

SECTION 1

**THE BIBLE  
AS FOUNDATIONAL  
FOR THEOLOGY**



All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,  
and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for  
correction, for instruction in righteousness,  
that the man of God may be complete,  
thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17

# PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON INERRANCY



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## Introduction

Behind every broad movement within Christianity lies an understanding of what the Bible is and how it functions in the community of faith. Scripture is determinative for where one stands on a host of doctrinal and theological questions. This especially is true for evangelicals who have defended the Trinity, the virgin birth of Christ, the Resurrection and the bodily return of Christ on the basis that they are revealed in the Bible. The commitment to Scripture as God's revelation has kept evangelicals on solid ground for these and a host of other doctrines. Indeed, as Francis Schaeffer said, "Evangelicalism is not consistently evangelical unless there is a line drawn between those who take a full view of Scripture and those who do not."<sup>1</sup> Maintaining a commitment to inerrancy must be a priority if evangelicalism is to continue to uphold truth.

In the nineteenth century, the nature of Scripture was examined extensively by John Bascom<sup>2</sup> and William Sanday.<sup>3</sup> After this, little attention was given to Scripture by philosophers of religion until the 1930s, when their focus turned to the examination of language itself. A survey of the literature in the field over the past two or three generations makes this clear. Emil Brunner in his book *The Philosophy of Religion from the Standpoint of Protestant Orthodoxy*<sup>4</sup> gave revelation a central place, but rejected the idea of seeing revelation in terms a divine book, something fixed, timeless, and enscripturated. For Brunner, revelation had to do with an existential encounter between the believer and God. Edgar Brightman,

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<sup>1</sup>Francis Schaeffer, "Form and Freedom in the Church" in J. D. Douglas, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide, 1974), 364-65; cited in Richard Lovelace, "Inerrancy: Some Historical Perspectives" in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. Roger Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels, 15-47 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 18.

<sup>2</sup>John Bascom, *A Philosophy of Religion or the Rational Grounds of Religious Belief* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1876), 203-312.

<sup>3</sup>William Sanday, *Inspiration: Eight Lectures on the Early History and Origin of the Doctrine of Biblical Inspiration, Bampton Lectures* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1893).

<sup>4</sup>Emil Brunner, *The Philosophy of Religion from the Standpoint of Protestant Orthodoxy*, trans. A. J. D. Farrer and Bertram Lee Woolf (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), 151.

writing in 1940, briefly treated revelation as a way of knowing God, but did not seriously consider the possibility that God had revealed himself in Scripture.<sup>5</sup> In 1954 Daniel Jay Bronstein and Harold M. Schulweis did not discuss Scripture in their *Approaches to Philosophy of Religion: A Book of Readings*<sup>6</sup> at all. John Wilson in his *Language and Christian Belief*<sup>7</sup> discussed religious language but not the Bible. Geddes MacGregor treated the way one makes assertions about religious subjects in his *Introduction to Religious Philosophy*<sup>8</sup> but did not consider the nature of the Bible. Paul Van Buren, in his 1963 book *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel Based on an Analysis of Its Language*<sup>9</sup> never mentioned the subject, though he devoted a chapter to religious language. Stuart Brown, a few years later, treated religion as something of an epistemological problem dealing with religious language and its validity from the standpoint of linguistic analysis.<sup>10</sup> James McClendon and James Smith treated religious language without dealing with the nature of Scripture.<sup>11</sup> In 1988, Norman Geisler and Winfred Corduan;<sup>12</sup> and in 1993, Brian Davies,<sup>13</sup> omitted inerrancy from their books; even though each devoted large discussions on religious language and its validity.

These twentieth century writers were responding to A. J. Ayer, whose *Language Truth and Logic*<sup>14</sup> became the standard work on logical positivism. Ayer asserted that only two classes of statements are meaningful: those that are empirically verifiable and those that are analytically true—true by logical or mathematical necessity. If Ayer is right, any kind of religious truth claim would be, quite simply, meaningless. If that is the case, then contending for biblical inerrancy is meaningless also. Therefore, philosophers of religion confined themselves to defending the right to make truthful—and therefore

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<sup>5</sup>Edgar Sheffield Brightman, *A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1940), 172-78.

<sup>6</sup>Daniel Jay Bronstein and Harold M. Schulweis, *Approaches to Philosophy of Religion: A Book of Readings* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1954).

<sup>7</sup>John Wilson, *Language and Christian Belief* (New York: St. Martin's, 1958).

<sup>8</sup>Geddes MacGregor, *Introduction to Religious Philosophy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959).

<sup>9</sup>Paul Van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel Based on an Analysis of Its Language* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

<sup>10</sup>Stuart C. Brown, *Do Religious Claims Make Sense?* (London: SCM, 1969).

<sup>11</sup>James William McClendon, Jr. and James M. Smith, *Understanding Religious Convictions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

<sup>12</sup>Norman Geisler and Winfred Corduan, *Philosophy of Religion, 2d ed.* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 211-91.

<sup>13</sup>Brian Davies, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 20-31.

<sup>14</sup>A. J. Ayer, *Language Truth and Logic* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1936.

authoritative—claims about religion. Primarily, inerrancy has been left to evidentialist apologetics and theologians.

Inerrancy is usually defended on the basis of evidence, historical, textual, and archaeological, which has been shown to support the truth claims of the Bible. However, an approach that is more philosophically driven offers possibilities for the apologist and needs to be given serious consideration.

## Approaches to Defending Scripture

If apologists want to claim that the Bible is inerrant and be justified in doing so, the question necessarily arises as to what method or approach is best for this. The doctrine of Scripture is usually approached inductively or deductively. Using the inductive method, people seek to amass evidence that the Bible is or is not inerrant, or they begin with certain premises that guarantee whichever conclusion they wish to prove. Using the deductive method to defend inerrancy usually begins with the doctrine of God. One might call it (in parallel to a popular Christological model) “the doctrine of Scripture from above.” The inductive method, on the other hand, begins with the phenomena of the text itself and may be called “the doctrine of Scripture from below.”

### Inductive Method

Examples of the inductive method abound. In 1888, Basil Manly sought “to build up an argument by successive steps” to prove biblical inerrancy.<sup>15</sup> More recently, Josh McDowell has defended the historicity of biblical events and has demonstrated the accuracy of Bible prophecies.<sup>16</sup> Both authors use the inductive method because, like detectives, they amass specific facts and use them to draw the conclusion that Scripture is inerrant. Stanley Anderson has also defended inerrancy this way. In his article “Verbal Inspiration Inductively Considered”<sup>17</sup> he amassed evidence from history, archaeology, Bible prophecy, science, and human psychology to demonstrate that the Bible is inerrant. Building his doctrine “from below,” he examined some seventy-nine Scripture passages in an eight-page article. Anderson early on turns to deduction in his argument asserting the following syllogism: All Scripture is inspired of God; each word is a part of Scripture; therefore each word is inspired of God (15).

There are weaknesses in formulating one’s doctrine of Scripture from below. The inductive method, at best, can only establish the high probability of the Bible as an inerrant document. It

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<sup>15</sup>Basil Manly, Jr., *The Bible Doctrine of Inspiration Explained and Vindicated* (New York: Armstrong and Son, 1888), 108, cf. 130-175.

<sup>16</sup>Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands A Verdict* (San Bernadino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972).

<sup>17</sup>Stanley E. Anderson, “Verbal Inspiration Inductively Considered,” in *Evangelicals and Inerrancy*, ed. Ronald Youngblood (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 13-21. This paper originally was read before the Evangelical Theological Society meeting in 1955.

can establish the probability at a very high level, but for some, this is still not enough. In addition, the inductive method often is used by those who hold to a doctrine of authority that falls short of inerrancy.<sup>18</sup> James D. G. Dunn has said that attention to the phenomena of Scripture itself will not get one to a doctrine of inerrancy.<sup>19</sup> Attention to the phenomena will not compel one to disbelieve inerrancy either, but the fact remains that the inductive method leads to an impasse.

One's conclusions from the phenomena of the text are, in fact, largely determined by what one brings to it. D. A. Carson has shown that it is not the claims of Scripture which count against its truthfulness but rather "a certain interpretation of the phenomena of the text."<sup>20</sup> The Enlightenment, which exalted both reason and the inductive method, beginning from Descartes and Bacon, has had an impact on the way Scripture is seen.<sup>21</sup> Bacon's inductive method especially led to the separation between "truth" and "religion," with religion relegated to the area of private opinion only.<sup>22</sup> Approached inductively, and with the presuppositions of the Enlightenment regarding authority, the supernatural, and the necessity for reason and coherence, it is little wonder that many moderns conclude that the Bible is not inerrant.

## Deductive Approach

A deductive approach, building a doctrine of Scripture from above, is much better. Here, one begins with God and works to the phenomena of the text, and so long as the text itself does not directly invalidate one's basic presuppositions, the argument is on strong ground. Working deductively guarantees the results if the argument is valid, and if the premises are true. What is necessary then is a proper doctrine of God.

### Presuppositions Necessary for a Deductive Approach to Scripture

Arguing for Scripture from above requires beginning with a proper understanding of God.

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<sup>18</sup>D. A. Carson, "Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture," in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1986), 23.

<sup>19</sup>Roger Nicole, "The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture: J. D. G. Dunn versus B. B. Warfield (continued)," in *Churchman* vol. 98, no. 3 (1984): 210-11; quoted in Carson, 20.

<sup>20</sup>Carson, 23.

<sup>21</sup>John D. Woodbridge, "Some Misconceptions of the Impact of the Enlightenment on the Doctrine of Scripture," in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1986), 241-70.

<sup>22</sup>Norman Geisler, "Inductivism, Materialism and Rationalism: Bacon, Hobbes, and Spinoza," in Norman Geisler, ed., *Biblical Errancy: An Analysis of its Philosophical Roots* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 11-22.

The way we frame our doctrine of God will determine the way we approach revelation.<sup>23</sup> If our doctrine of God is adequate, our view of revelation will be also.

An argument from above must be based on certain assumptions about God, His nature, power, and moral attributes. Even the statement “if Scripture is divinely revealed, then it is inerrant” makes a moral assumption about the nature of God—that He does not lie. When John Warwick Montgomery argues that inerrancy and inspiration are inseparable, he implicitly argues that a certain understanding of who God is and how He acts is necessary for the Bible to be inerrant.<sup>24</sup> God must be truthful, and He must be powerful enough to guarantee the results. Richard Swinburne has said directly, “A good God who knows everything, will not lie to us.”<sup>25</sup>

What, then, is essential in a doctrine of God which is adequate for inerrancy? First is the idea that God is sovereign. God is capable of so moving in history and in people’s lives as to produce and guarantee a written revelation. Sanday recognized this in 1893 when he spoke of the “providential disposition of events” which gave fuller meaning to biblical prophecies.<sup>26</sup> A God who is subject to the whims of human free will is not a God who can guarantee an inerrant revelation of himself. Many who argue against inerrancy do so on the basis of an overdeveloped understanding of human free will and an underdeveloped understanding of divine sovereignty.

Second, one must presuppose that God is interested in revealing Himself. There must be a reason for the revelation. Richard Swinburne has argued that if there is an all-wise, all-powerful God who desires that men be holy, then it is not unreasonable to suppose that He has revealed Himself and His purposes.<sup>27</sup>

Third is the matter of God’s moral nature. God must be moral enough to want to reveal the truth about Himself. In addition, He must care enough about truth itself to want to tell the truth in everything. God’s character is on the line in revelation. The God who reveals himself, if He is a truth-telling God, must tell the truth in everything, including science and history.

This may appear to some as if merely to choose which traits of God to emphasize, in an arbitrary manner, so as to guarantee the right outcome. There are, however, ways to confirm this direction. One way is found in the ontological argument for the existence of God. This argument, dating back to Anselm, has received new life in recent years in the form of Thomas Morris’s

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<sup>23</sup>Bascom, 204.

<sup>24</sup>Montgomery, 61.

<sup>25</sup>Swinburne, 85.

<sup>26</sup>Sanday, 404.

<sup>27</sup>Swinburne, 69-72.

perfect being theology.<sup>28</sup> God is the sum total of all of His perfections. He is the personification of perfection in every way, including existence.

Assuming that this argument is sound actually goes a long way toward defending inerrancy. If God is a perfect being and the sum of all His perfections, He must be both powerful and moral. What He reveals then has the guarantee of being perfect, in the sense of being exactly what He wanted and of being true. The God of Anselm and of Morris is powerful enough and good enough to guarantee this.

Alvin Plantinga's defence of belief in God as "properly basic" helps. He says "a person is entirely within his epistemic rights, entirely rational, in believing in God even if he has no argument for this belief, and does not believe it on the basis of any other beliefs he holds."<sup>29</sup> Believers in God have an immediate awareness of the truth of His existence apart from any justification for it.<sup>30</sup> Their belief is properly basic to other beliefs. Such faith may arise from a sense of God's presence, from an awareness of the created universe, or from a liberating sense of being forgiven for one's sins.<sup>31</sup> Such faith entirely is biblical since the Bible itself never attempts to argue for the existence of God.<sup>32</sup>

The God in whom we may properly believe may be shown to be no different from the God who is revealed in the Bible, that is, the God of classical theism. This is implicit in Plantinga's argument and is assumed also by his forebears, John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper.

How does this help us get to an inerrant Scripture? Plantinga's epistemology is congruent with presuppositional apologetics. Properly basic beliefs function as presuppositions, as the foundation for other beliefs. If belief in the God who is described in Scripture is properly basic, then belief that He has revealed Himself in that Scripture may be seen as properly basic as well.

Logically, it works as follows:

- 1) Belief in the God of classical theism is properly basic.
- 2) This God is powerful enough to guarantee any outcome He chooses.

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<sup>28</sup>Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

<sup>29</sup>Alvin C. Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," in Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, eds., *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 313.

<sup>30</sup>Alvin C. Plantinga, "On Reformed Epistemology," in Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, eds., *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 332.

<sup>31</sup>Plantinga, "Belief in God," 99-100.

<sup>32</sup>Plantinga, "Reformed Objection," 311.

- 3) This God is moral enough to be always truthful.
- 4) Any revelation that has its source in this God will be exactly what He chooses to reveal (from 2).
- 5) Any revelation which has its source in this God will be absolutely true (from 3).
- 6) The Bible gives evidence of having its source in this God, by the way it assumes His existence, and reveals intentions and purposes consistent with such a God (from 4).
- 7) One may begin from the God of classical theism as a properly basic belief and accept the Bible as His revelation (from 6).
- 8) The Bible is the inerrant word of God (from 4, 5, and 7).

These propositions show how one may begin with the idea of a God who is a perfect being and who also wishes to reveal himself and who is foundational in Plantinga's sense of the term. This doctrine of God, coupled with the idea that He has revealed Himself in Scripture, entails inerrancy.

This requires, however, some knowledge of the Bible. The Bible, to be inerrant, must be a book which would reveal that kind of God. It is at this point that one should go to the phenomena of the text, to argue for inerrancy "from below." One does this not as the first step but as the last, with one's presuppositions disclosed and defensible. No purely logical argument, however well founded, can stand alone on a matter like this. While its premises may guarantee its conclusions, its premises must be tested by the evidence.

Richard Swinburne developed a two-pronged test of content for Scripture. First it must provide "information necessary for our deepest well-being."<sup>33</sup> This information consists of moral truths, and truths about God's nature and actions to help one apply these moral truths, and some details of the afterlife as encouragement. Second, it must be true. Swinburne means it must be true according to the correspondence theory of truth: it must correspond to the real world. He says there must be nothing that is evidently false, nothing that is provable as false,<sup>34</sup> and its claims regarding future events must come true.<sup>35</sup> Swinburne also cites external evidence such as the character of the messenger and his miracle-working powers.<sup>36</sup> Here he has in mind Jesus as one who validates the message.

One question remains: why would God reveal Himself in something as fragile as a book? He could have inscribed the entire message in stone, not just the Law of Moses. If all of the Bible

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<sup>33</sup>Swinburne, 85.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 86.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 87.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 93-94.

were inscribed on a mountainside, or on one mountain on each continent, or if it were to appear miraculously in golden letters in the sky, one day every twenty years, it would be clear that this was a message from God and would cause people to pay more attention.

However, Swinburne says that it is reasonable that God, wanting to give people free choice, would locate His revelation in such a place that one would need to seek it and yet that it would be “available and discoverable.”<sup>37</sup> This argument is not so compelling, but it is worth considering. A stronger argument lies in the way God works in history. Miraculous events are rare. God usually works through the normal channels of everyday life. This is part of the hiddenness of God. In light of this, is it any wonder that His revelation comes in the form of a book, one that looks like any other, just paper and ink?

### **A Model for Inspiration**

A model for how revelation happens must be consistent with the understanding of God that we delineated here and consistent with inerrancy. Some want to locate revelation only in the historical events. The written text is secondary revelation only, an interpretation of God’s action in history. Others locate revelation both in the historical event and in the encounter between the modern reader and the text. Revelation happens when God speaks to the individual reader. This is the neo-orthodox approach. Those who hold to the “dynamic” view of inspiration want to locate revelation in the period of reflection before the writing begins, when God inspires the “ideas” that make up Scripture. All of these are efforts to come to grips with the phenomena of the text, the critical problems, and even the experience of reading. All of these views express a part of the truth, but they all fall short.

If the Bible is God’s word, and if it is inerrant, then the text itself must be a revelation of God. Any understanding of revelation that does not include the text is a deficient understanding of revelation. The text and the process behind its coming into existence are part of the sovereignty of God in guaranteeing the truth of His revelation. Thus revelation is both process and result, both the historical event and the text that describes it.

Here is a model consistent with this claim. The production of the Bible followed a process that was something like this: First, there was an event. Something happened in history, or perhaps it was revealed directly to the author. The events may have happened before the author’s own time, or he may have been an eyewitness. In the case of Luke’s Gospel, the events were some years earlier. Luke knew of them through personal investigation and interviews. In the case of Galatians, the letter was Paul’s initial response, perhaps written within a day or so of having received a disturbing report of heresy in that church. In some cases, authors may have pored over numerous documents and spent time in reflection on their meaning. This period of reflection and study led to the author penning the result of his reflections.

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 74.

Whatever the case for each human author, God is sovereign at all stages of revelation. God acts in history. God guides the process of reflection that precedes the written work. God has been active also in the life of the writer, bringing him to the point where his theology and linguistic style are such that he is ready to write what God wants written. The result is that the writer produces God's truth, without violating his own style. This understanding allows the text itself to be revelation.

The kind of revelation proposed here is the kind which the God in whom we may properly believe would give—the kind of revelation that is found in the Bible. This model accounts for the nature of the Bible, for the sovereignty of God and for the obvious human side of the process that occurred in the production of the Scriptures. Thus it accounts for the differences in tone and style among the authors while maintaining the essential source of Scripture in God. Because it begins with the doctrine of God, this approach allows for the defence of the doctrine of inerrancy of the text itself, and unites the best features of a presuppositional apologetic (“from above”) and an evidential approach (“from below”), giving to each its own place.

## Conclusion

The inerrancy of Scripture is a logical consequent of believing in the God of classical theism. Alvin Plantinga has demonstrated that such belief in this God is properly basic. Thus, it would seem that belief in inerrancy would be, within the circumstances of Christian faith, a properly basic belief also. In addition, beginning with the doctrine of God before examining the phenomena of the text is all together proper and sound. Evangelicals may proceed with confidence in the century ahead, not moving the ancient boundaries, nor redefining them but standing firmly on the “faith once for all delivered to the saints.”