

God's Inerrant Word: A Glance at Scripture's Freedom From All Error

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Inerrancy means that the sacred books are totally free from error in all their statements. This is very closely linked to the belief in inspiration...

Cardinal Taguchi
The Study of Sacred Scripture

Intro

Our previous article addressed the doctrine of biblical inspiration. We can now discuss a consequence of God-breathed Scripture: biblical inerrancy, the Bible's freedom from all error. Following our earlier method, we will have recourse to Pope Leo XIII's 1893 encyclical, *Providentissimus Deus* (hereafter PD).

Bible Difficulties aren't Bible Errors

The Bible is an intricate book that is prone to misunderstanding. The inspired pages, although clear in most places, contain many difficulties. Scripture acknowledges such complexities; 2 Peter 3:14-18 admits of difficult biblical writings from St. Paul. This latter apostle, incidentally, has more books (fourteen) attributed to his authorship than any other inspired writer.

Leo was cognizant of the intricacies: "the Sacred Writings are wrapt in a certain religious obscurity" (PD II, C, 1). We can narrow down such scriptural difficulties to several factors. Supernatural revelation was composed over an extended epoch that spanned many centuries. During this composition process, the inspired authors were many in number, originating from various backgrounds, geographical settings and cultures. Moreover, the abundant scriptural hagiographers usually wrote for entirely different doctrinal and practical reasons. As well, the biblical writers conveyed their messages through different kinds of literature, called "literary forms" or "genres" (e.g. history, poetry, apocalyptic, etc.).

The pontiff explains in PD II, C, 1 why God permitted these difficulties. Firstly, so we may attempt to grasp the truths of the Bible with increased zeal and gravity. Secondly, so we may appreciate Holy Mother Church as the sole custodian and interpreter of God's word (cf. Mt. 16:18-19; Acts 8:26-35; 1 Tim. 3:15). This wise papal counsel will prepare us to encounter scriptural difficulties, not in a state of frustration, but in the exercise of humility. Remember, we are not reading a mere secular tome, but interacting with God's precious word. Fittingly, divine revelation mentions the necessity of humility when approaching God and His things (cf. Ex. 10:3; Sir. 3:18; Is. 66:2; Mk. 9:35; Eph. 4:2; Jas. 4:10).

Biblical Inspiration: The Foundation for Biblical Inerrancy

The pope begins his exposition of inerrancy this way: "For all the books which the Church receives as sacred and canonical, are written wholly and entirely, with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Ghost" (PD II, D, 3a). The pontiff undergirds biblical inerrancy by emphasizing the Bible's divine origin. Our previous article examined the pertinent texts of 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and 2 Peter 1:20-21. Another passage can offer insight; John 10:35.

The context of the tenth chapter of St. John's gospel is as follows. The Savior gives His discourse on the "Good Shepherd," claiming to be the Redeemer. The result is a division amongst the Jews. Next, the Lord heads to the Temple for the Feast of Dedication. His opponents, still hostile because of Christ's earlier claims, pick up stones to kill Him after He reiterates His deity during the feast. Our Lord replies to His critics by citing Psalm 82:6, followed by a key comment: "and Scripture cannot be broken" (Jn. 10:35).

Traditional exegesis takes verse 35 as a witness to biblical inerrancy. For example, Father Ferdinand Prat, the renowned scholar, understood the text as "the witness of the Scripture is unimpeachable" (*Jesus Christ: His Life, His Teaching, and His Work* II, 76). Numerous scholars read John 10:35 the same way.

Let us return to Leo and the relevance of inspiration for inerrancy. The pontiff uses two key phrases: "wholly and entirely" and "with all their parts." These phrases are a familiar

way to describe inspiration; plenary and verbal. Plenary inspiration, “wholly and entirely” (Latin: *omnes atque integri*), refers to the overall content of Scripture. Verbal inspiration, “with all their parts” (Latin: *cum omnibus suis partibus*), denotes the very words of Holy Writ. These phrases were employed in two Ecumenical Councils: Trent’s *Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures* (1546) and Vatican I’s *Dei Filius* 2 (1870). Recent Magisterial pronouncements retain this traditional terminology: Vatican II’s *Dei Verbum* 11 (1965) and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 105 (1997).

The plenary and verbal aspects of biblical inspiration are rational. If God inspired the concepts of divine revelation, then He must have inspired the words. This seems inevitable; ideas and their expressions in words are closely connected, even in everyday speech. This is why individual words in Scripture are invaluable (cf. Judg. 12:5-6; Gal. 3:16). Certainly, the verbal aspect of inspiration would not violate the human freedom of the authors.

Biblical Inerrancy: A Consequence of God-breathed Scripture

The pope gets to the crux of the issue by stating “so far is it from being possible that any error can co-exist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God Himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true” (PD II, D, 3a). Leo says to attribute error to the Bible is to ultimately assign error to God. This attribution runs contrary to divine revelation — He is Truth Itself (cf. Jer. 10:10; Jn. 14:6; Rom. 3:4), whose utterances are always factual (cf. 1 Ki. 17:24; Ps. 119:160; Is. 45:19; Jas. 1:18; Rev. 21:5), because He cannot lie (cf. Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 89:35; Tit. 1:2). Attributing error to Scripture casts doubt upon God’s essence. This is conveyed in Vatican I’s *Dei Filius* 3, which teaches God neither deceives nor is deceived.

If God is going to communicate with mankind, then we ought to expect this communication to be free from all error. However, this inerrant word does not preclude complexities in Scripture. Despite the difficulties, the reader of Holy Writ should fix in his mind the following axiom: an alleged or apparent error isn’t a real error. Biblical

difficulties; yes. Biblical errors; no. With this outlook, we must address some specific scriptural difficulties.

Supernatural Revelation and “Secular Matters”

Leo observes “we have to contend against those who, making an evil use of physical science, minutely scrutinize the Sacred Book in order to detect the writers in a mistake, and to take occasion to vilify its contents” (PD II, D, 2b). This is the perennial conflict between faith and science. However, instead of bowing down to the golden calf of science, Leo enunciates a sound approach to the relation between the inspired word and physical science. The pontiff states the sacred writers “did not seek to penetrate the secrets of nature, but rather described and dealt with things in more or less figurative language, or in terms which were commonly used at the time and which in many instances are in daily use at this day, even by the most eminent men of science.”

The pontiff is stating the obvious: many times the biblical authors merely describe what comes under the senses; via ordinary speech primarily and properly — in a way we can understand and are accustomed to speaking. For a vindication of this kind of “sense” language within biblical revelation, the pope refers to St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 70, a. 1, ad 3. Such utilization of language will not, in every case, employ the exact precision one would find in a contemporary science book.

However, when Scripture does mention matters of physical science, such assertions are free from all error. The fact remains that Scripture frequently speaks of matters outside faith and morals, and these statements are as much a part of divine revelation as statements upon faith and morals. In other words, biblical inerrancy is not restricted to matters of faith and morals, but includes “secular matters” too. No wonder the Savior tells us: “If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” (Jn. 3:12).

The bottom line: there ought to be no conflict between the inspired contents of Scripture and true science. This is why the pontiff goes on to say “The Catholic interpreter, although he should show that those facts of natural science which investigators affirm to

be now quite certain are not contrary to the Scripture rightly explained, must nevertheless always bear in mind, that much which has been held and proved as certain has afterwards been called in question and rejected.” Today’s scientific “dogma” may be tomorrow’s discarded “theory.”

Beside the battle of faith and science, another war arises between faith and history. It is lamentable that God’s word is unreasonably subjected to extra-biblical sources, with the benefit of the doubt usually given to the latter. This process is absurd; a *sensus Catholicus* ought to scrutinize secular works in view of divine revelation. Although the study of the Bible is enhanced by the use of secular sources, the fact remains that non-biblical documents were never granted the charism of biblical inspiration, thus are prone to error. It is ludicrous when certain scholars endow a pseudo-inerrancy to Josephus or Philo, while denying both the inerrancy of the Bible and the infallibility of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church.

St. Augustine’s Testimony to Biblical Inerrancy

Aware of Tradition’s witness to Scripture’s freedom from all error, Leo cites St. Augustine in PD II, D, 3b. The bishop of Hippo utters that “only to those books of Scripture which are now called canonical that I have learned to pay such honor and reverence as to believe most firmly that none of their writers has fallen into any error. And if in these books I meet anything which seems contrary to truth, I shall not hesitate to conclude either that the text is faulty, or that the translator has not expressed the meaning of the passage, or that I myself do not understand” (*Epistle* 82).

St. Augustine, a typical representative of the Patristic view of the Bible, offers three guidelines for answering scriptural difficulties. Firstly, there may be a problem with the manuscripts in our possession. “Text criticism” is a legitimate discipline, whereby the manuscripts are compared and contrasted to try and replicate the original inspired documents. Secondly, the exegete (“translator”) is engaging in faulty biblical interpretation, which may involve not recognizing the proper literary genre, ignoring the context of the passage under scrutiny, or misapplying the two main senses (literal and

spiritual). Thirdly, it may be an intellectual defect on the part of the reader. Numerous quotes affirming biblical inerrancy are found in the Church Fathers.

St. Luke and Scripture's Freedom From All Error

The book of Acts by St. Luke will serve as a “test case” for biblical inerrancy. Extensive scrutiny has vindicated his geographical accuracy with approximately 32 countries, 54 cities, and 9 islands. Even the secularist should consider this remarkable.

Specific details of Acts are confirmed by historical and archaeological research; let us list five examples. First, we find the proper port, Perga, is given for a ship crossing from Cyprus (13:13). Second, we read the correct identification of the false gods Zeus and Hermes, associated with the city of Lystra (14:12). Third, we discover the accurate designation of Gallio as proconsul of Achaia (18:12). Fourth, we find a truthful representation of the law regarding Gentiles in the Temple (21:28). Fifth, we note reliable information on the two common ways of obtaining Roman citizenship (22:28). Other examples are plentiful.

Final Comments

Leo proclaims biblical inerrancy as “the ancient and unchanging faith of the Church” (PD II, D, 3a). Major ecclesiastical documents that address divine revelation confirm this doctrine. The Magisterium, following Scripture and Tradition, is merely echoing the Savior’s words to the Father: “Sanctify them in the truth, Thy word is truth” (Jn. 17:17).

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