

INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE

Since Scripture is inspired it has certain characteristics: revelation, unity, completeness, sanctity, veracity and inerrancy. Yet the term “inerrancy” has never been used in any conciliar document of the Catholic Church but many recent Popes have used terms which are strongly equivalent but papal commissions have used the term. Up to and including medieval times, the inerrancy of the Bible was accepted without question. From the Renaissance onwards, inerrancy became the subject of debate, due to scientific discoveries and discovery of extra-biblical sources of biblical history. It was only at the end of the nineteenth century, and during the last century, that the debate became intense.

1. Evangelicals and fundamentalists insist on the complete inerrancy of the Bible,
2. most Christian Churches speak of the authority of the Bible,
3. the Catholic Church speaks of inspiration.

DOUBTS ABOUT INERRANCY

Until the Renaissance the Scriptures were by and large held to be totally inerrant. It was unthinkable for the Church Fathers and rabbis to think of any error being in the Bible. For example the cosmological discrepancies (e.g. Gen 1:6) were said to be said to be a science of appearances, i.e. that everything in the Bible about the cosmos is a perfectly true account of what the cosmos appears to be to a human observer. Rain appears to come from a lake in the sky above. It doesn't come from a lake but appears to do so.

Beginning with the Renaissance there was increasing opposition to total inerrancy. This opposition was not from unbelievers but from those who wanted to redefine biblical truth in the light of facts that were coming to light.

The first person to raise questions was Erasmus (1466-1536), a Catholic humanist in Rotterdam. He noticed that the sayings of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) were slightly different in each. He suggested that the Holy Spirit had not bothered to correct the faulty memories of the evangelists.

William (Henry) Holden, an Englishman who was a professor at the Sorbonne in Paris in a publication in 1652 limited inerrancy as well as inspiration to only doctrinal matters in Scripture saying it could not apply to things “written by the by.” This was then taken up by others during the nineteenth century (in Germany by August Rohling, in Italy by Salvatore di Bartolo).

We see a development in François Lenormant (1837-1883) writing in 1868 and 1880-1882 who accepted the total inspiration of the Bible but insisted that we could not expect to find in the Bible truths not demanded by the intention of the Bible. Concerning these truths not demanded by the intention of the Bible, use was made of Augustine's maxim that came through Baronius and Galileo namely, in the sacred books the Holy Spirit wished to tell us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go. The Bible had used ancient forms of legendary history, genealogies etc and made them the clothes for teaching new truths of a spiritual order.

John Henry Newman was not dissimilar to Lenormant. Writing in 1884 he too believed in the full inspiration of Scripture but believed that it did not follow that inerrancy extended to everything the biblical author wrote. He said the biblical author could not have been safeguarded from all error when he wrote something incidental to his primary purpose, an *obiter dictum*. In this he was similar to Holden's concept of “written by the by.”

TEACHING OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON INERRANCY

Vatican I in 1870 came before Lenormant and John Henry Newman's writings so it did not react to and deal with their thinking. However its third session on [April 24 1870 in Chapter 2 on Revelation](#) declared,

§7. These books the Church holds to be sacred and canonical not because she subsequently approved them by her authority after they had been composed by unaided human skill, nor simply because they contain revelation without error, but because, being written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author, and were as such committed to the Church.

§8. Now since the decree on the interpretation of Holy Scripture, profitably made by the Council of Trent, with the intention of constraining rash speculation, has been wrongly interpreted by some, we renew that decree and declare its meaning to be as follows: that in matters of faith and morals, belonging as they do to the establishing of Christian doctrine, that meaning of Holy Scripture must be held to be the true one, which Holy mother Church held and holds, since it is her right to judge of the true meaning and interpretation of Holy Scripture.

It is in Pope Leo XIII's encyclical [Providentissimus Deus](#) (1893) that we find the teaching against restricting inerrancy.

There can never, indeed, be any real discrepancy between the theologian and the physicist, as long as each confines himself within his own lines, and both are careful, as St. Augustine warns us, "not to make rash assertions, or to assert what is not known as known."(51) If dissension should arise between them, here is the rule also laid down by St. Augustine, for the theologian: "Whatever they can really demonstrate to be true of physical nature, we must show to be capable of reconciliation with our Scriptures; and whatever they assert in their treatises which is contrary to these Scriptures of ours, that is to Catholic faith, we must either prove it as well as we can to be entirely false, or at all events we must, without the smallest hesitation, believe it to be so."(52) To understand how just is the rule here formulated we must remember, first, that the sacred writers, or to speak more accurately, the Holy Ghost "Who spoke by them, did not intend to teach men these things (that is to say, the essential nature of the things of the visible universe), things in no way profitable unto salvation." Hence they did not seek to penetrate the secrets of nature, but rather described and dealt with things in more or less figurative language, or in terms which were commonly used at the time, and which in many instances are in daily use at this day, even by the most eminent men of science. Ordinary speech primarily and properly describes what comes under the senses; and somewhat in the same way the sacred writers-as the Angelic Doctor also reminds us - "went by what sensibly appeared," or put down what God, speaking to men, signified, in the way men could understand and were accustomed to. Leo XIII [Providentissimus Deus](#) §18

"But it is absolutely wrong and forbidden, either to narrow inspiration to certain parts only of Holy Scripture, or to admit that the sacred writer has erred. For the system of those who, in order to rid themselves of these difficulties, do not hesitate to concede that divine inspiration regards the things of faith and morals,

and nothing beyond, because (as they wrongly think) in a question of the truth or falsehood of a passage, we should consider not so much what God has said as the reason and purpose which He had in mind in saying it-this system cannot be tolerated. For all the books which the Church receives as sacred and canonical, are written wholly and entirely, with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Ghost; and so far is it from being possible that any error can co-exist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God Himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true...For, by supernatural power, He so moved and impelled them to write-He was so present to them-that the things which He ordered, and those only, they, first, rightly understood, then willed faithfully to write down, and finally expressed in apt words and with infallible truth. Otherwise, it could not be said that He was the Author of the entire Scripture.” [Providentissimus Deus](#) §20.

In order that all these endeavors and exertions may really prove advantageous to the cause of the Bible, let scholars keep steadfastly to the principles which We have in this Letter laid down. Let them loyally hold that God, the Creator and Ruler of all things, is also the Author of the Scriptures - and that therefore nothing can be proved either by physical science or archaeology which can really contradict the Scriptures. If, then, apparent contradiction be met with, every effort should be made to remove it. Judicious theologians and commentators should be consulted as to what is the true or most probable meaning of the passage in discussion, and the hostile arguments should be carefully weighed. Even if the difficulty is after all not cleared up and the discrepancy seems to remain, the contest must not be abandoned; truth cannot contradict truth, and we may be sure that some mistake has been made either in the interpretation of the sacred words, or in the polemical discussion itself...[Providentissimus Deus](#) §23

Therefore we can see that the *obiter dicta* of John Henry Newman has now been put to rest.

[Divino Afflante Spiritu](#) (1943) in paragraphs §37-38 asserts,

§37. Nevertheless no one, who has a correct idea of biblical inspiration, will be surprised to find, even in the Sacred Writers, as in other ancient authors, certain fixed ways of expounding and narrating, certain definite idioms, especially of a kind peculiar to the Semitic tongues, so-called approximations, and certain hyperbolic modes of expression, nay, at times, even paradoxical, which even help to impress the ideas more deeply on the mind. For of the modes of expression which, among ancient peoples, and especially those of the East, human language used to express its thought, none is excluded from the Sacred Books, provided the way of speaking adopted in no wise contradicts the holiness and truth of God, as, with his customary wisdom, the Angelic Doctor already observed in these words: “In Scripture divine things are presented to us in the manner which is in common use amongst men.” [For as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things, “except sin,” so the words of God,](#)

expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect, except error. In this consists that “condescension” of the God of providence, which St. John Chrysostom extolled with the highest praise and repeatedly declared to be found in the Sacred Books.

§38. Hence the Catholic commentator, in order to comply with the present needs of biblical studies, in explaining the Sacred Scripture and in demonstrating and proving its immunity from all error, should also make a prudent use of this means, determine, that is, to what extent the manner of expression or the literary mode adopted by the sacred writer may lead to a correct and genuine interpretation...

§46. But this state of things is no reason why the Catholic commentator, inspired by an active and ardent love of his subject and sincerely devoted to Holy Mother Church, should in any way be deterred from grappling again and again with these difficult problems, hitherto unsolved, not only that he may refute the objections of the adversaries, but also may attempt to find a satisfactory solution, which will be in full accord with the doctrine of the Church, in particular with the traditional teaching regarding the inerrancy of Sacred Scripture, and which will at the same time satisfy the indubitable conclusion of profane sciences.

Vatican II said “the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that *truth* which God, *for the sake of our salvation*, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures” (*Dei Verbum* §11). Just how far thinking on inerrancy has advanced can be seen by comparing that statement in the final draft with the corresponding statement in the first draft, “the entire Sacred Scripture is *absolutely immune from error*” and note the big difference, the first draft saying the Bible was totally free from error while the final published version states that the Bible contains the truth necessary for our salvation.

First Draft: “Since divine inspiration extends to all things [in the Bible], it follows directly and necessarily that the entire Sacred Scripture is *absolutely immune from error*” By the ancient and constant faith of the Church we are taught that it is absolutely wrong to concede that a sacred writer has erred, since divine inspiration by its very nature excludes and rejects every error in every field, religious or profane. This necessarily follows because God, the supreme truth, can be the author of no error whatever.

Final Draft: “Since...it must be equally held that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that *truth* which God, *for the sake of our salvation*, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures.”

That toning down was due no doubt in no small part to Cardinal König on October 2 1964 listing the historical and scientific errors in the Bible to the Vatican II council fathers.¹ Note what the final draft says the Bible teaches, ‘the truth.’ Vorgrimler’s commentary (pages 199-215) contains the background information on the debates of the council fathers as the document went through its various drafts. On draft E/F (July 1964) in that commentary (page 203) we read,

¹ *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* ed Vorgrimler, NY 1969, Vol 3, 205

One thing had been shown: the account of inspiration was now less scholastic and “apersonal” than in Form D (1963). The hagiographer was no longer described as an “instrument”, and God no longer as the “*principalis auctor*”, but simply as *auctor*. This was formulated in such a way that a true causality was ascribed to God, which embraced the hagiographers too, but that **the activity of the writer was emphasized more**. At the same time everything that belongs to the *auctor litterarius* can be sought in the sacred writer. **It is not explained how this cooperation of the genuine influence of God and the activity of the sacred writer comes about**. The text does not go into any psychology of inspiration. The main thing was to be the theological interpretation. This also required that the idea should be briefly expressed that inspiration does not mean the exclusion of human capacities, neither of all of them taken together, not of single ones.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) repeats the definition of Vatican II.

“The inspired books teach the truth. Since therefore all that the inspired authors or sacred writers affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confined to the Sacred Scriptures.” CCC 107.

Dei Verbum §19 has the following to say on the historical truth of the Gospels.

Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and continues to hold, that the four Gospels just named, **whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts**, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day He was taken up into heaven (see Acts 1:1). Indeed, after the Ascension of the Lord the Apostles handed on to their hearers what He had said and done. This they did with that clearer understanding which they enjoyed (3) after they had been instructed by the glorious events of Christ's life and taught by the light of the Spirit of truth. (2) The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explaining some things in view of the situation of their churches and preserving the form of proclamation but always **in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus**. For their intention in writing was that either from their own memory and recollections, or from the witness of those who “themselves from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word” **we might know “the truth”** concerning those matters about which we have been instructed (see Luke 1:2-4).

Since Vatican II “inerrant scriptural ‘truth’ has not received primary emphasis in Roman Catholic circles, a change resulting from a more adequate understanding of the nature of the Scriptures.”²

R.E. Brown in *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (Paulist Press 1981) pages 17-18 has the following to say:

² RF Collins *Inspiration in New Jerome Biblical Commentary* Chapter 65 §50.

“...there is a *kenosis* involved in God’s committing His message to human words. It was not only in the career of Jesus that the divine has taken on the form of a servant (Phil 2:7)...We have spent too much time protecting the God who inspired the Scriptures from limitations that He seems not to have been concerned about. The impassioned debate about inerrancy tells us less about divine omnipotence than about our own insecurity in looking for absolute answers.”

The challenge to us in reading the Bible is to take account of both human and divine elements while maintaining the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture.

Why are the Catholic and Protestant theories of inerrancy different?

The teaching authority of the Church for Protestants rests not in the Pope but in the Scriptures. Therefore many Protestants see it necessary to assert the complete inerrancy of the Scriptures. In the Catholic Church the teaching authority rests with the Pope and Magisterium. Since Protestants reject the infallibility of both the Pope and the Church, they use the word ‘infallible’ increasingly of the Scriptures.

CONCLUSION

We might ask, “How could the biblical writers allow inaccuracies in their writings if they were inspired? We have a problem with inaccuracies because of our western logic but the biblical writers lived in the Orient which did not have the same rules of logic as we do. It has been said that when we hear a story we ask ‘Did it happen like this?’ whereas in the Ancient Near East they would have asked, ‘What does this story mean?’ Therefore scientific and historical accuracy were not major issues for them, unlike nowadays.

The Bible is not meant to be read as a scientific treatise or historical document although it does refer to historical persons and events. [*Dei Verbum*](#) §11 stated, the Bible is inerrant in “that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures.” Those who wrote the Bible had knowledge as limited as other people in their time. Inspiration gave them greater religious knowledge, but did not educate them about other matters. They cannot be expected to know more about the formation of the universe than anybody else at that time. But the Bible is free of error in truth.

Saying that the Bible is not to be read as a historical document does not mean that the Bible does not contain history, which of course it does, but that the historical serves as the frame for what it really intends to teach, our salvation. Because the events described in the Bible took place in a definite time in history, they are sometimes referred to as salvation history.

The human element in the Bible is obvious even from the titles of some of the books e.g. the Gospel according to Mark, the Gospel according to Luke, the letters of Paul. Luke mentions his sources, and shows no awareness of having been inspired (Luke 1:1-3) even though he was. In-depth study of individual books shows that the genius of Isaiah is not the same as that of Jeremiah, that Amos and Hosea had different temperaments. All the authors and editors contributed to the Bible and left their footprints in it; they were not merely God’s secretaries. Some people have reacted against this by resorting to easy answers in fundamentalism which brings us to our next class.

The Catholic Church’s teaching on inerrancy is to be found especially in [*Providentissimus Deus*](#) and [*Dei Verbum*](#).