

# Scripture

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## INERRANT ERRORS

There is a statement in the Bible (Ps. 13:1) which reads: 'There is no God.' A person coming across it for the first time can eat his heart out with worry. Is it a misprint for 'There is a God'? Does the word 'God' here *not* mean God but something else? Has perhaps the verb 'is' a nuance of 'appears to be'? There is an alternative. He can simply put the statement into its context: 'The *fool* has said in his heart, There is no God.' For what it is worth, this example is offered as an epitome of the problem of the Bible's inerrancy, and of the principle on which it must be solved.

The question of the Bible's inerrancy is obviously a vast one. It has to cover not merely commonplaces like the Six Days of Creation (which any schoolboy, one imagines, is now capable of dealing with), but all the highways and byways of the Old Testament narrative from Noah's Ark to Jonah's Whale, and finish by having some relevance even to the explosive question of the historicity of the Gospels. The Latin tag sums it up well: *Bonum ex integra causa, malum ex quocumque defectu*. You can build up the most sublime and intricate argument for the inerrancy of the Bible; one error is enough to bring the whole edifice tumbling about your ears. And anyone who sets his mind to it can find at least an apparent error on every page. If all of these, even the most notorious ones, are not mentioned here, it is because the problem is not to find a ready answer to each individual difficulty as it crops up, but to put one's finger on the basic principle which will provide a solution to all of them.

To begin then at the beginning. On the *fact* of inerrancy, certainly, there is no dispute, at least among orthodox theologians. If the word 'inspiration' is to have its full force and not be whittled down to something like poetic genius, then inerrancy is its necessary corollary. If the Bible can truly be called the word of God, if Scripture can truly be said to have God as its author—and this is Catholic teaching—then it is necessarily free from error. God is the truth, and can neither deceive nor be deceived. A quotation from Leo XIII will serve as a summary of Catholic teaching on the matter:

It is impossible for divine inspiration to include any error. By definition, it not only excludes error, but rejects it with the same necessity as that by which God, the Supreme Truth, can be the author of absolutely no error. This is the ancient and constant faith of the Church. . . . It follows, therefore, that those who think the original Scriptures contain anything false, have certainly either perverted the Catholic concept of inspiration, or made God himself the author of error. Indeed, all the Church's Fathers and Doctors were so convinced of Scripture's immunity from all error, that they exercised the utmost ingenuity and care to harmonize and reconcile those many texts which seemed to present some contradiction. All of them declared that these books, in whole and in part, were all equally inspired, and that the God who had spoken through the sacred writers could be responsible for absolutely nothing that is contrary to the truth. (*Providentissimus Deus*, cf. E.B.<sup>2</sup>, pp. 124-7)

That is definite and unambiguous enough; and the Fathers to whom Leo referred take the same line. The words written by Augustine to Jerome are famous, and he will have to stand for the rest. He is complaining that Jerome apparently expects him to treat every one of *his* words as Gospel:

I must confess to your reverence that it is only to the canonical books of Scripture that I have learnt to give this sort of respect and honour. It is of these alone that I firmly believe the authors were completely free from error. If I come across anything in these writings which seems to contradict the truth, I simply have to conclude either that my text is corrupt, or that it is a bad translation of the original, or that I have misunderstood it. But as for other books, however holy or learned their authors (!), I do not accept their teaching merely because they say so. . . . And I presume, brother, that you feel the same way as I do on this. I presume you want to make a distinction between your books and those written by the Prophets and Apostles, whom it would be unthinkable to accuse of error. (*Ep.* 82, 1, cf. *P.L.* 33, 277)

The principle enunciated by Pope Leo and by Augustine is a basic one. But it is also obviously based entirely on God's part in the authorship of Scripture, and has not yet allowed any recognition of the human part. From the point of view of the divine author, inerrancy is essential, and it must be stated uncompromisingly. But from the point of view of the human authors some qualification must surely be made if we are not to reduce them to mere dictaphones. Pope Leo does in fact deal with this matter in other parts of his Encyclical, this being the purpose for which it was written. But the Fathers did not entirely neglect this human aspect either, and they laid down some sound principles here as well.

St Augustine has already gone on record with the principle that what seems to be error could be due to the misunderstanding of the reader. We shall see later how important this statement is. Elsewhere he has this to say:

People ask what our Scriptures teach us to believe about the shape and size of the heavens. There is a tremendous amount of argument on this question, but we

have decided that it is wisest to offer no comment. The Holy Spirit had no intention of teaching men things which have nothing to do with their salvation. (*In Gen. ad Litt.* 2, 9, 20, cf. *P.L.* 34, 270)

In his great work *De Consensu Evangeliorum* he does not attempt to explain away all the inconsistencies between the four evangelists. They are due, he says, to the fact that they were drawing on their own memories. The *substance* of what they said agreed, but each related it as best he could remember.

St Jerome has a similar couple of quotations. On the occasional discrepancy he finds between Scripture and historical or scientific fact, he also says that questions outside of faith and morals were not the concern of the writers, and that on these things they accepted the common opinion of their day.<sup>1</sup> And in his introductions and commentaries on the biblical authors, he (who had translated them) was the last person to imagine that they were divine tape-recorders, and does not hesitate to compare their individual styles :

Jeremiah was obviously a man of poor education, even though he has some majestic thoughts. (*In Jerem.* 6:1)

St Athanasius, commenting on an epistle of St Paul, says :

To get his meaning here, you must see exactly who it is he is writing to, and why he's writing. Otherwise you will make him say something he is not saying. And this is true of *all* Scripture. (*Contra Arianos* 1, 54)

Jerome will say exactly the same :

The job of the interpreter is to expound what the author thinks, not what *he* thinks. (*Ep. ad Pammach.* 17, cf. *P.L.* 22, 507)

And so will Augustine :

The exegete's main task is to find the thought and intention of his author. Through this alone will he discover the will of God which the author was expressing. (*De Doctr. Christiana* 2, 5, cf. *P.L.* 34, 38)

In other words, for all their insistence on the divine aspect which made the Bible the truth incarnate, the Fathers were not unaware of the human element which went into the making of it, and insisted that the author's memory, education, culture, circumstances and especially his intention, had their part to play, and that to neglect them would mean finding errors where there were none. At the same time it is probably true to say that this reference to the human element was the exception rather than the rule. In the time of the Fathers, and for over

<sup>1</sup> *In Jerem.* 28, cf. *P.L.* 24, 856 ; *Adv. Helvid.* 4, cf. *P.L.* 23, 187 ; *In Matt.* 14, cf. *P.L.* 26, 98

a thousand years after, the information simply was not available to make the human background of the biblical authors a live problem. The occasional difficulty which *did* occur could be dealt with on its own merits, without raising the whole question of inerrancy. For the rest the Bible remained an absolutely unique piece of literature, and there was nothing else to compare it to. For the information it contained it was the only source that could be turned to, and it was almost inevitable that this information would be seen as divinely revealed, and the human authors as simply (for the most part) the mediums through which God spoke His word. Whether He spoke that word through Ezekiel or David or Paul did not make all that amount of difference.

It was not until our own times that this rather naïve view had to be changed. And the change came as a great shock ; we are not over the repercussions yet. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries suddenly discovered *ancient literature*, and the Bible suddenly lost the pedestal it had been standing on. From being something in a class of its own, it was now seen to be merely one piece of literature among hundreds. Worse, these centuries suddenly discovered *ancient history*, and all the heroes of the Bible suddenly lost their haloes. From being rather formalised and two-dimensional figures in stained glass, they were now seen to be men of flesh and blood, fitting surprisingly well into the primitive world of the second and first millenium B.C. unexpectedly revealed to us. Worse still, these centuries suddenly discovered *the sciences*—astronomy and geology, zoology and biology, anthropology and ethnology and the rest—and the Bible's information on these subjects suddenly became obsolete. Far from being divinely revealed it was now seen to be woefully inadequate, and even embarrassingly wrong. Examples do not have to be listed : everyone knows them : the idea that the universe is only 6,000 years old, and was originally produced within six days ; the idea that the earth is not only the centre of the universe but the largest thing in it ; the idea that all fauna can be neatly distinguished into five species (birds, fish, wild beasts, domestic animals and creepers), and all flora similarly ; the idea that mankind was a special creation, with no relation to the animal world ; the idea that men once lived for seven, eight or nine hundred years, or that a flood once covered the whole earth ; the idea that all the nations of the world could be neatly subdivided into three, and that this distinction took place within historical times. These are all taken from the early chapters of Genesis, but Exodus and Leviticus, Joshua and Judges are just as fair game for this sort of thing. Worst of all, these centuries suddenly discovered *the art of literary criticism*, and the Bible suddenly began to bristle with even more difficulties. Far from being an incarnation of truth, it was now seen to disagree not only

with facts but even with itself. Again the examples are notorious: the disagreement of Gen. 1 and 2 about whether man was the first being created or the last; the disagreement of Gen. 4 and 5 about whether Methuselah and the rest were descendants of Cain or of his brother Seth; Gen. 6-9 never seeming to make its mind up about whether the animals went in two by two or seven by seven; the goings and comings of the Patriarchs reported not in one consistent narrative but in various alternative ones which contradict each other; the book of Chronicles obviously relying on the same sources as the books of Samuel and Kings, but managing again and again to get it different. And even with the New Testament we are not out of the wood, although here, as was mentioned, the Fathers had already noticed the difficulties. Did our Lord tell the disciples to travel with nothing *but* a staff (Mark), or with nothing at all, not *even* a staff (Luke)? Did Judas die by hanging himself (Matthew) or by throwing himself off a precipice (Acts)? Why do Mark and Luke agree that there was only one blind man at Jericho, and one ass on Palm Sunday, and Matthew keep increasing them to two? And why does he suddenly turn round, when Mark and Luke have finally agreed that there were two angels at the Tomb, and say there was only one?

How is one to deal with these difficulties, which seem to make nonsense of the whole idea of inerrancy? The first reactions, especially to the scientific difficulties, were extreme ones. The Bible and science were incompatible, and one or the other had to be rejected. One would like to think that these extreme positions were emergency measures, and that on further reflection they were abandoned. But a great number of people have remained entrenched there, refusing to be moved. Very few of those outside the Church, even when they call themselves Christians, see the Bible as anything more than a great work of literature, whose inspiration or inerrancy is out of the question. And alongside them one can still find plenty of Bible-thumping fundamentalists, with their determination to 'cling to the superficial meaning of the Bible at all costs, even at the cost of real understanding.'

But there were some who made an attempt to reconcile their ancient faith with this new learning. The first attempts were rather half-hearted, and consisted of a number of makeshifts designed to 'save' the Bible. There was the suggestion—a rather desperate one—that many of the difficulties could be explained away as a corruption of the original text, which alone was inerrant. There was the suggestion that on some details (biblical numbers for instance) the author was sufficiently inerrant if he was approximately or roughly correct. There was the suggestion that where there was discord with science or history

or morality, the author was only quoting and not giving his own approval<sup>1</sup>—the exegete being left with a fairly free hand. There was, most persistent of all, the suggestion that the Bible, far from contradicting modern discoveries, actually anticipated them. The biblical authors really knew all the astronomy and biology and zoology which were now being rediscovered, and if we looked hard enough we would be able to confirm this. The formation of the planets from a gaseous state, the six geological eras, the evolution of life out of the sea—all this was in Genesis long ago. Day by day archaeology was confirming the fact that Lysanias *was* tetrarch of Galilee, that Bethesda *did* have five arches, that Paul *did* preach in South Galatia. If they were given long enough, archaeologists would vindicate the whole Bible against the charge of error. This mania for ‘concordism,’ as it is called, has never really died out, in the vague hope that this might be the solution of all difficulties. It is to be found in all the books and articles which have the theme ‘The Bible Is True’—as if this was the only kind of biblical truth that mattered. It is to be found above all in periodic letters to the press, like the following one written in reference to an eclipse :

Sir—Readers must have been impressed by your reference to the literal fulfilment of the prophecy of Amos in the words : ‘ I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear sky.’ This seems to be another evidence in the support of the belief of many that the Bible, mysteriously enough, contains anticipations of scientific facts which remained undiscovered by scientists for thousands of years. For example, when Goethe called the attention of scientists to the function of the pistil, showing the relationship subsisting between fruit and flower, this was regarded as a great botanical discovery, yet many centuries before Isaiah wrote that ‘ the grape is ripening in the flower.’ The Bible called the earth ‘ the round world ’ and yet for ages it was the worst form of heresy for Christians to say that the world is round. The important geographical fact of the earth’s rotundity is mentioned in Isaiah 40:22. ‘ It is He that sitteth upon the circle of the earth ’; the Hebrew word *khug* meaning a spherical arch indicates the earth’s globular character. Also when the Psalmist sang that ‘ He maketh the lightnings for the rain ’ he anticipated a remark which Lord Kelvin once made at Glasgow University : ‘ I believe there is never rain without lightning. . . . ’ (Letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, July 5th 1954)

St Thomas was already pretty severe about this sort of tomfoolery :

Sacred Scripture can be interpreted in many ways. No-one ought to be so adamant about one interpretation that he hangs on to it as the true sense of Scripture even after it has been proved to be wrong. This will only make non-believers ridicule the Bible, and bar them from the way to belief. (S. Th. 1, 68, 1 *in corp.*)

<sup>1</sup> e. g. ‘ The author does not (could not ?) approve of Judith’s action ; he only describes what she did.’ ‘ St Luke does not (could not ?) make his own Stephen’s mistaken calculation of Old Testament chronology.’

And St Augustine expressed it even more pithily beforehand :

Christ our Lord did not say ' I am sending you the Paraclete ' in order to teach you about the course of the sun and the moon. His aim was to make Christians of us, not mathematicians. (*De Act. cum Felice* I, 10, cf. *P.L.* 42, 525)

Such solutions are obviously makeshifts. Is there not something which would not give the impression of being a mere stop-gap, or temporary expedient, something worthier and relevant to the *whole* problem ? There is, and it is along the lines suggested at the beginning of this article, where the difficulty contained in the words ' There is no God ' disappeared when they were put into their context. It was the Fathers who first suggested that anything can become a problem or even nonsense if it is ripped out of its context, and it is high time that we went back to those first principles. Not that it is easy to discover the context of a literature which extends across two thousand years or so. But unless we at least make the effort, we condemn ourselves to the danger of constant misunderstanding. And in that effort we will find that what we once feared as our enemy has become our ally. The discoveries of the last few decades have raised all sorts of problems which never had to be faced before. But they have also solved them by making it possible to reconstruct the context in which the Bible was written : mental, scientific, chronological, moral and literary.

### *Mental Context*

It is no good reading the Bible as if it was written by a Greek mind, when it was written, New Testament as well as Old, by Semites. This aspect of the context is put first because it is the most neglected, in spite of the fact it is the most far-reaching in its consequences. The Semitic mind will not in general express itself, as we do, in abstractions. It is so attached to the concrete that it will always prefer to convey its meaning through the medium of a story. If a rabbi is asked, even today, to explain some point of doctrine, he will invariably do so by way of a parable, an allegory or even a piece of history. Now this means that the very first thing that a Semite expects to be asked of his story, even of his history, is not ' Where did it happen ? ' or ' When did it happen ? ' or ' How did it happen ? ' or ' Did it happen at all ? ' but ' What does it *mean* ? What is the teaching you are trying to convey to me in this story ? ' His story, even if it is history, has no value at all independent of the teaching it contains. To make the story the first consideration (as we do because we think in the abstract, where a story is told only because it happened), and the teaching it conveys an afterthought (half a paragraph—*de doctrina huius libri*) is to reverse the Eastern order of thinking, and to do injustice to all the narrative parts of the Bible, the New Testament included.

Of course this does not mean that the historical reality of these stories is immaterial. Obviously in many cases the very teaching will depend on historical fact. But the historical facts remain secondary, and subordinate to the doctrine, which the author can convey just as easily—and at times does so—by parable. The very first thing that the Bible demands of us is that we untwist ourselves from our Greek mentality, and adapt ourselves to the Semitic mentality in which it was written. Perhaps as much as ninety per cent of our difficulties about inerrancy are due to a failure to orientate ourselves, literally to get Eastern.

### *Scientific Context*

It is no good reading the Bible as if it was written by a twentieth-century don, when it was written by men who had neither training nor interest in the sciences. The views of the author of Genesis on cosmogony were as unscientific as those of any layman at any time, and if he was not writing about cosmogony at all but about religion then we have no more right to accuse him of error than we would the man who said: 'The sun rises upon the good and the evil alike.'

That principle, that in scientific matters the Bible speaks as any non-specialist will speak *secundum ea quae sensibiliter apparent*, was already established by St Augustine (*De Gen. ad Lit.* 2, 9, 20) and St Thomas (S.Th. I, 70, 1 ad 3) in reference to Gen. 1. What is not always realised is that it applies with equal force to the other sciences: to philology (Babel does not really mean 'confusion'), to literary criticism (David did not really personally write the *Dixit Dominus*), even to history itself understood as a scientific study (see below). The biblical authors wrote in an unscientific age. We may bewail the fact, but it would be stupid to neglect it.

### *Chronological Context*

It is no good reading the Bible as if it dropped ready made from heaven, when its composition was spread over thousands of years. A lot of the supposed difficulties in the Bible come from the fact that people have not allowed for this, and have read it as if there is no difference between 1000 B.C. and A.D. 100. God did not reveal His plan for mankind in one parcel and dump it in the world for men to get on with. He chose a people, and revealed Himself gradually—if you like painfully—in the chequered history of that people. To understand that revelation it is absolutely essential to place each element of it accurately in the period to which it belongs. There is no point in being scandalized, for instance, at a 550 B.C. statement that there is



no life after death, when God did not clearly reveal His mind on the matter until 150 B.C.

### *Moral Context*

The moral context follows suit. If the faith of the Israelites could only be a progressive thing, it is no good expecting their morals to be otherwise. God did not choose a people who were already confirmed in the Seventh Mansion of saintliness; that was the end of the story, not the beginning. And if the beginning of the story shocks us, with all its insincerity and cruelty and sheer crudity, then we ought to gasp with all the more wonder at the end to which God brought it. It is a truism that *autres temps* have *autres mœurs*. We have to make allowance for it in the Bible too, and see God not as giving His sanction to them, but allowing them as He said, 'for the hardness of your hearts.' To find a difficulty in the fact that the Patriarchs divorced their wives, or that David had a harem, is like finding a difficulty in the fact that Stone Age Man did not wear a collar and tie.

### *Literary Context*

It is no good reading the Bible as if it was all written in one consistent literary form, when in fact it was written in dozens. The literary form of different books has been compared to the key in which a piece of music has been composed to be played. It is obviously important to be able to read that key; get it wrong and discord will be produced. A good deal of the supposed disharmony between the Bible and science can be traced to this misreading of the literary form.

People tend to fight shy of this aspect of the biblical context, as if it were a mere subterfuge of scholars to escape difficulties. But there is nothing terribly scholarly about it; it is a mere recognition of the fact that different occasions have different conventions. When a person writes: 'Dear Sir,' he does not mean 'Dear' and he does not mean 'Sir.' He means: 'I am beginning a letter, and this is the convention.' When Christ said: 'A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho,' he did not mean us to make a chart of the road and plot the place where the accident took place. He meant: 'I am teaching a lesson in divine charity, and I have chosen to do so by means of a parable.'

The literary forms with which we are familiar cause us no difficulty: all we need is the right key-word written at the top of each piece. It may surprise us that the word 'Fiction' has to be read at the top of a piece which we once thought was 'History,' but once we are satisfied it is fiction, we will grasp the author's meaning without misrepresenting him. The real difficulty with the Bible is that it uses all sorts of literary

forms with which we are not familiar at all. Worse still, it uses forms which are dangerously similar to the ones we use, but which follow quite different conventions. An obvious example may be found in the various historical forms used in the Old Testament. For us there is only one kind of history, and if it is not a scientifically exact record of objective fact, we do not call it history. But the Israelite historian did not scruple to mix his facts with folklore, anachronisms, approximations, popular simplifications, quotations without acknowledgment, juxtaposition of contradictory documents. . . . This, again, may scandalise us, but it would be quite unscientific to make no allowance for it. It is no good saying: 'It looks like history, therefore I shall take it as history as I understand history,' when the author never intended it to be taken in that way. Pius XII had some salutary warnings on the subject :

In many cases in which the sacred authors are accused of some historical inaccuracy, or of the inexact recording of some events, it is found to be a question of nothing more than those customary and characteristic forms of expression or styles of narrative which were current in human intercourse among the ancients, and which were in fact quite legitimately and commonly employed. . . . A knowledge and careful appreciation of (these) *literary forms* will provide a solution to many of the objections made against the truth . . . of Holy Writ. . . . The Sacred Books need not exclude any of the forms of expression which were commonly used in human speech by the ancient peoples, especially of the East, to convey their meaning. . . . (What these were) is not determined only by the laws of grammar or philology, nor merely by the context. It is absolutely necessary for the interpreter to go back in spirit to those remote centuries of the East, and make proper use of the aids afforded by history, archaeology, ethnology, and other sciences, in order to discover what literary forms the writers of that early age intended to use, and did in fact employ. For to express what they had in mind, the ancients of the East did not always use the same (literary) forms as we use today; they used those which were current among the people of their time and place; and what these were the exegete cannot determine *a priori* (namely, from what they look like), but only from a careful study of ancient oriental literature. (*Divino Afflante*, C.T.S. 39-42)

A stronger plea could not be made for the need to put the biblical authors in their right context. Nor should there be any scruple about applying the same sound principles to the writers of the New Testament too, from whom it would be just as unfair to demand a type of history which had not yet been invented. It was Cardinal Cajetan who said :

Consider, prudent reader, the text of the Gospel, and be careful to put yourself in harmony with the Gospel. You must not accommodate or twist the Gospel to your own point of view. (*In Matt.* 5:31)

What precise literary form was used by the writer of the Gospel (or of Genesis or of Daniel) is obviously, as Pius XII said, a matter for

specialists, and we are dependent on their findings. It is worth recalling that he also said :

Let other children of the Church bear in mind that the efforts of these valiant labourers in the vineyard of the Lord are to be judged not only with fairness and justice, but also with the greatest charity. They must avoid that somewhat indiscreet zeal which considers everything new to be for that very reason a fit object for attack or suspicion. . . . This true freedom of the sons of God is the condition and source of any real success and progress in Catholic science. (op. cit. 49-50)

The question of the Bible's inerrancy can, of course, be presented in a more philosophical manner, and it has been done excellently in terms of the psychology of the sacred writers by Père Benoit in his treatise on Inspiration.<sup>1</sup> In short, he asks for the distinction to be kept clear between the *speculative* judgment and the *practical* judgment. The adage says *Error est in iudicio, non in conceptu* ; that is to say, no-one can be accused of error before he has made a judgment. But this applies to the speculative judgment only, because that alone by definition is concerned with the assent of the mind. The practical judgment is only concerned with the producing of an effect ; it may do it well or badly, but it cannot do it erroneously.

Now, as long as biblical inspiration was thought to be the same as *prophetic* inspiration, where man simply receives the divine message and transmits it like a good radio, then it was possible to think that the sacred writers were constantly tuned in to the wavelength of their speculative judgment, and were making a series of *ex cathedra* statements. But if biblical inspiration is something wider than prophetic, if it leaves the writer entirely free to work up his own thoughts and express them in a fully human way, then he will not always be making a series of statements. His human psychology simply does not work that way. Nine times out of ten he will not be teaching, but appealing, consoling, threatening, attracting, in other words using his practical judgment. Benoit aptly quotes 2 Tim. 3:16.

This already limits considerably the hunting ground for error. But Benoit goes further to say that even the speculative judgment is limited. It is limited by its *formal object*—people do not usually make a judgment on every aspect of a thing, only on one, and with the biblical writer this will always be a religious aspect. It is limited by the *degree of affirmation*—people do not always make their judgments absolute and categoric ; more often they are qualified, and under inspiration God's confirmation of them is necessarily qualified too. It is limited by *publication*—people do not usually assert all their privately held opinions,

<sup>1</sup> *Saint Thomas d'Aquin, Somme Theologique—La Prophetie*. Ed. des Jeunes, Desclée 1947, appendice II. Recast in ch. I of Robert-Tricot's *Initiation Biblique*, Desclée 1954, pp. 6-45. English translation of original in *Prophecy and Inspiration*, Desclée 1961.

however much we can read them between the lines ; when they write we may only pick them up on what they intend to pass on to the reader. Obviously these three limitations have considerable bearing on the interpretation of the Bible, especially of what are called its historical books. On these principles inerrancy guarantees the historicity of the events recorded to the *precise* extent to which the writer intends to support his religious teaching on fact. And the principles have the same relevance to the New Testament.

These limitations were not of course discovered by Benoit. Other great names at the end of the last century had already suggested that inspiration does not apply with the same force to *obiter dicta* as to matters of faith and morals (Newman's famous example of Tobias' dog) ; that the author's *purpose* must be considered if we are going to find out what is inerrant and what is not ; that apart from his public utterances a writer may have *private* views which are not covered by inspiration in the same way ; that there is a valid distinction between *historia secundum realitatem* and *historia secundum apparentias*. The trouble is that all these solutions were condemned. Leo XIII and Benedict XV regarded them as so many expedients to avoid difficulties.<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that the suggestions themselves were fruitless, only that they were wrongly formulated. They were formulated to suggest that it was inspiration itself which had to be limited, as if only certain parts or aspects of the Bible were inspired. It should be clear that, as re-formulated by Benoit, they do not touch inspiration but only inerrancy, which is limited of its very nature.

To summarise. It is suggested that most, if not all, the difficulties that people feel about biblical inerrancy will disappear if the Bible is read in its full human context. The older approach to inspiration concentrated so exclusively on the Bible's divine aspect that this human context was not fully appreciated. The more recent approach insists that we face up to the fact that, for good or ill, God chose to transmit His word to us not by dictaphones but by men, men of such a date and such a place, with this particular mentality, outlook, morality and literary tradition. To understand these men, to penetrate fully not merely what they say but what they mean, it is not sufficient simply to translate them. Their whole living context must be reconstructed.

To put it in another way. The answers which are nowadays given to the classical difficulties of Scripture look, at first sight, like a series of evasions. This article has tried to show that the difficulties are in fact false ones, and that there is nothing to evade. Does this mean that

<sup>1</sup> cf. *Providentissimus Deus* in Denz.1950 and E.B.109, *Comm. Bibl.* in Denz.2179, *Spiritus Paraclitus* in Denz.2187.

inerrancy is now so vague a reality that it could include pretty well anything? On the contrary, it is now a far more precise reality, because we have defined exactly what can and what cannot be demanded of it. When the third century tried to analyse Christ's humanity, and specified that it involved a fully human intellect and a fully human will, it did not make Christ's divinity more vague; it defined it more exactly. If this process of defining inerrancy has resulted in inerrancy being given less prominence than it once had, that is a good thing. For it is not the only effect of inspiration, let alone its purpose. God did not inspire Scripture in order that we should have a list of divine truths to be learnt, defended and quoted as proof-texts, like a vast *Denzinger*. God inspired Scripture in order that we might have His word dwelling amongst us, to draw us to Himself and fashion us after His Own image. If that word, in coming amongst us, has come to us (even in its pre-incarnate form) in a more thoroughly human fashion than we should have thought possible, we should not be scandalised, but overwhelmed at the extent to which God will go to appeal to His wayward children.

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THE UNKNOWN PROPHET OF THE  
EXILE—II<sup>1</sup>

*The Cosmogonic Battle*

We can begin by quoting what we may call the first stanza of a magnificent poem on the hope of a speedy return to Jerusalem. It is not entirely consecutive, given the present state of the text, but can be identified on the basis of stylistic analysis, especially the initial repetitions. It seems to be composed of three and possibly four stanzas: Is. 51:9-11; 51:17-23; 52:1-2; 52:11-12 (?) It could be that the well-known text 52:7-10 forms part of this poem too. We give a close translation of 51:9-11:

Awake ! awake ! put on strength  
O arm of Yahweh,  
Awake as in days of yore,  
Generations long past.

Are you not he that dismembered Rahab  
That pierced Tannin ?  
Are you not he that dried up the Sea

<sup>1</sup> cf. *Scripture* 1962, pp. 81-90