p. 171.

acter. If the Scriptures are indeed true, they must be in accordance with every true principle of whatever kind. It is against the wrong application of such principles, and against the presumption which pushes them too far, that we must protest. It is not much knowledge, but little knowledge that is the dangerous thing here as elsewhere. From the full light of science or criticism we have nothing to fear.

One more quote, this time from J. D. G. Dunn who was commenting on Lightfoot's views on this matter, will be apt at this juncture: "Christianity is a religion whose truth claims are irrevocably tied to a period of history nearly twenty centuries ago. It cannot dispense with historical inquiry, and frees its foundation texts from that period at its peril."²

I. IS THIS MUCH ADO ABOUT NOT VERY MUCH—AN EXERCISE IN FUTILITY?

As I doubt any scholar of the Bible will seriously dispute at this point, *we simply do not have or know exactly what was in the original first copies of any of the NT books*. We can talk in confident percentages perhaps, as my old mentor Bruce Metzger used to do about having something like 90% certainty about what the original text looked like in 90% of the cases, but of course even then text criticism involves thousands of decisions about thousands of variants, even when we are pretty certain what was this or that earliest and best reading of this or that verse. But for a doctrine of the inerrancy of the *entire* Scriptures this, of course, is not good enough.³ Even if we limit the term "inerrancy" to the substance or subject matter of the NT, there are still places in the Greek NT where matters of historical, theological, or ethical importance are affected by one variant reading or another. Wouldn't it on the whole be better to stick to referring to the truthfulness and trustworthiness of Scripture rather than a term like inerrancy which at least to most twenty-first century persons connotes a sort of precision of and in the text that we cannot vouch for in every case at present?

I was reading the excellent new book published by Oxford, *The Early Text of the New Testament* (2012) and got rather depressed reading the article by Peter Head on the state of the text of the Gospel of Mark. We have exactly one significant papyrus of this text which might predate the turn of the third century, the famous Chester Beatty papyrus that includes only some of Mark (p45), and even then the experts have concluded that the scribe who did p45 was operating more in a "the Message" or "the Voice" kind of mode, translating concept for concept, rather

² J. D. G. Dunn, "Lightfoot in Retrospect," in *Durham University Journal*, The Lightfoot Centenary Lectures (published in 1992) 71–94, here p. 77.

³ In our plenary discussion with Don Carson, Don pointed out that he was not entirely happy with the phrase "inerrant in the autographs," which, of course, we do not have, and have not had for about twenty centuries. We did not then go on to discuss what the term "inerrancy," applied to either the modern Greek NT or a current translation of the NT, could really mean when we *currently* have a Greek NT with about 10% of the text being textually uncertain. This is all the more worth discussing since it is not true that no important historical, theological, or ethical issues are affected by these textual uncertainties.

than engaging in a literal copying of an earlier original. The upshot is, we can do little better than the famous 4th-century codices when it comes to the original text of Mark, which, by the way, does not include the long ending of Mark (abandon hope, ye snake-handlers in Kentucky).

I am, however, heartened by the fact that we continue to discover more and more, and earlier and earlier fragments of the Greek NT all the time, drawing closer to the autographa at various points. The historical work and progress is ongoing to try and establish the original text and needs to continue. I must confess, though, that I am dismayed that there are not more Daniel Wallaces and Michael Holmeses amongst our evangelical crowd, and we have left the text-critical dirty work to folks like Bart Ehrman. As has sometimes been said, “These things ought not to be.”

God in his wisdom has not chosen to do what Joseph Smith claimed the angel Moroni did in regard to the Book of Mormon—namely, drop original golden tablets from the sky with the biblical autographa on them—in Reformed hieroglyphics (a non-existent language, though I am relieved he didn’t call it Arminian hieroglyphics even though Smith had a Methodist background)!

Some have even suggested that the reason the Almighty didn’t do this was to avoid bibliolatry—the worship of a perfect book. If that was God’s purpose, I’m afraid it failed. I’ve run into plenty of fundamentalists in the South in my life who regularly and gleefully commit “translationolatry” when it comes to the dear old King James. One of my favorite examples from the mountains of my home state of North Carolina is the church whose sign reads—“a full immersion, King James only preaching, Dispensational, snake-handling Christian Church.” Well, at least you know what you’re in for, if you enter the portals of that establishment. I must admit I have demurred from attending said establishment.

So in the end, many will see the whole debate about inerrancy as a *cul de sac*, as much ado about something we do not have—the original text of the Greek NT. How can you establish the inerrancy of a text that is textually uncertain to begin with in many places? Inquiring minds want to know.

You may be surprised to hear that I don’t think this discussion is totally fruitless, because as Metzger says, even with all the textual variants, there are really very few places where any sort of *major* theological or historical or ethical issue in regard to the views of the writers of the NT is seriously in doubt.⁴ This is where I find the arguments of Ehrman in books like *Misquoting Jesus* not merely misleading, but an effort to *deliberately* problematize things for the unwary non-scholars who will receive the news with gladness that there’s something wrong with the Bible. As I have said in debating Ehrman and critiquing Ehrman’s many books, it doesn’t really matter that the text of some verses in 1 John 5 are dubious when it comes to the

⁴ And here I would distinguish between things of major import and things that are simply important. For example, it is important whether or not the NT affirms that Christians, if they have sufficient faith, should be able to handle poisonous snakes or drink poison without harm. If it is certain that Mark 16:9–20 is no original part of the Gospel of Mark, then this problematic text ceases to be a problem anymore. What I mean by things of major import would be things like the virginal conception or bodily resurrection of Jesus, which are attested in a variety of texts which are not textually dubious.

notion of the Trinity, when in fact you can find the idea of a threefold personal God elsewhere in the NT in texts that are not textually dubious.

Nevertheless, confident claims about the inerrancy of the original autographa need to be chastened by the realization that we don't know exactly what was in those original texts, and since inerrancy is about precision and exactitude, this fact matters. The God who could give us a perfect biblical text could also have perfectly preserved the text until it was canonized. For whatever reason, God chose not to do the latter, whatever our views may be about the former.

II. CANONICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IS NOT SUFFICIENTLY HISTORICAL IN CHARACTER

One of the things I find most troubling as a historian about the usual debates about the inerrancy of the Bible in evangelical circles is that it is an *ex post facto* debate. What I mean by this is that it is a debate about something that did not really *exist* as a collection before the 4th century AD—namely, the 27-book canon of the NT. It's all very well to go around waving the banner of *sola Scriptura* but at the end of the day, the Scriptures we have today went through a messy process of assemblage, through numerous debates in the first four centuries of the Christian era, and some of the books we now find in the NT only got in by the hair of their chinny-chin-chins. I happen to believe that Metzger is right that it was not so much that the church determined the canon (in which case the church and not the Scriptures would be the final authority) but that the church finally *recognized* the canon, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, prompting wise church leaders in the right direction. Even, however, if this is true, as a historian I would want to insist that *text determines canon, not the other way around*. By this I don't merely mean that it is only the original and earliest text of the Greek NT that ought to be in our canon, though I certainly agree with that proposition (in which case we will have to give up the ghost on the supposed scriptural nature of Mark 16:9–20 in all likelihood). I also mean that the issue for inerrancy should have to do *not with whether something is in the canon in the first place, but whether something is true!*

This is why I have tried to set up a taxonomy, in my book *The Living Word of God*, where we quite properly distinguish between the “Word of God,” the “Scripture,” and the canon of the NT. These three phrases do not refer to exactly the same thing, and only the first two phrases really show up in the NT itself. As a historian I want to insist that our views on inspiration, authority, and Scripture must in the first instance *be based on what the Bible itself tells us about such matters*. Indeed, as a convinced Protestant, I want to insist on this principle. There was a spoken Word of God before there was an inscripturated form of that Word in most cases and long before there was a NT canon. A few examples will have to suffice to indicate what I mean.

If one does a study of the phrase *logos tou theou* in the NT, one quickly discovers that nowhere and at no point does the phrase refer to a text! In most instances it refers to the oral proclamation of God's inspired word, and more particularly it

refers to what we call the Gospel. In a couple of places it refers to the Son of God himself (namely in John 1, and probably in Revelation). Let me illustrate the former.

In 1 Thess 2:13 Paul says, “We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the Word of God *that you heard from us*, you accepted it not as a human word, but as what it really is, God’s word, which is at work in you believers.” Clearly, this is a reference to a *heard* word, which is said to be not merely human in character but also divine. The same can be said about the phrase “Word of God” in Heb 4:12—where we hear about the Word being active and penetrating the inner being of humans. The author is not referring to eating a scroll or even seeing one. He is referring to the heard Word. We could go on and point out that the phrase “Word of God,” which is strangely said to “grow” in Acts (and Luke is not referring to the expansion of the canon) again refers to an orally proclaimed and heard inspired message. Nothing more, and nothing less. This is hardly surprising since all the NT cultures were by and large oral cultures, not cultures of texts. And we would do well to ask: what is the function of sacred texts in an overwhelmingly oral culture? But that is a query for another day.

In other words, despite our anachronistic practice of calling the text of the Bible “the Word of God for the people of God,” the writers of the NT say that that phrase refers to the oral proclamation in the first instance, and for them it could not refer to the canon of NT books since that didn’t even exist in the NT era, or even at the end of that era so far as we can tell (if we are talking about all 27 books). What has happened far too often in the inerrancy debate is that *the history of the process from Word of God to sacred text to canon has been ignored, collapsed, or simply denied*, and canon consciousness has been assumed to be the same thing as Word of God consciousness. It was not so in the NT era.

I am quite convinced that in the old debate of whether various NT authors believed they were speaking inspired words from God or not, we can answer with a confident “yes” at least in the case of the evidence that Paul, and perhaps the authors of Hebrews and 1 and 2 Peter present us with. First Thessalonians 2:13 is rather clear on this point. Paul believes he proclaimed something that was hardly just a matter of human opinion, even his own human opinion. Nor was it just a matter of sacred tradition. No, it was a late Word from God, in this case the Gospel about Jesus. We could also discuss why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14 that he is inspired, a prophet, and he, too, speaks the Word of God. Yes, at least in some cases there is firm historical evidence that these early Christians thought they were proclaiming an inspired, divine, Word of God message. And if this is so, it is but a small step from that to believing that what one writes in a missive to one’s converts is also a late Word from God, and not merely Paul’s opinions. The oral, however, is primary, its textual residue or incriptionation, secondary.

When the writers of the NT do clear their throats and refer to a pre-existing scriptural text they are always, or almost without exception, referring to what we call the OT. This of course is especially true in cases like the famous 2 Tim 3:16—“every Scripture is God-breathed...” says the text, and we may presume it is referring to the threefold divisions of Torah—Law, Prophets, Writings, which while there were still some debates about some of the lattermost part of that corpus, it

does appear that the OT canon was largely closed by the time the Pastorals were written.⁵

Even from the historical starting point, the phrase “a NT Christian” was about as much of an oxymoron as the phrase “Microsoft Works.” From the outset, the writers of the NT embraced the OT as their written Scriptures. It can also be shown that as it happens they are always and everywhere referring to the content of the same 39 books we now call the OT. Even the citation from Enoch in Jude is not an exception to this rule. All that Jude says is the prophet Enoch (not the book) spoke an inspired word that he believes is true. Every single time in the NT when we have the phrases “God says,” “it is written,” or the like, the reference is to some OT text or texts *we can identify*. In other words, the canon of the OT was not really up for grabs in the NT era, though a few books were still debated from the Writings. As for the canon of the NT, that would have to wait some centuries.

III. HOW SHOULD THE INERRANCY DEBATE BE FRAMED IN LIGHT OF HISTORY?

Ken Collins, in his splendid book *The Evangelical Moment*, has rightly reminded us that the modern debate about inerrancy is just that—a modern debate about inerrancy largely prompted by things like the fundamentalist-modernist controversies in the early 20th century (including the debate prompted by the Scopes trial). The modern debate has reflected anachronistically *modernist* approaches to the issue of history imposed back on the biblical text. I shall not soon forget that while I was at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, and Harold Lindsell was one of our trustees, the book *The Battle for the Bible* became must reading. Lindsell claimed to be a historian (though not one of the biblical period) and we were regaled with arguments such as—in order to reconcile the various accounts of Peter’s denials of Christ and the cock crowing, it was necessary to conclude that Peter denied Christ six times—something no biblical account of the event suggests! Clearly, something was wrong with a harmonizing of Scripture in this manner which led to a conclusion that not one of the Gospel writers could be said to support in their accounts of the event!⁶

What this incident points out is the failure to study the Scriptures in light of their ancient context—in this case their ancient historical context. NT writers did not conform their writings to modern notions of historical precision. Rather they followed the accepted conventions of their day telling the truth about their subject matter in ways that would be words on target in their original contexts and for their original audiences. Harold Lindsell’s classic misstep became grist for my mill when I have taught students that “a text without an historical context is just a pretext for whatever you want it to mean.” We would still do well to remember this fact.

⁵ This can be debated and on this matter see my treatment of the subject, and disagreement with Lee MacDonald on the subject in *What’s in a Word?* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

⁶ Let me be clear that I am not opposed to all attempts to harmonize the Scriptures, just attempts that make one or more Scriptural texts say something than none of them say!

I take it as an axiom that any discussions of the inerrancy of Scripture today must start with the irreducible historical facts. They should not start from a posture of systematic theology, or philosophy, or reasoning based on what is assumed to be true theologically about: (1) God's nature; (2) God's speech; (3) how God *must have* done things to produce a truthful and trustworthy Scripture. No, for a historical religion like Christianity, history and the facts of history must be primary even when it comes to the issue of the nature and authority of Scripture.

Put another way—*nothing can be theologically true about the Bible that is historically false if we are talking about something where history and theology intersect.*⁷ As Paul puts it, if Christ is not raised, then we are still in our sins. History matters, always matters, for an historically-based religion like Christianity, and this includes when we are thinking about the historical origins and character of the NT.

Taking into account history then, I think it is far more fruitful to talk about the truthfulness and trustworthiness and beneficial nature (see 2 Tim 3:16) of Scripture than to die the death of a thousand qualifications by using a negative term like inerrancy. Even if we limit the term to “inerrant in all that it intends to assert” or teach, no two persons will have the same definition of what counts as an error. For example, there are various reports of lies in the Bible. Clearly, we would not want to say those lies are true. The most one could say is: “That’s a truthful presentation of a lie.” This is precisely why we need qualifications like “truthful and trustworthy” *in all that it teaches or intends to assert.*⁸

I am perfectly happy with using that last phrase, but then the question is: what subjects does the divine Author of Scripture, speaking through various human vehicles, intend to teach us? Here again, as with the case with the definition of “error,” equally devout evangelicals with equally high views of Scripture will disagree. In my view, the Bible intends to teach us about three main subjects: (1) history; (2) theology; and (3) ethics. Put another way, the Bible intends to teach us about God, ourselves, and the interactions of God with his people in space and time. The Bible is not a history of all peoples or all subjects. It is not a scientific textbook downloaded on a befuddled public in the pre-scientific era. It was a word on target for its original audiences, and it still is a word on target today.

We must respect the historical givenness of the text, whether we are happy about it or not. We must do our detailed contextual study and exegesis of the text before jumping to applications and implications for today, or even second order theological deductions based on the biblical text. The starting point must be the historical character and givenness of the text.

What the text meant when the originally inspired author spoke or wrote it, is what the text still means today. The meaning has not changed, though its significance and applications change in every era. It is not up to us to tell the text what it means. We are

⁷ Obviously there are theological truths, like the eternity of God, which are not truths in the first instance based or grounded in history.

⁸ I should add that I quite happily sign the faith statement of Gordon-Conwell or Asbury which do refer to the “inerrancy” of what the Scripture teaches, though I much prefer a positive way of putting the matter.

not the meaning makers of the biblical text, reader-response criticism take the hindmost. It is our job to discover the meaning embedded in those texts and in their original contexts. It is not our job to be active readers in some sort of narcissistic enterprise that justifies phrases like “the text means what it means to me.” That is an artful dodge, and a way to avoid submitting oneself to the authority of Scripture.

These immediately preceding remarks may not warm the hearts of post-modern people bent on more Gnostic or spiritual readings of the Bible that all too often involve reading into the text what is not there. These words may be unfashionable. I do not care. They are the truth about the Truth. In an age of biblical illiteracy what we do not need is more self-centered, narcissistic readings of Scripture. What we need is to hear and heed and place ourselves under the living Word of God and submit to its authority.

IV. DID THE CANON MISFIRE?

This, in turn, leads to some discussion about so-called canonical criticism and canonical theology. I am certainly not opposed to the doing of NT theology or OT theology or even Biblical Theology, but on the lattermost score I do have to ask: who is sufficient for such tasks? Who is enough of an expert in the whole Bible to clear their throat and do a proper Biblical Theology of the whole? I don't know anybody like that, and it was with some trepidation that I spent eight years of my life working up to and working on *The Indelible Image* where I attempted to study both the theology and ethics of the individual witnesses in the NT, and the collective witness of the NT on such matters.⁹

As a historian, my large problem with canonical criticism, at least as it has been sometimes practiced by some of Brevard Childs's offspring, is that it becomes an anti-historical or unhistorical enterprise. What I mean by this is that it is assumed, without argument, that we can compare and combine biblical texts in our mental cuisinarts again and again without respect to their historical givenness or original contexts. The only context, apparently, that we need is the canon itself which, by the way, *is a literary context*. And even worse, the assumption that the collection of the canon in the 4th century was a game-changer and created a Bible has serious historical problems.

Here's the problem. All of the books in the NT were written in the NT era. They were written by apostolic figures, their coworkers, and other eyewitnesses. We are actually talking about the NT being written by a rather small circle of persons—Paul, Luke, Peter, the author of Hebrews, Mark, the Beloved Disciple, John of Patmos, Matthew (and company), the brothers of Jesus (James and Jude), the collector of 2 Peter's source material. What we're probably *not* talking about is pseudepigrapha in the NT. Bart Ehrman's two most recent bombshells (see, e.g., *Forged*) I

⁹ In our panel discussion of this matter it was pointed out that some scholars uses the term biblical theology to refer to the exposition of the major theological themes or subjects of the Bible. This is true, but I am using the term in a more comprehensive sense.

think have blown up the theory that pseudepigraphy was a known, recognized, accepted, and morally unobjectionable literary practice. In my view, we don't have any of those sorts of documents in the NT. The ones we do have are honest about authorship issues, and do not feel compelled to claim some apostolic author when the document was not written by such a person (see, e.g., Hebrews or even 1 John which are anonymous documents).

More importantly, these documents were the truthful Word of God long before there was a canon. The canonizing of these books did not make them Word of God, or Scripture. It simply made them an approved and recognized collection of books by the church in both the East and the West. It is not an accident; rather, it is an example of the singular providence of God, that the only books that in the end made it into the NT canon were books that met the criteria of being not merely from the NT era, but from the apostles, the eyewitnesses, the family of Jesus, and their co-workers. In short, the canon did not misfire.

But *long before* these books became canon they were already inscripturated forms of the inspired and inspiring Word of God. Again, text determines canon, not the other way around, and more specifically, truthful apostolic text determined what was in the canon. This means that history mattered then, in the canonizing process, and it still matters now. Indeed, it is of supreme importance. This is so because truth matters, especially since we have a God who calls himself “the Truth” as well as the Way and the Life.

The Bible is a great thing. The canons of the OT and NT are wonderful witnesses. But before they ever existed there was a truthful God who spoke a truthful word to his prophets, priest, kings, apostles, and to his own Son and his family. It is true in far more than one sense to say “in the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God.” The NT is truthful and trustworthy in all that it intends to assert and teach us—and its subjects include history, theology, and ethics.

AMEN.