

Inerrancy of Scripture

The inerrancy of scripture is at the heart of what evangelicals believe. Though the concept is under attack today, in contexts which would previously have been thought of as evangelical, it is noteworthy that the major statements of faith include comments on the place of scripture. Terms associated with the place of scripture include *inerrancy*, *authority* and *infallibility*. It is important to be clear what we mean by these terms. It is also important to realize that they do not refer to three different aspects of our understanding of scripture, which could be adopted separately. Although they have different meanings, inerrancy implies authority and authority implies infallibility etc.

Inerrancy

To say that the Bible is inerrant is to say that it is without error. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy¹ puts it thus:

¹ < <http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html> >

We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit.

This is a problematic statement for some, as they appeal to the various translations that have been made over the years and suggest that copyists' errors might have been made. The Chicago Statement has something to say on that issue.

We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original.

We deny that any essential element of the Christian faith is affected by the absence of the autographs. We further deny that this absence renders the assertion of Biblical inerrancy invalid or irrelevant.

What is being stated is that, although there could be errors of translation, we have sufficient stable well-

researched manuscripts to be sure that an accurate translation can be made, which, in turn, increases our confidence in the Bible's inerrancy.

Authority

A document which can be claimed to be inerrant, that gives instructions on how one might be saved, will be endowed with a unique authority. That document is the Bible, claiming, as it does, to be the inspired word of God. That inspiration of God endows the Bible with a unique authority.

Many official Statements of Faith (SoF) require this level of biblical authority. For example, the SoF of the Assemblies of God (UK) states:

We believe that the Bible (i.e. the Old and New Testaments excluding the Apocrypha), is the inspired Word of God, the infallible, all sufficient rule for faith and practice.²

The AoG SoF quotes scripture verses with its articles. The article about the Bible – which is the first article – lists the verses 2 Timothy 3:15-16 and 2 Peter 1:21. The

² < <http://www.aog.org.uk/pages/17-statement-of-faith/content> >

import of these verses will be discussed later. Although this article does not explicitly use the word authority, this is implied by the use of the phrase (“all sufficient rule”).

The SoF of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC) states:

God has revealed himself in the Bible, which consists of the Old and New Testaments alone. Every word was inspired by God through human authors, so that the Bible as originally given is in its entirety the Word of God, without error and fully reliable in fact and doctrine. The Bible alone speaks with final authority and is always sufficient for all matters of belief and practice.³

The FIEC’s article emphasizes inerrancy, authority and sufficiency of the Bible. These three would seem to imply infallibility.

Infallibility

Infallibility implies that, not only is the Bible without error, but it speaks without fault. This quality

³ < www.fiec.org.uk >

is implied by SoFs that speak about the sufficiency of scripture. Sufficiency means that all doctrine can be determined from within the pages of scripture, without having to add external ideas. This is not to say that no external literature is ever consulted. If any ideas external to scripture are adopted, it would only be because these ideas were supported by scripture, so that they would not actually be ideas external to scripture. This explains why evangelical groups can quote evangelical authors, on the understanding that their work is itself based on the sufficiency of scripture.

It is usually understood that these terms work together. In theory, it could be supposed that scripture might be infallible but not inerrant. Evangelicals deny that possibility. Scripture's infallibility is dependent on its inerrancy. Likewise, there are those who lend an authority to scripture, without accepting infallibility. Evangelicals also deny this possibility.

The Scriptural Basis for Inerrancy

The Bible argues for its own inerrancy, authority and infallibility. Two good starting points for seeing this internal argument in practice are the verses quoted with the AoG SoF.

From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:15-17)

Paul commends Timothy for knowing the scriptures. He describes these scriptures as “holy” – which means “set apart” – literally, set apart for God. Paul tells Timothy that the scriptures are there to make him wise. So his wisdom is not to come from external sources, but only to be based on scripture. This wisdom is “for salvation through faith”. Our basis for our faith is to be found only in scripture. The fact that this is “in Christ Jesus” emphasizes that our

knowledge of Christ Himself is to be found in scripture. It should be noted that the scripture, to which Paul is here referring, is the scripture of his time – i.e. the Old Testament. So this verse emphasizes the inerrancy, infallibility and authority of the Old Testament. It will then be necessary to see if we can apply this verse to the New Testament also.

Paul refers to “all scripture” being “inspired”. Therefore, there is not a part of the OT which is not inspired (and our further studies will apply this to the NT). If it is inspired, then it is the Holy Spirit who has spoken through it. Therefore, although different books were written by different authors, it was the one Holy Spirit who inspired their writing. Inspiration is not dictation. The styles of the different authors were not subverted by the Holy Spirit. But nor is inspiration just a vague kind of influence. Inspiration implies that all scripture is from God – indeed it is His word.

Finally, in this section, Paul explains the use of scripture. It is there to provide us with all our doctrine or teaching; it is there to rebuke us and correct us

when we are going astray; and it is there for our instruction. It is only with scripture, and our adherence to and knowledge of it, that we can be “complete” or “thoroughly equipped for every good work”.

No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke *as they were* moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:19-21)

In the previous passage, Paul laid down the implications of inspiration. In this passage, Peter explains **how** inspiration came about. Scripture comes by prophecy. This does not imply that all prophecy is scripture. For example, we do not have a record of the words of the prophets in the cave (1 Kings 18:4). The theology of prophecy is not appropriate to the current discussion. Nevertheless, we can state that all scripture is prophecy – and that it is all that is necessary for our life and work. To say that it is prophetic implies that it came directly from God. Yet Peter acknowledges that it is written by human hand –

yet he emphasizes that these human hands “were moved by the Holy Spirit”.

Once again, we are being told about the Old Testament scripture. Historic documents make it very clear that the Old Testament Canon was known and complete very soon indeed after the completion of its writing, about 400BC. However, Peter goes on to add some of the New Testament writings to his definition of scripture.

Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider *that* the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable *people* twist to their own destruction, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures. (2 Peter 3: 14-16 emphasis mine)

Peter is here acknowledging that Paul is his beloved brother. Why is Paul “our beloved brother”. In one

sense, Peter is speaking for himself and his readers. But it is not too far a stretch to suggest that Peter is also including Paul among the brethren of the apostles. Since Paul includes himself as such in his epistles, Peter's inclusion of "all his epistles" is also an endorsement of Paul's apostleship. Finally, we should note that Peter talks about "the rest of the scriptures" – clearly endorsing Paul's epistles as scripture. This passage could also be taken slightly more broadly, and be seen as an implicit endorsement as scripture of the genuinely scriptural writings of other apostles (e.g. Matthew and John), as well as those under direct apostolic authority. Popular theologian, Brian Edwards, has written at length on why we should accept all 27 NT books (and no others) as being Canonical.

The Canon of Scripture

On a number of occasions in this discussion, I have used the words *canon* or *canonical*. These words are used to describe whether a book is truly biblical or not. The etymology of the word *canon* is from the word for *rule* – implying not a law but rather a way of doing

things. I wrote previously about the use of the word *canon* in the *New Answers Book 2*, as follows:

We have become quite used to the word *canon* these days. The word is frequently used of a body of literature. For example, one can refer to the complete works of Shakespeare as the *Shakespearian canon*. More bizarrely, I recently read a discussion about whether certain novels about *Doctor Who* could be considered to be part of the *Doctor Who canon*. Strangely, this last usage was closer to the correct use of the word *canon*, as applied to Scripture. The argument went that the novels introduced concepts and ideas that were later contradicted or not found to be in harmony with events reported in the recent revised TV series. Presumably, the writer of the article felt that these *Doctor Who* novels were not following an accepted rule or pattern.⁴

The books previously footnoted by Brian Edwards discuss in great detail why the 66 books of the Bible are included in the canon and why others are not. A study

⁴ Taylor, P.F., *Is the Bible Enough?*, in Ham, K. (ed.) (2008), *New Answers Book 2*, (Green Forest, AR: Master Books), pp219-220

of the accepted canon of scripture is very helpful in underlining the inerrancy, sufficiency and authority of scripture.

Casting Doubt on God's Word

Having accepted the whole Bible as authoritative, inerrant, infallible and sufficient, we can see that a failure to accept any part of scripture is a failure to believe God Himself. This does not mean that honest Bible-believing people will not sometimes disagree on the interpretation of parts of scripture – though these disagreements will center on secondary issues, rather than the primary issues, essential to our faith. It is interesting to note that, in the opinion of this writer, the common objections to the acceptance of scripture as God's word are seen in the very first temptation and sin, found in Genesis 3.

Genesis 3 is about the temptation of Eve by Satan, the sin of Adam, God's curse on Satan, Adam and creation and the promise of redemption.

The Serpent of Genesis 3 is identified in Revelation 12 as the devil or Satan.

So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. (Revelation 12:9)

In Genesis 3, he is described as being “cunning”.

Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. (Genesis 3:1)

This verse emphasizes that Satan was created. The text is not referring to serpents in general, but to this particular serpent – i.e. Satan. His “cunning” is referred to as “craftiness” in 2 Corinthians 11.

But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. (2 Corinthians 11:3)

This “craftiness” is contrasted with the simplicity of Christian doctrine “that is in Christ”. The KJV uses the concept of “subtlety” in both the above passages. In both cases, the implication is that a twisting of scripture has occurred. How can this be, when in

Genesis 3 no written scripture yet existed? The answer lies in the acknowledgment that scripture is the word of God. Therefore, God's previous words to Adam have the authority of scripture. The key words, on which the events of Genesis 3 rest, are to be found in chapter 2.

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Genesis 2:16-17)

These verses give a command to Adam, and the consequences for not obeying that command. The fact that the command is given suggests that God had made Adam with the capability of obedience or disobedience. In order for Adam to exercise obedience, he had to have a command, which it was possible for him to disobey. Therefore, the command involved not eating a particular fruit. It should be noted that there was almost certainly nothing inherently poisonous about the fruit. It was not the fruit that led to Adam's death – it was his disobedience toward God. This

disobedience – a breaking of a commandment – is what the Bible refers to as sin.

God told Adam that there would be a consequence for disobedience. He said that “the day that you eat of it you shall surely die”. What sort of death happened? Adam didn’t appear to fall dead on the spot. For this reason, some have suggested that Adam’s death was “spiritual” rather than literal. The theistic evolutionist, Denis Alexander, says this about the events of Genesis 3:

“The failure of Adam and Eve to physically drop dead on the *yom* [day] that they disobeyed God highlights once again the need to interpret the meanings of words by their context. Here in Genesis 3 the passage is quite clear that Adam and Eve died as a result of their sin, just as God warned, *but they died spiritually.*”⁵

⁵ Alexander, D.R. (2008), *Creation or Evolution: Do we have to choose?*, (Oxford: Monarch), p261, emphasis mine

In his masterful review and refutation of Alexander's ideas, David Anderson writes:

Dr. Alexander achieves these conclusions mostly by continuing to interpret Genesis overall as a “theological and figurative”... narrative, and by interpreting other relevant biblical passages through the false dichotomy of “spiritual death” versus “physical death”. This is carried on even when dealing with passages such as 1 Corinthians 15, where the physical resurrection from physical death is stage front and center – even then, it never seems to really dawn on Dr. Alexander to see that this dualistic separation is fundamentally un- and anti-biblical.⁶

Alexander is incorrect to make a point about Adam failing to drop dead the same day that he ate the fruit. Dr Terry Mortenson has pointed out that the biblical phrase “surely die” does not mean immediate death. The same phrase occurs in Numbers 26:65.

⁶ Anderson, D. (2008), *Creation or Evolution: Why we must choose*, (Leicestershire: J6D Publications), p112

For the LORD had said of them, "They shall surely die in the wilderness." So there was not left a man of them, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun.

In the passage from Numbers, it is clear that the death is not to be immediate. Moreover, the Genesis 2:17 passage does not imply a 24-hour day. Alexander is deliberately mixing his contexts for this purpose. In Genesis 2:17, *yom* (day) is not accompanied by a number, or the words evening, morning or night. All 6-day creationists acknowledge that the word *yom* can mean something other than a 24-hour day – it just can't mean something other than a 24-hour day when used with a number, evening, morning or night. See Numbers 7, for example, and decide whether the events of Numbers 7 could have taken place over 12 literal days or 12,000 years.

Mortenson goes on to suggest this about the phrase "you shall surely die".

The phrase "you shall surely die" can be literally translated from the Hebrew Biblical text as "dying

you shall die.” In the Hebrew phrase we find the imperfect form of the Hebrew verb (you shall die) with the infinitive absolute form of the same verb (dying). This presence of the infinitive absolute intensifies the meaning of the imperfect verb (hence the usual translation of “you shall surely die”).⁷

What this means is that God’s word did not tell Adam that he would drop dead the very same day that he disobeyed God’s command. Instead, it means that the **process** of death would start immediately and be inevitable from that moment. Adam lived for a further 930 years. That sounds like a long time. But when you remember that Adam was designed to live forever, 930 years does not sound so long after all.

It is interesting that the objection to a literal interpretation of Genesis 2:17 has a great deal of

⁷ Mortenson, T. (2007), *Genesis 2:17 - “You shall surely die”*, < <http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/2007/05/02/dying-you-shall-die> >

resonance with the objection to God's word conjured by the serpent in Genesis 3.

And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?"
(Genesis 3:1)

It is quite useful to deconstruct what Satan is doing here. First, we notice that he spoke to the woman, not to the man. Yet God's command, while being in place for all humanity, was originally delivered to the man. Satan therefore tackled the person who had received the command second-hand. This is not to excuse Eve's subsequent errors – she should have accepted the information from Adam fully. We should also note that Genesis 3:6 suggests that Adam was with her. There are those who would suggest – and I count myself among them – that Adam was actually a witness to the entire deception of Eve, yet said nothing during their conversation. It must be noted that there are many commentators who disagree with the point I have just made but, if it were correct, it would add to the joint failure of Adam and Eve to accept fully the word of God. We can fall for the same trick. If our adherence to God's

word is only second-hand, we will be susceptible to Satan's attacks. For this reason, and for many other reasons, we need to read the Bible for ourselves, being fully immersed in it.

The second point about Satan's initial temptation is his phrasing. He puts the commandment negatively. God's commandment in Genesis 2:16 was positive – "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat" – with a negative injunction for the fruit of one tree only. Satan is a master of the concept that the media is the message. By phrasing the command negatively, he tries to make God out to be mean – a spoilsport, out to ruin Adam and Eve's pleasure. The positive command shows the abundant care that God has for the people He has created. Satan tries to imply that God does not care for His people, nor lavish His love on them, whereas Genesis 2:16 – with its huge and wide-ranging permission to eat all sorts of different fruits – illustrates an abundance of love and care, over and above what we need. Throughout scripture, we read of God's lavish love for us, yet it is the devil's trick to try to persuade us that God does not care for our

particular situation. God gives us rules and laws for our protection, because He cares for us, but too often we portray such biblical morality as a hindrance to our freedom.

Third, we should notice that Satan places the command in a question, in order to cast doubt on God's word. "Has God indeed said...", or, as the NLT puts it, "Did God really say...", requires us to consider whether God really said this or not. It becomes a test of our ability to discern the mind of God from scripture. The theistic evolutions, like Dr. Alexander, fall short at this very point. Alexander says "the biblical understanding of creation is not primarily concerned with how things began, but why they exist." Yet Genesis 1 explicitly claims to be an account of how God made the world, and doesn't actually state why God made it. Another theistic evolutionist said, in debate with me, "we need to understand what the actual purpose of Genesis is". In their minds, the purpose of Genesis is not historical narrative. Yet the plain meaning of the text actually is historical narrative. So, if we read what the words actually say,

the theistic evolutionists think we should filter our reading of the word through their presupposition of how the world began. It is as if they are saying “Did God really say He made the world in six 24-hour periods? Actually, He meant millions of years.” “Did God really say...” is the preface to the world’s oldest lie and the world’s oldest temptation. And the theistic evolutionists – even those who claim, as Alexander does, to believe “the Bible as the authoritative Word of God” – are actually echoing that deception of the devil.

And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which *is* in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.'" (Genesis 3:2)

Having analyzed Satan’s first deception, we now look at Eve’s reply. There is a good point and a bad point about Eve’s reply. The good point is that Eve picked up on the main accusation Satan made against God – that He was mean and unfair in restricting their choice of fruit. She countered Satan with a repeat of

the positive mode, in which God placed the command “we may eat...”. However, the source of her error – and eventual downfall – is detected in her report of God’s command. She misquotes what God said. Indeed, she added to what God said: “You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die”. She had added the phrase “nor shall you touch it”. God had not forbidden them from touching the fruit – only from eating it. This is the reason why God tells us throughout scripture not to add to His words.

Do not add to His words, Lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar. (Proverbs 30:6)

To some extent, it is not a surprise that Eve got her ideas mixed up. Perhaps her first error was to engage Satan in conversation at all. Our reaction, when it is intimated to us that we should doubt God, should be to turn away from the Tempter – “Get behind me Satan” – rather than to discuss the issue. There was no way, for example, that Eve was going to persuade Satan that God’s law was just.

Having succeeded in disturbing Eve's adherence to God's word, Satan comes in with a second strategy.

Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:4-5)

Satan's next comment is a direct contradiction of what God said – "You will not surely die". In resisting temptation, it is important to note that Satan does not usually start by contradicting God. But he will certainly end up there. His strategy in Genesis 3 is a common one.

- i. He casts doubt on what God says.
- ii. He watches for us misquoting God.
- iii. He contradicts God.

Satan suggests to Eve that knowing good and evil would be a desirable end. It would make them, he suggests, like God. Satan's comment in verse 5 is suggesting that God is deliberately concealing something from Adam and Eve that would give them

power; withholding something that would do them 'good'.

Even at this stage, it would have been possible for Adam and Eve not to sin. It is not inevitable that they should follow Satan's strategy. Moreover, the New Testament reminds us that Eve's sin was her own, but that Adam was not taken in by Satan – yet he still sinned, thereby passing his original sin down to all his heirs – including you and me.

And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. (1 Timothy 2:14)

So the whole pattern for doubting the inerrancy of the Bible was set here in Genesis 3. We don't know when the events of Genesis 3 happened – though it is most likely that Genesis 3 occurred soon after the creation week. Archbishop Ussher suggests that these events happened on the very same day that Adam and Eve were brought into the Garden of Eden – which he suggests would be Day 10. His reason for choosing this date is that, if it were so, then the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:27) would fall on an anniversary of the

event, which would make *Yom Kippur* doubly significant. (In parentheses, it can be noted that this dating is also part of the reason why so many of us take Ussher's chronology to be very accurately worked out, and not the object of ridicule, in which it is held by so many so-called scholars on the subject). Whether or not Ussher's chronology is correct, it would seem to make sense to place the events of Genesis 3 very soon after the Creation Week. And there is so much more to say on Genesis 3 – so we will need to revisit an exegesis of the chapter in our studies on 'Sin and Death' and 'The Gospel'.

Conclusion

The first temptation and the first sin involved a pattern of disbelief in the inerrancy of God's word – a direct analogue of our own times' disbelief in the inerrancy of scripture. God had given a clear and positive command, but with information about what the consequences of disobedience would be. Satan's temptation involved casting doubt on God's word, attacking a faulty knowledge of God's word, then directly contradicting God's word. This pattern is seen

today in liberal churches, but also in churches and among scholars who we would hitherto have thought evangelical (and who frequently still call themselves evangelical).

Our earlier discussions – and the books referenced, especially those by Brian Edwards – remind us that a belief in the inerrancy of scripture is a rational and reasonable position to take, and is essential to give us any foundation for our beliefs and teachings.