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, misunderstandings, myths and legends, a world where the Gospel writers are not angels. 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 “human” method, second, it obliges us to observe the principle of harmony.’

1. Grammatically-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 upon the biblical text. The natural meaning of the biblical writer’s words in the light of all this 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 comparative material adduced will itself be drawn from biblical and extra-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 student has always much 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 writers. While I do not refer to non-canonical books as New Testament evidence, I do think there is need to place non-canonical writings in their proper perspective in the exegesis of the New Testament, and to use them as fully as the ancient authors did. Theologians like Calvin’s Institutes to Winne 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 we use the resources which have been given us.

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 origin of the story of Jonah (Jon 2:1—5:30), 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 reading out of 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 clues have been identified. There is a need to give the readers of 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.

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ment of the exegetical demands of an evangelical hermeneutic: ‘First, it binds us to continue using the biblical-sentential method; second, it obliges us to observe the principle of harmony.’

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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 text. The natural and usual 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 conserva-

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But some conservative students are unnecessarily timid about admitting the possible influence of non-canonical writings on the New Testament writings. While important references to non-canonical books are few in the New Testament, they are undoubtedly present. Jude, in his few verses, quotes explicitly from the Book of Enoch and the Apocalypse of Moses, and makes 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. Anyone who has wrestled with the exegeses of 1 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 it 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 known 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 in this context are simply the devil). Peter’s readers, which is the subject of the wider context of these verses).”

Why then do some evangelical students find the New Testament writers’ use of non-canonical literature embarrassing? There is nothing novel in this 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. 1:16), 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 text itself. 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 Paul’s conversion account in Acts 9:15-20, 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 they used, not simply echo the tradition of the fallen angels, but uses it and transforms it into a vehicle for pro-
claiming the victory of Christ. It is the context in 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 understanding of 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-
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 flooding 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 Galiilee, where it may still be seen under the water, 'this is the lake'. The Bible 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 a help and apt illustration of Christ. While he regarded the Bible as fiction as historical fact is debatable, but he cited it not for its historical value, but for its spiritual significance: *menemzakis* here probably indicates that he interpreted the tradition typepos to mean 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 evangelical, by merely contrasting them with 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 themselves 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 kind of thinking at work in these 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 difficult passages, 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 instinctive aver- sion to the non-canonical allusions of Jude, may rob the Christian of some wholesome, even exciting, biblical teaching, it is an obvious evil to every one of us. If the obscure passages of Scripture are viewed with a due sense of proportion, the sort of difficulties we have been considering are seen to be less significant than the sufficiently central to the message of Scripture to cause us to question the popular (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 far as the other interpreter herself casts any doubt on what the passage actually says.

But the trouble begins when our literary judgments seem to lead us away from the literal mean- ing of the author's words. Here the question of inerrancy is perhaps more directly and more closely connected with the clashes between New Testament state- ments and external sources (as in the case of the Lukan census), but from apparent disagreements between the New Testament writers themselves. The question then arises as to which of these mediates 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 chronological order, but a study of the literal history of the lit- erary and historical conventions of the time. Not that the biblical writers need necessarily have been bound by the canons of Graeco-Roman historiography or of inter-testamental Jewish literature; but if we come to such, even with the literary norms of their time, it must be on the evidence of their own writings, not of our tenth-century conventions.

We are concerned in the lightning point, for instance, of Matthew's passage about the coin in the mouth of Judas (26:24- 27)? To record a miracle of Jesus, most of us would agree. But let us 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 in- cidentally 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 life and death for Judas, as it is 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 7 suggest that this was a popular story motif, to which Jesus may have been playfully alluding, rather than giving a solemn command.

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 tradi- tion that the disciples of Peter and John exclaimed 'majesty and divinity' (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 far as the other interpreter herself casts any doubt on what the passage actually says.

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sion to the non-canonical allusions of Jude, may rouse the Christian of some sophistication, even exciting, biblical teaching, it is easy to see why it is a danger to the student of Scripture to be too intuitively clear about the historical situation in which the vague statement of the text is rooted. It is like saying that ‘God’s people will always know enough to lead them, starting from where they are.’

(b) Determining the Writer’s Intention
This is a crucial part of grammatico-historical
exegesis. Until we know what was the aim of
the biblical writer in compiling a given passage, we
are likely to misinterpret its meaning. It is as
dangerous to interpret metaphorically or
literally as it is to evaporate a historical narrative
into symbolism. And the criteria for determining
the writer’s aim are not necessarily the exegetical
conventions of their particular theological
school. They have to be determined from the
literary and historical conventions of the time.

The passages about Matthew’s account of the
Gospel are about Jesus’ suffering and death and
reserved for the public懂得 nourishment.

Exegesis involves understanding the passage in
the context of the author’s message. Matthew’s
account of Jesus’ crucifixion is not a literal
account, but a symbolic one. His intention was
to convey the idea of Jesus’ sacrifice and its
significance for humanity. He used symbolic
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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, who, without immediately accusing 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 some historians have perhaps overemphasized 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, but if we may take such a thing 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, it seems to make His actions and words with the equal public and even more provocative gesture of Jesus' donkey ride 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 when it was 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, we have a historical situation in which our own critical and precocious tendency to see everything as a pattern, so let me repeat that even the secular historian, dealing with ancient (or even modern) sources, has a duty to look first for realistic ways of harmonising apparent discrepancies (including the possibility that Gospels have been written independently), 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 interested in finding out what can be told instinctively from the suggestion that God's word is either mistaken or misleading. There is nothing obscenist 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 grammatico-historical exegesis. This is the point already sufficiently laboured 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 the whole, or an isolated passage, 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 nature of the original discrepancy.

For example, did the centurion send his Jewish 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. Goydens's commentary on Luke\(^1\); 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 diversification of the material would be to admit that 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 practicality itself of the situation? 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 the whole. The emphasis in the Levanate passage was 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's presence is important in emphasising the centurion's humility and docility; to Matthew they are insignificant. Luke's account is indeed less concerned with the 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 the 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 fast, mechanical harmonisation in this case would be either misunderstanding 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 not scholars that we may reasonably expect for harmonisation rob 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 two very different accounts.

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 to take the two accounts as independent. No attempt to force the sayings of Jesus into one form in context of the other can in general be advocated. Instead, the emphasis 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 glossed as 'you poor', and that has the effect of taking us well out of context to do stupidly what He meant. To harmonise what was originally distinct is in this case disastrous.

On the other hand, it is clear to anyone who has made a study of Christian origins that the present evangelists, for all their undisclosed 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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For a detailed account of this passage see again my contribution to the forthcoming symposium on New Testament Interpretation, ed. I. Howard Marshall.
objection to this suggestion, and many cases of 'duplicate narratives' are in fact better 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, whose task it is, who 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 scepticism in this case is not unlikely 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. But it seems that such a highly 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, would make the event look more like an incident, if 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 placement 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 less a historical and more a thematic decision 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 illustrate the point that a study of the Gospel texts themselves indicates that chronology was not always the governing factor: and, of course, the more detailed approach is needed here than in the earlier chapters of this book. I am not suggesting, of course, that they never arranged their material chronologically, and that all attempts to draw up a chronological 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 principle 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, we must first get the timing right. 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 critical study 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, mistakes are often made because of a failure to see that what seems a technical or an anachronistic feature may be an effect of some other purpose, and that this purpose may offer the clue to the nature of the document. 'A student worry about the validity of the claim of inerrancy is in fact created by ourselves, by our failure to practise sufficiently carefully the grammatico-historical exegesis to which our evangelical commitments lead. Two accounts of the same scene may still be problems, to some of which there is no ready answer, but there is no need to multiply them by mid-directed exegesis!' 2

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 kind of grammatico-historical principle, such as, so let me repeat that even the secular historian, dealing with ancient (or even modern) sources, has a duty to look first for realistic ways of harmonising apparent discrepancies (including the possibility of ignoring the detail) 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 justified in resorting to this procedure. He may, of course, recite instinctively from the suggestion that God's word is either mistaken or misleading. There is nothing obscurentist 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 grammatico-historical exegesis. This is the point already sufficiently laboured 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 in their story content or their form, on the basis 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 difference between the account and its context.

For example, did the centurion send his Jewish 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. Goodman's commentary on Luke: 3 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 doctrine of the Virgin Birth would be as arbitrary as 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 method itself or the two accounts? 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 point of emphasis. Matthew has placed great weight on the fact that the story of the centurion's servant, which is stated as a fact, is put on the lips of the centurion himself, and relates this to the other stories which, though his complaint is put on the lips of the centurion himself, and relates this to the other stories which, though the centurion himself (so Mark has it), or as contrasted with the faith of the centurion there is nothing improbable in such a supposition, as anyone who does much public speaking knows from his own experience. I find it very hard, for instance, to believe that the public speaker who has the emphasis onMt 6:20-26, that this faith of the centurion is not anything to the Lindley if he has the emphasis onMt 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 part is conveniently left off at 'you poor', and on the Lukan version in context to do this. He 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 much to do with a large number of local evangelists, for all their unintended 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 can be justified by rules of the game of academic biblical study? In fact, an evangelical would not do this: 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 therefore cannot spare no pains in discovering what it really means. If he involved himself in the most rigorous grammatico-historical exegesis, without taking short cuts or fudging the issue, it is the evangelical. His doctrinal position obliges him to the painstaking and demanding task, 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 the grounds for the reason to question, even in 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 customarily import into the study of the Bible modern anti-supernatural presuppositions, and even blinkered critical procedures which make New Testament studies the laughing-stock of scholars working in related historical and literary disciplines. If he involved himself 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 and non-evangelical.

In biblical studies, as in so many areas of study (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 commitment, 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 rules are neutral; he can be the spectator, not only permitted but, if he chooses, in a position to enforce them.

Preaching from the Patriarchs

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 underlies the exposition 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 rehabilitation 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 Nuzi. There is no direct evidence of the existence of Abraham or the covenant with him, yet custom and practice 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 where the city was known to the Babylonians for 400 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 to the east and settled in Harran, a well-known city 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 anticipations of movements by emergent powers such as the Hittites and Hurrians (cf. Gn. 14)—still too weak to act other than in co-operation with another. The bent of the archaeological evidence for this period is of tribal movements 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 (Amorite) brethren were concerned. Equally against the trend 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 custom of references to the women of the family. Consequently it is pointed out that the patriarchy in the Hurrian culture were an important element in the population of Haran and many other Mesopotamian cities. Abraham's pretence that Sarah was his sister (which he uses 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 give us a 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 would have 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 the day. 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.

Fundamental to the Abraham story is a tension between promise and fulfilment which is only partly resolved. The theme of faith in God against all the odds is most clearly seen in the story 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
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In Chapter II. Exegesis and the Original Text, Fee walks you through the process of analyzing and utilizing the various tools and strategies to understand what the original text says and means. Even if you are not studied in Greek there is so much of what Fee shares in this section that will expand your Biblical horizon and help you better grasp the whole process of Bible study (and might just entice you to decide to undertake learning Greek yourself :-)) In Chapter III. Short Guide for Sermon Exegesis, expounds on the Exegetical Task, and how to move from Exegesis to Sermon. In Chapter IV. Biblical inerrancy is a belief and a doctrinal stand that the Bible, both the Old Testament and New Testament is without error. Such belief or trust in the truths of the Bible weigh heavily into Christian epistemology, and ultimately faith in salvation. Although some point to alleged contradictions, biblical inerrancy is a position held because external evidences can be found in many forms; extra biblical attestation, prophetic prediction and fulfillment, scientific foreknowledge before the exact