Hermeneutics and Biblical Authority

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Dr Packer, Associate Principal of Trinity College, Bristol, is well known on both sides of the Atlantic as a leading exponent of the evangelical view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture. In this significant article, which first appeared in The Churchman, vol. 81 (1967), and is reprinted by permission, he considers the implications of this doctrinal position for our approach to biblical interpretation, in the context of the modern debate on hermeneutical principles.

The importance of my theme is obvious from the single consideration that biblical authority is an empty notion unless we know how to determine what the Bible means. This being so, I have been surprised to find how rare evangelical treatments of the relation between hermeneutics and biblical authority seem to be. Indeed, I do not know a single book or article by an evangelical writer that is directly addressed to this topic—though that may, of course, only indicate the narrowness of my reading! But my impression is that this is a subject on which fresh thought by evangelical Christians is very much needed; otherwise, we shall constantly be at a disadvantage, in at least two ways.

First, we shall be forced to remain (where we have long been!) on the edge of the modern Protestant debate about Holy Scripture; for in this debate the theme of my paper remains, as it always was, central. Since the age of rationalism in the eighteenth century, and of Schleiermacher in the nineteenth century, and more particularly since the work of Kähler, Barth, and Bultmann in the twentieth century, the relation between hermeneutics and biblical authority, and the meaning of each concept in the light of the other, have been constant preoccupations, and the mere mention, with Bultmann, of thinkers like Fuchs and Ebeling will assure us that this state of affairs is likely to continue for some time to come. Now, if we are going to join in this debate to any purpose, we must address ourselves seriously to the problem round which it revolves; otherwise, nothing we say will appear to be ad rem. One reason why the theology of men like Barth, Bultmann, and Tillich (to say nothing of J. A. T. Robinson!) has rung a bell in modern Protestant discussion, in a way no con-
temporary evangelical dogmatics has done, is that their systems are explicitly conceived and set forth as answers to the hermeneutical question—the question, that is, of how the real and essential message of the Bible may be grasped by the man of today. One reason why evangelical theology fails to impress other Protestants as having more than a tangential relevance to the ongoing theological debate of which we have spoken is that it does not appear to them to have tuned in on this wavelength of interest. That the interest itself is a proper one for evangelicals will not be denied, and it is not to our advantage when we appear to be neglecting it.

Then, second, in the absence of reflection on my present theme, we risk being contradicted in our own thinking by over-simplifications at more than one point. Let me set this out as I see it.

I am sure I need not spend time proving that over-simplification is a damaging form of mental self-indulgence, leading to shallow, distorted, and inhibited ways of thinking. I am sure that my evangelical readers have all had abundant experience of this particular evil. I am sure we have all had cause in our time to complain of over-simplifications which others have forced on us in the debate about Scripture—the facile antithesis, for instance, between revelation as propositional or as personal, when it has to be the first in order to be the second; or the false question as to whether the Bible is or becomes the Word of God, when both alternatives, rightly understood, are true; or the choice between the theory of mechanical dictation and the presence of human error in the Bible, when in fact we are not shut up to either option. I am sure we have all found how hard it is to explain the evangelical view of Scripture to persons whose minds have once embraced these over-simplifications as controlling concepts. Warned by these experiences, we shall be on our guard against allowing similarly cramping over-simplifications to establish themselves in our own thought.

The basic over-simplification that threatens us here, in my view, is that we should treat the relation between biblical authority and hermeneutics as a one-way relation, whereas in fact it is a two-way relation operating within a one-way system. Let me define my terms, and you will see what I mean.
Biblical authority

Biblical authority, as historically (and, in my judgment, rightly) understood by evangelicals, is a complex dogmatic construction made up of seven elements as follows.

The first is a view of inspiration as an activity whereby God, who in His providence overrules all human utterance, caused certain particular men to speak and write in such a way that their utterance was, and remains, His utterance through them, establishing norms of faith and practice. In the case of those written utterances which make up the canonical Scriptures the effect of inspiration was to constitute them as norms, not merely for that limited group of people to whom God’s messengers directly addressed their writings, but for all men at all times. This, I judge, is the precise notion expressed by Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16, where he describes ‘all Scripture’ as theopneustos (literally ‘God-breathed’), and therefore ‘profitable’ as a standard of intellectual and moral perfection for anyone who would be a ‘man of God’.

Theological basis of biblical inspiration is the gracious condescension of God, who, having made men capable of receiving, and responding to, communications from other rational beings, now deigns to send him verbal messages, and to address and instruct him in human language. The paradigm of biblical inspiration (not from the standpoint of its literal types or of its psychological modes, which were manifold, but simply from the standpoint of the identity which it effects between God’s word and man’s) is the prophetic sermon, with its introductory formula, ‘Thus saith the Lord’. The significance of biblical inspiration lies in the fact that the inspired material stands for all time as the definitive expression of God’s mind and will, His knowledge of reality, and His thoughts, wishes, and intentions regarding it. Inspiration thus produces the state of affairs which Warfield (echoing Augustine) summed up in the phrase: What Scripture says, God says. Whatever Scripture is found to teach must be received as divine instruction. This is what is primarily meant by calling it the Word of God.

It is hardly possible to deny that what God says is true, any more than it is possible to deny that what He commands is binding. Scripture is thus authoritative as a standard of belief no less than of behaviour, and its authority in both realms, that of fact as well as that of obligation, is divine. By virtue of its inspiration the authority of Scripture resolves into, not the historical, ethical, or religious expertise of its human authors, however great this may be thought to have been, but the truthfulness and the moral claim of the speaking, preaching, teaching God Himself.

The second element in the historic evangelical account of biblical authority is a view of the principle of canonicity, as being objectively the fact, and subjectively the recognition, of inspiration. This follows from what has just been said. All Scripture was given to be the profitable rule of faith and practice. It is not suggested that all the inspired writings that God ever gave were for the church’s canon; the Scriptures themselves show that some books of prophetic oracles, and some church epistles of Paul (to look no further) have, in God’s providence, perished. What is suggested is not that all inspired writings are canonical, but that all canonical writings are inspired, and that God causes His people to recognise them as such. Accounts of canonicity which distort, or discount, the reality of inspiration, and rest the claims of Scripture on some other footing than the fact that God speaks them, misrepresent both the true theological situation and the actual experience of Christians. This leads to our next point.

The third element in the evangelical position is a belief that the Scriptures authenticate themselves to Christian believers through the convincing work of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to recognise, and bow before, divine realities. It is He who enlightens us to receive the man Jesus as God’s incarnate Son, and our Saviour; similarly, it is He who enlightens us to receive sixty-six pieces of human writing as God’s ininscripturated Word, given to make us ‘wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus’ (2 Tim. 3:15). In both cases, this enlightenment is not a private revelation of something that has not been made public, but the opening of minds sinfully closed so that they receive evidence to which they were previously impervious. The evidence of divinity is there before us, in the words and works of Jesus in the one case and the words and qualities of Scripture in the other. It consists not of clues offered as a basis for discursive inference to those who are clever enough, as in a detective story, but in the unique force which, through the Spirit, the story of Jesus and the knowledge of Scripture always carry with them to strike everyone to whom they come. In neither case, however, do our sinful minds receive this evidence apart from the illumination of the Spirit. The Church bears witness, but the Spirit produces conviction, and so, as against Rome, evangelicals insist that it is the witness of the Spirit, not that of the Church, which authenticates the Canon to us. So the fourth answer of the Westminster Larger Catechism declares: ‘The Scriptures manifest themselves to be the Word of
God, by their majesty and purity; ... by their light and power to convince and convert sinners, to comfort and build up believers unto salvation: but the Spirit of God bearing witness by and with the Scriptures in the heart of man, is alone able fully to persuade it that they are the very Word of God.

Fourthly, evangelicals maintain that the Scriptures are sufficient for the Christian and the Church as a lamp for our feet and a light for our path—a guide, that is, as to what steps we should take at any time in the realms of belief and behaviour. It is not suggested that they tell us all that we would like to know about God and His ways, let alone about other matters, nor that they answer all the questions that it may occur to us to ask. The point of the affirmation is simply that, in the words of Article VI of the Church of England, 'Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation', and does not need to be supplemented from any other source (reason, experience, tradition, or other faiths, for example), but is itself a complete organism of truth for its own stated purpose. The grounds on which this position rests are, first, the sufficiency of Jesus Christ as Saviour; second, the demonstrable internal completeness of the biblical account of salvation in Him; third, the impossibility of validating any non-scriptural tradition or speculation relating to Christ by appeal to an inspired source.

Fifthly, evangelicals affirm that the Scriptures are clear, and interpret themselves from within, and consequently, in their character as 'God's word written' (Article XX), are able to stand above both the Church and the Christian in corrective judgment and health-giving instruction. With this goes the conviction that the ministry of the Spirit as the Church's teacher is precisely to cause the Scriptures to fulfil this ministry toward the Church, and so to reform it, and its traditions, according to the biblical pattern. It is also held that the ministry of the Spirit as interpreter guarantees that no Christian who uses the appointed means of grace for understanding the Bible (including worship and instruction, both formal and informal, in the Church—there is no atomic individualism here) can fail to learn all that he needs to know for his spiritual welfare. Not that the Christian or the Church will ever know everything that Scripture contains, or solve all biblical problems, while here on earth; the point is simply that God's people will always know enough to lead them to heaven, starting from where they are.

Sixthly, evangelicals stress that Scripture is a mystery in a sense parallel to that in which the Incarnation is a mystery—that is, that the identifying of the human and the divine words in the one case, like the taking of manhood into God in the other, was a unique creative divine act of which we cannot fully grasp either the nature or the mode or the dynamic implications. Scripture is as genuinely and fully human as it is divine. It is more than Jewish-Christian religious literature, but not less, just as Jesus was more than a Jewish rabbi, but not less. There is a true analogy between the written word and the incarnate Word. In both cases, the divine coincides with the form of the human, and the absolute appears in the form of the relative. In both cases, as we say, the divine in the human manifests and evidences itself by the light and power that it puts forth, yet is missed and overlooked by all save those whom the Holy Ghost enlightens. In both cases, it is no discredit to the believer, nor reason for rejecting his faith, when he has to confess that there are problems about this unique divine-human reality that he cannot solve, questions about it that he cannot answer, and aspects of it (phenomena) which do not seem to fit comfortably with other aspects, or with basic categories in terms of which it asks to be explained as a whole (sinlessness, for instance, in the case of Jesus; truthfulness, for instance, in the case of Scripture). When you are dealing with divine mysteries you must be prepared for this sort of thing; and when it happens, you must be quick to recognise that the cause lies in the weakness of your own understanding not in any failure on God's part to conform to His own specifications.

Seventhly, evangelicals hold that the obedience of both the Christian individually, and the Church corporately, consists precisely in conscious submission, both intellectual and ethical, to the teaching of Holy Scripture, as interpreted by itself and applied by the Spirit according to the principles stated above. Subjection to the rule of Christ involves—indeed, from one standpoint, consists in subjection to the rule of Scripture. His authority is its, and its is His.

**Hermeneutics**

Such is biblical authority; what, now, is hermeneutics? Hermeneutics as commonly understood, is the theory of biblical interpretation. Interpretation has been defined as the way of reading an old book that brings out its relevance for modern man. Biblical hermeneutics is the study of the theoretical principles involved in bringing out to this and every age the relevance of the Bible and its message. Evangelical practice over the centuries has reflected a view of the process of interpretation as involving
three stages; exegesis, synthesis, and application.

Exegesis means bringing out of the text all that it contains of the thoughts, attitudes, assumptions, and so forth—in short, the whole expressed mind—of the human writer. This is the 'literal' sense, in the name of which the Reformers rejected the allegorical senses beloved of medieval exegetes. We would call it the 'natural' sense, the writer's 'intended meaning'. The so-called 'grammatico-historical method', whereby the exegete seeks to put himself in the writer's linguistic, cultural, historical, and religious shoes, has been the historic evangelical method of exegesis, followed with more or less consistency and success since the Reformers' time. This exegetical process assumes the full humanity of the inspired writings.

Synthesis means here the process of gathering up, and surveying in historically integrated form, the fruits of exegesis—a process which is sometimes, from one standpoint, and at one level, called 'biblical theology' in the classroom, and at other times, from another standpoint, and at another level, called 'exposition' in the pulpit. This synthetic process assumes the organic character of Scripture.

Application means seeking to answer the question: 'If God said and did what the text tells us He did in the circumstances recorded, what would He say and do to us in our circumstances?'

This applicatory process assumes the consistency of God from one age to another, and the fact that 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yea and for ever' (Heb. 13:8, RV).

Now, it is already clear from what has been said that the principle of biblical authority underlies and controls evangelical hermeneutics. The nature of this control can conveniently be shown by adapting Bultmann's concept of the 'exegetical circle'—a concept springing from recognition of the truth (for truth it is) that exegesis presupposes a hermeneutic which in its turn is drawn from an overall theology, which theology in its turn rests on exegesis. This circle is not, of course, logically vicious; it is not the circle of presupposing what you ought to prove, but the circle of successive approximation, a basic method in every science. Without concerning ourselves with Bultmann's use of this concept of the 'exegetical circle' we may at once adapt it to make plain the evangelical theologian's method of attaining his hermeneutic. First, he goes to the text of Scripture to learn from it the doctrine of Scripture. At this stage, he takes with him what Bultmann would call a 'pre-understanding'—not, like Bultmann, a Heideggerian anthropology, but a general view of Christian truth, and of the way to approach the Bible, which he has gained from the creeds, confessions, preaching, and corporate life of the Church, and from his own earlier experiments in exegesis and theology. So he goes to Scripture, and by the light of this pre-understanding discerns in it material for constructing an integrated doctrine of the nature, place, and use of the Bible. From this doctrine of the Bible and its authority he next derives, by strict theological analysis, a set of hermeneutical principles; and then, armed with this hermeneutic, he returns to the text of Scripture itself, to expound it more scientifically than he could before. Thus he travels round the exegetical circle. If his exegetical procedure is challenged, he defends it from his hermeneutic; if his hermeneutic is challenged, he defends it from his doctrine of biblical authority; and if his doctrine of biblical authority is challenged, he defends it from the texts. The circle thus appears as a one-way system: from texts to doctrine, from doctrine to hermeneutic, from hermeneutic to texts again.

What control does the hermeneutic which derives from the evangelical doctrine of Scripture place upon one's exegesis? First, it binds us to continue using the grammatico-historical method; second, it obliges us to observe the principle of harmony. We will say a word about each of these, though brief formal discussion of them (which is all that our space allows) can scarcely give an idea of how far-reaching they really are.

The grammatico-historical method of approaching texts is dictated, not merely by common sense, but by the doctrine of inspiration, which tells us that God has put His words into the mouths, and caused them to be written in the writings, of men whose individuality, as men of their time, was in no way lessened by the fact of their inspiration, and who spoke and wrote to be understood by their contemporaries. Since God has effected an identity between their words and His, the way for us to get into His mind, if we may thus phrase it, is via theirs. Their thoughts and speech about God constitutes God's own self-testimony. If, as in one sense is invariably the case, God's meaning and message through each passage, when set in its total biblical context, exceeds what the human writer had in mind, that further meaning is only an extension and development of his, a drawing of implications and an establishing of relationships between his words and other, perhaps later, biblical declarations in a way that the writer himself, in the nature of the case, could not do. Think, for example, how messianic prophecy is declared to have been fulfilled in the New Testament, or how the sacrificial system of Leviticus is explained as typical in Hebrews. The
point here is that the *sensus plenior* which texts acquire in their wider biblical context remains an extrapolation on the grammatico-historical plane, not a new projection on to the plane of allegory. And, though God may have more to say to us from each text than its human writer had in mind, God’s meaning is never less than his. What he means, God means. So the first responsibility of the exegete is to seek to get into the human writer’s mind, by grammatico-historical exegesis of the most thoroughgoing and disciplined kind—always remembering, as Calvin so wisely did, that the biblical writer cannot be assumed to have had before his mind the exegete’s own theological system!

As for the principle of harmony, this also is dictated by the doctrine of inspiration, which tells us that the Scriptures are the products of a single divine mind. There are really three principles involved here. The first is that Scripture should be interpreted by Scripture, just as one part of a human teacher’s message may and should be interpreted by appeal to the rest. *Scriptura scripturae interpres!* This does not, of course, imply that the meaning of all texts can be ascertained simply by comparing them with other texts, without regard for their own literary, cultural, and historical background, or for our extra-biblical knowledge bearing on the matters with which they deal. For instance, one cannot get the full point of ‘Thou shall not seethe a kid in its mother’s milk’ (Ex. 23: 19; 34:26; Dt. 14:21) till one knows that this was part of a Canaanish fertility rite and this one learns, not from comparison with other texts, but from archaeology. Similarly, this principle gives no warrant for reading the Bible ‘in the flat’ without any sense of the historical advance of both revelation and religion, and the difference of background and outlook between one biblical author and another. Such lapses would show failure to grasp what grammatico-historical exegesis really involves. But the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture does require us to treat the Bible organically and to look always for its internal links—which are there in profusion, if only we have eyes to see them.

The second principle is that Scripture should not be set against Scripture. The church, says Article XX of the Church of England, may not ‘so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another’—nor should the individual expositor. The basis for this principle is the expectation that the teaching of the God of truth will prove to be consistent with itself.

The third principle is that what appears to be secondary and obscure in the Scripture should be studied in the light of what appears primary and plain. This principle obliges us to echo the main emphases of the New Testament and to develop a christocentric, covenantal, and kerygmatic exegesis of both Testaments; also it obliges us to preserve a studied sense of proportion regarding what are confessedly minutiae, and not to let them overshadow what God has indicated to be the weightier matters.

These three principles together constitute what the Reformers called *analogia Scripturae*, and what we have termed the principle of harmony. It is a principle which makes an integrative aim in interpretation mandatory at every point. To have such an aim is, of course, no guarantee that the interpreter will always succeed in achieving what he aims at, but at least it keeps him facing in the right direction and asking some of the right questions.

Here, then, are two hermeneutical axioms which we may call ‘deductive’ principles, though, as we have seen, they derive from an exegetical induction in the first instance. They are presuppositions, gained through exegesis of some texts, which demand to control the exegesis of all texts. They are historically, and in my view rightly, basic to evangelical interpretation of Scripture.

**Over-simplification**

Now it is just here, as it seems to me, that the dangers of over-simplification threaten. I am not now thinking of the popular pietistic over-simplification of supposing that if one approaches Scripture by the light of these evangelical axioms, then interpretations will become magically easy and one’s exegesis will be infallibly right. Such ideas do not demand discussion here; we know better than to expect interpretation ever to be easy, and we know there are no infallible interpreters, certainly not ourselves. No; the over-simplifications I have in view are other than this.

The first and basic over-simplification consists simply of forgetting that, as our concept of biblical authority determines our hermeneutic in the manner described, so that concept itself is always, and necessarily, open to challenge from the biblical texts on which we bring our hermeneutics to bear. For our concept of biblical authority is a theological construct, or theory, one of a number which make up our dogmatics; and theological theories, like the theories of natural science, have to be tested by seeing whether they fit all the relevant biblical data (think, for instance, of the doctrine of the Trinity, which is an example of a successful theological theory). If the data seem not to fit the theory, then the relation between them should be thought of as
one of reciprocal interrogation: each calls the other in question. So, if particular texts, despite our exegetical coaxing, still appear to be out of accord with each other in some significant way, or to assert what is untrue, methodologically the first thing we have to do is to re-examine our concepts of biblical authority, and of the hermeneutic which we drew from it. But we must do this by appeal to the proper evidence, that is, the statements of Scripture about itself, not the phenomena which have prompted the check-up. A mistake in method at this point would be disastrous, as the following comments by Dr Roger Nicole on one of the theses of Dr Dewey Beegle’s book, *The Inspiration of Scripture*, will show.

‘Dr Beegle very vigorously contends that a proper approach to the doctrine of inspiration is to start with induction from what he calls “the phenomena of Scripture” rather than with deduction from certain biblical statements about the Scripture. . . . This particular point needs to be controverted. If the Bible does make certain express statements about itself, these manifestly must have a priority in our attempt to formulate a doctrine of Scripture. Quite obviously, induction from Bible phenomena will also have its due place, for it may tend to correct certain inaccuracies which might take place in the deductive process. The statements of Scripture, however, are always primary. To apply the method advocated by Dr Beegle in other areas would quite probably lead to seriously erroneous results. For instance, if we attempted to construct our view of the relation of Christ to sin merely in terms of the concrete data given us in the Gospels about His life, and without regard to certain express statements found in the New Testament about His sinlessness, we might mistakenly conclude that Christ was not sinless. If we sought to develop our doctrines of creation merely by induction from the facts of nature and without regard to the statements of Scripture, we would be left in a quandary. The present remark is not meant to disallow induction as a legitimate factor, but it is meant to deny it the priority in religious matters. First must come the statements of revelation, and then induction may be introduced as a legitimate confirmation, and, in some cases, as a corrective in areas where our interpretation of these statements and their implications may be at fault’ (Gordon Review, Winter 1964-1965, p. 106).

When we check our concept of the nature and authority of Scripture by the appropriate biblical evidence, in the light of the specific questions raised by the hard texts, we may find that our previous interpretation of the evidence needs to be modified; or we may not. In the latter case, methodologically we are now bound to embrace as our working hypothesis that the inconsistency of the phenomena with the biblical doctrine is apparent, not real. However, the embracing of the hypothesis is not itself a solution of the problem, and a real tension between our deductive principles and the phenomena remains. When, as in most if not all cases, the puzzling phenomena are minutiae, the principle of *analogia Scripturae*, as we saw, would counsel us not to get them out of proportion. But as long as they are there, they continue to present a challenge to us to check and re-check our doctrine of Scripture, and the hermeneutical principles which we derive from it, just as our doctrine of Scripture challenges us to seek harmonistic explanations of puzzling phenomena. It would be a potentially serious over-simplification, as it seems to me, to ignore the fact that we may need to go round the one-way system of the exegetical circle very many times, reviewing our doctrine of Scripture and our hermeneutics again and again in the light of the various queries about both that the different classes of phenomena raise. The point can be illustrated and, perhaps, given some application by citing from two evangelical documents which have had some currency in recent years, and whose overall thrust is in each case admirable. On page 49 of his *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Louis Berkhof states boldly, as Warfield did before him, that part of the interpreter’s task is to ‘adjust the phenomena of Scripture to the biblical doctrine of inspiration’. A memorandum for theological students produced under the auspices of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students in 1961, closed with a summons to ‘development of a truly biblical, i.e. biblically determined, hermeneutic’ and ‘derivation from this hermeneutic of a proper understanding of the nature of biblical authority’. My present point is simply to say either of these things without the other would be to over-simplify. The first statement is no more than a half-truth, until it is added that our apprehension of ‘the biblical doctrine of inspiration’ itself must be constantly checked against the queries concerning it which the phenomena themselves raise. The second statement is no more than a half-truth, until it is added that some pre-understanding of the nature of Scripture and its authority is necessarily involved in any attempt to develop a ‘biblically determined hermeneutic’. (After all, even Bultmann would claim, on the basis of his own pre-understanding at this point, that his own hermeneutic
was 'truly biblical, i.e. biblically determined'! It is at the point of this pre-understanding that the ways divide.) The truth is that neither our doctrine of Scripture nor our exegesis can be in a healthy state unless they constantly interact, and each undergoes constant refinement in the light of the other.

If, therefore, we allowed ourselves to treat a pre-packaged, deep-frozen formula labelled 'the evangelical doctrine of Scripture' as a kind of untouchable sacred cow, we should not only be showing ourselves more concerned about our own tradition than about God's truth (and you do not need me to remind you how dangerous that would be); we should also be jeopardising our own prospects in the realm of biblical exposition. If, however, we recognise and accept the principles just stated, it will keep vividly before us the element of mystery that confronts us in the Scriptures, the audacity of our confession of the doctrine of biblical authority, with so many problems, albeit small ones, yet unsolved, and the need to make this confession in great humility and utter dependence upon God; and this will undoubtedly be good both for us and for our handling of the sacred text.

The modern debate

I want now to glance at the modern hermeneutical debate, and to consider how far evangelicals are equipped to enter into it.

The debate has sprung from felt perplexities at three points. First, there are perplexities about the Word of God. Since Barth, the Bible has been re-acknowledged as the medium of God's self-communication to man; but the question presses, how can this be, when (ex hypothesi) the Bible, regarded as a human book, is both fallible and fallacious? How does God communicate Himself through the Bible? What is the real nature of the Word of God? What is its relation to the words of the book?

Then, second, there are questions about the New Testament. Modern scholars, preoccupied with the complexities of its contemporary setting, and working in disregard of the notion of revealed truth, feel it to be a most elusive book. What is its real nature? What is its real relation to the Old Testament? What is the significance of its intractable eschatology? What must one do to it to make plain its message for our own time?

Then, third, linked with this are problems about preaching. The New Testament is kerygmatic: it consists of proclamation of Christ; but the world to which it proclaims Him is a very different world from ours. What transpositions of the form of the message are needed to enable us to preach it today?

To these questions various answers are given. Let us briefly remind ourselves of three of the main ones.

(i) Karl Barth holds that God communicates with man through the Scriptures by freely choosing to use them to make Jesus Christ, the true Word of God, known. The statement that Scripture is the Word of God means simply that God constantly uses it in this way. Christ is the reality to which all Scripture, when thus used by God, bears witness. Barth's hermeneutical method, therefore, is to apply the 'christological method' of his Dogmatics, asking all texts one question only—what have you to say of Jesus Christ? According to Barth's ontology, it is only when one is reading Christ out of texts that they tell us anything about either God or man. This at first sounds promising to evangelical ears; however, what we find is that Barth's ontology, which goes off at a tangent from what the biblical writers were concerned to say about God and His world, imposes on his thought a cramping preoccupation with problems of theological knowledge, and the dogmatic arbitrariness of his 'christomonism', as Althaus called it, according to which all truth about creation and the created order is swallowed up into the doctrine of Christ, leads him to conceptions of election, reprobation, and redemption, which systematically distort both his exegesis and any preaching that may be based on it.

(ii) The 'biblical theology' and heilsgeschichte movements tell us that God has revealed Himself through a sequence of redemptive events which came to its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To this historical sequence Scripture is man's interpretative witness. Scripture is the product of illumination and insight, but not of inspiration as we earlier defined it, and there is no identity of God's word with man's. The hermeneutical method of these movements, therefore, is to ask the texts what witness they bear to the acts of God, and to integrate their testimony into a complex christocentric whole by means of the organising categories of prospect and fulfilment. ('Prospect' is a better word than 'promise' here; the God of 'biblical theology' does not speak, and so cannot make promises.) One odd result is that theologians of this type seem a good deal more sure that this pattern as a whole corresponds to the acts of God as a whole than they are about the truth of any single part of it! This is particularly noticeable in such a writer as Alan Richardson. The preaching that springs from this movement is a summons to trust in the God, and the Christ, of this whole story, which is good so far, but since
this teaching affords no basis for a direct correlation between faith and Scripture in general, or the biblical promises in particular (since it is not held that God has ever actually used words to talk to man), the preaching is necessarily inadequate.

(iii) Bultmann holds that God acts in man’s consciousness through the myths of the New Testament kerygma (which myths, he says, we may now ceremonially debunk, and replace, in order to show modern man that they are nothing more than myths!). His action consists of bringing about in experience the dynamic event of the ‘word of God’. This ‘word of God’ is a summons and a decision to live in openness to the future, not bound by the past: which is the whole of Bultmann’s understanding of faith. Nothing depends for Bultmann on the fact that the Christ of the myths has no basis in the facts concerning the historical Jesus: ‘faith’ for him is not correlated to particular historical facts, any more than it is to particular divine words. His hermeneutical method is to ask how the texts disclose the human situation according to Heidegger, and how they summon us to the decision of faith, as described above.

Our enumeration need not go further; these three positions are, between them, the fountain-heads of all the main hermeneutical trends of our time. (The so-called ‘new hermeneutic’ is only new in the sense of being an extended development of the third approach.) They all appear as products of Christian thought deflected, more or less, from the historical biblical road by the Kantian and post-Kantian heritage in western philosophy. Kant’s ‘Copernican revolution’ in the philosophy of mind and nature, carried through at just the critical moment when Europe was recoiling from Rationalism into Romanticism, diverted interest from the known world to the knowing subject, ruled out the possibility of God addressing man in words, and let loose the bogy of sceptical and nihilistic solipsism to plague his successors. Idealism, positivism, and existentialism, the three main philosophical developments since Kant’s time, should be seen as a series of attempts to banish the bogy by new answers to the problem of the knowing subject; and similarly the three types of hermeneutic sketched out above should be seen as so many attempts to banish the same bogy by vindicating the proposition that Christians really know God, even though He does not really talk to us. But this is precisely what the God of the Bible does!—and the first point to be made as we approach the modern hermeneutical debate is that, to the extent to which an expositor denies or discounts the reality of divine talk, to that extent he neither opens the Scriptures nor confesses their God, but wrests the former and denies the latter.

In none of the positions described is the testmony of Scripture to a speaking God, and to itself as His organic revealed Word, taken with full seriousness. Each of them effectively breaks loose from the authority of the Bible by declining fully to accept either its account of its own nature or the hermeneutic that is bound up with that account. Each, in consequence, fails satisfactorily to answer the questions from which it starts. Arbitrariness of this kind brings its own penalty of instability, not to say untruth. In fact, the true key to solving the problems which sparked off the modern hermeneutical debate is to take the Bible’s self-testimony perfectly seriously, and to give full weight to the truth that, to put it as vividly as I can, God has talked, and Holy Scripture is His own recorded utterance, and what He said in Scripture long ago He says still, in application to ourselves.

It is sometimes said that this view of revelation is itself arbitrary, since the texts on which we rely do not really affirm so much; but Warfield answered that thesis two generations ago, and nothing since his day has in my judgment affected the conclusiveness of his answer. It is also said that this position is rationalistic. That word is, of course, a dreadful missile, but what does it signify in this context? ‘Rationalistic’ in theology may mean (i) reducing reality, both God and His world, to the limits of an exhaustively intelligible scheme, so ruling out all recognition of the partial character of knowledge of God in this world, as compared with that which is to come (1 Cor. 13:13); or (ii) going against Scripture at some particular point at the dictates of reason; or (iii) speculating beyond biblical limits; or (iv) seeking to ground on logical or historical proof truths about God which should be received by faith, simply on the ground that God has told us of them. In which of these senses, now, can the evangelical revelation-claim be called rationalistic? In none! The truth is that it is not rationalistic at all, but simply rational. It is a confession of faith in a rational God who has talked rationally to creatures whom He made rational, and whom He declines to treat as anything other than rational.

And the evangelical hermeneutic is a rational hermeneutic, based on the recognition that the affirmations of the biblical writers are the authoritative affirmations of God Himself, and seeking to extract them by exegesis in order that they may be applied afresh to men and their problems in our own day, so that God’s message to us may be made plain. Traditionally, when formulating our hermeneutics, we evangelicals have limited the subject
to questions of exegesis and synthesis (see any textbook, Berkhof’s Principles of Biblical Interpretation, or Ramm’s Protestant Biblical Interpretation, for example, for proof of this) and have left questions of the application of truth to be dealt with under the rubrics of homiletics and practical theology; but it is much to be wished that we might re-state our hermeneutics in explicit correlation to the concept of God communicating, God speaking in a way that terminates on man. This would involve a final section in the textbooks and lecture courses on the possibility, purpose, and modes of God’s address to men through the Bible, and the discussion would cover topics like the imago Dei in man as the presupposition of communication; sin, which makes man deaf to God, and grace, which unstops his ears; the whole complex of relations that exists between the revealing Spirit and the revealed Word; preaching as the Word of God; and the Church as the community that listens to God’s Word, and lives by it.

The concept of God active in communication is certainly the focus of hermeneutical interest and the field of hermeneutical debate, in modern theology, and when one observes the encroaching shadows of post-Kantian nihilism one sees why this should be so. But this does not mean that there is anything wrong with the concept itself. The truth is rather the reverse. Is not the thought of God active in communication the central, and organising, hermeneutical concept to which the Bible itself would lead us? If so—and I think it is—then our traditional presentation of hermeneutics ought to be re-thought and re-angled so as to express this fact. Until we have shown ourselves to be tackling this task in good earnest, we are hardly ready to take part in current hermeneutical discussions; for not only shall we not be on its ‘wavelength’, shall we be making it plain to all the world that we have not yet learned, in the theological sense, to take our own hermeneutical principles quite seriously. Books like Gustav-Wingren’s The Living Word and Alan Stibbs’ unpretentious and untechnical, yet extraordinary seminal, little paperback Understanding God’s Word give some of the leads that are in point here.

Inerrancy

It is sometimes supposed that evangelical hermeneutics are necessarily vitiated by evangelical adherence to the concept of biblical inerrancy. For some reason which, to say the least, is not obvious, this adherence is thought to betray an anachronistic resolve to make the Bible teach science, in the modern sense and with modern precision, and thus to mark a departure from the grammatico-historical method which cannot but distort interpretation radically. It is also thought to betray confidence of ‘having the answer’ to all seeming contradictions and difficulties in the biblical text. In view of these mistaken impressions, it is well to round off this paper by sketching out what inerrancy does and does not mean.

Inerrancy is a word that has only been in common use since the last century, though the idea itself goes back through seventeenth-century orthodoxy, the Reformers, and the Schoolmen, to the Fathers and, behind them, to our Lord’s own statements, ‘the Scripture cannot be broken’, ‘thy word is truth’ (Jn. 10:35; 17:17). The word has a negative form and a positive function. It is comparable with the four negative adverbs with which the Chalcedonian definition fenced the truth of the Incarnation. Its function, like theirs, was not to explain anything in a positive way, but to safeguard a mystery by excluding current mistakes about it. It, like them, has obvious meaning only in the context of the particular controversy that caused it to be used; apart from that context it, like them, may well seem esoteric and unhelpful. Logically, its function has been to express a double commitment: first, an advance commitment to receive as truth from God all that Scripture is found on inspection actually to teach; second, a methodological commitment to interpret Scripture according to the principle of harmony which we analysed above. It thus represented not so much a lapse into rationalism as a bulwark against rationalism—namely, that kind of rationalism which throws overboard the principle of harmony. It thus expressed also, not an irreligious preoccupation with scientific accuracy, as some have suggested, but an attitude of reverence for the sacred text which some were irreverently expounding as if it were in places self-contradictory and false.

Whether evangelicals continue to speak of biblical inerrancy or not will depend on whether we think that the gain of having a verbal pointer to this double commitment outweighs the disadvantage of being lumbered with a term that is regularly, though mistakenly, taken to imply a blanket claim to know solutions for all apparent biblical discrepancies. The prevalence of this misconception is really rather disastrous, for scholarly advance in biblical study, as in all other realms of science, has the effect, not only of extending broad areas of certainty, but also of increasing the number of questions of detail which at any single moment have to be regarded as open, pending further inquiry or the discovery of more evidence.
—some of these, inevitably, being questions to which earlier generations thought they knew the answer; and if we evangelicals are thought to be making a claim which shows, not merely unawareness of this fact, but a dogmatic interest in denying it, we shall have a hard time convincing others that our approach to Scripture is not fundamentally unscientific and unsound. This might be thought a strong argument for eschewing the word wherever possible. But whether or not we use the word is not the most important issue. What matters is that in our exegetical practice we should abide by the principle of harmony; in other words, that we should be agreed at the methodological level. If, on the one hand, we actually agree to receive as truth from God all that Scripture writers are found actually to assert, and, on the other hand, we are agreed in continuing to look for convincing harmonisations of the hard places and declining to cut the knot by saying flatly that the Bible errs, it will not matter whether we talk of inerrancy or not. What matters is never the word, this or any other, but the thing for which it stands.

What I am saying assumes that the scope of each biblical passage, its literary genre, and the range and content of the actual assertions made, must be determined entirely inductively, by grammatico-historical exegesis. It is necessary to insist constantly that the concept of inerrancy gives no direct help in determining such questions as these. It is not—repeat, not—an exegetical short cut.

No doubt we shall all find that many particular exegetical and harmonistic problems, arising from puzzling biblical phenomena, will have to be left open at every stage in our pilgrimage of biblical study. What significance has this fact? I would suggest that it has no significance that need alarm us. It is stimulating for continued exegetical inquiry; it is unimportant, so far as I can see, for dogmatics, except insofar as it stimulates closer reflection on the doctrine of Scripture; and it is only unmanageable for apologetics if one’s apologetic method is rationalistic in type, requiring one to have all the answers to the problems in a particular area before one dare make positive assertions in that area, even when those positive assertions would simply be echoing God’s own, set forth in Scripture. But it might be worth asking whether it is not perhaps a blessing to be warned off apologetics of that kind.
Inerrancy and New Testament Exegesis

R. T. France

The decision to reprint Dr Packer's article was taken before the merger of the TSF Bulletin with Themelios was planned, and the following article was commissioned by the then editor of the TSF Bulletin to accompany it. The two articles have thus been inherited by the new journal, and the fact that the author of this article is to be editor of the new journal is quite fortuitous!

My brief is to comment on the doctrinal and hermeneutical position advocated in Dr Packer's excellent article, from the point of view of its application to academic study of the New Testament. I shall focus particularly on his concluding section on inerrancy, because it is here that most of the practical problems arise for the conservative student engaging in New Testament exegesis. I shall take Dr Packer's article as read, and not stop to repeat points already made by him.

To turn from Dr Packer's article to the average Gospel commentary is to enter a different world, a world of alleged synoptic contradictions, mis-understandings, myths and legends, a world where the author said 'Here is a helpful thought', a world in which the scholar stands in judgment over the primitive views and historiographical incompetence of the Gospel writers. Coming from the warm security of an all-embracing doctrine of the inspiration and authority of Scripture, the evangelical student finds himself all at sea. Can he survive in these waters? Should he be here at all? And if he should be here, has he any hope of making a positive contribution to biblical studies, or is he ipso facto out of the game because he is a conservative, and so will not play according to the accepted rules?

Let us take as our framework Dr Packer's statement of the exegetical demands of an evangelical hermeneutic: 'First, it binds us to continue using the grammatico-historical method; second, it obliges us to observe the principle of harmony.'

1. Grammatico-Historical Exegesis

There can be no problems for the evangelical student in the commitment to rigorous exegesis to discover 'what the author really meant', and this will involve the fullest possible use of linguistic, literary, historical, archaeological and other data bearing on the immediate context. The most natural meaning of the biblical writer's words in the light of all this comparative material must be the starting-point of any serious study, whether by a conservative or by a radical. And that is what grammatico-historical exegesis means.

(a) The Use of External Data

In the nature of the case a large part of the com- parative material adduced will itself be drawn from biblical literature. In study of the New Testament, the influence of the Old Testament is by far the most significant literary factor to be considered. Echoes of Old Testament language should always be taken seriously, and this conservative students have always been taught to do. So far there is no problem in principle.

But some conservative students are unnecessarily timid about admitting the possible influence of non-canonical writings on the New Testament writer. While I very much appreciate the useful role of non-canonical books are few in the New Testament, they are undoubt-dly present. Jude, in his few verses, quotes explicitly from the Book of Enoch and the Apocalypse of Moses, and makes free use of the non-biblical tradition of the imprisonment of the fallen angels awaiting their final punishment, which holds a central place in much of the Enoch literature, and recurs frequently in other late Jewish literature. The one who has wrestled with the exegesis of I Peter 3:19-20 will have discovered (if he has done his job properly) that the same tradition is the basic prerequisite for understanding that passage, indeed that to try to interpret it without reference to the Book of Enoch is a recipe for chaos, making it a happy hunting-ground for extraneous ideas like purgatory and the harrowing of hell, to which in fact gives no support. The passage is obscure to modern readers because we are not familiar with a body of tradition which was clearly common ground to Peter and his readers.

Read it in the light of those traditions, and it yields a clear and very relevant meaning: the risen Christ is supreme even over those malignant spirits who, even in their imprisonment, are the focus of the world's rebellion against God (and who therefore threaten us). Peter is too clever a writer for his readers, the writer of Peter's readers, is the subject of the wider context of these verses).

Why then do some evangelical writers use the non-canonical literature as embarrassing? There is no mystery in that: this confers canonical status on the book concerned, any more than when Paul quotes from the pagan poets Menander, Aratus and Epimenides (1 Cor 15:33; Acts 17:34; Tit 1:13), or when we reflect on Calvin's Institutes to win the Pooh in the course of a sermon. Grammatico-historical exegesis demands that we allow the biblical writers to speak to us out of their own environment, and that environment includes more than just the Bible. It is our business to discover the concepts and traditions which were common ground between the biblical writers and their original readers, but which may be lost or little known to us. Sometimes, as in the case of the Old Testament, this is the principle of the New Testament context, or at least of the New Testament literature. Surely there can be no doctrinal problem about using them to the full, thankful that we have these aids to a fuller understanding of what God led Peter to write for our instruction.

But there is also a need for caution here. A New Testament writer's thought is not confined to the background from which he wrote. Peter does not simply echo the tradition of the fallen angels, but uses it and transforms it into a vehicle for proclaiming the victory of Christ. It is the context in his own writing which is the key to his meaning, once the context has been identified.

Here the principle of harmony comes into play: we may not so interpret one passage that it makes the author contradict himself, or breaks the flow of his thought. Our problem is to determine the New Testament context; the elucidation of the cultural and historical background should illuminate the terms and concepts employed, but can never alone determine the exegesis of the passage.

Take Paul's reference to the 'rock that followed them' (1 Cor 10:4). A study of this theme in Jewish literature will soon uncover a fascinating body of tradition about this rock, or rather 'rock-

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3 This exegesis is worked out in detail in my contribution to the forthcoming symposium on New Testament Interpretation, ed. J. Howard Marshall.
Inerrancy and New Testament Exegesis
R. T. France

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To turn from Dr Packer’s article to the average Gospel commentary is to enter a different world, a world of alleged synoptic contradictions, misunderstandings, myths and legends, a world where the term ‘inerrant’ is almost unknown. Here is a helpful thought, a world in which the scholar stands in judgment over the primitive views and historiographical incompetence of the Gospel writers. Coming from the warm security of an all-embracing doctrine of the inspiration and authority of Scripture, the evangelical student finds himself all at sea. Can he survive in these waters? Should he be here at all? And if he should be here, has he any hope of making a positive contribution to biblical studies, or is he ipso facto out of the game because he is a conservative, and so will not play according to the accepted rules?

Let us take as our framework Dr Packer’s statement of the exegetical demands of an evangelical hermeneutic: ‘First, it binds us to continue using the “canon” in the one, general, sense in which it is used by the New Testament writers, which is the subject of the wider context of these verses’.

Why then do some evangelical writers use non-canonical literature as embarrassing? There is no reason to think that this confers canonical status on the book concerned, any more than when Paul quotes from the pagan poets Menander, Aratus and Epimenides (1 Cor. 15:33; Acts 17:34, Tit. 1:11a), or when Paul quotes from Calvin’s Institutes to win the Pooh in the course of a sermon. Grammatico-historical exegesis demands that we allow the biblical writers to speak to us out of their own environment, and that environment includes more than just the New Testament. It is our business to discover the concepts and traditions which were common ground between the biblical writers and their original readers, but which may be lost or little known to us. Sometimes, as in the case of Hebrews 11:15-19, the clues may have disappeared, and we can only guess. But when the clues are there in Enoch and Jubilees and the Testaments of the Patriarchs, surely there can be no doctrinal problem about using them to the full, thankful that we have these aids to a fuller understanding of what God led Peter to write for our instruction.

But there is also a need for caution here. A New Testament writer’s thought is not confined to the background from which he wrote. Peter does not simply echo the tradition of the fallen angels, but uses it and transforms it into a vehicle for proclaiming the victory of Christ. It is in the context of his own writing which is the key to his meaning, once the clues have been identified. Here the principle of harmony comes into play: we may not so interpret one passage that it makes the author contradict himself, or breaks the flow of his thought. Our task is to harmonize the New Testament context; the elucidation of the cultural and historical background should illuminate the terms and concepts employed, but can never alone determine the exigesis of the passage.

Take Paul’s reference to the ‘rock that followed them’ (1 Cor. 10:4). A study of this theme in Jewish literature will soon uncover a fascinating body of tradition about this rock, or rather ‘rock-
shaped well, like a kind of beehive, which rolled along with the Israelites as they wandered through the desert, providing them with water to drink, irrigating the ground, and on one occasion taking the offensive against their enemies by drowning the Arnon canyon to drown them, and coming rolling up out of the valley carrying 'skulls, arms and legs innumerable,' until eventually it rolled into the Lake of Galilee, where it may still be seen under the water, 'this river' (Herod. 1:16). Paul was familiar at least with the idea of a mobile rock/well, even if not with the bizarre details of the later midrash, and found in this ever-present source of supply and help a apt illustration of Christ. While he believed that the tradition concerning this historical fact is debatable, he cited it not for its historical value, but for its spiritual significance: *penematiqes* here probably indicates that he interpreted the tradition typologically to *confine* Paul's thought to the traditional material by which he drew his illustration would be to do violence to his expressed intention in making the allusion. It is referred to not for itself, but for its illustrative value; the focus of his thought is Christ.

Grammatico-historical exegesis demands, then, that we discover all we can of the background to the expressions and concepts used by the New Testament writers, but forbids us to interpret them as merely explicit, historical, and merely relevant to the contemporaries. They are using these non-Christian ideas as vehicles to express a radically new message, and it is in the light of this new proclamation that their use of contemporary language must be interpreted. In this process, there is no doctrinal stumbling-block for the evangelical. He, of all people, has the strongest incentive to get his exegesis right.

A question might be raised here about the evangelical’s insistence, mentioned by Dr. Packer, that ‘the Scriptures are clear, and interpret them from within’. Does not all this talk of Enoch and midrash put the true understanding of Scripture beyond the grasp of all but the specialist biblical scholar? Has not the changed meaning at the hands of the author of the passages of Scripture which are anything but clear to the ordinary Bible reader? In a sense this is true. It is the business of the biblical scholar to throw light on such things, and the whole church should be the wiser for his labors. Without his help the ordinary Christian, and indeed many a preacher, will continue to make mistakes in exegesis through lack of awareness of the cultural context of the biblical writer. But while a failure to understand 1 Peter 3:19-20, or an insistently aver- sion to the non-canonical allusions of Jude, may move the Christian of some whomelse, even exciting, new teaching, it poses no equally crushing problem to Christian as (and Jesus’) sense of humour or sober literalism to which a study of the Gospel leads us. It is a literary, not a theological question, and our judgment here will not affect our view of the inerrancy of Scripture, as well as the other inerrancy issues. A few doubts cast no doubt on what the passage actually says.

But the trouble begins when our literary judgments seem to lead us away from the literal meaning of the author’s words. Here the question of interpretation is not merely a matter of nuances in the differences between the verses of the New Testament as a whole, the implicit assumptions the reader may make, but also the effect of the clashes between New Testament statements and external sources (as in the case of the Lukan census), but from apparent disagreements between the New Testament writers themselves. To some extent, the debate is not so much a matter of whether the Gospel narratives are reliable or not, but of the manner in which they have been constructed. Not only is there a level of literary creativity in the Gospel stories, but there is a level of theological creativity as well. The Gospel narratives are not simply reports of historical events, but are shaped by the needs and interests of the communities that produced them.

For example, Matthew’s story of the Cleansing of the Temple is a classic illustration of this point. Matthew places the Cleansing of the Temple on the same day that Jesusdiesthe night before he is crucified. In this way, Matthew connects the events of the Cleansing of the Temple with the events of the crucifixion. This connection is not simply a matter of chronological coincidence, but is a deliberate literary device that serves to emphasize the importance of the Cleansing of the Temple in the overall narrative of Matthew.

Similarly, in the case of the temptation in the desert, Matthew places the temptation on the same day that Jesus begins his public ministry. This connection is not simply a matter of chronological coincidence, but is a deliberate literary device that serves to emphasize the importance of the temptation in the overall narrative of Matthew.

In both cases, the literary devices used by Matthew are designed to emphasize the importance of the events in the overall narrative of the Gospel. This is not simply a matter of chronological coincidence, but is a deliberate literary device that serves to emphasize the importance of the events in the overall narrative of the Gospel.
It is not explicitly stated that Peter carried out the proposal. Our decision on this question (which is in any case peripheral to the main point of the passage) will be made not on the basis of a tradition that the declarator of the future (and Jesus') sense of humour or sober literalism to which a study of the Gospel leads us. It is a literary, not a theological question, and our judgment here will not affect our view of the inerrancy of Scripture, as we shall see later. It simply casts doubt on what the passage actually says.

But the trouble begins when our literary judgments seem to lead us away from the literal meaning of the author's words. Here the question of inerrancy becomes an extra-literary matter. If the reader sees 'from the clashes between New Testament statements and external sources (as in the case of the Lukan census), but from apparent disagreements between the New Testament writers themselves. The question revolves around this difficulty most forcibly in the study of the Gospels, and here most of the problems arise in the area of chronology.

Events are recorded in apparently chronologically organized narratives, even when the language indicates that 'then' and 'immediately', and yet the order of the events varies between the Gospels. Most scholars therefore conclude either that one or more of the evangelists has 'got it wrong', or that the order was not important in the chronologically organized, superficially chronologically apparent to the narrator. The former conclusion is clearly incompatible with a belief in inerrancy; but is the latter any less objectionable?

This brings us back to the question of the writer's intention. And the question of what sort of arrangement a Gospel was intended to have is the proper province of grammatically-historical exegesis. It will be decided not by our modern canons of historiography, but by a study of the literary conventions of the time, and most important, by a study of the actual nature of the Gospels themselves and their relation with each other. If such a study leads us to the conclusion that the aim of the writer was to provide evidence for the doctrine of the strict chronology might on occasion take second place, so that 'then' need not always imply an exact chronological sequence, then there is no obvious ground for postulating 'error' in cases where the order of events differs between the Gospels.

A few examples will clarify the point. To begin with a relatively simple case, Matthew and Luke record the three temptations of Jesus in a different order. Evangelicals have never had any difficulty in accepting that there is a literary or theological motive behind the variation in order, and few have found the 'chronological discrepancy' here a problem for a belief in inerrancy.

But where the evangelists differ over the order in which certain events occurred, the problem of inerrancy looms larger. Take the order of events after Jesus' entry to Jerusalem. Matthew apparently regards the cleansing of the temple as happening immediately on Jesus' arrival in the city, after which the disciples come back to the Mount of Olives (21:10-12,17). Mark, however, tells us that the cleansing of the temple was the next day, after the night spent at Bethany (11:11-12,15). So far there is no unharmonious discrepancy: Matthew has simplified the situation, Mark reconstructed the situation as he did not consider significant; he does not actually say that the cleansing happened the same day. It is quite in character for Matthew to omit 'irrelevant' details which occur in Mark. But the situation is complicated by the fig-tree episode, Acts 3:19: Mark, Jesus cursed the tree on His way into the city after the night spent at Bethany and before the cleansing, but it was not discovered to have withered, and the lesson drawn out, until the next day. The final study of Matthew's account of the fig-tree events varies between the Gospels. Most scholars therefore conclude either that one or more of the evangelists has 'got it wrong', or that the order was not important in the chronologically organized, superficially chronologically apparent to the narrator. The former conclusion is clearly incompatible with a belief in inerrancy; but is the latter any less objectionable?

Here we come to the point, for instance, of Matthew's passage about the coin in the temple (24: 27)? To record a miracle of Jesus, most of us would answer. But look at the passage. No miracle is explicitly recorded as having actually happened. The passage is about Jesus' attitude to the payment of the temple tax, with the fish coming in incidentally at the end. An exegesis which regards this passage as primarily a miracle-story is wide of the mark; it is a discussion of a practical question of the tax in its relations with Judaism, and embodying principles of lasting importance for the Christian vis-a-vis the society to which he belongs. Whether the coin was found in the fish's mouth at all is debatable, for similar stories of treasure from a fish in both pagan and Jewish literature suggest that this was a popular story motif, to which Jesus may have been playfully alluding, rather than giving a solemn command.

3 Midrash Rabhah on Numbers 1:2: 19:25-26. The tradition is found earlier in a less elaborated form in the rabbis of the schools of Hillel and Shammai, and in the Tosefta.

4 Herodotus II. 41-42 (the ring of Polykrates); Shabbath 19a; Genesis Rabhah 11:4, as cited by Strack-Billerbeck 1, 614 (cf. Pesikta Rabhah 23:6).
objection to this suggestion, and many cases of 'duplicate narratives' are in fact best explained as accounts of originally separate but comparable incidents, which have naturally come to be told in increasingly similar words as the stories have been passed down. This is the best explanation, for instance, of the feedings of the 5,000 and the 4,000, or of the various anointing stories, or, probably, of the two miraculous catches of fish in such different historical circumstances. It is a poor historian, who, when he has immediately accused his sources of error and distortion, on the assumption that similar incidents do not happen, rather than weighing up what is the most realistic explanation of the accounts as they stand.

But something in the nature of the case not likely to be repeated, and the cleansing of the temple looks like one of these, a public dramatic gesture, a stark demonstration of Jesus' Messianic claim, after which His relations with the Jewish establishment could never be the same again. Nor does any of the evangelists hint that there was a second such incident; it is just that they locate it differently in the development of Jesus' ministry. Which is the more probable stage for it to occur is an open question. It is possible that such a public and provocative demonstration right at the beginning of the ministry, when for most of His ministry Jesus was so reluctant to make an open claim to be the Messiah; to make it fits naturally with the equally public and provocative gesture of Jesus' donkeyride into Jerusalem, in the frame-work of the final confrontation with the establishment. If so, it is hard to see any way of accounting for its place in the John if it were placed at the beginning as a fitting declaration of who Jesus was (like the immediately preceding incident at Cana, in which Jesus 'manifested His glory'), rather than because it actually happened then; in other words, a historical and chronological precision took second place to a thematic arrangement designed to effect John's declared purpose in writing, 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ'.

No doubt many refinements ought to be made to these very bald summaries of a few problem areas, but I hope enough has been said to indicate the point that a study of the Gospel texts themselves indicates that chronology was not always the governing factor in the narrative material. I am not suggesting, of course, that they never arranged their material chronologically, and that all attempts to draw up a chronology of New Testament events are futile. Harmonisation must always be our first aim, in chronology as in other areas of discrepancy, and in very many cases it can be done quite satisfactorily. I am merely pointing out that there are some cases where it does not seem to work. If that is so, then our understanding of inerrancy in this connection must surely be governed by the intention with which the Gospels were written. A non-chronological arrangement is only an 'error' where the aim was to present a strictly chronological account. We should not put to the biblical text questions it was not designed to answer, and if we do, it makes the reader look for what it is not trying to give. I am not suggesting that this is an 'Open Sesame' to all the problems of the Bible, even in the area of chronology alone. But our commitment to a rigorous application of the grammatico-historical method demands that we determine first what sort of writing we are dealing with, and what its author's aim was in composing it, and it will in fact be found that many of the 'errors' and 'discrepancies' which plague the conservative when he takes up study critical of the Bible are due to our arrogant attempt to impose our modern canons of historiography on the biblical writers, rather than listening to them in the context of their own cultural and literary conventions. In other words, a hermeneutic of verification might make the evangelical student worry about the validity of the claim of inerrancy as in fact created by ourselves, by our failure to practise sufficiently carefully the grammatico-historical exegesis to which our evangelical predecessors appealed, and still be problems, to some of which there is no ready answer, but there is no need to multiply them by misdirected exegesis.  

2. The Principle of Harmony  

The examples already discussed have raised the question of harmonisation in different ways. What I have said about the last two examples might be taken as a more general and historical point of view, and it is not such, so let me repeat that even the secular historian, dealing with ancient (or even modern) sources, has a duty to look for realistic ways of harmonising apparent discrepancies (including the possibility of 'normal' repairs). No deliberate fudging (a 'second witness' when there is none) before he considers the possibility that one or more of his sources may be either mistaken or deliberately misleading. Clearly the biblical scholar, if he regards the biblical texts as God-given, is all the more bound to follow this principle rather than to recite instinctively from the suggestion that God's word is either mistaken or misleading. There is nothing obscurantist in this attitude; it is the necessary corollary of his dual commitment as a historian and as a Christian.  

The proper indulgence of the harmonising instinct, however, must be controlled by at least two cautionary considerations.  

(i) Harmony must be sought in terms of the biblical writer's intention, as determined by careful grammatical-historical exegesis. This is the point already sufficiently laboriously made above. It is perverse to look for a chronological harmony of accounts which were apparently not intended to be chronologically organised, or to look for a literal agreement, whether halakhic or otherwise, in the hope that the discrepancy is real, not the product of shallow excesses, before we start to harmonise.  

(ii) We must beware of such an exclusive concern for harmonisation that we fail to notice the very different purpose of the original text.  

For example, did the centurion send his Jewish friend to ask Jesus to heal his servant (so Lk 7: 1-10), or did he come himself (so Mt 8: 5-13)? A classic way of harmonising here is that represented by J. N. D. Goldingay's commentary on Luke4; both are true, in that first he sent his friends, then he came himself; Luke has recorded the first scene, and Matthew the second. Presumably if this method is pushed to its logical conclusion the whole draft of the original evangelist is thrown out of kilter, apart from this improbability, the method introduces a new problem, by making a man declare that he is unworthy to approach Jesus in person, only to do just that immediately afterwards. Is this the authentic itself of the text? Let us look at this, and two accounts of a single event, still be problems, to some of which there is no ready answer, but there is no need to multiply them by misdirected exegesis!  

Does Luke's narrative really read as if he could envisage the centurion meeting Jesus in person?  

A more careful exegesis of the two accounts reveals that each has a rather different purpose in personality. While the emphasis in Matthew is heavily on the faith of the centurion, and the significance of such faith in a Gentile. Luke, while also stressing the man's faith, is more interested in his character, particularly his humility, than in his nationality. Here is a more promising explanation of the discrepancy about the friends. To Luke their presence is important in emphasising the centurion's humility and diffidence; to Matthew they are important as bringing attention from the main point of the story, the response of the Gentile to Jesus. So Matthew has done what he often does elsewhere (as mentioned above); he has left out a detail irrelevant to his purpose, in order to concentrate on what was for him the main point of the story. This is not ground for accusing Matthew of falsification or error in suggesting that the two met face to face; his omission of the means of the centurion's approach to Jesus is a valid literary device to highlight the message of the incident as he sees it (on the principle, common in biblical and contemporary literature, that a messenger or servant represents the one who sent him to the point of virtual identity).  

A too hasty, mechanical harmonisation in this case would be to overlook the whole point of the incident, by ignoring the distinctive theological contribution of the two evangelists in their recording of it. Unless we believe that the evangelists were mere mindless compilers of stories and do not look for distinction in the way of the text, then the harmonisation robs us of the very messages which they wrote their Gospels to put across. If God has given us a story in two different forms, each with a special theological emphasis, it will becomes us to try to reduce them to a common denominator. Besides, this example reminds us that a proper attention to the writers' purpose will sometimes direct us to a much more plausible harmonisation than a mechanical fitting together of the texts.  

Similar principles apply to the differing form in which the Gospels record the sayings of Jesus. Here, as in the case of 'duplicate narratives' mentioned above, it is often the most realistic approach which helps. And it is through looking at the different sayings that we can begin to get insight into the sayings of Jesus, and understand the sayings of Jesus in different contexts.

I find it very hard, for instance, to believe that the Parables of the cities 6:20-26 in Matthew and Luke have any conforms. The attitudinal parallels of Matthew 5:3-12 are variants of one original discourse, or can I see any reason why they should be thought to be so. The desire to make them say the same thing is perhaps one of the reasons why we are not faced as often as we should be by the stark anti-materialism of the Lucan passage; it is spiritualised into poverty 'in spirit', and the whole uncomfortable point is conveniently left 'to you' and 'the mind', and lost in the context to do with it. I meant what He said. To harmonise what was originally distinct is in this case disastrous.

On the other hand, it is clear to anyone who has made extensive studies of the synoptic Gospels that the Christian evangelists, for all their undefined concern to preserve the content of Jesus' sayings intact, were quite prepared to vary the wording of a saying they had received in order to emphasise the message which they found in it, and that thus

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objection to this suggestion, and many cases of 'duplicate narratives' are in fact best explained as accounts of originally separate but comparable incidents, which have naturally come to be told in increasingly similar words as the stories have been passed down. This is the best explanation, for instance, of the feedings of the 5,000 and the 4,000, or of the various anointing stories, or, probably, of the two miraculous catches of fish in such different historical circumstances. It is a poor historian, whether Jewish or Christian, who without immediately accuses his sources of error and distortion, on the assumption that similar incidents do not happen, rather than weighing up what is the most realistic explanation of the accounts as they stand.

But something more than the case not likely to be repeated, and the cleansing of the temple which looks like one of these, a public dramatic gesture, a stark demonstration of Jesus' Messianic claim, after which His relations with the Jewish establishment could never be the same again. Nor does any of the evangelists hint that there was a second such incident; it is just that they locate it differently in the development of Jesus' ministry. Which is the more probable stage for it to occur is an open question. No writer in such a public and provocative demonstration right at the beginning of the ministry, when for most of His ministry Jesus was so reluctant to make an open claim, and so anxious to keep; to my mind it fits naturally with the equally public and provocative gesture of Jesus' donkeyride into Jerusalem, in the framework of the final confrontation with the establishment. If so, it is hard to see any way of accounting for its placement were it not placed at the beginning as a fitting declaration of who Jesus was (like the immediately preceding incident at Cana, in which Jesus 'manifested His glory'), rather than because it actually happened then; in other words, a hypothesis of theologically motivated ill-crafted precision took second place to a thematic arrangement designed to effect John's declared purpose in writing, 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ'.

No doubt many refinements ought to be made to these very bald summaries of a few problem areas, but I hope enough has been said to indicate the point that a study of the Gospel texts themselves indicates that chronology was not always the governing, or even an important, criterion. (I am not suggesting, of course, that they never arranged their material chronologically, and that all attempts to draw up a chronology of New Testament events are futile. Harmonisation must always be our first aim, in chronology as in other areas of discrepancy, and in very many cases it can be done quite satisfactorily. I am merely pointing out that there are some cases where it does not seem to work.) If that is so, then our understanding of inerrancy in this connection must surely be governed by the intention with which the Gospels were written. A non-chronological arrangement is only an 'error' where the aim was to present a strictly chronological account. We should not put to the biblical text questions it was not designed to answer, or, worse still, immediately assuming that the discrepancy is real, not the product of shallow exegesis, before we start to harmonise.

We must beware of such an exclusive concern for harmonisation that we fail to notice the damage that we do to the text. For example, did the centurion send his Hebrew friends to ask Jesus to heal his servant (so Lk 7: 1-10), or did he come himself (so Mt 8: 5-13)? A classic way of harmonising here is that represented by J. N. D. Kelly's commentary on Luke in the Tyndale Bible. Both are true, in that first he sent his friends, then he came himself; Luke has recorded the first scene, and Matthew the second. Presumably if this method is pushed to its logical conclusion the whole discourse would be so harmonised apart from this improbability, the method introduces a new problem, by making a man declare that he is unworthy to approach Jesus in person, only to do just that immediately afterwards. Is this the way the text itself was harmonised? Does Luke's narrative really read as if he could envisage the centurion meeting Jesus in person?

A more careful exegesis of the two accounts reveals that each has a rather different purpose in prophecy. For Luke the emphasis is on the hopefulness of the healing, and the claim is made that it is almost entirely on the faith of the centurion, and the significance of such faith in a Gentile. Luke, while also stressing the man's faith, is more interested in his character, particularly his humility, than in his nationality. Here is a more promising explanation of the discrepancy about the friends. To Luke their presence is important in emphasising the centurion's humility and diffidence; to Matthew they represent the same virtue. Not only are we following the original text, but maintaining attention from the main point of the story, the response of the Gentile to Jesus. So Matthew has done what he often does elsewhere (as mentioned above); he has left out a detail irrelevant to his purpose; in order to concentrate on what was for him the main point of the story. This is not ground for accusing Matthew of falsification or error in suggesting that the two met face to face; his omission of the 'means' of the centurion's approach to Jesus is a valid literary device to highlight the message of the incident as he sees it (on the principle, common in biblical and contemporary literature, that a messenger or servant represents the one who sent him to the point of virtual identity). A too hasty, mechanical harmonisation in this case, by ignoring the whole point of the incident, by ignoring the distinctive theological contribution of the two evangelists in their recording of it. Unless we believe that the evangelists were mere mindless collectors of stories and that what we read is a reconstruction for harmonisation robs us of the very messages which they wrote their Gospels to put across. If God has given us a story in two different forms, each with a special theological emphasis, it ill becomes us to try to reduce them to a common denominator. Besides, this example reminds us that a proper attention to the writers' purpose will sometimes direct us to a much more plausible harmonisation than a mechanical fitting together of the two narratives in question.

Similar principles apply to the differing form in which the Gospels record the sayings of Jesus. Here, as in the case of 'duplicate narratives' mentioned above, it is often the most realistic explanation of the disparity itself that makes the most sense of the texts. In John's Gospel we have 6:20-26, which is clearly based on the text of Matthew 5:3-12 are variants of one original discourse, nor can I see any reason why they should be thought to be so. The desire to make them say the same thing is perhaps one of the reasons why we are not faced as often as we should be by the stark anti-materialism of the Lucan passage; it is spiritualised into poverty 'in spirit', and the whole uncomfortable point is conveniently reduced to 'you poor', and then further relieved in context to doctoring the text which He said. To harmonise what was originally distinct is in this case disastrous.

On the other hand, it is clear to anyone who has merely read the Gospels that the two evangelists, for all their undoubtedly common concern to preserve the content of Jesus' sayings intact, were quite prepared to vary the wording of a saying they had received in order to emphasise the message which they found in it, and that thus

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and admit defeat in his search for a real harmony in that which God has caused to be written.

To return, then, to our original question: does the evangelical’s commitment to a high view of Scripture, which entails inerrancy, automatically exclude him from the use of the critical methods which any given rules of the game of academic biblical study? In fact no such rule exists: he has, if anything, a stronger incentive than any- one else to work hard and critically at his exegesis, for he believes that what he is interpreting is the word of God, and therefore should spare no pains in discovering what it really means. If he involved himself to practise the most rigorous grammatico-historical exegesis, without taking short cuts or fudging the issue, it is the evangelical. His doctrinal position obligates him to maintain the purity of the word in demand, to study the text of Scripture critically in the light of all available knowledge relevant to it. He can, and should, have a real positive contribution to make to responsible exegesis, which is what academic biblical study is, or should be, all about.

In the process he will find that he will come into confrontation with many fanciful theories and sceptical presuppositions which he is unable to accept. If his study is sufficiently thorough, it will provide him with a reason to question, on solid academic grounds, the validity of many commonly held positions. He will soon come to suspect that if anyone is not paying according to the rules it is not necessarily he, but those scholars, often best-known, who vehemently import into the study of the Bible modern anti-supernatural presuppositions, and evolve blinkered critical procedures which make New Testament studies the laughing-stock of scholars working in related historical and literary disciplines, for many years ago. Such a location would seem to be implied in Stephen’s reference to Abraham’s time in Mesopota- mia ‘before he lived in Haran’ (Acts 7:2). If the identification is correct it would mean that Terah took his family into Egypt, yet customs and practices in southern Mesopotamia to another in the north (the names of both Terah and Laban probably reflect the family’s devotion to the moon-god). While precise dates for Abraham and the other patriarchs are not possible (estimates for Abraham vary between 2000 and 1300 BC) the whole of the period within which his story undoubtedly falls was one of considerable population movement. The great events of the international era later in the second millennium were anticipated by emergent powers such as the Hittites and Hurrians (cf. Gn. 14)—still too weak to act other than in co-operation with one another. The bent of the archaeological evidence for this period is of tribal movements down the Euphrates valley, not by the Amorites. From moving from Ur to Haran Terah’s family was going against the trend as far as their Semitic (Amorite) brethren were con- cerned. Equally against this was Abraham’s abandoning of city life and embracing the fortunes of a semi-nomad (cf. Gn. 11:1-9).

It is the Hurrian tablets from Nuzi which provide the closest parallels to the patriarchal customs. The Hurrians were noted for their closeness to the Semitic peoples. Nuzi was an important element in the population of Haran and many other Mesopotamian cities. Abraham’s pretence that Sarah was his sister (which in a sense: see Gn. 20:12) may be understood in the light of the Hurrian veneration of sisterhood. The status of a marriage could be enhanced by the husband’s adoption of his wife as a sister. The Hurrian practice of adoption is an important element in the case of a childless couple which invites comparison with Eliezer’s position in Abraham’s house (Gn. 15:2-4). Yet another method of dealing with this problem was for a barren wife to provide her husband with a concubine, that by her he might have an heir. This is just what Sarah did when she gave Hagar to Abraham. And, as happened when Isaac was born, if an heir was born to the man’s own wife it was to take precedence over any child born in concubinage. As a result, there is no com- pelling reason for regarding the patriarchal stories as inventions from the period of the Israelite monarchy which reflect the social customs and practices of the period. On the contrary, the antiquity of the narratives is with the second rather than the first millennium. Theology and didactic abound in the Abraham cycle, but they are built on credible historical data.

II

Fundamental to the Abraham story is a tension between promise and fulfillment which is only partly resolved. The theme of faith in God against all the odds is a recurring motif of the promised heir (cf. Gn. 15:1-6) and the promised land (cf. Gn. 15:7-21). The call to be God’s nomad imposed a great strain on Abraham as a man and as a believer; the generous appraisal in Romans 4:20 does not deny that he made
and admit defeat in his search for a real harmony in that which God has caused to be written.

To return, then, to our original question: does the evangelical’s commitment to a high view of Scripture, which entails inerrancy, automatically exclude him from the use of the critical methods which any given rules of the game of academic biblical study? In fact, he accepts the criticism; he has, if anything, a stronger incentive than any- one else to work hard and critically at his exegesis, for he believes that what he is interpreting is the word of God, and therefore he should spare no pains in discovering what it really means. If his involvement in the study of the most rigorous grammatico-historical exegesis, without taking short cuts or fudging the issue, it is the evangelical. His doctrinal position obliges him to be vacillating the pandering to demand, to study the text of Scripture critically in the light of all available knowledge relevant to it. He can, and should, have a real positive contribu- tion to make to responsible exegesis, which is what academic biblical study is, or should be, all about.

In the process he will find that he will come into confrontation with many fanciful theories and sceptical presuppositions which he is unable to accept. If his study is sufficiently thorough, it will provide a stronger reason to question, on solid academic grounds, the validity of many commonly held positions. He will soon come to suspect that if anyone is not playing according to the rules it is not necessarily he, but those scholars, often well-known, who cannot import into the study of the Bible modern anti-supernatural presuppositions, and evolve blinkered critical procedures which make New Testament studies the laughing-stock of scholars working in related historic and literary disciplines. If his involvement in academic biblical study enables him to restore some critical sanity to an ingrown discipline, he will deserve the thanks of all serious students of the Bible, evangelical or otherwise.

In biblical studies, as in so many areas of study (and of life), it is the half-hearted who get hurt. The evangelical scholar who is not afraid to get fully involved with critical study of the Bible is soon in a position to see that not the rules of the game which discourage an evangelical’s com- mitment, but a one-sided interpretation of the rules, which he has every right to challenge, on the basis of the grammatico-historical method itself. The study may be prolix, it is endured, but it is the players, not the spectators, who are likely to be in a position to enforce them.

Preaching from the Patriarchs
Background to the Exposition of Genesis 15
Robert P. Gordon

This article was prepared for a series in the TSF Bulletin under the title ‘Preparation for Exposition’, which was planned to give examples of ‘the Bible study which preceded the presentation of the Word of God’, without setting out the exposition itself. Dr Gordon, Lecturer in Hebrew at the University of Glasgow, here shows that academic historical study of the patriarchal period has its contribution to make to the use of Genesis in the pulpit.

The twentieth century has witnessed the rehabilita- tion of Abraham as a historical person who lived in the first half of the second millennium BC. This is in large measure thanks to archaeological discoveries at such centres as Mari and Ugarit. There is no direct evidence of the existence of Abraham or the city of Ur to help the student, and even basic to the Genesis narratives have been amply illustrated from these centres. The significance of these finds for the patriarchal accounts is qualified, certainly not nullified, by the consideration that they are probably to be dated after the time of Abraham.

Abraham is introduced to us as a member of a pagan family living in Ur of the Chaldees. It is still widely held that this is the Ur in southern Iraq which is mentioned not long after the great flood about 2000 years ago. Such a location would seem to be implied in Stephen’s reference to Abraham’s time in Mesopo- tamia ‘before he lived in Haran’ (Acts 7:2). If the identifications is correct it would mean that that Ur took its name from the city, yet custom and practice in southern Mesopotamia to another in the north (the names of both Terah and Laban probably reflect the family’s devotion to the moon-god). While precise dates for Abraham and the other patriarchs are not possible (estimates for Abraham vary between 2000 and 1300 BC) the whole of the period within which his story undoubtedly falls was one of considerable population movement. The great events of the international era later in the second millennium were anticipated by migrations and the second millennium were anticipated by emergent powers such as the Hittites and Hurrians (cf. Gn. 14)—still too weak to act other than in co-operation with one another. The bent of the archaeological evidence for this period is of tribal movements down the Euphrates valley, notbably by the Amorites. In moving from Ur to Haran Terah’s family was going against the trend as far as their Semitic (Amorite) brethren were con- cerned. Equally, Terah’s abandoning of city life and embracing the fortunes of a semi-nomad (cf. Gn. 11:1-9).

It is the Hurrian tablets from Nuzi which provide the closest parallels to the patriarchal customs of the age. Nuzi is noted for its near- as similarity in the alien cultures in which they settled. By the mid-second millennium they were an important element in the population of Haran and many other Mesopotamian cities. Abraham’s pretence that Sarah was his sister (which is true in a sense: see Gn. 20:12) may be understood in the light of the Hurrian veneration of sisterhood. The status of a marriage could be enhanced by the husband’s adoption of his wife as a sister. The Hurrian tablets, in their form of adoption in the case of a childless couple which invites comparison with Eliezer’s position in Abraham’s house (Gn. 15:2-4). Yet another method of dealing with this problem was for a barren wife to provide her husband with a concubine, that by her he might have an heir. This is just what Sarah did when she gave Hagar to Abraham. And, as happened when Isaac was born, if an heir was born to the man’s own wife it took precece over any child born in concubinage. As a result, there is no com- pelling reason for regarding the patriarchal stories as inventions from the period of the Israelite monarchy which reflect the social customs and practices of the time. On the contrary, the affinity of the narratives is with the second rather than with the first millennium. Theology and didactic abound in the Abraham cycle, but they are built on credible historical data.
mistakes, but shows that God chose to overlook them as he reviewed Abraham's life of faith. Abraham does not appear to have been long in Canaan before the inadequacies of the place were impressed upon him. There was a famine in the land and he felt it necessary to go down to Egypt to keep his flocks. He could not imagine God had called him was no Garden of Eden. Going down to Egypt was a necessary and wise step (cf. Mt. 2:13-21). Traffic of this sort between Palestine and Egypt was common enough in the Egyptian 1st Intermediate Period. Abraham's flight was instinct for self-preservation, and the measures to which it drove him, which must be questioned. He evidently failed to derive strength from the consciousness his promise could not be fulfilled in a dead Abraham.

For Lot the uncertainties of the nomadic way of life became too much. It was time for him to part company with his uncle. Abraham's encouraging Lot to go to whichever part of the land appealed to him is to be seen as being as much an expression of faith in God as a generous offer to his nephew. Lot's subsequent history forms a superbly-handled sub-plot throwing into relief the trials and triumphs of Abraham. One of the results which forms the background to the episodes described in that chapter. Later he was reckoned an elder in Sodom (Gn. 19:1), but sadly lacking in influence because of compromise. So dependent on city life had he become that when Sodom was destroyed he did not bear to live under any other conditions. The little town of Zoar was a desirable refuge indeed (Gn. 19:18-23). How much higher Abraham rose can be seen from his encounter with two Canaanite kings, as recorded in Genesis 14:17-24.

Genesis 14 bears signs of great antiquity, notably in one or two details of vocabulary and toponymy. There are several instances of the contemporizing of archaic names. The word translated "trained men" in verse 14 (RSV) does not occur elsewhere in the Old Testament but is paralleled in the early second millennium Egyptian excavation texts where it denotes Canaanite retainers. It may be that the compiler had an independent existence before it was incorporated into the Genealogical narratives. Abraham as the 'Hebrew' might suggest this. We have in any case a very detailed itinerary of the four kings which embraces much more than is of immediate concern for the history of Abraham, Lot or Sodom. There is a good historical ring about Melchizedek's name, its original meaning was probably 'Melchi-king', with Zedek a toponymic element. In the time of Joshua, Jerusalem was ruled by a king called Adonizedek ('Zedek is (my) lord') see Jos. 10:1 and it would seem that the god Zedek was specially venerated at Jerusalem. The name 'Zedek' is known probably as in Ps. 76:2). Melchizedek is described as 'priest of Most High'; the divine title 'God Most High' (el 'elyon) is paralleled in Canaanite religious texts. In Abraham's reply to the king of Sodom he invokes the name of El (Gn. 14:22) 'elleyon with Yahweh is made. The insertion of YHWH, therefore, can only be meant to emphasise the identity, not the difference, between the God of Melchizedek and the God of Abraham, known to the people of Israel as YHWH. This accords with the biblical idea of individual non-Hebrews who acknowledge the one God. The point of the intervention by Melchizedek is that he takes from Abraham, whereas the king of Sodom, representative of worldly powers at their worst (cf. 15:13), wishes to confer benefits on him. (Such a didactic element in the story is quite compatible with the desire to preserve a tradition linking Jerusalem with the patriarchal period.) It was involved with Sodom which had so quickly punished all the other kings at risk, so that Abraham had resolved not to compromise in the slightest degree with the king of Sodom (14:22-23). On the other hand, his willingness to renounce the emerging pattern of Abraham's life, with its subordination of present gain to future prosperity under God.

Through the interview(s) with God in chapter 15 Abraham is made more aware of the way in which the promises will be fulfilled. In particular, he learns that he will have a son who will carry on his name. What had not been specifically stated was whether Sarah would be the mother of that heir. Sarah was in her 90th year when God promised to make Abraham rich and to give him a son. The letter of the word meant the capability of his wife's advice and had a son by Hagar her maid. No matter how socially acceptable this action was, in terms of the grand theme of trust in the God of the promises Abraham was wrong to submit to Sarah's wishes. In both cases contracts it was usually the husband who insisted on the right of concubinage should his wife fail to provide him with an heir. Genesis 17 tells of important new developments in the story. Abraham is made aware that Canaan is the new phase of life into which they are entering. The first stage in God's covenant-making with Abraham

mistakes, but shows that God chose to overlook them as he reviewed Abraham's life of faith. Abraham does not appear to have been long in Canaan before the inadequacies of the place were impressed upon him. There was a famine in the land and he felt it necessary to go down to Egypt to keep himself and his family from starving. To which God had called him was no Garden of Eden. Going down to Egypt was a necessary and wise step (cf. Mt. 2:13-21). Traffic of this sort between Palestine and Egypt was common enough in the Egyptian laws. Abraham's instinct for self-preservation, and the measures to which it drove him, must be questioned. He evidently failed to derive strength from the consciousness of his promise could not be fulfilled in a dead Abraham.

For Lot the uncertainties of the nomadic way of life became too much. It was time for him to part company with his uncle. Abraham's encouraging Lot to go to whichever part of the land appealed to him is to be seen as being as much an expression of faith in God as a generous offer to his nephew. Lot's subsequent history forms a superbly-handled sub-plot throwing into relief the trials and triumphs of Abraham and Sarah in the abadonment of the pilgrim vocation and return to urban life—in some of its worst manifestations. Genesis 14:12 speaks of 'Lot who dwelt in Sodom', and it is his presence there at the time of the raid of the kings which forms the background to the episodes described in that chapter. Later he was reckoned an elder in Sodom (Gen. 19:1), but sadly lacking in influence because of compromise. So dependent on city life had he become that when Sodom was destroyed, he was not to bear to live under any other conditions. The little town of Zoar was a desirable refuge indeed (Gen. 19:18-23). How much higher Abraham rose can be seen from his encounter with two Canaanite kings, as recorded in Genesis 14:17-24.

Genesis 14 bears signs of great antiquity, notably in one or two details of vocabulary and topography. There are several instances of the contemporising of archaic names. The word translated 'trained man' in verse 14 (RSV) does not occur elsewhere in the Old Testament but is paralleled in the early second millennium Egyptian excavation texts where it denotes Canaanite retainers. It may be that the chronicler had an independent existence before it was incorporated into the text. We have seen above that Abraham as 'the Hebrew' might suggest this. We have in any case a very detailed itinerary of the four kings which embraces much more than is of immediate concern for the history of Abraham, Lot or Sodom. There is a good historical ring about Melchizedek's name, and its original meaning was probably 'Zadek (the just) king', with Zedek a theophoric element. In the time of Joshua, Jerusalem was ruled by a king called Adonizedek ('Zedek is my lord'); see Jos. 10:1. And it would seem that the god Zedek was specially associated with Jerusalem; in Gn. 14:18 the name of the city probably as Jerusalem as in Ps. 76:2. Melchizedek is described as 'priest of Most High'; the divine title 'God Most High' (Eìl 'elyon) is paralleled in Canaanite religious texts. In Abraham's reply to the king of Sodom he states that he 'served the Most High (Eìl 'elyon) with Yahweh is made. 'The insertion of YHWH, therefore, can only be meant to emphasise the identity, not the difference, between the God of Melchizedek and the God of Abraham, known to the people of Israel as YHWH. This accords with the biblical idea of individual non-Hebrews who acknowledge the one God.¹ The point of the intervention by Melchizedek is that he takes from Abraham, whereas the king of Sodom, representative of worldly powers at their worst (cf. 15:13), wishes to confer benefits on him. (Such a didactic element in the story is quite compatible with the desire to preserve a tradition linking Jerusalem with the patriarchs.) It was involved with Sodom which had so quickly punished all sin and sinners at risk, so that Abraham had resolved not to compromise in the slightest degree with the king of Sodom (14:22-23). On the other hand, his willing- ness to set his people free in the emerging pattern of Abraham's life, with its subordination of present gain to future prosperity under God.

Through the interview(s) with God in chapter 15 Abraham is made more aware of the way in which the promises will be fulfilled. In particular, he learns that he will have a son who will carry on his name. What had not been specifically stated was whether Sarah would be the mother of that heir. Abraham's eagerness in God's promise included his wife's advice and had a son by Hagar her maid. No matter how socially acceptable this action was, in terms of the grand theme of trust in the God of the promises Abraham was wrong to submit his Sarah's feelings of desolation. He contracted it usually the husband who insisted on the rights of concubinage should his wife fail to provide him with an heir. Genesis 17 tells of important new developments in the story. Abraham could now have their son, but the legitimation of this new phase of life into which they are entering. The first stage in God's covenant-making with Abraham follows by chapter 15, chapter 14 being a separate document of uncertain origin.² Such an assumption of mindless editing is quite unnecessary. The promise of protection and reward (15:1) is as well suited to the circumstances described in chapter 14 as to those of chapter 15. (That(Mosaic) removes the embarrasment of having, in the same source, two similar messages from God encouraging Abraham after Lot had chosen the most fertile tract of land.) Cassuto thinks that there is a numeri- kind of a pattern—like the one in which God promised to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah—this was a threat to the New Testament commentator on this episode observes: 'He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back' (Heb. 11:19).

The second great issue—that of the possession of the land—was not within sight of being fulfilled. The promise to give Abraham the whole land to the generation after him (Gn. 13:15-17) died and he had to buy a piece of ground in which to bury her. As a 'stranger and sojourner' (23:4) Abraham was rather dependent on the goodwill of the Hittites to whom he put his request. At first they were willing to give him land to acquire from them, but when they changed their minds, he did take the land and set up a pillar (6:23). "To the promise of the covenant agrees well with what is known of land transactions, both Hittite and Mesopotamian. Such minor difficulties do not detract from the text which stands at Moriah. One of his last recorded acts was to solemnly commission his servant to go to Padan- Aram to find a wife for Isaac. What concerned him was that the young lady should be brought down to Canaan and should not be forced to travel to Padan- Aram. 'See to it that you do not take my son back there!' (24:6). It was nothing if not a magnificent declaration of his conviction that the future of his family lay in Canaan and not back in Mesopotamia.

The opening words of Genesis 15, 'after these things' appear to link the chapter with the section immediately preceding it, but the legitimacy of this has frequently been disallowed. Bennett's application of the documentary theory led him to suppose that these "things" refers to Abraham's building of altars and his generosity to Lot, because in the original Yahwistic document chapter 13 was


with Eliezer. The first of these objections is the more substantial, but only permits the conclusion that Nuzu does not afford a complete parallel to the case of Eliezer. As to the exclusion of Eliezer from any rights of inheritance—Thompson is reading this into the text. Such is the Hebrew writer's preoccupation with the issue of natural succession that he is little interested, if at all, in how events affected Eliezer.

The latter part of verse 2 poses difficulties for the translator, its purport is clear from verse 3. Eliezer would in the normal course of events have looked after Abraham and Sarah and would have been responsible for the performance of the proper funerary rites when they died. In return he would have inherited all his master's possessions. This kind of arrangement is known from other places as well as Nuzu. Apart from the natural desire of an ancient Semite to survive through his progeny (to what extent did this take the place of an expectation of an after-life?), Abraham was doubtless thinking of the original terms of his call ("I will make of you a great nation", 12:2). Note that nothing was said to Eliezer in connection with the possibility of Sarah having a son, Abraham could well imagine, and probably did imagine, that the son was to be born to Hagar. That he was still far from thinking that the promise could involve Sarah is evident from 16:1-4.

How do we understand verse 6, and in what way, if any, does Paul's use of it differ from its original significance? The Hebrew word 'mānā' (faith) may be applied to both God and man. So God is described as having faith (Gen 15:6; 12:2) as a 'righteous man' (Gen 15:6; 'el mānā), because of the observable justice in all His actions. This is the word used in Habakkuk 2:4, 'the just shall live by his faith' (or 'faithfulness')

Usually, as here, the OT expresses the idea of faithfulness (compare the Fourth Gospel in this respect); cf. also 2 Chronicles 20:20, Proverbs 3:5, Isaiah 12:2, etc. Kidner remarks appositely: "Note that Abram's trust was both personal (in the Lord, AV, RV) and corporate (NRSV). It is the word of the Lord in verses 4, 5.)

In Christian proclamation the appeal for faith in a personal God must always be coupled with a presentation of the evidence for the truth of the Gospel. It is not enough to say that God reveals Himself in acts which man must interpret and from which he must infer the character of God and His own destiny. Biblical faith claims a firmer foundation than the restriction of God's self-disclosure to His actions would allow. If God does not explain His actions man cannot arrive at certain knowledge. And there are many areas where truth cannot be conveyed except in propositional form. Abraham believed God in the absence of any act of God from which he might have drawn inferences about the divine will for himself or indication of the moral law. The verse was seminal for the NT development of the doctrine of justification. That righteousness was reckoned to Abraham before the covenant of circumcision was initiated (i.e., Gen. 15 comes before Gen. 17). The acceptance by God indicated by highly significant by Paul (Rom. 4:9-12). This showed that acceptance by God was not dependent on the observance of the rite of circumcision. Indeed, for Paul the proper significance of Genesis 15:6 is that Abraham's acceptance was not dependent on any work or merit he might plead (see Rom. 4:3). Such a message did not only make the Jew aware of his true position before God, it offered great hope to the Gentiles (Rom. 4:16-25). This latter point is taken up in Gal. 3, where our text is linked with the promise of blessing to all nations (Gal. 3:6-9): "those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith". James 2:1-24 stresses that even the Gentile slave in the Egyptian court was the fulfillment of Genesis 15:6. No opposition between faith and works is implied; real faith issues in works. The necessity of an active principle in faith presumably explains why Genesis 15:6 does not receive full emphasis in Christian reflection. Paul uses the idea of faith in Hebrews 11. Abraham is commended for actions expressive of his trust in God (verses 8-10 and 17-19).

How do we define 'righteousness' in this context? Attempts to tie the original significance of the Hebrew root q-d-q have not resulted in a unanimous verdict, though there is something to be said for the explanation adopted by, among others, Strauss.

In his opinion the root meaning is 'to be straight'. The root (q-t) occurs 65 times in the Hebrew Bible and is itself derived from the Akkadian q-t (qur-sumunu) — whose importance for Pauline thought scarcely needs mentioning.) But root meanings will help us in little in our pursuit of q-d-q in Genesis 15:6. Hooke gives 6 different meanings for q-d-q, all mean the same thing: it signifies 'nothing less than the character of God Himself in His dealings with man. The original intention in man's creation was that he should be in God's image, after His likeness. By his act of disobedience the image was defaced, the likeness destroyed; now the work of restoration has begun; God has found the response of faith and obedience. He has found a man in whom His own character begins to be formed." Skinner attaches more of a positional significance to the word: 'a right relation to God conferred by a divine sentence of approval for himself and for his recognition of that'. The root q-d-q may well be discerned in this occurrence of q-d-q, that 'righteousness' is implied in the occurrences of q-d-q, that 'righteousness' is one who meets the obligations of the relationship upon which he has entered; God is always 'righteous'. His dealings with man. Abraham's insight of his relationship to God by his faith-dependence. In verses 7ff., the question of Abraham's possession of the land is raised. Assurance is conveyed through a covenant pledge. While the animal used were acceptable as Levitical offerings in later times, and the treatment of the birds conforms to Leviticus 1:17, this was much more than a sacrifice. From verses 1? and 5 it appears that the first part of Abraham's covenant with Mil'tu was against this treaty, so may, just as the head of Mil'tu was torn off ... the head of Mil'tu be torn off ..." 11 Samuel 11: 7 shares the same outlook. The Hebrew expression for making a covenant translates literally as 'to cut off' or 'to make a division'. It follows that the understanding of the covenant ceremony. It was in the reign of David that Abraham's descendants actually came to control the territory detailed in verses 18-21.

For Paul it was a fact of the utmost significance that this unconditional covenant was ratified centuries before the Mosaic covenant at Sinai (see Gal. 3:15-18). The privilege of salvation by grace (implicit in the promise to Abraham) preceded, and was never superseded by, the covenant of law. The privilege of grace remains an essential part of the Christian message. While God must fulfill His covenant undertakings; it is men individually who may cut themselves off from the covenant blessings. What God has required in all ages, so that His saving power may be fulfilled in all ages, almost entirely in advance (verse 6). Genesis 15 has the gospel in a nutshell.

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Usually, as here, the OT expresses the idea of faithfulness in a different word from the word for faithfulness. (Compare the Fourth Gospel in this respect); cf. also 2 Chronicles 20:20, Proverbs 3:5, Isaiah 12:2, etc. Kidner remarks appositely: 'Note that Abram's trust was both personal (in the Lord, AV, RV) and corporate (in Israel, RV)'. Note the word of the Lord in verses 4, 5, 6. 'In Christian proclamation the appeal for faith in a personal God must always be coupled with a presentation of the evidence for the truth of the Gospel. It is not enough to say that God reveals Himself in acts which man must interpret and from which he must infer the character of God and His own destiny.' Biblical faith claims a firmer foundation than the restriction of God's self-disclosure to His actions would allow. If God does not explain His actions man cannot arrive at certain knowledge. And there are many areas where truth cannot be conveyed except in propositional form. Abraham believed God in the absence of any act of God from which he might have drawn inferences about the divine will for himself or the sanction of His Word.

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How do we define 'righteousness' in this context? Attempts to draw the origin of the significance of the Hebrew root q-d-h have not resulted in a unanimous verdict, though there is something to be said for the explanation adopted by, among others, Snith. 4 In his opinion the root meaning is 'to be straight'. (The root q-d-h is specifically used in Genesis 25:20, 26 and its derivatives, particularly dikaiosunē—whose importance for Pauline thought scarcely needs mentioning.) But root meanings will help us little in our pursuit of ἱκανότητα in Genesis 15:6. Hooke gives a very helpful explanation to mean the state of being fit, which signifies 'nothing less than the character of God Himself in His dealings with man. The original intention in man's creation was that he should be in God's image, after His likeness. By his act of disobedience the image was defaced, the likeness destroyed; now the work of restoration has begun; God has found the response of faith and obedience. He has found a man in whom His own character begins to be formed.' Snith attaches more of a positional significance to the word: 'a right relation to God conferred by a divine sentence of approval.' Righteousness by faith is implied in the occurrences of ἱκανότης; the 'righteous man' is one who meets the obligations of the relationship upon which he has entered. God is always 'righteous' in His dealings with man. Abraham's identity with the obligations of His relationship to God by his faith-dependence.

In verses 7-8 the question of Abraham's possession of the land is raised. Assurance is conveyed through a covenant pledge. While the animal was used as an acceptable as Levitical offerings in later times, and the treatment of the birds conforms to Leviticus 1:17, this was much more than a sacrifice. From verses 1(?) and 5 it appears that the first part of Abraham and the birds of sacrifice is a toast against his execution; the fact that verse 12 refers to sunset has been taken as an indication that the chapter is of composite origin. This may be the case, but need verses 7-8 be treated as if they were intended to refer to the earlier verse? The text and the vision really was composite! At all events, the scene is set in such a way as to convey a sense of awe in the face of the ceremony about to take place. Abraham's deep sleep is reminiscent of Genesis 2:21. We need here a Hebrew word to describe Adam's unnatural sleep.

The total of four hundred years for the Egyptian bondage is a round figure (cf. Acts 7:6). According to Exodus 12:40 'the time that the people of Israel dwelt in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years'. That the Israelites would come out with great possessions accords with Exodus 12:35-36. In view of the fact that Abraham's ancestors were buried in Mesopotamia the reference to his going to his fathers is not at all surprising. Husbands would be buried in a family grave. The 'fourth generation' (verse 16), representing the end of the period of four hundred and thirty years, must be understood in the light of the Canaanite and Mesopotamian use of 'generation' to denote a lengthy life-span. 11 The Amorites were the inhabitants of Canaan. The statement about them in verse 16 is regarded by Kidner as one of the most important OT pronouncements on theedity. Joshua's invasion was 'an act of justice, not aggression'. 12 Throughout the section beginning with verse 12 the section is under g the laws which God undertaken to bestow the covenant blessings and at this stage no obligation is laid upon Abra- ham. The divine initiative becomes most express in verse 17. As at Sinai (Ex. 19:18) God's presence becomes visible on the mountain and fire God passes between the pieces of the dismembered victims, in solemn undertaking that He will fulfill the promises made. Illustration of this procedure comes from a passage in Jeremiah and from extra-Biblical sources. In speaking of those who broke a covenant which they had made with God the prophet (Jer. 34:18-20) develops the significance of the divided caherce. As the calf had been divided when the covenant was ratified so the people concerned were to eat of it as an effect of having broken the terms of the covenant. Of the various Mesopotamian analogues we choose the treaty between Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Mat'iu of Ammon, for the later texts contain against this treaty, so may, just as the head of the calf, cut off... . the head of Mat'i'iu be torn off. . . . ' 13 Samuel 11: 7 shares the same outlook. The Hebrew expression for making a covenant translates literally as 'to cut off the head of man'. This action is associated with the covenant ceremony. It was in the reign of David that Abraham's descendants actually came to control the territory detailed in verses 18-21.

For Paul it was a fact of the utmost significance that this unconditional covenant was ratified centuries before the Mosaic covenant at Sinai (see Gal. 3:15-18). The principle of salvation by grace (implicit in the promise to Abraham) preceded, and was never superseded by, the covenant of law. The principle of faith was heeded: God must fulfi his covenant undertakings; it is men individually who may cut themselves off from the covenant blessings. What God has required in all ages, so that His saving purpose may be fulfilled in them, is therefore already in their nature (verse 6). Genesis 15 has the gospel in a nutshell.


and admit defeat in his search for a real harmony in that which God has caused to be written.

To return, then, to our original question: does the evangelist's commitment to a high view of Scripture, which entails inerrancy, automatically exclude him from the use of the critical methods which have been applied to the game of academic biblical study? In fact, I believe that he has, if anything, a stronger incentive than any other to work hard and critically at his exegesis, for he believes that what he is interpreting is the word of God, and the reason he should spare no pains in discovering what it really means. He finds himself obligated to practice the most rigorous grammatico-historical exegesis, without taking short cuts or fudging the issue, it is the evangelical. His doctrinal position obliges him to vacate the pandthic position, to bring out a different face of the message of Jesus. The principle of harmony forbids us to interpret one version of a saying as contradicting another, but it is compatible with critical exegesis, without making the different nuances which the evangelists bring out. Indeed the evangelical, with his doctrine of inspiration, should be in the forefront of those who try to bring out the significance of each inspired writer. In other words, he has every reason to welcome redaction-criticism as an exccetional tool, however much he may deplore the critical assumptions which have motivated some of its best-known practitioners.

So harmonisation must not be sought mechanically, in such a way as to obscure the different emphases of the biblical writers. But this is really no different to what harmonisation must be sought under the guidance of grammatico-historical exegesis, and not in defiance of it. The two methodological commitments isolated by Dr Packer as involved in an evangelical hermeneutic are not in conflict with each other. They are the principles which should guide any careful historian in his approach to ancient sources. The difference for the evangelical is that he is committed to the most patient and exacting application of these principles, and will not lightly give up

This article was prepared for a series in the TSF Bulletin under the title 'Preparation for Exposition', which was planned to give examples of 'the Bible study which has been made possible by the discovery of the Word of God', without setting out the exposition itself. Dr Gordon, Lecturer in Hebrew at the University of Ghana, here shows that academic historical study of the patriarchal period has its contribution to make to the use of Genesis in the pulpit.

The twentieth century has witnessed the re habilitation of Abraham as a historical person who lived in the first half of the second millennium BC. This is in large measure thanks to archaeological discoveries at such centres as Mari and Nuvi. There is no direct evidence of the existence of Abraham or of whether he was a nomad or a settled peasant. However, basic to the Genesis narratives have been ample illustrated from these centres. The significance of these finds for the patriarchal accounts is qualified, certainly not nullified, by the consideration that they are probably to be dated after the time of Abraham.

Abraham is introduced to us as a member of a pagan family living in Ur of the Chaldees. It is still widely held that this is the Ur in southern Iraq which is involved in the Biblical stories. It is around 50 years ago. Such a location would seem to be implied in Stephen’s reference to Abraham’s time in Mesopotamia ‘before he lived in Haran’ (Acts 7:2). If the identification is correct it would mean that Terah took his family out of Mesopotamia—possibly Ur—to another in southern Mesopotamia to another in the north (the names of both Terah and Laban probably reflect the family’s devotion to the moon-god). While precise dates for Abraham and the other patriarchs are not possible (estimates for Abraham vary between 2000 and 1300 BC) the whole of the period within which his story undoubtedly falls was one of considerable population movement. The growth of the international era later in the second millennium were anticipated by emergent powers such as the Hittites and Hurrians (cf. Gn. 14)—still too weak to act other than in co-operation with one another. The bent of the archaeological evidence for this period is of tribes moving down the Euphrates valley, notably by the Amorites. In moving from Ur to Haran Terah’s family was going against the trend as far as their Semitic (Amarite) brethren were concerned. Equally good evidence was Abraham’s abandoning of city life and embracing the fortunes of a semi-nomad (cf. Gn. 11:19).

It is the Hurrian tablets from Nuvi which provide the closest parallels to the patriarchal customs of the Age. They are noted for their high degree of similarity in the alien cultures in which they settled. By the mid-second millennium they were an important element in the population of Haran and many other Mesopotamian cities. Abraham’s pretence that Sarah was his sister (which is mere a sense: see Gn. 20:12) may be understood in the light of the Hurrian veneration of sisterhood. The status of a marriage could be enhanced by the husband’s adoption of his wife as a sister. The Hurrian tablets also suggest a form of adoption in the case of childless couples which invites comparison with Eliezer’s position in Abraham’s house (Gn. 15:2-4). Yet another method of dealing with this problem was for a barren wife to provide her husband with a concubine, that by her he might have an heir. This is just what Sarah did when she gave Hagar to Abraham. And, as happened when Isaac was born, if an heir was born to the man’s own wife, then he was the father’s heir by all precedence over any child born in concubinage. As a result, there is no compelling reason for regarding the patriarchal stories as inventions from the period of the Israelite monarchy which reflect the social customs and practices of that age. On the contrary, the authenticity of the narratives is with the second rather than with the first millennium. Theology and didactic abound in the Abraham cycle, but they are built on credible historical data.

Fundamental to the Abraham story is a tension between promise and fulfillment which is only partly resolved. The theme of faith in God against all the odds is a statement of the constancy of the promised heir (cf. Gn. 15:1-6) and the promised land (cf. Gn. 15:7-21). The call to be God’s nomad imposed a great strain on Abraham as a man and as a believer; the generous appraisal in Romans 4:20 does not deny that he made
mistakes, but shows that God chose to overlook them as He reviewed Abraham's life of faith. Abraham does not appear to have been long in Canaan before the inadequacies of the place were impressed upon him. There was a famine in the land and he felt it necessary to go down to Egypt to keep his flocks. In which he was not alone, for God had called him was no Garden of Eden. Going down to Egypt was a necessary and wise step (cf. Mt. 2:13-21). Traffic of this sort between Palestine and Egypt was common enough in the Egyptian life. So, Abraham's instinct for self-preservation, and the measures to which it drove him, must be questioned. He evidently failed to derive strength from the conviction that his promise could not be fulfilled in a dead Abraham.

For Lot the uncertainties of the nomadic way of life became too much. It was time for him to part company with his uncle. Abraham's encouraging Lot to go to whichever part of the land appealed to him is to be seen as being as much an expression of faith in God as a generous offer to his nephew. Lot's subsequent history forms a superbly-handled sub-plot throwing into relief the trials and triumphs of Abraham. There is the aband- onment of the pilgrim vocation and return to urban life—in some of its worst manifestations. Genesis 14:12 speaks of 'Lot who dwelt in Sodom', and it is his presence there at the time of the raid of the four kings which forms the background to the episodes described in that chapter. Later he was reckoned an elder in Sodom (Gen. 19:1), but sadly lacking in influence because of compromise. So dependent on city life had he become that when Sodom was destroyed he did not even bear to live under any other conditions. The little town of Zoar was a desirable refuge indeed (Gen. 19:18-23). How much higher Abraham rose can be seen from his encounter with two Canaanite kings, as recorded in Genesis 14:17-24.

Genesis 14 bears signs of great antiquity, notably in one or two details of vocabulary and topography. There are several instances of the contemporising of archaic names. The word translated 'trained men' in verse 14 (RSV) does not occur elsewhere in the Old Testament but is paralleled in the early second millennium Egyptian inscription texts where it denotes Canaanite retainers. It may be that the chapter had an independent existence before it was incorporated into the text, but the legitimate idea of Abraham as 'the Hebrew' might suggest this. We have in any case a very detailed itinerary of the four kings which embraces much more than is of immediate concern for the history of Abraham, Lot or Sodom. There is a good historical ring about Melchizedek's name, which means 'pious king', with Zedek a theophoric element. In the time of Joshua, Jerusalem was ruled by a king called Adonizedek ('Zedek is my lord'); see Jos. 10:1) and it would seem that the god Zedek was specially venerated in Jerusalem. Melchizedek ('Zedek'), a title translated 'king', with Zedek a theophoric element. In the time of Joshua, Jerusalem was ruled by a king called Adonizedek ('Zedek is my lord'); see Jos. 10:1 and it would seem that the god Zedek was specially venerated in Jerusalem. Melchizedek is described as 'priest of Most High'; the divine title 'God Most High' (כֶּל 'elyon) is paralleled in Canaanite religious texts. In Abraham's reply to the king of Sodom he uses the title 'Israel'. (Gen. 14:18) 'Elyon with Yahweh is made. The insertion of YWHW, therefore, can only be meant to emphasise the identity, not the difference, between the god of Melchizedek and the god of Abraham, known to the people of Israel as YWHW. This accords with the biblical idea of individual non-Hebrews who acknowledge the one god. The point of the intervention by Melchizedek is that he takes from Abraham, whereas the king of Sodom, representative of worldly powers at their worst (cf. 15:13), wishes to confer benefits on him. (Such a didactic element in the story is quite compatible with the desire to preserve a tradition linking Jerusalem with the origins of Israel.) It was involvement with Sodom which had so quickly pushed all the Israelites at risk, so that Abraham had resolved not to compromise in the slightest degree with the king of Sodom (14:22-23). On the other hand, his willingness to accept garments and the emerging pattern of Abraham's life, with its subordination of present gain to future prosperity under God.

Through the interview(s) with God in chapter 15 Abraham is made more aware of the way in which the promises will be fulfilled. In particular, he learns that he will have a son who will carry on his name. What had not been specifically stated was whether Sarah would be the mother of that heir. Genesis 16:1 clearly recorded that Abrahameded his wife's advice and had a son by Hagar her maid. No matter how socially acceptable this action was, in terms of the grand theme of trust in the God of the promises Abraham was wrong to submit to Sarah's feelings of despair. The Abrahamic contracts was usually the husband who insisted on the right of concubinage should his wife fail to provide him with an heir. Genesis 17 tells of important new developments in the story. Abraham is declared to be a 'servant of God' and in an extraordinary new phase of life into which they are entering. The first stage in God's covenant-making with Abraham is followed by chapter 15, chapter 14 being a separate document of uncertain origin. Such an assumption of mindless editing is quite unnecessary. The promise of protection and reward (15:1) is as well suited to the circumstances described in chapter 14 as to those implied in chapter 15. (This explanation removes the embarrassment of having, in the same source, two similar messages from God encouraging Abraham after Lot had chosen the most fertile tract of land.) Cassuto thinks that there is a numeri- cal link between the two sections that he has envisaged. It is a question whether God had seen the end of his trials. In fact it is only now, and in connection with the command to go to Moriah and offer Isaac as a burnt offering, that the Biblical writer speaks of God putting Abraham to the test. Moriah the name of the site is not a term for 'the test' but rather it means 'that which demonstrated not so much his obedience as his faith. The New Testament commentator on this episode observes: He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back (Heb. 11:19).

The second great issue—that of the possession of the land—was not within sight of being fulfilled. The promise to Abraham who was dead and had he to buy a piece of ground in which to bury her. As a 'stranger and sojourner' (23:4) Abraham was rather dependent on the good-will of the Hittites to whom he put his request. At first they refused to have tried to discourage him from acquiring land among them. Eventually the deal was made, and the report of the conveyancing agrees well with what is known of land transactions, both Hittite and Mesopotamian. Such minor difficulties did not daunt the Israelites, for they had stored away treasure at Moriah. One of his last recorded acts was to solemnly commission his servant to go to Padan- Aram to find a wife for Isaac. What concerned him was that the young lady should be brought down to Canaan, for he did not want to be cut off from the land. Aram. 'See to it that you do not take my son back there!' (24:6). It was nothing if not a magnificent declaration of his conviction that the future of his family lay in Canaan and not back in Mesopotamia.

III

The opening words of Genesis 15, 'after these things', appear to link the chapter with the section immediately before it but the legitimate connection has frequently been disallowed. Bennett's application of the documentary theory led him to suppose that these things refers to Abraham's building of altars and his generosity to Lot, because in the original Yahwistic document chapter 13 was


2 W. H. Bennett, Genesis (Oxford: Century Bible, n.d.), p. 294. The knowledge of adoption concern free citizens. In addition, the Hurrian ewaru was still given a (secondary) share in the inheritance in the event of a natural heir being born, and this does not appear to have been the case.


mistakes, but shows that God chose to overlook them as he reviewed Abraham's life of faith. Abraham does not appear to have been long in Canaan before the inadequacies of the place were impressed upon him. There was a famine in the land and he felt it necessary to go down to Egypt to keep his flocks and herds. When he went, God had called him was no Garden of Eden. Going down to Egypt was a necessary and wise step (cf. Mt. 2:13-21). Traffic of this sort between Palestine and Egypt was common enough in the Egyptian Hellenistic period. Abraham's instinct for self-preservation, and the measures to which it drove him, must be questioned. He evidently failed to derive strength from the consciousness that his promise could not be fulfilled in a dead Abraham.

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is a good historical ring about Melchizedek's name. Melki means 'my lord'; there is an original meaning was perhaps 'Melki' (Zedek; Gen. 14:18 'king'), with Zedek a theophoric element. In the time of Joshua, Jerusalem was ruled by a king called Adonizedek ('Zedek is my lord'); see Jos. 10:1 and it would seem that the god Zedek was specially identified with the city of Jerusalem (probably Jerusalem as in Ps. 76-2). Melchizedek is described as 'priest of God Most High'; the divine title 'God Most High' ('Elyon) is paralleled in Canaanite religious texts. In Abraham's reply to the king of Salem (Gen. 14:18), 'Elyon with Yahweh is made. The insertion of YWHW, therefore, can only be meant to emphasise the identity, not the difference, between the God of Melchizedek and the God of Abraham, known to the people of Israel as YWHW. This accords with the biblical idea of individual non-Hebrews who acknowledged the one God. 1 The point of the intervention by Melchizedek is that he takes from Abraham, whereas the king of Sodom, representative of worldly powers at their worst (cf. 15:13), wishes to confer benefits on him. (Such a didactic element in the story is quite compatible with the desire to preserve a tradition linking Jerusalem with the Semitic Semitic). It was involved with Sodom which had so quickly punished all evil down to the risk, so that Abraham had resolved not to compromise in the slightest degree with the king of Sodom (14:22-23). On the other hand, his willing-
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The latter part of verse 2 poses difficulties for the translator, its purport is clear from verse 3. Eliezer would in the normal course of events have looked after Abraham and Sarah and would have been responsible for the performance of the proper funerals when they died. In return he would have inherited all master’s possessions. This kind of arrangement is known from other places as well as Nuzi. Apart from the natural desire of an ancient Semite to survive through his progeny (to what extent did this take the place of an expectation of an after-life?), Abraham was doubtless thinking of the original terms of his call (‘I will make of you a great nation’, 12:2). Note that nothing was said to Eliezer about the possibility of Sarah having a son, Abraham could well imagine, and probably did imagine, that the son was to be born to Hagar. That he was still far from thinking that the promise could involve Sarah is evident from verse 16.

How do we understand verse 6, and in what way, if any, does Paul’s use of it differ from its original significance? The Hebrew word ‘mînâd (‘faith’) may be applied to both God and man. So God is described as having faith in Abraham (Gen 12:2 as a ‘man of faith’ (‘el mînâd), because of the observable justice in all His actions. This is the word used in Habakkuk 2:4, the ‘just shall live by his faith’ (or ‘faithfulness?’).

Usually, as here, the OT expresses the idea of faithfulness or faithfulness (compare the Fourth Gospel in this respect), cf. also 2 Chronicles 20:20, Proverbs 3:5, Isaiah 12:2, etc. Kidner remarks appositely: ‘Note that Abram’s trust was both personal (in the Lord, AV, RV) and corporate (in the seed). This word is not used for faithfulness in Hebrews 11. Abraham is commended for actions expressive of his trust in God (verses 8-10 and 17-19).

How do we define ‘righteousness’ in this context? Attempts to pin the original significance of the Hebrew root p-d-q have not resulted in a unanimous verdict, though there is something to be said for the explanation adopted by, among others, Saith. In his opinion the root meaning is ‘to be straight’. (The root) is specified in the text of Genesis 16:6 by dikî and its derivatives, particularly dikâq (—whose importance for Pauline thought scarcely needs mentioning.) But root meanings will help us little in our pursuit of p-d-qaq in Genesis 15:6. Hooke gives a nice insight into Hebrew idiom which signifies ‘nothing less than the character of God Himself in His dealings with man. The original intention in man’s creation was that he should be in God’s image, after His likeness. By his act of disobedience the image was defaced, the likeness destroyed; now the work of restoration has begun; God has found the response of faith and obedience. He has found a man in whom His own character begins to be formed. Skinner attaches more of a positional significance to the word: ‘a right relation to God conferred by a divine sentence of approval for himself in recognition of his works. The root p-d-q may well be discerned in this occurrence of s-dqâq, in circumstances where Abraham’s weakness was much in evidence his trust in God was acknowledged by the divine Judge as sufficient guarantee of his acceptance. Right relationship is implied in the occurrences of s-dqâq; the ‘righteous’ man is one who meets the obligations of the relationship upon which he has entered. God is always ‘righteous’. His dealings with man. Abraham with the obligations of his relationship to God by his faith-dependence. In verses 7f the question of Abraham’s possession of the land is raised. Assurance is conveyed through a covenant pledge. While the animal used were acceptable as Levitical offerings in later times, and the treatment of the birds conforms to Leviticus 1:17, this was much more than a sacrifice. From verses 1f and 5 it appears that the first part of Abraham’s lip was on the placenta at midnight. The fact that verse 12 refers to sunset has been taken as an indication that the chapter is of composite origin. This may be the case, but not verses 7f. The vision may be intended to refer to the events of the religious celebrations or the vision really was composite! At all events, the scene is set in such a way as to convey a sense of awe in the face of the ceremony about to take place. Abraham’s deep sleep is reminiscent of Genesis 2:21, and Genesis 49:24, but the Hebrew word describes Adam’s supernatural truce. The total of four hundred years for the Egyptian bondage is a round figure (cf. Acts 7:6). According to Exodus 12:80 ‘the time that the people of Israel dwelt in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years’. That the Israelites would come out with great possessions accords with Exodus 12:35-36. In view of the fact that Abraham’s ancestors were buried in Mesopotamia the reference to his going to his father’s land is virtually meaningless, as Jacob would be buried in a family grave. The ‘fourth generation’ (verse 16), representing the end of the period of four hundred and thirty years, must be understood in the light of the Canaanite and Mesopotamian use of ‘generation’ to denote a lengthy life-span. The Amorites were the inhabitants of Canaan. The statements about them in verses 16 is regarded by Kidner as one of the most important OT pronouncements on theodicy. Joshua’s invisa was ‘an act of justice, not aggression’. Throughout the section beginning with verse 12 there is a double line of reasoning. God undertakes to bestow the covenant blessings and at this stage no obligation is laid upon Abra-

h. The divinitv initiative becomes most explicit in verse 17. As at Sinai (Ex. 19:18) God’s presence is acknowledged to dwell in fire over the people. In the vision which Haggai the prophet (Jer. 34:18-20) develops the significance of the divided cace. As the calf had been divided when the covenant was ratified so the people concerned were divided in their effects for having broken the terms of the covenant. Of the various Mesopotamian analogues we choose the treaty between Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Mat’tu-i (of Assyria) as the treaty against this treaty, so may, just as the head of Maitu be torn of..." 1111 Samuel 11: 7 shares the same outlook. The Hebrew expression for making a covenant translates literally as ‘to cut or to make a cut in’ and may well have developed from the covenant ceremony. It was in the reign of David that Abraham’s descendants actually came to control the territory detailed in verses 18-21.

For Paul it was a fact of the utmost significance that this unconditional covenant was ratified centuries before the Mosaic covenant at Sinai (see Gal. 3:15-18). The principle of salvation by grace (implicit in the promise to Abraham) preceded, and was never superseded by, the covenant of law. The principle of justification by faith (which Abraham had in ample measure; Gen. 31:18) is the basis of all Christian assurance. God must fulfill His covenant undertakings; it is men individually who may cut themselves off from the covenant blessings. What God has required in all ages, so that His saving purpose may be fulfilled in the end (cf. Romans 8:29), is that the God who has made a covenant (verse 6). Genesis 15 has the gospel in a nutshell.
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Usually, as here, the OT expresses the idea of faithfulness by faithfulness towards (compare the Fourth Gospel in this respect); cf. also 2 Chronicles 20:20, Proverbs 3:5, Isaiah 12:2, etc. Kidner remarks appositely: 'Note that Abram's trust was both personal (in the Lord, AV, RSV) and collective (in the Lord, NRSV) of the Lord in verses 4, 5). 4 In Christian proclamation the appeal for faith in a personal God must always be coupled with a presentation of the evidence for the truth of the Gospel. It is not enough to say that God reveals Himself in acts which man must interpret and from which he must infer the character of God and His own destiny.

Biblical faith claims a firmer foundation than the restriction of God's self-disclosure to His actions would allow. If God does not explain His actions man cannot arrive at certain knowledge. And there are many areas where truth cannot be conveyed except in propositional form. Abraham believed God in the absence of any act of God from which he might have drawn inferences about the divine will for himself or in connection with his rule. The verse was seminal for the NT development of the doctrine of justification. That righteousness was reckoned to Abraham before the covenant of circumcision was initiated (i.e., Gen. 15:12 before Gen. 17:11) is highly significant by Paul (Rom. 4:9-12). This showed that acceptance by God was not dependent on the observance of the rite of circumcision. Indeed, for Paul the proper significance of Genesis 15:6 is that Abraham's acceptance was not dependent on any work or merit he might plead (see Rom. 4:3). Such a message did not only make the Jew aware of his true position before God, it offered great hope to the Gentiles (Rom. 4:16-25). This latter point is taken up in Gal. 3, where our text is linked with the promise of blessing for all nations (Gal 3:6-9): "those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith". James 2:1-24 stresses that the meaning of the place at which Sarah was buried was the fulfillment of Genesis 15:6. No opposition between faith and works is implied; real faith issues in works. The necessity of an active principle in faith presumably explains why Genesis 15:6 does not follow, nor precede, Genesis 17:15, and appears in Hebrews 11. Abraham is commended for actions expressive of his trust in God (verses 8-10 and 17-19).

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ham. The divine initiative becomes most express in verse 17. As at Sinai (Ex. 19:18) God's presence is declared, and fire enters. The special relationship between the pieces of the dismembered victims, in solemn undertaking that He will fulfil the promises made. Illustration of this procedure comes from a passage in Jeremiah and from extra-Biblical sources. In speaking of those who broke a sworn agreement which they had made with God the prophet (Jer. 34:18-20) develops the significance of the divided carchas. As the calf had been divided when the covenant was ratified so the people concerned here were to regard the effect of having broken the terms of the covenant. Of the various Mesopotamian analogues we choose the treaty between Ashurbarriqainy of Assyria and Maitu'li of Arpad. Maitu'li sets against this treaty, so may, 

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