

Contemporary American Evangelical Issues on Inerrancy Debates in History and Practice*

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Introduction

There are at least two approaches that could have been taken to this topic. The first would have been to deal with what are termed higher critical attacks on the church's doctrine of inerrancy. That analysis would have included critiques of works by the British scholar N.T. Wright¹ or the German theologian Michael Welker,² among others. Helpful as that approach might have been, it seems that more important for an ETS meeting would be to deal with problems that flow either directly from evangelical sources or have measurably disrupted evangelical thinkers.

However, by choosing to focus primarily on evangelical writers I have to admit that there are both existential and cognitive difficulties in the analysis. On the one hand, some of the scholars involved in this debate are former colleagues and students. Furthermore, the debates between some of them have gotten sinfully personal, as can

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¹ N. T. Wright, *The Last Word : Beyond the Bible Wars to a new understanding of the authority of Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2005).

² Michael Welker, *God the Revealed: Christology*. Translated by Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2013). See R. Gamble review (forthcoming) *Westminster Theological Journal*.

sadly be expected when someone is fighting to retain his academic position. On the other hand, faulty teaching needs to be opposed because it will unnecessarily unsettle faith.³

The cognitive difficulty lies in the many necessary theological distinctions significant to proper communication. Some topics are very precise and involve extensive technical background information. Another practical difficulty is the vast amount of recent publications.

While choosing this more limited direction, it must also be admitted from the outset that there are some important topics that, because of time constraints, cannot be addressed. For example, there is much debate on how evangelicals should interpret the Exodus event.⁴

Another important topic is the impact of postmodernism on evangelical interpretation which I had planned to cover in the lecture, but cannot.⁵ This paper does not provide a total picture of inerrancy but focuses on debatable issues. Another session will handle that. Finally, today's analysis will seek to follow the requirements of the 9th commandment to protect and preserve a brother's good name. Author's names will be used infrequently and when mentioned will refer to primary texts cited in their proper context. Moving to the topic, analysis will begin at the time of the reformation.

I. Brief Historical Analysis as Background

A. From the Reformers through the WCF on Scripture. First, the reformers maintained both continuity and discontinuity with their medieval predecessors. In continuity with medieval systematics, the reformers agreed that theology should differentiate between the notions of revelation and inspiration. However, they moved beyond medieval systematic theology's more loosely connected

³ G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 83. Cites D.A. Carson, "Three more books on the Bible".

⁴ Beale, *Erosion of Inerrancy*, 70.

⁵ For more information, see Beale, *Erosion of Inerrancy*, 229.

notion of *principia theologiae* to a deeper analysis of the sources of a *principium unicum theologiae*.

After the reformation, Protestant doctrine developed in light of the need for internal confessions as well as external polemics aimed against Roman Catholicism. These developments brought unity as well as some discontinuity. All doctrinal advances, whether great or small, are born out of heated discussion. To suggest a theological advance within protestant systematics is not the same as arguing for theological discontinuity. The reformer's successors maintained all of the protestant distinctives in the doctrine of scripture.

1. **Independent Loci.** One advance as Protestantism matured was a change in the systematic ordering of doctrine. Later Protestants stated the *loci* more technically and strictly than had the Reformers.

The doctrine of Scripture became an independent *locus* of systematic theology; in part as a reaction against Roman Catholic polemics aimed against the Protestants. The development of a distinct *locus* of scripture was seen in both Reformed and Lutherans creedal statements. For example, the WCF placed the doctrine of Scripture first before the doctrine of God.

2. A second advance came from the arena of biblical interpretation. Some of the exegetical advances can be attributed to a better knowledge of Hebrew and cognate languages. There was a deeper wrestling with passages not fully examined by the reformers. There were also new advances in hermeneutics.

3. **Debate.** Having seen the need for an independent *locus* and having made advances in interpretation, nevertheless, the reformed community was not unified on the best approach to the topic of scripture. The debate among Protestants related to the proper theological method as well as the most faithful techniques of biblical interpretation. They stressed the objective authority of the text, an emphasis that is important for later discussion of our topic.⁶

⁶ In modern society, objective authority is based on factuality. Thus, if scripture is factual, then it is an authority. See Merrick & Garrett, *Five views on Biblical Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 16.

B. Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Debates: from Descartes to Nietzsche. Fundamental to an inerrant, authoritative bible is the fact that it gives epistemological certainty. In many ways, the history of western philosophy is the search for epistemological certainty.

The French Catholic philosopher Descartes had searched for epistemological certainty. He thought that he found it in the *cogito ergo sum*. For him, true knowledge was not dependent upon sense experience.

A century later, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1784), Kant wanted knowledge to begin with sense experience. However, he knew that all knowledge did not arise from sense experience and that there needed to be a synthesis of rationalism (knowledge not from sense experience) with empiricism.⁷ Kant wanted to have a Cartesian “thinking self” who also somehow had twelve organizing categories, and from those innate categories structured what he received by sense experience, and thus had knowledge of the “thing in itself”. Kant believed in an autonomous (self-sufficient) human mind that must not be subservient to any type of authority outside of itself.

Kant’s philosophy denied the possibility of divine revelation. Since God was relegated to the noumenal realm, if he existed at all, he could not be able to communicate to the phenomenal. Finally, Kant understood that history could only give scholars facts, nothing more. For him, there was no purpose to the flow of human history.

Nietzsche (1844-00) began the demise of the Kantian union of Cartesian rationalism and empiricism. Nietzsche said that Kant’s “thing in itself” was only a postulate, not a part of the mechanism itself. Since Kant’s “thing in itself” had vanished under Nietzsche’s atheistic glare, then there were no facts, and everything is in flux. In his own day, philosophers did not pick up on all of Nietzsche’s ideas. In stead they focused on logic, empiricist methodologies, and what is termed representationalism. However, Nietzsche would come back to haunt the 20th century.

⁷ W. Andrew Hoffecker, “Enlightenment and Awakening” in Revolutions in Worldviews (P&R), 264.

C. Early 20th Century Debates. 1. B. B. Warfield asked the question, “What does an exact and scientific exegesis determine to be the Biblical doctrine of Inspiration?”⁸ His answer was that the New Testament authors saw their writings as equal in authority to the OT, and were thus “inspired”. Their writings were not an expression of their will, but God’s will.⁹ Because it is thus inspired, then the Bible gives readers divinely mandated epistemological security.¹⁰ This is the answer to every philosopher’s dream!

Warfield was aware of the problems with the dictation theory of inspiration and its inability to account for differences in biblical vocabulary and style.¹¹ He rejected the idea that when the human appears the divine exits.¹² Maintaining both elements (human and divine) was, for him, of the highest importance.¹³

He furthermore argued that the inspiration of scripture was not simply limited to matters of faith and practice (what some term “infallibility”). He warned against any who would acknowledge that some parts of scripture were inspired- for example the great matters of faith, but in other parts argue that God let the biblical authors rely upon their natural powers of sight or study.¹⁴ ¹⁵

⁸ Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 174-75: “...any objections brought against the doctrine from other spheres of enquiry are inoperative; it being a settled logical principle that so long as the proper evidence by which a proposition is established remains unrefuted, all so-called objections brought against it pass out of the category of objections to its truth into the category of difficulties to be adjusted to it.”

⁹ Warfield, “The Authority and Inspiration of the Scriptures,” in *Selected Shorter Writings of Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter (Nutley, NJ: P&R, 1973), 2:540: “It ascribes to the authors such an attending influence of the Spirit in the process of writing, that the words they set down become also the words of God; and the resultant writing...the expression of God’s will.”

¹⁰ Warfield, “The Authority and Inspiration of the Scriptures,” 2:541.

¹¹ Warfield, “The Divine and Human in the Bible,” 2:543-44.

¹² Warfield, “Divine and Human in the Bible,” 2:546.

¹³ Warfield, “Divine and Human in the Bible,” 2:547, 547-8: “... for every word in the Bible, it is asserted that it has been conceived in a human mind and written by a human hand.”

¹⁴ Warfield, “Inspiration,” in *Selected Shorter*, 2:626.

2. The Twentieth Century Linguistic Turn. Nietzsche had already proven that Kant's anchor, the "thing in itself", was gone. There was thus a need for a new metaphor, and this need, at least in part, propelled what is called the linguistic turn. The "linguistic turn" came with the advent of logical positivism and the early Wittgenstein.

For the logical positivist, "truth" became words that were organized in a logical, mathematical form that supposedly represented both the world as well as the mind. The belief was that the knowing subject was not to contribute to a true knowledge of the object. The concern was the way in which language could be a legitimate vehicle for modern epistemology.

The early Wittgenstein was a logical atomist, and his ontology was that words had to refer to a substance that existed independent of language. If words do not refer to something, then there will be no meaning in their use.

Language mirrors a state of affairs. It was a "label" view of language. The purpose was to identify or name an object with a fixation on explanation. In other words, language's principle function was correctly to name or identify objects. There was supposedly a pure relation between the human mind and the objects that were external to the mind.

The later Wittgenstein (of the *Philosophical Investigations*) followed Ordinary language analysis. Meaning was now focused in the words' use. Something is required to name an object, and naming presupposes categories and procedures that make identifying the object possible.¹⁵ He argued that what are termed "basic facts" can be identified only when there was already a category for "factness." That category (factness) demanded a world of relations and meanings. Someone cannot speak from a position that resides outside of language.

3. Method. The philosopher's goal was no longer to "explain" but simply to describe. The old "explanatory" approach, specifically the attempt to move from particular to general truth, was deemed wrong. What was important was the "game of

¹⁵ His method of explaining the relationship was with the word "concurrus". Warfield, "Inspiration," 2:629.

¹⁶ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, 31.

life" or "Language Game", with emphasis on action and description, rather than on propositions.¹⁷ There can be no "timeless truths".¹⁸ This background information makes it possible to turn to contemporary debates on inerrancy.

II. Contemporary Debates on Inerrancy.

A. Introduction. Since the time of the enlightenment, liberal scholarship has attacked the authority and inspiration of God's holy word. As mentioned in the introduction, this lecture will not focus on liberal critiques, important as they are. Rather, sadly, the biblical doctrine of Inerrancy has recently been challenged on at least two broad areas from within the evangelical world itself. The first subject of attack concerns how Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) culture and texts relate to the OT and the second controversial area is the use of OT quotations in the NT. Both of these problems have roots squarely placed in past theological and philosophical developments.

B. Ancient Near Eastern Texts. Various fairly recent discoveries have made it possible to compare the Bible, as a piece of literature, with the texts of its surrounding cultures. Some of those discoveries include late Second Temple Jewish sources known as the OT Pseudepigrapha as well as the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Particularly problematic for inerrancy are the parallels with Babylonian creation myths and Sumerian cataclysmic flood myths.¹⁹ The question posed by contemporary evangelicals is whether the doctrine of scripture, as classically formulated, has adequately dealt with the challenges that arise from this new learning.²⁰ Some believe that it has not, and must therefore be revised.

Specifically, some argue that the proper starting point for analysis of the Genesis creation story is to affirm that the roots of the biblical creation account are

¹⁷ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, 7, 19.

¹⁸ The issue for Enns is epistemological certainty. Enns, *Biblical Inerrancy*, 113: "Must Christians truly believe that God left for the church a private epistemology, by which we know truth differently and better than others?"

¹⁹ See Beale, *Erosion of Inerrancy*, 28.

²⁰ Beale, *Erosion of Inerrancy*, 59 citing Enns, "Response to Beale 1", *JETS* 49 (2006), 317.