

Biblical Authority and the Concept of Inerrancy

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Leon Morris

“Modern biblical scholarship has proved itself so insipid and unstimulating. We are confronted with the paradox of a way of studying the word of God out of which no word of God ever seems to come, with an imposing modern knowledge of the Bible which seems quite incapable of saying anything biblical or thinking biblically.” In these words J. V. Langmead Casserley expresses concisely the basic objection to the usual critical approach.¹ This is not a criticism which deals with peripheral matters. It goes to the heart of the matter. For this critical approach not only does not yield us a word from God: it cannot yield us a word from God. It rests on the presupposition that the Christian must abandon his views of inspiration when he interprets the Bible in order to make quite sure that his method is historically and critically respectable. The critic insists on being so “objective” that an unbeliever must respect his scholarship even if he cannot agree with his conclusions.

In carrying out this process he is rarely aware of the grave limitations of his method or of the spiritual barrenness it necessarily involves. I find it interesting for example, to notice that R.P.C. Hanson can doubt whether anything is gained by calling the Bible “inspired”.² And he can say of a conservative evangelical’s account of the biblical-view: “Perhaps I should make it clear that I emphatically deny that Mr. Beckwith’s account of inspiration is either really biblical or anything but utterly incredible.”³ It is not without its interest that Hanson makes no attempt whatever to show that his own approach is biblical. He simply affirms it. He points to no biblical passage or passages to support him though he complains that an account which at the very least makes frequent reference to the Bible is “incredible”. It is plain that Langmead Casserley’s assertion that modern criticism is incapable of saying anything biblical must be taken with the utmost seriousness.

One consequence of the modern approach is that no word in the Bible appears to be definitely from God. R. A. Finlayson quotes William Temple on the Bible generally: “No single sentence can be quoted as having the authority of a distinct utterance of the All-Holy God.”⁴ This is by no means an isolated utterance. It could be paralleled again and again from modern writers. While assuring us that God has revealed Himself they refuse to pin themselves down as to exactly what this revelation is. In fact on occasion they may be found glorying in the uncertainty of it all and in the scope this offers for the exercise of faith.

The question before us in this study is not whether this modern approach is right and that of the conservative evangelical wrong, but rather, which is that of the Bible.⁵ Does the Old Testament really teach that its general drift is important but not its details? Do the New Testament writers go astray in minor matters but preserve the truth in broad perspective? Does the Bible set forth ideas which men can no longer accept? Or, do the Bible writers regard the whole as reliable and worthy to be called “The Word of God”?

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The first point to be made is that the Old Testament consistently records words which it claims are God’s words. We are not kept waiting for this, for ten times in the first chapter of

Genesis we read, “And God said”. Each time this introduces to us a divine utterance, usually one of power.

This phenomenon is repeated in many parts of the Old Testament. Again and again we are given the very words of God. This should be kept in mind in view of the often repeated statement that there is no view of inspiration in the Old Testament. This is true in the sense that no Old Testament writer sets out to explain what inspiration is and how it works. But it is misleading, for quite often passages are introduced, and sometimes passages of considerable length, with words like, “And God said”. For example we read, “Jehovah hath spoken” (Jer. 13: 15; Amos 3: 1) or “Jehovah spake” (Is. 8: 11; Jer. 30: 4), “the mouth of Jehovah hath spoken” (Jer. 9: 12). “the mouth of Jehovah of hosts hath spoken” (Mic. 4: 4), “the Spirit of Jehovah spake by me” (2 Sam. 23: 2), “hear the word of Jehovah” (Is. 28: 14; Jer. 9: 20), “the word of God came unto . . . saying” (1 Kings 12: 22; 1 Chron. 17: 3), “the word of Jehovah came expressly unto Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:3), “The word of Jehovah that came unto Hosea” (Hos. 1: 1); “Thus saith Jehovah” (Amos 1: 3), “Thus saith the Lord Jehovah” (Obad. 1: 1). There are several slight variants on the theme the word of God “came” to the prophets, and in one form or another the expression is very common.

This kind of formula is said to occur 3,808 times in the Old Testament.⁶ Perhaps more important even than the frequency of occurrence of such formulae is the way they are used. The prophets, for example, habitually introduce their messages with words like, “And the word of the Lord came unto—”. The prophet does not regard himself as originating a tract for the times. Rather he passes on a message which he understands to have been divinely given.⁷ So with other writers. The formulae we are considering express the deeply held conviction that God has chosen to put His words on record.

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All this is usually discounted in modern scholarship. It is taken almost as axiomatic that the revelation comes not in words, but in events. God performs certain “mighty acts” and in the process reveals Himself. All that the prophets are doing is giving interpretations of historical events.

We shall take this point up later. Here I simply comment that the view is hard to square with what the prophets say. An instructive illustration of the way they regarded their task comes from the call of Jeremiah. He did not apparently regard himself as called to draw attention to events whose true significance lay in themselves and could be discerned by any careful observer. The son of Hilkiah tells us that he was dismayed when he heard the call of God, and he exclaimed, “Ah, Lord Jehovah! behold, I know not how to speak; for I am a child.” But he was met with divine reassurance, “Whatsoever I shall command thee thou shalt speak”. Then, “Jehovah put forth his hand, and touched my mouth; and Jehovah said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth” (Jer. 1: 6-9). The prophet was not to be concerned about his lack of eloquence. God touched his mouth. God put His words into His servant’s mouth.

I do not see how this can mean anything other than that Jeremiah was given the very words of God to speak. The prophet is claiming that it was God, not man, who told him what to say. This is not an affirmation that God would reveal Himself in certain deeds to which Jeremiah would call attention. It is an affirmation that when Jeremiah delivered his message God would give him the very words in which to express it. The revelation is in the words as well

as in the events.

Centuries before, Moses had had a not dissimilar experience. The great law-giver attempted to evade his call on precisely the same grounds as did Jeremiah: "Oh, Lord, I am not eloquent . . . I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue". But he was met with Jehovah's reply. "Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh a man dumb, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, Jehovah? Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt speak." When Moses still hesitated Aaron was nominated to be spokesman, but the Lord still said to Moses, 'thou shalt speak unto him, and put the words in his mouth: and I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what ye shall do . . . he shall be to thee a mouth, and thou shalt be to him as God" (Ex. 4: 10-16; cf. also Ex. 7: 1f). Moses' self-distrust is recognized and allowed for. But the main part of the reassurance is that he will not have to depend on his own eloquence or the like. God will give him the words. God will be "with" Moses' mouth and will teach him what to say. Even when Aaron is nominated to be the spokesman before others God will still give Moses the words. God will be with both of them, which seems to be a way of saying that there will be no possibility of either of them speaking amiss. God had things He wanted said and He would see to it that both Moses and Aaron were so influenced that it would be these things, and not something else, that was said.

And according to Deuteronomy it was this that happened. Moses says, "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish from it, that ye may keep the commandments of Jehovah your God which I command you" (Deut. 4: 2). Moses is not giving the people some injunction of his own, but "the commandments of Jehovah". Since they are God's commandments they must be treated with full respect. So Moses says that they must not be added to or taken from. This appears to mean that the fullest possible authority is given to the words. It is certainly hard to fit it into the view that the deeds of God are significant, but that the words do not matter greatly. This might also perhaps be deduced from the fact that God is said quite often to have spoken to Moses. What this means is brought out in the words, "Jehovah spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend" (Ex. 33: 11; cf. Num. 12: Deut. 34: 10). Similarly we have God's command, "stand thou here by me, and I will speak unto thee all the commandments, and the statutes, and the ordinances, which thou shalt teach them" (Deut. 5: 31).

The story of Balaam and Balak indicates that on occasion God took charge of a man so that he uttered words not his own. This, however, is exceptional. More typically the man who spoke God's word was in full possession of his faculties. This does not mean that the prophet simply ruminated over his problems and called the result "the word of God". E. J. Young calls attention to the significance of passages where the prophet uses the first person singular as he speaks in the name of God, for example, Isaiah 5: 3: "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard". Professor Young asks: "How dare the prophet speak in such a fashion? What right has he to assume the prerogatives which belong to God alone, and to speak as though he were God?" He answers: "Certainly, no right at all, unless he believed that, in speaking as he did, he was uttering words which God actually placed in his mouth".⁸

There are some instructive examples in the life of Jeremiah. Once Johanan and the people asked him to pray for divine guidance. Jeremiah was not able to produce a "word of God" for the occasion, but had to wait. Ten days later "the word of Jehovah came unto Jeremiah" (Jer. 42: 7). We do not know how the prophet recognized the word of God as being such, but

plainly he did, and equally plainly he could not command it. He had to wait until God was ready to reveal it.

Even more instructive is an earlier incident. God told Jeremiah to buy the field of Hanamel during the siege which the prophet had consistently proclaimed as the foretaste of God's judgment on the people (Jer. 32: 6f). He had been proclaiming that the people would go into exile, and he believed that they would. Though he was so sure of this he was also sure of God's command, so he bought the field (v. 9). But he did not understand this one little bit. He prayed what is almost a prayer of remonstrance with God (vv.16-25), which comes to its climax in the words, "thou hast said unto me, O Lord Jehovah. Buy thee the field for money, and call witnesses; whereas the city is given into the hand of the Chaldeans". He is subsequently told that, while the people will go into captivity, ultimately they will return. The point of all this for us is not the ultimate solution of the difficulty, but the fact that it existed. Jeremiah was quite sure that a certain commandment was from the Lord even though the course urged upon him made no sense and, indeed, appeared to cut clean across what God had previously told him. It was the direct opposite of what he had hitherto understood as the purpose of God. The word of God for Jeremiah was clearly something other than the prophet's sanctified reason and common sense.

Jeremiah gives us a further glimpse of the method of the true prophet when he asks, "For who hath stood in the council of Jehovah, that he should perceive and hear his word?" (Jer. 23: 18). It is a tantalizing glimpse; for he does not tell us how a prophet goes about standing in this "council". But it is important, for God says, "if they had stood in my council, then had they caused my people to hear my words" (Jer. 23: 22). Again there is a reference to the very words of God which the prophet is to make known.⁹

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Now and then God is said to have written certain words. Notably is this the case with the ten commandments. The "tables of stone" given to Moses on Mount Sinai were "written with the finger of God" (Ex. 31: 18; cf. also Ex. 24: 12, 32 :16, Deut. 5: 22, 9: 10). Moses, of course, broke the tables, but God said to him, when He told him to hew out two more of them, "I will write on the tables the words that were on the first tables which thou brakest" (Deut. 10 12; so also Ex. 34: 1; Deut. 10: 4). It is clear that this piece of writing was firmly held to be of divine origin. The repetition indicates that we are dealing with no casual expression.¹⁰ On two other occasions Scripture appears to assign writing to the Lord's agency. One concerns the instructions for the building of the temple. David delivered them to Solomon and said, "All this . . . have I been made to understand in writing from the hand of Jehovah, even all the works of this pattern" (1 Chr. 28: 19). The other is at Belshazzar's feast when a hand appeared and wrote on the wall (Dan. 5: 5). The account does not say whose hand it was, but there can scarcely be reasonable doubt but that the writer means that God wrote the words.

With these we should take other passages where the Lord instructed His servants to write certain words. He said to Moses, "Write thou these words" (Ex. 34: 27; the words refer to the covenant between God and Israel). Similarly Isaiah was commanded to write: "Take thee a great tablet, and write upon it with the pen of a man, for Maher-shalal-hash-baz" (Is. 8: 1). The same thing happened to Jeremiah; "Thus speaketh Jehovah, the God of Israel, saying, Write thee all the words I have spoken unto thee in a book" (Jer. 30: 2). On a later occasion the same prophet received a similar command (Jer. 36: 2); Ezekiel was also instructed to write, though we have no record of any extensive writing as a result (Ezek. 24: 2, 37: 16).

Habakkuk was another recipient of such a command: “Write the vision, and make it plain upon tablets, that he may run that readeth it” (Hab. 2: 2).

All these passages indicate that God was interested in the exact words the prophets wrote. Ezekiel tells us that God said to him, “thou shalt speak my words unto them” (Ezek. 2: 7). He also gives us this picture of his activity: “Moreover he said unto me, Son of man, all my words that I shall speak unto thee receive in thy heart, and hear with thine ears. And go, get thee to them of the captivity, unto the children of thy people, and speak unto them, and tell them, Thus saith the Lord Jehovah” (Ezek. 3: 10f).

With these we should take passages which ascribe the activity of the men of the Old Testament to the Spirit of God. “The Spirit of Jehovah spake by me,” said David, “and his word was upon my tongue” (2 Sam. 23: 2), after which he proceeds to tell us what the God of Israel had said. Again, Ezekiel can introduce a prophecy with, “the Spirit of Jehovah fell upon me, and he said unto me” (Ezek. 11: 5 ; cf. also “The hand of Jehovah was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of Jehovah”, Ezek. 37: 1). We quite often read of the Spirit coming upon men as a result of which they prophesy (2 Chr. 15: 1, 20: 14, 24: 20; 1 Ki. 22: 24). That this is a typical attitude to prophecy is clear from the prayer of the Levites: “Yet many years didst thou bear with them, and testifiedst against them by thy Spirit through thy prophets” (Neh. 9: 30; cf. also v.20; Zech. 7: 12). It is clear that there was a very strongly held idea that it was the Spirit of God who spoke through the prophets.

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I am not aware of any passage in which any of the Old Testament writers specifically deals with the problem of inerrancy. Presumably when they record words expressly said to be written by God, or at God’s behest, error would be ruled out. But they do not speak of this.

Modern scholars remind us that the men of the Old Testament never claim to be inerrant,¹¹ and they often maintain that in fact their writings contain demonstrable errors.¹² As to the first point I am unimpressed. Since they do not deal with the topic at all it is not in the least surprising that they do not claim inerrancy for themselves. It is sufficient reply that they do not repudiate it, and that they do in fact claim it by implication at least for those passages which they assign to God as the writer or speaker.

The other objection is more weighty. It perhaps comes to its most serious expression in passages which appear to contradict each other. Where there is a dispute between the modern historian or scientist and the biblical writer it is always possible to claim that the former is wrong and the latter right. But where one biblical ‘writer is set against another (or against himself) the position is difficult. Perhaps we might take as a typical example of this type of objection that which points out that in one place we read, “the anger of Jehovah was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them, saying, Go, number Israel and Judah” (2 Sam. 24: 1), while in another, which tells of the same incident, “Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to number Israel” (1 Chr. 21: 1). The Chronicler did not like the theology he found in his source, we are told, and therefore he corrected it.

But it is possible to see the two passages in another light. From one point of view it was Satan who moved David to this act. There was something wrong in it (even if we do not discern exactly what the evil was), and thus it came from the evil one. But from another point of view the hand of God must be seen in it. It is the uniform picture in Scripture that Satan

has no absolute power. He can operate only within the limits that God prescribes. But if God permits his activities there is a sense in which He is responsible. He may even be termed the author of these activities.

A difficulty of another sort is the objection that the Old Testament contains unworthy views of God. Thus we read of God as commanding that Joshua and his men destroy the cities of Canaan, allowing none to remain alive (Jos. 10: 40, 11: 20, etc.), of His putting a lying spirit into the mouths of Ahab's prophets (1 Ki. 22: 23), and of His moving David to number the people and then punishing him for it (2 Sam. 24: 1, 15f). With these we should take the imprecatory Psalms and hate passages like Nahum 3. Critics suggest that the ideas in these are sub-Christian and that they cannot be held to be inspired.¹³ They are undoubtedly difficult, but it must be borne in mind that many passages here may be understood as forthright expressions of opposition to evil. It is not personal animosity that shines through, but a blazing concern for the right. Again, some passages may be understood along the lines of the Job's comforters passages. In this case they are accurately recorded, but give us a warning of what is to be shunned rather than an example to follow.

Explanations, more or less plausible, have been found for all the difficult passages. The question is not whether there are explanations, but whether we should accept them. Obviously it brings discredit on the evangelical position when resort is made to strained interpretations or when again and again the commentator says, "If we had more facts we would be able to explain this." In the last resort each man must make up his mind about this. The difficulty may be crystallized thus: the Old Testament appears to teach that God has spoken and that many of His words have been recorded. But to modern readers it seems easier to take some passages as in error than to regard them as divinely given and therefore as factual. Our answer depends on what weight we give to the claims that these are words of God and what to modern ideas of what is true.

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The New Testament writers uniformly regard the Old Testament as completely authoritative. Jesus and His followers quote it as a way of ending all discussion. The New Testament writers also have some well-known sayings in which they make far-reaching claims for the Old Testament. They say that the Holy Spirit moved the original writers (Acts 1:16, 28: 25; 1 Pet. 1:10f.; 2 Pet. 1: 20f), or they speak of Scripture as given by inspiration (2 Tim. 3: 16), or the like.

Such lines of reasoning are important, and it would be improper for me not to notice that an important part of the evidence in assessing our problem is the authority of the Old Testament in the light of New Testament exegesis. All the more is this the case in that the New Testament writers clearly regard the new dispensation as no whit inferior to the old (cf. 2. Cor. 3: 7-11). It is a reasonable inference that they regarded the writings in which the new was set forth as in no way inferior to the Scriptures of the old. We may often use the *a fortiori* argument. If, for example, Jesus could say to His followers, "many prophets and righteous men desired to see the things which ye see, and saw them not; and to hear the things which ye hear, and heard them not" (Mt. 13: 17), and if the prophets are sacred Scripture, what are we to say of the words of Christ?

Words are significant. Jesus said "Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away" (Mk. 13: 31; so also Mt. 24: 35). This stresses the importance of words. On the

basis of words men will be justified or condemned (Mt. 12: 37). There is a prediction of Jesus that he would be killed which is followed by, "And they understood none of these things" (Lk. 18: 34). The revelation was made in words. It was not in the general realm of ideas for we are told specifically that they did not grasp it. But the revelation is there, for the precise words are recorded. Exactly the same comment is to be made about Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus Himself said, "flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father who is in heaven" (Mt. 16: 16f). But immediately Peter showed that he did not understand the real meaning of what had been revealed and received the rebuke, "thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men" (Mt. 16: 23). The proposition had been revealed and Peter could say the words. But he did not really get the meaning!

There are several passages which tell us that the teaching of Jesus is divine in origin: it is "of God" (Jn. 7: 17); "the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's who sent me" (Jn. 14: 24); "as the Father taught me, I speak these things" (Jn. 8: 28); "I have given them thy word" (Jn. 17: 14); "He that is of God heareth the words of God" (Jn. 8: 47). Other such passages could be listed.

Several times words from God Himself are recorded. This is the case with the voice at Jesus' baptism (Mt. 3: 17, Mk. 1: 11, Lk. 3: 22), and at the transfiguration (Mt. 17: 5, Mk. 9: 7, Lk. 9: 35). There were words of God given to Paul while at sea (Acts 27: 24), and the response that his "thorn in the flesh" might be taken away is recorded: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12: 9). Several times in Revelation we have words ascribed to the Father (Rev. 1: 8, 21: 5f), or to Christ (Rev. 1:17ff, chs. 2, 3, 22: 7, 16, 20), or to the Spirit (Rev. 2: 7, 11, etc., 14:13).

Then there are passages which affirm the divine origin of the Christian message. It is "the gospel of God" (1 Thess. 2: 2, 8, 9, 1 Tim. 1:11, 1 Pet. 4: 17; cf. Gal. 1: 12). Or it may be referred to as "the word of the Lord" or as "the word of God" (Acts 13: 46, 49, 17:13, 18: 11, 1 Thess. 1: 8, 4: 15, 2 Thess. 3: 1, 2 Tim. 2: 9, Heb. 4: 12, 6: 5) while "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20: 27) is not dissimilar. The salvation to which the Christian writers refer was "at the first spoken through the Lord" (Heb. 2: 3), while the message of 1 John is "the message which we have heard from him" (1 Jn. 1: 5; this message is then given in set terms, so that it applies to the written word). Paul uses the expression, "this we say unto you by the word of the Lord" (1 Thess. 4: 15) specifically of the written word, for he goes on to say what his "this" comprises.

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Turning now to the question of authority, we must take note of the general tone of authority throughout, say, the Pauline correspondence. Paul recognizes that he and others are "not sufficient of ourselves". But he can add, "our sufficiency is from God; who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant" (2 Cor. 3: 5f). This consciousness of a divinely given sufficiency pervades all he writes. He can go so far as to say, "If any man thinketh himself to be a prophet, or spiritual; let him take knowledge of the things which I write unto you, that they are the commandment of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14: 37). This consciousness of inspiration is brought also out in these words: "Which things also we speak, not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Spirit teacheth" (1 Cor. 2: 13). He can "command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 3: 12). Or command "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 3: 6). Such words show that Paul knows himself to be the vehicle of the divine Spirit as he writes. The words are to be regarded not as the product of

human wisdom, but as “the commandment of the Lord”. This gives them the very highest authority possible.

But, of course, for Christians the supreme authority is that of Christ. He could give authoritative directions on an equality with Scripture itself: “Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time . . . but I say unto you . . .”. It is impossible to regard such directions as having any less authority than the Old Testament. But for later Christians these authoritative sayings are found only in the Gospels, which must accordingly in this respect rank with the Old Testament. Again, Jesus taught “with authority” (Lk. 4 :32; so Mt. 7: 29, Mk. 1: 22). Where is this authoritative teaching to be found if not in the Gospels?

Relevant are all the passages which indicate the deity of Christ, for the words of deity are not to be treated lightly. Jesus lays down authoritative directions for His followers. Thus He can ask, “why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say”? (Lk. 6: 46). Unless we hold that He meant this to apply only to those who heard Him in the days of His flesh this points to the authority of those books which record what He said. If it is a serious matter not to do the things He says, then His followers must have a deep respect for the record of His words.

A similar line of reasoning applies to passages speaking of Christ as having authority to forgive sins (Mk. 2:9ff., Lk. 5: 24; cf. “the Saviour of the world” Jn. 4: 42). Forgiveness occupied a large place in the life and thinking of the early Church. The first Christians accordingly cannot have taken lightly the documents in which the story of salvation was set forth. The same might be said of those passages, which tell of the kingdom of God. This important event is present in the coming of Jesus and specifically in His power over the demons (Mt. 12: 28, Lk. 11: 20). This is critical. It cannot be repeated. The coming of the kingdom is a decisive, once-for-all event. The record accordingly is significant, indeed all-important. For all later Christians here and here alone is to be found the authoritative account of forgiveness and of the kingdom.

This line of reasoning can be greatly extended. To take an example more or less at random, Matthew records for us the words of Jesus: “Everyone therefore who shall confess me before men, him will I also confess before my Father who is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 10: 32f). Unless men heed these words they are in grave danger. They will at the last be denied before God. They *need* the words. With eternal issues hinging on the outcome it is imperative that they be able to trust the written words. So is it with other sayings, in fact with all that the Gospels record. Once grant that Jesus is more than a man, that He is in fact the incarnate Son of God, and His words become authoritative for all His followers. But for all those after His lifetime the words are accessible only through the written record.

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Paul is so confident of what he preaches that he can say, “though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema” (Gal. 1: 8). Similarly he can refer to Christ as speaking in him and apparently regard this as something that can be proved (2 Cor. 13: 3). His preaching at Corinth was “in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (1 Cor. 2: 4; cf. 1 Thess. 1: 5). And, as he contrasts what he says with merely human wisdom, he affirms, “we speak God’s wisdom” (1 Cor. 2: 1-7). He reminds the Thessalonians that “when ye received from us the

word of the message, even the word of God, ye accepted it not as the word of men, but, as it is in truth, the word of God, which also worketh in you that believe” (1 Thess. 2: 13). He can say, “ye know what charge we gave you through the Lord Jesus” (1 Thess. 4: 2). Several times Paul speaks of his message as “revealed” (Rom. 16: 25f., 1 Cor. 2: 10ff., Gal. 1: 12, Eph. 3: 3ff.).

Now if (as we saw earlier) the written message was the commandment of God (1 Cor. 14: 37), and if (as we have just seen) the oral preaching was given from God, it is difficult to see on what ground we should deny that those writings which embody the message are the very Word of God. The fact that Paul was so confident of the message means that it can scarcely be regarded as fallible when it is set down for the benefit of believers. This high view is common to the whole New Testament. We read of “them that preached the gospel unto you by the Holy Spirit sent forth from heaven” (1 Pet. 1: 12), and again, the Pauline Epistles are classed as Scripture which those who “wrest” do so “unto their own destruction” (2 Pet. 3: 16). Another interesting passage is that which quotes as Scripture Deuteronomy 25: 4 and Luke 10: 7 (cf. Mt. 10: 10), namely 1 Timothy 5: 18. This raises problems, for it seems unlikely that the Gospel according to St. Luke was written before 1 Timothy.¹⁴ If it was not, then the words of Jesus, apparently carried in oral tradition, are regarded in the same light as Scripture. This would not be as striking a thought in the first century as it is to us.¹⁵

Another significant passage occurs at the beginning of Revelation and pronounces a blessing on that book’s readers: “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of the prophecy” (Rev. 1: 3). This seems to mean reading aloud in the assembly of the Christians, and many commentators take this to indicate that the writer expected his words to be taken as Scripture. This is supported by the fact that he speaks of God as revealing Himself and of his book as being the record of that revelation. (Rev. 1: 1, 22: 6, 16 etc.). He can use expressions like, “These are true words of God” (Rev. 19: 9).

Next we should notice that Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would guide His followers when they had to face hostile tribunals: “it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Spirit” (Mk. 13: 11; cf. also Mt. 10: 19f., Lk. 12: 11f., 21: 14f., Acts 2: 4). It is difficult to think that the Holy Spirit would speak through the accused for such a transitory purpose and not speak through those who were to write the authoritative Christian documents. All the more so since Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would teach His apostles and bring to their remembrance what He had said (Jn. 14: 26, 15: 26, 16: 12f.). Paul informs us that God revealed certain things “through the Spirit” and claims that we have received the Spirit, “that we might know the things that were freely given to us of God”. He goes on to ascribe not merely the general drift but the very words of his teaching to the Spirit (1 Cor. 2: 10-13). Sometimes this applies specifically to what is written. Thus the letter giving the decisions of the Council of Jerusalem said, “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things”, after which the specific items are listed (Acts 15: 28f.).

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This emphasis on the importance of words is overlooked or at the least minimized in a good deal of modern writing. We are informed that “the God who acts” reveals Himself in the mighty deeds recorded in Scripture, and it is insisted that the revelation is not in the form of propositions, but in the deeds. This view is certainly held very widely but it is completely without scriptural basis.¹⁶

The words in which the deeds are recorded are very important to the men of the Bible. We can go further and say that the words are necessary for revelation. The Egyptians took part in the same episodes as did the Israelites at the time of the Exodus but they did not (as far as we know) regard them as revelation. So with the Babylonians, or for that matter the Persians, at the time of the return from the Exile.¹⁷ It is also worth asking why the wars of ancient Israel and not those of, say, modern African nations should be held to be revelational. The deeds by themselves are not revelation.

There are in fact some situations in which the deeds are almost non-existent, but where it is impossible to deny the revelation. A good example is the making of the covenant between God and His people on Sinai. (Ex. 24). What did God actually *do* on this occasion? It is difficult to see any objective deed at all. But the revelation that at that time God had entered into covenant relationship with Israel was of profound importance for all the subsequent history of the nation.

One of the important insights in modern writing is that which sees God as active in *all* the affairs of men. "The God of the gaps" is widely repudiated and theologians of very varied outlook insist that God is to be seen in all of life. This makes it even harder to see revelation in the biblical deeds. Why these deeds only? If God is in all the deeds of men why should we regard *these* deeds as specially significant? Clearly it is not the deeds but the deeds plus the inspired interpretation which make the revelation.

Again, considerable sections of the Bible have nothing to do with deeds. The Psalter and the Pauline Epistles, for example, have very few deeds. For that matter large sections of the prophetic writings mention no deeds. Creation, and future happenings like the Parousia and heaven and hell between them take up considerable amounts of biblical space. If the modern contention is right a great deal of the Bible is not revelation at all.

As a matter of fact there is a curious ambivalence in modern writings about the "mighty deeds". On the one hand some stress the revelation in the deeds. But on the other hand there are those who, as historians, stress that the only deeds which they can assess are human deeds. The divine, they assure us, is not the province of the historian. So they will talk of the natural forces which were operative at the crossing of the Red Sea but not of God as intervening to save His people (that they say, is only the interpretation put on the event by the writer of Exodus). They will refer to the Easter faith but not to the resurrection. The latter is not a historical event, and it does not come within their province. God does not appear to do anything. In the writings of modern biblical historians "the God who acts" is a singularly inept description.¹⁸

Some recent writers are recognizing the importance of propositional revelation. D. B. Knox, for example, maintains that "if revelation is in the event rather than in the interpretation, revelation becomes like a nose of wax to be reshaped according to every man's whim. In fact, if revelation is only in event, then there is no revelation in the sense of God-given knowledge of God".¹⁹ Downing also stresses the importance of propositional revelation. It seems to him "inescapable".²⁰ He realizes that this is not popular just now but he points out that "it is much harder to find circumstances that will justify a claim that a 'person' is revealed, than that certain propositions are 'revealed'; and the latter is hard enough".²¹

The idea that a person and not a proposition is revealed is not found in the Bible, whether the Old Testament or the New. There it is always the words, the propositions, which receive the

stress. It is just as true for the liberal as for the conservative that if the words cannot be trusted we have nothing.

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Yet we must face the fact that there are passages which raise problems. Take, for example, the accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper. This was a very solemn moment and, if ever Christ's followers were to regard sayings as significant and remember them, this was surely the time. Yet did Jesus say, "this is my body" (Mk. 14: 22)? Or, "This is my body which is given for you" (Lk. 22: 19)? Or, "this is my body, which is for you" (1 Cor. 11: 24)? And over the cup did He say, "This is my blood of the covenant" (Mk. 14: 24)? Or, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (Lk. 22: 20)? It is legitimate to counter that the differences are not important. But is this inerrancy?

Difficulties sometimes appear in parallel accounts of the same incident. Thus when Jairus came to ask Jesus' help he said, "My daughter is even now dead" (Mt. 9: 18), or, "My little daughter is at the point of death" (Mk. 5: 23). Similarly according to Mark 6: 8 the Twelve, when they were sent out two by two, were permitted to take a staff, but the staff is expressly forbidden in Matthew 10: 10 and Luke 9: 3. Sandals are to be used in Mark 6: 9, but are forbidden in Matthew 10: 10.²² Sometimes there are difficulties over quotations from the Old Testament. Probably none is more striking than that in Matthew 27: 9. The passage is cited by the name of Jeremiah but the words come from Zechariah 11: 12f.²³

Or we might draw attention to passages in which Jesus quotes His own words inaccurately. Thus He said, "No man can come to me, except the Father that sent me draw him", but He quotes this in the form, "no man can come unto me, except it be given unto him of the Father" (Jn. 6: 44, 65). This kind of variation is recurrent in Jesus' quotations of his own words in the Fourth Gospel. Compare John 1: 48 with 1: 50, 8: 21 with 8: 24, 16: 14 with 16: 15, 16: 16 with 16: 19. In no case is the variation important, but the point is that in no case does Jesus exactly reproduce His original words though He says He is quoting.

It is, of course, legitimate to say that the original thought is reproduced. But does this deal with the problem of inerrancy? The nub of the difficulty is that it is not easy to see how parallel accounts which do not say the same thing can be inerrant. Or how inexact quotation can be thought of as inerrant. But the rejection of inerrancy is also difficult in view of the strong statements which the biblical writers make about their writings. And we might add, in view of the fact that those who trust the Bible implicitly so often have a very close walk with God.²⁴ And that many modern discoveries indicate the accuracy of the biblical writers.²⁵

I wish to make briefly some concluding points. The first of them is that the Bible does not come to us as, so to speak, a bare word and nothing more. God's Holy Spirit still witnesses to the devout reader and applies the Word to his need. We do not think of final authority as so much paper and printer's ink. As Bernard Ramm reminds us, "the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures, which are the product of the Spirit's revelatory and inspiring action, is the principle of authority for the Christian Church".²⁶ It is the very Spirit of God who speaks to us through the Bible. Our final authority is dynamic and not static. Nor should we think that the last word has been spoken about the content of Scripture. As Pastor Robinson said to the Pilgrim Fathers, "I am very confident that the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth, out of His Holy Word".²⁷ The Spirit is not to be confined by the exegesis of previous days. He can and does use Scripture in new ways in each new generation.

We should also bear in mind G. E. Wright's point: "The truth and authority of the present canon of scripture is constantly confirmed by the work of God himself through his spirit of truth. If it is his word, he will sustain and confirm it".²⁶ The last words are important, God will use His Word to effect His purpose. In the last resort it is not we, but He who will defend it.

My second point is that the importance of a trustworthy Bible is widely recognized, sometimes even by those whose writings appear to indicate a contrary opinion. Thus, though he can affirm that "there are no grounds whatever for saying that the Bible is free from historical or literal error", John Huxtable can yet say that "if . . . it could be proved that there never had been an Exodus, still more, if it could be proved that Jesus Christ was no more than a figment of pious-imagination, Christianity would cease to exist in any recognizable form"²⁹ All serious students agree that it is important that the Bible can be relied upon. But many refuse to accept the Bible's testimony to itself.

For Christians it is the Bible that is the basic book (as even those who are far from being evangelical usually recognize). Therefore the Bible's witness to itself is important and must be taken with full seriousness. The difficulty is that the Bible writers do not use the same categories as we do. They never speak in terms of inerrancy, and rarely of inspiration.

But they invariably regard what they have written, and also what other Bible writers to whom they refer have written, as fully authoritative. They are clearly not in the slightest degree concerned that all their statements should be obviously consistent, whether with one another or with what other Bible writers have written. (It is this which enables those who seek discrepancies to make out a case.) But they never go on from there to make the point that anything biblical can be disregarded. No Bible writer ever takes any Bible statement, whether his own or someone else's, as no more than an allowable opinion, a basis for discussion. It is always set forth as though meant to be believed implicitly and acted upon.

This means that the whole of the Bible is to be taken seriously. It is common among scholars to reject some parts of Scripture and to accept other parts. John Baker has recently pointed out that this procedure inevitably takes the heart from biblical authority. He points to those who discount anything "which to our eyes appears ethically substandard or scientifically implausible" or which contradicts the modern picture of Jesus as "the Man for Others". He goes on: "Yet why should this selection be preferred to that of a Schweitzer, or of anti-Christian polemicists? The only principle on which the procedure can be made logical is that of a total historical scepticism which turns Jesus into a blank screen, on to which the current personal ideals of a secular world can be projected. Here Scripture is not only not supreme, it has ceased to have any positive impact at all. Experience over nineteen hundred years suggests that Scripture is only supreme when it is taken as a whole, an irreducible datum, seeming warts and all. To anthologize is always to dethrone."³⁰ This is not widely realized and it ought to be. Those who make their selection among the teachings of Scripture in effect set themselves above Scripture. They do not let it play the normative role.

My third point is that what we need more than anything is a way of looking at the Bible which holds fully to its authority,³¹ but which does not bog down on the defence of minor points. The Bible writers, while consistently regarding what they have written as reliable, do not speak of inerrancy. We must recognize that it is not our concern to show that every Bible statement can be proved to be in harmony with every other one and with the facts ascertained

by various academic disciplines. It is rather to show that the Bible is eminently trustworthy.

It is important that we think biblically. The modern critic often complains that conservatives are unbiblical, but he rarely makes a serious attempt to show how this is the case, or that his own method accords with that of the Bible writers. The fact is that the men who wrote our Bible believed in a God who acts and a God who speaks. As a general rule they put no emphasis on the minutiae of what He says, but they are sure that He has spoken. Modern criticism is unbiblical because it refuses to take this with full seriousness. It will not face the fact that the Bible tells of a God who speaks as well as acts, and a God who sees that His words go on record. When the typical critic is through he does not confront us with a word from God. He confronts us with his own historical reconstruction and he prides himself that this is much the same as that of the non-Christian historian. Instead of interpreting all of life by revelation he prefers to interpret revelation by secular life.

Can we take Christ's quotations of His own words in the Fourth Gospel as giving us a useful clue? In no case is the quotation verbally identical with the original. But in no case is the sense distorted. Each gives us a true picture. We cannot look for more than the Bible writers actually give us (nor, of course, should we settle for less). We must not impose an inerrancy of our own making on the Bible, but rather accept the kind of inerrancy that it teaches. And this is an inerrancy which is compatible with variant reports of the words used on a given occasion.

The important thing is that the Bible is reliable. It will not lead us astray. As we accept it, it gives us true knowledge of God.

LEON MORRIS

Endnotes:

- 1 *Toward A Theology of History*, London. 1965, p. 116 cf., also, "The fundamentalists have tried to react against a real scandal, a method of interpreting a supremely great religious-historical document like the Bible out of which no word from God ever seems to come" (*op. cit.*, p. 25).
- 2 *The Anglican Synthesis*, ed. W. R. F. Browning, Derby, 1964, p. 21
- 3 *Op cit.*, p. 26 n.
- 4 *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry, London, 1959, p. 227.
- 5 Yet we must notice briefly that G. W. H. Lampe objects to the appeal to Scripture as basically unsound. He says, "To attempt to find in Scripture direct 'proof' of what are, in fact, much later developments of Christian doctrine is an activity proper only to an age which has not begun to think historically; and it is the historical revolution of the past century which, far more than any other factor, has made the view of scriptural authority which we find in the Anglican formularies untenable" (*Authority and the Church*, S.P.C.K. Theological Collections, No. 5, London, 1965, p. 11).
- 6 W. Evans, *The Great Doctrines of the Bible*, Chicago, 1939, p. 203.
- 7 Cf. F. Gerald Downing: "Sometimes the prophets appear just to have had to speak the word of

Yahweh, as his mouthpiece: 'Thus says Yahweh' ('Yahweh speaking')" (*Has Christianity a Revelation?* London, 1964, p. 30).

- 8 *Thy Word is Truth*. London, 1963, p. 43.
- 9 For other passages important for an understanding of the method of the prophet, cf. Num. 12: 6, Deut. 18: 18, Jer. 23: 29f.
- 10 We should perhaps note that many hold that Moses wrote the ten commandments on the basis of "he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments" (Ex: 34: 28). But, while this is a possible explanation of the words, it is also possible to take the "he" as referring not to Moses, but to God. In view of the other passages we have noted this would seem to be the meaning of the author. S. R. Driver and others assign Ex. 34: 28 to J and the passages speaking of God as writing on the tables to E, but this involves such improbabilities as detaching the second part of Ex. 34: 1 from its J context and assigning it to E. This is scarcely sober criticism, but rather a determination that J shall not be found guilty of ascribing the writing of Jehovah.
- 11 Everett F. Harrison maintains that the Bible "does not require us to hold inerrancy, though this is a natural corollary of full inspiration" (*Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry, London, 1959, p. 250).
- 12 As an example, A. J. Foreman cites as errors, "locating the sources of the Nile (the 'Gihon') and the Euphrates in the same spot (Gen. 2:10), asserting that the hare chews the cud (Lev. 11: 6), or classifying the bat as a bird (Lev. 11: 13-19). And how could we say that God dictated personally the sub-Christian elements in the Old Testament?" (*Layman's Bible Commentaries*, Introduction to the Bible, B. M. Metzger *et al*, London 1960, p. 25).
- 13 Cf. C. H. Dodd, commenting on Is. 9: 17, 60: 12: "Any theory of the inspiration of the Bible which suggests that we should recognize such utterances as authoritative for us stands self-condemned. They are relative to their age. But I think we should say more. They are false and they are wrong (*The Authority of the Bible*, London, 1947, p. 128).
- 14 C. F. D. Moule, of course, argues that Luke was the amanuensis and part-author of the Pastoral Epistles, including 1 Timothy (*Bull, Ryl, Lib.*, vol. 47, March, 1965, pp. 430-452).
- 15 B. Gerhardsson, in *Memory and Manuscript*, Lund, 1961, makes it clear that authoritative teaching was quite commonly transmitted orally in first century Judaism. This put a premium on accurate memorization, and the accepted teachings of the Rabbis were passed on with the greatest of care. We cannot think that the first Christians were less careful about the words of their Master.
- 16 Cf. James Barr, "the commonplace of biblical theology that 'God revealed himself' in or through history, especially in his 'mighty acts and the events like the Exodus, is echoed, although there is not a place in the Old Testament where these 'mighty acts' are referred to with *g-l-h* 'reveal'" (*The Semantics of Biblical Language*, Oxford, 1962, p. 230).
- 17 H. Wheeler Robinson enunciates a principle, "the transformation of the event into a new fact by a new interpretation of it" (*Redemption and Revelation*, London, 1943, p. 183). John Baillie finds "general agreement" that the "illumination of the receiving mind is a necessary condition of the divine self-disclosure" (*The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought*, London, 1956, p. 64), and he cites Barth, Temple, and Brunner for the view that the activity of the interpreter is integral to the process of revelation.

- 18 Cf. Langmead Casserley: "It is unfortunate that they (i.e. the prophets and apostles) depict and symbolize God as the God who acts, for this really means that, from the point of view of the historical method conventional in the modern world, the prophets and the apostles were really mistaken, and this is, in fact, the true implication, rarely confessed or acknowledged, of course, of modern biblical scholarship" (*op. cit.*, p. 95).
- 19 *The Reformed Theological Review*, XIX, February 1969, p. 5.
- 20 *Op. cit.*, p. 252.
- 21 *Op. cit.*, pp. 219f. From a slightly different point of view F. I. Andersen says: "To belittle propositions because they are impersonal is to destroy human relations by despising their normal medium. The bliss of being loved different from the words of love-making, but the 'proposition', 'I love you', is a welcome, nay, indispensable means to the consummation of love in actuality. But in modern theology we have a Lover-God who makes no declarations!" (cited in J. I Packer, *God Has Spoken*, London, 1965, p. 34).
- 22 Unless the *σανδαλια* of Mark differ from the *υποδηματα* of Matthew.
- 23 In each of these cases explanations may be given. Thus it is possible to say that Matthew has abbreviated the story of Jairus and that he saves space by making clear at the beginning that the girl died. The passage about the sending out of the Twelve is explained by A. Plummer in this way, "These discrepancies need not disturb us: the general meaning in all three Gospels is the same: 'make no elaborate preparations, but go as you are'" (*An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, London, 1910, p. 150). In the quotation from Zechariah the evangelist is apparently using some variations from passages in Jeremiah and thus the words may be regarded as in part at any rate from that prophet. Or the evangelist may be using a Testimony book with a section beginning with passages from Jeremiah and ending with one from Zechariah. Calvin regards the error as textual.
- 24 Alan Cole points out, with reference to evangelicalism during the dominance of liberalism: "Many of its detailed views about the Bible may have even been incorrect: but that its resultant attitude was correct, in humble faith, few would deny. That is perhaps why Evangelical scholars and theologians have been few, but Evangelical missionaries many" (*The Reformed Theological Review*, XVII, February, 1958, p. 20). He has earlier said: "The Bible, rightly read, read as a whole, read Christocentrically, and read humbly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the fellowship of the Church, can never deceive us as to what God is like, or as to what man is like, or as to what God's world is like" (*op. cit.*, pp. 19f.).
- 25 An article in *Life International*, Vol. 38, No. 7, April 19, 1965, which is highly critical of conservative positions, complaining of "bibliolatry" and regarding as an "indefensible view" the idea that "every word was divinely and equally inspired" can yet say, "All the recent findings of scholarship have tended to raise, not lower, the status of the Bible as history" (*op. cit.*, p. 6).
- 26 *The Pattern of Authority*, Grand Rapids, 1957, p. 28.
- 27 Cited in J. K. S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture*, London, 1957, p. 58.
- 28 *The Book of the Acts of God*, London, 1960, p. 40.
- 29 *A Companion to the Bible*, ed. H. H. Rowley, Edinburgh, 1963, p. 5.
- 30 *Theology*, LXIX, March, 1966, pp. 113f.

31 Cf. K. Barth: “The intention of the authors of the Bible was not to express opinions which we are open to contradict with our own opinions. They speak from a Word that does not allow us to enter into discussion with them” (cited in Downing, *op. cit.*, p. 262).