

# *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*

## **A Textbook of Hermeneutics for Conservative Protestants**

by  
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### CHAPTER VIII

#### THE PROBLEM OF INERRANCY AND SECULAR SCIENCE IN RELATION TO HERMENEUTICS

##### A. THE PROBLEM OF INFALLIBILITY AND INERRANCY

Judged by their official creeds and confessions, all the major churches of Christendom have accepted the divine inspiration of the Bible. They are agreed that the Bible is a book brought into existence by the special grace of God, possessing a quality which books of purely human production do not have. Judging further from official creeds and confessions, the churches have accepted the *infallibility* of the Bible in all matters of faith and morals. Men may depend on the doctrines and morals of the Bible with complete certitude of their truthfulness. Going yet another step, these churches have accepted the *inerrancy* of all the historical and factual matters of the Scriptures which pertain to matters of faith and morals. This is demanded by the very historical nature of the Biblical revelation, and the plan of redemption. Some men have tried to defend infallibility of the faith and morals of the Bible, but not the inerrancy of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> What is actually proposed is that the major historical features of the Scriptures are reliable. The Bible is errant in historical, factual, and numerical matters which do not affect its faith and morals.

To accept the infallibility of the faith and morals of the Bible is *mutatis mutandis*<sup>2</sup> to accept the historical trustworthiness of the historical elements in redemption. The Christian faith has taught the infallibility of the faith and morals of Scripture, and the inerrancy of all matters of history pertaining to faith and morals. No lower ground than this can be held. It is true that extremes can be found in orthodoxy in this matter. J. Paterson Smyth (*How God Inspired the Bible*) does not wish to admit more than infallibility of faith and morals. The Buxtorffs defended the inspiration of the Hebrew vowels.<sup>3</sup>

Careful conservative scholarship has indicated that the inerrancy of the Bible must be judged by the very nature of the divine revelation. The revelation came to men speaking human languages and living

1 For example Gore (*Lux Mundi*) and Briggs (*The Bible, The Church, and Reason*).

2 "Used when comparing two or more things to say that although changes will be necessary in order to take account of different situations, the basic point remains the same: *This complex pattern has been repeated, mutatis mutandis, all over the country.*" (This definition was not provided by Ramm but is taken from [dictionary.cambridge.org](http://dictionary.cambridge.org)., and added here for the benefit of the reader.)

3 Hebrew was originally written with consonants (radicals) only. When it ceased to be a spoken language, Jewish scholars added vowels (vowel points) to indicate its pronunciation. It is now universally admitted that these vowel points are a late insertion and not part of the autographs.

in a cultural context. To be meaningful it had to come in the language of the prophets and apostles, and employ the cultural background for figures, illustrations, analogies, and everything else associated with linguistic communication. No artificial or abstract theory of inerrancy is to be imposed on the Scriptures.

To impose a precise literalness to the number usages of the Bible is an illustration of an artificial theory of inerrancy. Some interpreters have insisted that Jesus had to be in the grave exactly seventy-two hours because he said he would be buried for three days and three nights. But the expression "three days and three nights" *must be determined by Jewish usage*. In fact, to insist on exactly seventy-two hours creates confusion. If Jesus were crucified on Friday, as practically all competent scholars agree, then the resurrection would not be till late Monday afternoon. In fact, if the burial were in the afternoon--as is stated in the Scriptures that it was before sundown--the resurrection had to be just seventy-two hours later in the afternoon. If one insists that the crucifixion were on Wednesday then the seventy-two hours ends before sundown on Saturday, and not on the Lord's day.

In 1 Corinthians 15:5 Paul says our Lord was seen after his resurrection by "the twelve." An artificial notion of inerrancy would demand twelve apostles, but Judas was dead and his successor was not appointed till after the ascension. But "the twelve" had become a regular expression for "the group of disciples."

Two other illustrations may be given to show that inerrancy must be judged by *usus loquendi* of the times and not artificially. In Mark 1:2 a citation is made from Malachi and Isaiah. Isaiah's name does not appear in the King James, but it does in the best critical editions of the Greek text. Mark attributes both citations to Isaiah. The Jewish custom in citing two or three prophets in a brief catena of Scripture was to name only the leading prophet. In Matthew 27:9 a verse from Zechariah is cited as coming from Jeremiah. The Jewish tradition was that the spirit of Jeremiah was in Zechariah and such a method of citation would not offend their historical sense.

We can sum up what we have been trying to say as follows: *in judging the inerrancy of the Scriptures we must judge them according to the customs, rules, and standards of the times the various books were written, and not in terms of some abstract or artificial notion of inerrancy.*

To those who accept the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture, the problem of inerrancy presents a special problem to the interpreter. In dealing with this important and difficult problem we suggest the following principles:

(1). *A belief in the inerrancy of the Bible does not mean that all the Bible is clear.* The inspiration of the Bible does not guarantee its lucidity. The apostle Peter indicates that the prophets themselves were puzzled about what they wrote (I Peter 1:10 ff.). He further admits that Paul said many things which are hard to interpret (2 Peter 3:16, *dysnoētos*, difficult to understand). The writer of Hebrews tells his listeners that his exposition about Christ and Melchisedec is lengthy and difficult to interpret (Hebrews 5:11). Our Lord Himself puzzled his own disciples with many of his utterances. The inerrancy of the Scriptures does not mean that it is possible to give a clear interpretation of every passage.

Above the express statements of the Scriptures to their own partial obscurity is the very nature of the Bible. We must expect obscurities from the very fact that the Bible is written in ancient languages, in a strange culture, and that the Bible refers to persons, places, and events for which no other source for

corroboration exists. The Bible was composed over a vast geographical territory--from Egypt to Babylon to Rome--and written over a span of some fifteen centuries.

A considerable source of encouragement is the findings of archaeology which are clearing up some obscurities. The reference to seething a kid in its mother's milk has been a puzzler since patristic exegesis (Exodus 23:19). It is now known to be part of heathenish idolatry.<sup>4</sup>

The older commentators spent much time trying to unravel the meaning of the expression "daily bread" in the Lord's prayer. Deissmann has discovered the expression in the papyri and it refers to the provisions given to laborers and soldiers for the following day's work. Deissmann<sup>5</sup> translates it: "Give us today our amount of daily food for tomorrow."

(2). *When we assert the inerrancy of the Bible, we do not assert that the Bible speaks all its mind on a subject in one place.* It is the total Bible in historical perspective which is inerrant. The monogamous ideal of marriage is not clearly set forth till the pages of the New Testament. What is not even mentioned to a two-year-old is reprimanded in a ten-year old. So God tolerated much in the Old Testament period while mankind (specifically Israel) was in its ethical and theological swaddling clothes. The full light of revelation burns in the New Testament. It is not proper to pit the earlier part of the Bible against the later as if they contradict. McIntosh has argued repeatedly in his work, *Is Christ Infallible and the Bible True?* that the immature or preliminary does not exist in a state of contradiction with the mature and final, and with this we agree.

The complete mind of God on a subject matter is given (as far as revelation contains it) by a historico-synoptic view. No charge of errancy can be made against the Bible by isolating a doctrine from its complete Biblical development.

(3). *Belief in the inerrancy of the Scriptures leads us to affirm there are no contradictions in the Bible.* As much as is made over the proposed contradictions in Scripture, it is surprising how few examples of any possible merit can be supplied, and it is further surprising how difficult it is to make a successful case out of these examples. To be specific, Marcus Dods lists six contradictions in the Gospels as his basis for not accepting their inerrancy, and Frederic Kenyon supplies us with another list of contradictions which prove the errancy of the Scriptures.<sup>6</sup> In both cases it will be discovered that in the conservative commentaries there are plausible explanations of every one of these alleged contradictions. The burden of proof is on the accuser. The believer in the Scriptures needs only to show that the evidence of errancy is not conclusive. A contradiction to be valid must be unequivocal, and as long as the proposed contradiction is alleged on ambiguous grounds no charge of errancy is valid.

Archeology has again supplied some help at this point. The difficulties about Luke's census that were once so formidable have not practically vanished, thanks to archeology. Certain other embarrassments

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4 Cf. J. Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, p. 148. The rite is referred to in the Ras Shamra texts.

5 Deissmann, *The New Testament in the Light of Modern Research*, p. 86. For the better understanding of the grammar of the New Testament from research in papyri see A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (fifth edition), pp. 1-139.

6 Dods, *The Bible: Its Origin and Nature*, pp. 136-37. Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology*, p. 27.

in the Gospel accounts have been relieved.<sup>7</sup>

In considering so-called contradictions many matters must be weighed:

(i). We must be sure of our original text. In the healing of the maniac of Gerasa it was assumed incredible that the pigs could run thirty-five miles to the lake and plunge in, for the town of Gerasa was so situated. Textual critics have come to the conclusion that the correct reading of the original text should be Gerasenes. To supplement this has been the work of Thompson who has found the ruins of a town named Khersa right at the edge of a steep place by the sea.<sup>8</sup>

(ii). Some problems, especially those dealing with numbers, may easily be corruption of the text; e.g., 1 Samuel 13:1 and Acts 12:21; 1 Kings 4:26 and 2 Chronicles 9:25. Paul declares that twenty-three thousand died in a plague (1 Cor. 10:8), whereas Numbers 25:9 records twenty-four thousand. That Paul records how many died in a day and Moses in the entire plague is a thin explanation because how would Paul know such a breakdown of the figures? A corrupt text seems to be the better accounting of this. It could also be argued that Paul contradicts Moses only if he intended to be giving the exact number. If he had *in mentis* the intent of only supplying a round number, no contradiction exists. The same is true for 1 Kings 7:23 where the value for *pi* is three. It has been argued that with a flange the circumference could be reduced to 30 cubits, but if the numbers are general and not intended to be to the decimal point no contradiction can be said to exist. Further the susceptibility of numbers to corruption in ancient texts is well known.

(iii). We may misinterpret one or both of two conflicting passages. The two genealogies of Christ present a real problem. That they are contradictory has never been unequivocally established.<sup>9</sup> Further, the scheme of Matthew to give his genealogy in compressed form and in units of fourteen each is his specific intent, and not to be made thereby contradictory to a fuller account. Much care must also be used in correlating the Gospel narratives. In the healing of blind Bartimaeus, Matthew mentions two blind men, whereas Luke and Mark mention only one. In the healing of the Gerasene demoniac, Matthew again mentions two, and Luke and Mark, one. Mark and Luke pick out the more notorious of the two and limit their account to him. The healing of blind Bartimaeus is stated to be while leaving the city, and while entering the city. There was a new Jericho and an old Jericho. If the healing took place between the two cities both expressions are true.

(iv). We may identify two similar events that are really different. There is the possibility of two cleansings of the Temple (John 2; Matthew 21). The Sermon on the Mount might have been given several times (Matthew 5; Luke 6). Many of the healings evidently followed similar patterns even to the conversation.

(v). The fuller account is to be used to explain the shorter account. No contradiction is to be construed if the writer condenses an account or speech for economy of space or time. What God said to Ananias in Acts 9:10-19, Paul puts in the mouth of Ananias as speaking to him (Acts 22:12-16). Acts 9 is the full account of Paul's conversion, and Acts 22 the abbreviated account.

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7 Cf. A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels*, p. 71 fn.

8 Robertson, *loc. cit.*

9 Cf. Robertson's discussion. *Op. cit.*, p. 259. We prefer Machen's solution to Robertson's, however. *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, p. 229 ff.

(vi). In a given instance one writer may give direct discourse, and the second either indirect discourse or a simple statement of the content of what was said. This is a constant phenomenon in the synoptic Gospels. This is standard and accepted methodology of prose composition and not to be taken as contradictory.

(vii). Inerrancy does not mean *literalness* of detail. All of the speeches in the book of Acts are very short, and we are persuaded that Peter and Paul talked for more than one or two minutes. We have in Acts a faithful digest of these speeches and not the *ipsissima verba* of Paul and Peter.<sup>10</sup>

(4). *Belief in the inerrancy of the Bible does not demand the original manuscripts nor a perfect text.* That original manuscripts of the Bible existed cannot be doubted although sometimes critics of inspiration argue as if original manuscripts never existed. The Biblical writers began with copies, so it seems! Nor can it be doubted that errors of transmission took place when the autographs were copied. It is therefore entirely proper to assert that a given reading in a text might not exist in the original text. We have not by so reasoning proved the autographs to be inerrant, but on the other hand we have argued that corruptions do exist and that there may be a difference between present-day manuscripts and autographs. The fact of textual corruptions is not a denial of inspiration, but a *problem* of inspiration. It is a logical *non sequitur* to argue from a corrupted text to a denial of inspiration. There is nothing inherently contradictory in the notion of an inspired text imperfectly transmitted.

Obviously we have no autographs of either Testament. The oldest manuscript of the New Testament is the John Rylands Papyrus fragment of the Gospel of John dated by some as early as A.D. 125, although usually about A.D. 150. Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls our oldest Old Testament manuscript was the Leningrad Codex, dated A.D. 916. Now we have manuscripts of Isaiah and Daniel dated a hundred years or so before the birth of Christ, and fragments of many of the other Old Testament books.

All orthodoxy needs to claim in this regard is that errors of transmission touch nothing vital in Scripture. There is no question that the most faithfully transmitted manuscripts from antiquity are the Old and New Testaments. For proof of this assertion with reference to the Old Testament we cite Green: "It may be safely said that no other work of antiquity has been so accurately transmitted."<sup>11</sup> The texts of Daniel and Isaiah in the Dead Sea Scrolls are substantially Masoretic and so further confirm this claim of Green.

As far as the New Testament is concerned, the situation is just as satisfactory. In the first place the number of Greek manuscripts for critical work is now over 4000. If Latin and other early versions be admitted, then the figure moves up over the 13,000 mark. Further, practically the entire New

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10 *Verbal* inspiration does not mean *exact literal reproduction* of what is said or done. A study of parallel passages with a Greek harmony of the Gospels reveals how many words and expressions the Spirit considered synonymous; and it is also interesting to note variation in detail and difference of length of accounts.

11 Green, *General Introduction to the Old Testament: The Text*, p. 181. Cf. also remarks of the same commendatory nature by Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, pp. 38 and 47. For the conservative position clearly and lucidly explained see John H. Skilton, "The Transmission of Scriptures," *The Infallible Word*, pp. 137-187.

Testament can be culled from citations in the Fathers. There is nothing in classical documents which even comes close to this. Hort claims that less than one thousandth of the New Testament text is corrupt. In the remarkable providence of God the text of the Bible in the original languages forms the most reliably transmitted text known to classical scholarship.

## B. THE PROBLEM OF SCIENCE

If we accept the divine inspiration of a Book which was written several centuries before the discoveries of modern science we are faced with the very acute problem of relating its statements about creation to those of modern science. To claim that the Bible is a book filled with anticipations of modern science does not seem to accord with the cultural conditioning of any revelation, and to declare all its statements about nature as invalid does not seem to accord with its inspiration. What canons of interpretation should we follow in regard to this important and knotty question?<sup>12</sup>

(1). *When we assert the inerrancy of Scripture we do not assert that the Bible uses scientific language.* Classical scholars, historians, and students of the history of philosophy make a conscious effort to find modern counterparts to ancient terminology. This is not considered as depreciating the validity of these terms. Thomists insist that if present scholars would take the pains to make accurate correlations between Thomas' vocabulary and modern terms, present day scholars would find much more significance in Thomas. Others have said that much of Newton's genius goes unheralded because scholars will not bother to learn the scientific Latin jargon of Newton's day and transpose it into our contemporary language. The popular nature of the Biblical statements about nature is no argument against the validity of these statements.

The Bible is a book adapted for all ages of the human race and therefore its vocabulary about nature must be popular. It is no objection against inerrancy that the Scriptures are in popular language.

(2). *No objection can be brought against inerrancy because the language of the Bible is phenomenal.* A language which is phenomenal is restricted to terms of description and observation. Its language about astronomy, botany, zoology, and geology is restricted to the vocabulary of popular observation. What can be seen through microscope or telescope is not commented on. Phenomenal language is true because all it claims is to be description. One is not deceived when he sees the sun rise and the sun set. One is deceived only if he artlessly converts his observations into theories.

The corollary to this is that the Bible does not theorize as to the actual nature of things. It does not contain a theory of astronomy or geology or chemistry. It does not seek to present knowledge which could be formed into a science text. The words of Paul Woolley are very relevant at this point:

The Bible, then, should not be approached with a view to finding it a comprehensive treatise on, for example, natural science. A great many statements in the realm of natural science are to be found in the Bible, and they are true statements. But the Bible offers no information as to the validity of the various modern theories concerning the nature of matter and the constitution of the physical world. There is nothing in the Bible with which to test the theories of relativity . . . One could not write a biological

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12 We have treated this more extensively in our volume, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*.

textbook from the Bible alone.<sup>13</sup>

(3). *No objection can be brought against the inerrancy of the Bible because it is a culturally conditioned revelation.* The Bible uses the terms and expressions of the times of its writers. Any revelation must be so accommodated to the human mind. The interpreter who seeks for modern relativity theory in the Bible is mistaken, as he asks the Bible to speak on a subject it *ex hypothesi* will not. When the religious liberal renounces much of the Bible because it is culturally conditioned he fails to understand that inspiration uses cultural terms and expressions to convey an infallible revelation.

The mustard seed is not the smallest seed known to botanists, but among the Semites it was considered to be the smallest of seeds. Its phenomenal growth became the basis for an analogy for the growth of anything unusually small to something very large. For our Lord to have given the Latin terms of the smallest seed would have been grotesque.

John 1:13 states that the Christian is born of God, not of "bloods." It was the Jewish opinion that the seeds of inheritance were carried in the bloodstream. Does John argue that the seeds of reproduction are in the bloodstream? What John intends to teach is that a man is born of God, not on the basis of his Jewish ancestry. He had to use the culturally current terms to make his theological point. The same is true of much of the psychology of the Bible, e.g., attributing psychic properties to bowels, kidneys, heart, liver, and bones. The divine revelation came in and through these modes of expression and the infallible truth shines *through* them.

(4). *It is not proper to attempt to find numerous correlations of Scripture and modern science.* The careful interpreter will not try to find the automobile in Nahum 1, or the airplane in Isaiah 60, or atomic theory in Hebrews 11:3, or atomic energy in 2 Peter 3. All such efforts to extract modern scientific theories out of Scripture eventually do more harm than good.

(5). *It must be kept in mind that Genesis 1 is in outline form.* Contemporary works which endeavor to sketch the salient facts of the universe run up to five hundred pages. Genesis sums up creation in thirty-four verses (Gen. 1:1 to 2:3). The extreme brevity of the account must temper all our exegesis of it. Trying to read too much specific detail into this sketch can cause needless conflict with science. It is always problematic to go from the "let there be" of Genesis to the *modus operandi*.

It is the province of the sciences to fill in the details of what is in outline form in the Bible. Science should not preempt to itself *the first principles* of the Biblical account, nor should theologians endeavor to dictate to the scientists empirical details about which Genesis 1 is actually silent. The Church has suffered much because (i) what theologians have said about Genesis 1 has not been clearly differentiated from (ii) what Genesis 1 actually says. A. J. Maas has stated very acceptably the relationship which science should bear to interpretation, and interpretation to science.

It would be wrong to make Scripture the criterion of science, to decide our modern scientific questions from our Biblical data. . . . It is well, therefore, to temper our conservatism with prudence; prescinding from 'matters of faith and morals' in which there can be no change, we should be ready to accommodate our exegesis to the progress of historians and scientists in their respective fields, showing at the same time

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13 Paul Woolley, "The Relevance of Scripture," *The Infallible Word*, p. 190.

that such harmonizing expositions of Scripture represent only a progressive state in Bible study which will be perfected with the progress of profane learning.<sup>14</sup>

Maas suggests in this citation that our interpretations about science and Scripture should be kept fluid. Exegesis and science are both developing and progressing. It would be improper to make hard and fast interpretations if this is the situation. Just as history gives us clues to the meaning of prophecy, so our knowledge of science gives us greater insight into the Biblical statements about natural things. No interpretation of Genesis 1 is more mature than the science which guides it. To attempt to interpret the scientific elements of Genesis 1 *without* science is to attempt the impossible, for the concepts and objects of the chapter have meaning only as they are referred to nature, and the subject matter of science may be called simply "nature."

One more observation must be made, however, before we conclude this chapter. The older polemic against the inspiration of the Bible was directed at specific contradictions. One unequivocal contradiction could, it was urged, bring down the doctrine of inerrancy. The critics thought they could produce examples but the orthodox felt the examples to be equivocal. The attack has taken a new, drastic and serious turn. It is not so much directed at finding contradictions or discrepancies in Scripture as it is in finding deep-seated contradictions in the very nature of the record.

One example of such an alleged deep-seated contradiction is the assertion that the historical record of the Old Testament does not contain the true order. The prophets were actually before the law. The Jewish canon which governs the order of the books in the Bible is the reverse order of history.

Further, the discussion over this or that fact in Scripture and science gave way to a new problem. The allegation was that the Scriptures represented the cosmological schemes of antiquity and were in very violent contrast to the world as understood by modern science. To attempt to reconcile Genesis to geology was repudiated because in the eyes of the critics it amounted to trying to harmonize some ancient Babylonian cosmology with the cosmology of modern science.

A third deep-seated contradiction alleged by the critics is that there was a moral contradiction between the Old and the New Testaments. Some of the practices of the Old Testament are primitive or barbaric or cruel and in stark contradiction to the ethics of the New Testament.

Finally, the critics have proved to their satisfaction at least that the Bible represents no theological unity, but is a veritable congeries of theologies. The Old Testament books reflect a variety of religious beliefs, and several main strands of divergent theological thought can be found in the New Testament. Priest is set against prophet, the New against the Old, Paul against Peter, and John against James.

This is where the older problem of "discrepancies and contradictions" have moved and evangelicalism must reply in kind to maintain the unity of the divine revelation.

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