Well-Versed Inerrancy: Literary Meaning, Literal Truth, and Literate Interpretation in the Economy of Biblical Discourse

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Introduction: "It is a truth..."

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." Jane Austen could not in 1813 have foreseen the dramatic social changes that have led, in our day, to cohabitation, pre-nuptial agreements, and female CEOs. Despite its grand claim, therefore, the contemporary reader is hard-pressed to say that the opening line to *Pride and Prejudice*, though justly famous, is also inerrant, which we can provisionally define as a proposition that is unfailingly true.[1] Austen writes prose divinely, but we must not confuse her words with God's. What is the literary meaning, literal truth, and literate interpretation of this first line? What is Austen doing with her words? Is she affirming the truth "that a single man..." or is she speaking ironically? When we take context (i.e., the rest of the novel) into consideration, what she really means is that a single *woman* must be in want of a rich husband – a quite different proposition.

Scripture nowhere says of anything "It is a truth universally acknowledged," though its wisdom literature comes close. The book of Proverbs contains parental advice to a son, and many commentators suppose that the son in question – a man born to be king – is indeed in possession of a fortune, in want and in search of a wife. Is there an overarching "message" in Proverbs – "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7), or perhaps a moral variation on Newton's Third Law of Motion: "For every action there is a happy or unhappy

[1] A proposition is the content of a communicative act. Coming to appreciate both the distinction and the relation between sentences and propositions will prove crucial to my account.

consequence" – or is each single proverb an individual pearl on a proverbial necklace? Is it a truth universally acknowledged that "He who tills his land will have plenty of bread" (Prov. 12:11) – even during droughts?

Jesus spoke in proverbs too, though his favorite mode of teaching was the parable. What happens in Jesus' stories, unlike Austen's novels, is anything but truth universally acknowledged. Jesus' stories contain shocking subversive developments that go *against* the status quo. Is it a truth, universally acknowledged or not, that a father will always welcome home a son who has squandered his inheritance (Lk. 15:11-32)? What *kind* of truth is Jesus teaching (i.e., *about what* and *in what way* is he communicating truth)? How is Jesus able to teach truth about the kingdom of God by means of metaphors and stories? Is Jesus teaching a single proposition in each parable or several? Similar questions pertain to the Gospels – "passion narratives with long introductions." Is Jesus' Passion narrative true in the same way that proverbs, parables, and *Pride and Prejudice* are true, or is biblical truth always and everywhere a matter of historical fact?

The doctrine of inerrancy must be *well-versed* because the textual truth of Scripture is comprised of language and literature. Well-versed inerrancy is alert to the importance of rhetoric as well as logic. Poorly versed accounts of inerrancy – accounts that fail to address the nature of language, literature, and literacy – do not ultimately help the cause of biblical authority, and may, in fact, constrict it.[2]

[2] John Stott says that one reason why inerrancy makes him uncomfortable is because God's revelation in Scripture is so rich "that it cannot be reduced to a string of propositions which invites the label *truth* or *error*" (*Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity, and Faithfulness* rev. ed. [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003] 61). He also worries that inerrancy seems "to make us excessively defensive in relation to apparent discrepancies" instead of encouraging us to search the Scriptures to grow in grace and knowledge of God (61).

Inerrancy and evangelical Christianity: the state of the question

Evangelicalism, as a renewal movement at the heart of Protestant Christianity, affirms Scripture's supreme authority over belief and life. Such "biblicism" has long been thought to be a distinguishing feature of Evangelicalism.[3] However, Evangelicals have come to understand biblical authority in two contrasting ways, with some emphasizing Scripture's authority for faith and practice alone ("infallibilists"), others its authority over all domains it addresses, including history and science ("inerrantists"). Does the Bible tell us how the heavens go and/or how to go to heaven? Calvin says that if you want to learn about astronomy, you should ask the astronomers, not Moses, since his purpose was not to deliver supernatural information about the movement of planets.[4] Evangelicals disagree about the *extent* of the Bible's authoritative *domain*, with infallibilists limiting it to "religious" matters and inerrantists expanding it indefinitely.[5] The critical question at present is whether inerrancy is a divisive distraction or an essential feature, perhaps even the rallying cry, of Evangelical biblicism.[6]

What is inerrancy for (and how important is it)?

Inerrancy is not the issue that separates the sheep from the goats; inerrantists are not necessarily "truthier than thou." The doctrine of inerrancy is not a blunt instrument with which to bludgeon those who are not in good conscience able to subscribe to the notion. Nor is inerrancy a means for eliminating all biblical difficulties, or of ensuring particular biblical interpretations, or

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[3] See David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 3-19.
[4] Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 1:86.
[5] Michael Rea suggests that Scripture has authority over "the domain defined by the text itself" "Authority and Truth," in D. A. Carson, ed., *The Scripture Project* 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).
[6] See John D. Woodbridge, "Evangelical Self-Identity and the Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy," in Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough, eds., *Understanding the Times: New Testament Studies in the 21st Century* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011) 104-38.

of proving the Bible to be true. Nor should we use inerrancy to determine in advance what kind of truths we will find in Scripture, or to stipulate that what matters most in the Bible is the information it conveys. Inerrancy is neither a hermeneutical shortcut nor a substitute for good exegesis. What, then, is inerrancy good for?

God's word will accomplish the purpose for which it has been sent (Isa. 55:11). It follows that the Bible is authoritative over any domain God addresses. Inerrancy points out how the efficacy of God's word works out with regard to assertions. To anticipate: inerrancy means that *God's authoritative word is wholly true and trustworthy in everything it claims about what was, what is, and what will be.*[7] While inerrancy is not a full-orbed hermeneutic, it does give believers confidence that Scripture's teaching is ultimately unified and coherent. God does not contradict himself, despite surface textual appearances to the contrary (Isa. 45:19). If exegesis without presuppositions is not possible, then inerrancy is one of the right presuppositions, enabling us to name what some see as errors for what they are: not errors, but difficulties.

The Bible contains difficulties: *this* is a truth universally acknowledged. Honesty compels us to acknowledge it; integrity compels us not to skim over it. Some of these difficulties may be quickly dispatched; others require prayer and fasting. In any case, difficulty is the operative concept, and George Steiner helpfully distinguishes three kinds.[8] "Looking things up" can resolve *contingent* difficulties. *Modal* difficulties have to do not with surface infelicities (i.e., there is nothing to "look up") but with the reader's inability to relate to the text's overall style and subject matter. *Tactical* difficulties arise from the author's willful intention to be ambiguous or obscure, perhaps to spur the reader to think further and read again.

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[7] I shall later add the important qualification "when rightly interpreted."
[8] George Steiner, "On Difficulty," in *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) 18-47.

Many contingent difficulties in Scripture have now been resolved thanks to discoveries in archaeology. Nevertheless, there are still some difficulties that we do not yet know how to resolve. Steiner's modal difficulties are often *moral* or *spiritual* difficulties, offenses not merely to reason but to the hardened human heart. And, of course, a poet's tactics are child's play in comparison to those of the divine rhetor. Inerrancy does not make the difficulties go away. Rather, it expresses faith's conviction that, to use Shakespeare's phrase, "the truth will out,"[9] and this gives us a reason to endure critical questioning, to continue trusting each and every part of God's word, and humbly yet boldly to read again. The purpose of inerrancy is to cultivate readers who confront biblical difficulties like Augustine: "And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand."[10] Difficulties are not necessarily indications of the "dark side" of Scripture's moon (contra Sparks), only spots in its sun.

Is inerrancy a uniter or a divider with respect to the Evangelical movement? There seem to be three possibilities: (1) inerrancy is *essential* for the unity and integrity of Evangelicalism (2) inerrancy is *inimical* to the unity and integrity of Evangelicalism (3) inerrancy is *incidental* to the unity and integrity of Evangelicalism, a matter of indifference.

Stephen Holmes concedes that it is technically correct to say that church tradition affirmed the truth of Scripture's propositions, but "this is not an especially interesting or important claim."[11] Even Warfield would not say that inerrancy is the essence of Christianity. In other words, inerrancy is not a doctrine of first dogmatic rank – a doctrine on which the gospel stands

[9] *Merchant of Venice* Act II, scene 2.
[10] *Letter* 82.

or falls – as is the doctrine of the Trinity. On the other hand, a high view of biblical authority that affirms its entire trustworthiness is necessary to preserve the integrity of the gospel, and other candidate terms (e.g., infallibility) that have sought to capture this notion have become diluted over time. So, while inerrancy is clearly not part of the *substance* of the gospel (union and communion with Christ, the "material principle" of Trinitarian theology and the Reformation), it is connected to the *proclamation* of the gospel: "Specifically, it is an outworking of the *trustworthiness* of Scripture."[12] Still, inerrancy pertains directly only to the assertions of the Bible, not the commands, promises, warnings, etc. We would therefore be unwise to collapse everything we want to say about biblical authority into the nutshell of inerrancy. The term "infallible" – in the sense of "not liable to fail" – remains useful as the broader term for biblical authority, with "inerrancy" a vital subset (i.e., not liable to fail *in its assertions*).[13]

Inerrancy is neither inimical nor incidental to the present and future of Evangelicalism. To say it is essential is to go too far, though it is a natural outworking of what is essential (authority) and thus a mark of one who is *consistently* Evangelical. I agree with Packer: inerrancy "ought always to be held as an article of faith not capable of demonstrative proof but entailed by dominical and apostolic teaching about the nature of Scripture."[14] Perhaps, in order to be at peace with as many evangelicals as possible, we could agree that inerrancy, if not *essential*, is nevertheless *expedient* (there was a fourth possibility after all!). Even the faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary, which dropped the phrase "free from error in the whole and in the part"

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[11] Stephen R. Holmes, "Evangelical doctrines of Scripture in transatlantic perspective," *Evangelical Quarterly* 81.1 (2009) 62.
[12] Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009) 130.
[13] Ward views inerrancy as a true description of the Bible, but not in the top rank of attributes inasmuch as it derives from inspiration (*Words of Life*, 130).

from their doctrinal statement in 1971 in favor of "infallible rule of faith and practice," appears ready to use the term again if *properly* defined: "Where inerrancy refers to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the churches through the biblical writers, we support its use."[15] The problem, however, is that there are various definitions, and caricatures, in circulation. What, then, do I mean by speaking of "well-versed" inerrancy?

Why "well-versed"?

Accounts of inerrancy are well-versed, first, when they understand "the way the words go."[16] Well-versed inerrancy acknowledges that biblical truth involves form as well as content. Well-versed inerrancy thus takes account of the importance of rhetoric as well as logic for "rightly handling [*orthotomeo*] the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). To be well-versed is to have a *literate* understanding of the *literal* sense. The early Christians had "an addiction to literacy."[17] My primary concern about inerrancy today is that too many contemporary readers lack the literacy needed for understanding the way the words go, or for rightly handling the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). Biblical inerrancy in the context of biblical illiteracy makes for a *dangerous* proposition.

Second, and more importantly, a well-versed doctrine of inerrancy gives priority to the Bible's own teaching about God, language, and truth. "Well-versed" thus stands in for "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) – the overarching story-line of the Bible that features the

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[14] "Upholding the Unity of Scripture Today," *Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer* vol. 3, *Honoring the Word of God* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2008) 141.
[15] Fuller Theological Seminary, "What We Believe and Teach," http://documents.fuller.edu/provost/aboutfuller/believe–teach.asp.
[16] Eugene Rogers's paraphrase of Thomas Aquinas' description of the literal sense ("How the Virtues of the Interpreter Presuppose and Perfect Hermeneutics," *Journal of Religion* 76 [1996] 64-81).
[17] William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 123.

economic Trinity (i.e., the words and acts of God in history). My primary intent is not to react to immediate challenges (many others are doing this, often quite effectively) but rather to probe further into the deep theological roots of the idea of inerrancy, which involves the truthfulness of God and God's relationship to Scripture – the economy of truth and triune rhetoric.

Inerrancy is not a speculative postulate but an inference from God's self-communication in word and deed. It is always a temptation to assume that we know what God is like simply by unpacking the concept of "infinitely perfect being." Elsewhere I have cautioned against "perfect being" theology, not least because God's revelation in Christ has confounded the wisdom of this world.[18] We must make every effort to avoid identifying God with *our* ideas of Perfect Being and inerrancy with *our* ideas of what a Perfect Book must be. I want to distinguish, following Luther, an "inerrancy of glory" (i.e., a natural theology of inerrancy derived from our culturally-conditioned concept of perfection) from an "inerrancy of the cross" (i.e., a revealed theology of inerrancy derived from the canonically-conditioned concept of perfection). A well-versed doctrine of inerrancy that takes its bearings from Scripture understands truth not merely in terms of the philosopher's idea of correspondence but, biblically first and theologically foremost, in terms of covenantal faithfulness and testimonial endurance. God's truth endures, and hence proves itself over time, but not without opposition from critics or suffering on the part of its witnesses.

Scripture's truth does not depend on interpreters acknowledging it as such. The reality of God, the world, and ourselves is what it is independently of our thoughts and words about it. Nevertheless, only readers born from above, by the Holy Spirit, can be "well-versed" in the dual sense in which I am using the term: grammatical-rhetorical and biblical-theological. A well-

[18] See my *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge:

versed approach to inerrancy is *Augustinian* ("faith seeking understanding") and *sapiential* in orientation, for it sees truth not simply as information to be processed, but as life-giving wisdom: "the truth shall set you free" (Jn. 8:32).

Is the Chicago Statement well-versed?

The Chicago Statement on Inerrancy was agreed upon in 1978 by a coalition of some three hundred Evangelical scholars and leaders representing a variety of constituencies. Can anything good come out of the 1970s?

It is unfair to hold the Statement itself responsible for the less than edifying use that others have made of it. The Preface alone belies the objection that inerrancy is a distraction from more important Christian concerns by emphasizing, in a spirit of humble conviction, the importance of biblical authority for Christian faith and discipleship, and by acknowledging that those who deny inerrancy may still be evangelical (albeit less consistently so) in their belief and behavior and that those who profess it but fail to do the truth. The Short Statement does a fine job in locating the doctrine of Scripture in the doctrine of the triune God, thereby keeping it theological.[19]

In asking whether the Chicago Statement is well-versed, I have four major concerns: (1) its definition of inerrancy (2) whether it gives primacy to a biblical-theological rather than a philosophical understanding of truth (3) whether it is sufficiently attentive to the nature and function of language and literature (4) whether it produced a theological novelty.

The definition of inerrancy

Cambridge University Press, 2010), 94-98.

[19] For a further elaboration of this point, see Robert W. Yarbrough, "Inerrancy's Complexities: Grounds for Grace in the Debate," *Presbyterion* 37/2 (2011) 85-100.

"People surely accept or reject the word [inerrancy] without agreeing or even knowing what someone else means by it."[20] This is a shrewd insight. For years now I have refused to say whether or not I hold to inerrancy until my interlocutor defines the term or allows me to do so. Everything hinges on a clear and careful definition, and once this is in hand many objections will be seen to be attacking either a caricature or a false implication of the doctrine.

The Statement's first eleven Articles treat biblical inspiration. It is clear that inerrancy is an entailment of divine authorship, and that the peculiarities and particularities of human authorship do not call Scripture's truth into question. However, we do not get an explicit definition of inerrancy in any one Article, though we are told "it is true and reliable in all the matters it addresses" (Article XI) and "free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit" (Article XII). Is the Bible inerrant because it happens not to have erred or because, as God's word, *it could not have erred*?

Paul Feinberg's celebrated definition gathers up the various threads of the Chicago Statement into a conceptual coat of many colors (i.e., qualifications): "when all facts are known, the Scripture in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences."[21] The Chicago Statement is also compatible with David Dockery's briefer formula: "The Bible in its original autographs, properly interpreted, will be found to be truthful and faithful in all that it affirms concerning all areas of life, faith, and practice."[22] This definition is attractive because (1) it is a positive statement (2) it says that the Bible has to be properly interpreted (3) it argues that the Bible is true not in everything it *mentions* but in what it

[20] Paul Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," in Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 293.
[21] Ibid., 294.
[22] David Dockery, "Can Baptists Affirm the Reliability and Authority of the Bible?" *SBC Today* (March 1985), 16.

affirms (Dockery calls this *critical* rather than naive inerrancy).[23]

I propose the following definition: to say that Scripture is inerrant is to confess one's faith that *the authors speak the truth in all things they affirm (when they make affirmations), and will eventually be seen to have spoken truly (when right readers read rightly).*[24] I shall unpack this definition further below.

Truth, language, literature, and interpretation

One of the most common objections to the idea of inerrancy is that it is essentially *modern*, unequally yoking biblical authority to a particular theory of meaning (i.e., referential), knowledge (i.e., foundational), and truth (i.e., correspondence). It is therefore incumbent on the inerrantist to set forth a theological account of meaning and truth. Does the Chicago Statement deliver?

The Short Statement opens powerfully with declarations that God "is Himself Truth and speaks truth only" and that biblical authority is "inescapably impaired" if inerrancy is "made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own." The terms "true," "truth," and "truthful" appear again in Articles IX, XIII, XIV, and XVII. The Statement never explicitly defines them, but would seem to presuppose a correspondence view of truth. This alone is hardly modernist, for some kind of correspondence is implied in Aristotle's celebrated definition: "To say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true."[25] It is perhaps better to think of

[23] David Dockery, "Variations on Inerrancy," *SBC Today* (May 1986) 10-11.
[24] By "right readers" I mean right-hearted and right-minded readers: those who read in faith and humility, not to mention the general prerequisites for literary competence. Strictly speaking, I should also say "as originally given" to specify that I am not claiming that any particular copy or translation is inerrant (and thus acknowledging the importance of textual criticism). However, because this qualification does not distinguish my position from others, and because I have nothing else to add to standard evangelical explanations of why it is important, I have seen fit to consign it, not to the margins of my discourse, but to this footnote.
[25] *Metaphysics* 1011b25.

correspondence as an intuition about the way in which language accords with reality rather than a full-blown theory, since theories, even about truth, come and go. Whether the correspondence view makes sense of the Statement's claim that "God...is himself Truth," or of Scripture's claim that "Jesus is ... the Truth" (Jn. 1:14) is a point to which we shall return in the next section.

Curiously, the Statement does not explicitly identify what in Scripture are the *bearers* of truth (e.g., words, sentences, statements, propositions, or texts). The lack of any mention of "propositions" is, however, a surprising and conspicuous absence, especially given its prominence in subsequent material on inerrancy.

The Statement is at its best when it situates its discussion in terms of the Bible and theology, as it does in Article IV, which reminds us that God uses language, and neither human finitude nor fallenness render language "inadequate as a vehicle for divine revelation."[26] Article VIII similarly affirms the appropriateness of the "distinctive personalities and literary styles" of the human authors as vehicles of revelation, and Article XIII stipulates that truthful language need not be technically precise (that way lies modernity) but can include figurative language. And Article XVIII helpfully reminds us that Scripture employs various literary forms to speak the truth.

We can identify two areas of concern: (1) whether inerrancy pertains to those portions in Scripture (and there are large swaths of them) that are *not* affirmations and (2) how language and literature "correspond" to reality. As to the first point, J. L. Austin criticized the philosophers of his day (the mid twentieth-century) for their tendency to think that the purpose of language is to

[26] Some Evangelicals radicalize Calvin's notion of accommodation, arguing that God adopts not only the raw communicative materials at hand but also the fallen and therefore errant human perspectives as well. It is not clear, however, why everything humans say be somehow mistaken or faulty. If the incarnation is the paradigmatic divine accommodation, and if the man Jesus is

"state facts" or to describe "states of affairs." The notion of a speech act is now well established in the literature; we know now that authors do many things with words besides asserting.[27] Language can be used to describe the world and report history, and that it is able to do so is vitally important to Christian faith, where the main message is indeed historical: "He is risen!" But not all sentences in the Bible state facts. To be sure, we have to assume certain things to be true in order to make sense of other speech acts. Jesus *commanded* his disciples to fetch a donkey from a near-by village (Mt. 21:2), and in doing so tacitly assumed certain truth conditions (i.e., that there was a village with a donkey in it). Yet what Jesus *did* with words was *command*, not *assert*.

As to assertions themselves, my opening example of *Pride and Prejudice* reminds us that the relationship of language to reality is not always simple or linear, as if one could draw a straight line between words and things in the world. While the Chicago Statement does not officially subscribe to the idea that meaning is reference, it may inadvertently encourage it. Some of its most enthusiastic and vociferous supporters have appealed to the Statement as warrant for reading all biblical narrative as if it were a species of the genus "modern historiography." The main problem, with the Statement and with much twentieth-century philosophy of language, is that it appears to take individual sentences (e.g., "the cat is on the mat"; "Jesus wept") as paradigmatic illustrations of how words refer to or picture the world. To insist that true statements are always exact representations of extra-linguistic reality leads to overly-literalistic

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impeccable (sinless), then we may sat that God assumes the createdness but not the fallenness of humanity, in which case inerrancy is the textual counterpart of impeccability

[27] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1975).

interpretations.[28] A picture of "literality" holds us (moderns) captive.[29] To say "I believe in the literal truth of the Bible" may mean something quite different when uttered in the modern world than it did in the time of Augustine.

Truth is indeed about reality, but there is more than one way to render reality in language.[30] We have truth "when what is said is that this is how things are." The map of the Paris métro is about the Paris métro – it says "This is how the Paris métro is" – but "the way the words go" (if maps could speak!) is not like the way a picture corresponds. The tracks that take tourists to the Eiffel Tower are not really orange, as they are on the map, nor are they only a centimeter wide. Most users understand the convention. Truth is the "fit" between text and reality, between what is written and what is written about, but one can speak about (map) the same terrain in many ways. Some maps highlight topography, others points of scenic interest, and still others buried treasure. A road map need not contradict one that points out historical landmarks or topography. Each type of map reflects a certain interest and highlights what it wants its readers to know. There is no such thing as a universal, all-purpose map. The metaphor of the map reminds us that *there is more than one kind of fit*.[31] I worry that some theories of inerrancy imply that there is only one way correctly to map the world.

Biblical inerrancy requires biblical literacy. The literate interpreter understands the language and the literary form. The biblical books are like different kinds of maps. To read a

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[28] See the helpful critique of the "mental-picture theory" of truth and reference in Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012) chapter 7.
[29] See James Barr, "Literality," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989) 412-28.
[30] Cf. C. S. Lewis: "truth is always about something, but reality is that about which truth is." "Myth Became Fact," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) 66.
[31] See my *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005) 295-97.

biblical map correctly requires a certain familiarity with its conventions: one needs to know its scale, key, and legend. The biblical books speak of how things are, and thus correspond to the eternal reality of God, God's mighty acts, the world of nature and of human being, but not always in the same way. The literate reader needs to follow the way the biblical words go, especially when they speak of the reality of the past. "Go" is the key term because biblical revelation is indeed progressing, moving with increasing speed to their ultimate referent: what God has done, is doing, and will do in Jesus Christ. The Chicago Statement does well to highlight both the progressive nature of the Bible's teaching (Article V) as well as the importance of reading the parts in light of the whole and the whole in light of the parts (Article VI).

In recognizing the importance of reading Scripture according to its own standards of truth, figures of speech, and literary forms, the Chicago Statement largely succeeds in following an "inerrancy of the cross" and avoiding an "inerrancy of glory." I resonate with the way the "Exposition" of the Statement puts it: "Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed." If inerrancy has acquired a bad name, it is less the fault of the Chicago Statement than of the way its proponents deploy the notion in defense of certain literalistic interpretations.[32] I agree with Mark Thompson: "[inerrancy] should not be judged by the abuse of it or by inadequate explanations."[33] Nor ought we to expect too much of it. Inerrancy alone does not a hermeneutic make: "Inerrancy does not set down any

[32] Unfortunately I am not as enthusiastic about the 1982 Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics, which to my mind is a retrograde effort due to an overemphasis on historical reference (i.e., factuality) and a subsequent lack of emphasis on the literary sense (i.e., form).

principle that requires certain sections of Scripture to be treated as intended to be either largely historical or largely metaphorical."[34] Stated differently: inerrancy tells you that what is said is true, but it cannot tell you what is said. Nor, alas, is professing inerrancy sufficient to keep one orthodox. No such necessary correlation exists between having the right doctrine of Scripture and getting the right doctrine out of Scripture.[35] We must be careful neither to inflate nor deflate inerrancy's role in interpretation.

A theological novelty? What does Chicago have to do with Nicaea?

Article XVI states "that the doctrine of inerrancy has been integral to the Church's faith throughout history." It also denies that inerrancy is "a reactionary position postulated in response to negative higher criticism." To refute the claim that the doctrine of inerrancy was "invented" by nineteenth-century Princeton is also to rebut the objection that inerrancy, along with the Chicago Statement, is a provincial and parochial concern. Can it be done?

A full-orbed demonstration of inerrancy's historical pedigree is beyond the scope of the present essay. Others have been there, done that.[36] I propose instead to compare and contrast the Chicago Statement to the creedal statement on the Trinity of the Council of Nicaea. To be sure, the framers of the Chicago Statement explicitly say in the Preface that they do not propose to give the statement "creedal weight," but this is not the salient feature of my comparison. I propose to focus instead on a certain parallel between inerrancy and *homoousios*.

Chicago is not Nicaea: the gospel itself is not directly at stake in inerrancy, nor is it clear

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[33] "Toward a Theological Account of Biblical Inerrancy," in James Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary, eds., *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith: A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012) 72.
[34] Ward, *Words of Life*, 134.
[35] Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "What Does 'Inerrancy' Mean?" *Concordia Theological Monthly* 36 no. 8 (1965) 591.

whether there was in Chicago a counterpart to Athanasius. I am nevertheless struck by four similarities: (1) both notions arose at a time when the truths they express – in the one case, the full deity of the Son; in the other, the divine truth of the Scriptures – were being challenged (2) both *homoousios* and inerrancy are technical terms that have proven to be stumbling blocks to many (3) neither term is biblical, in the sense of occurring in Scripture, yet (4) both terms reflect underlying biblical convictions or *judgments*.

My thesis, in brief, is this: while the term or concept "inerrant" may be new, the underlying judgment is not.[37] I owe the concept/judgment distinction to David Yeago, who in a seminal article developed it in connection to Nicaea. Yeago thinks that Paul's language in Philippians 2:6, about the Son's *isos theos* ("equality with God"), is saying the same thing as Nicaea's very different concept *homoousios* ("of the same substance"). It is essential "to distinguish between judgments and the conceptual terms in which those judgments are rendered" so that "the same judgment can be rendered in a variety of conceptual terms."[38] Similarly, I submit that "inerrancy" is saying (nearly) the same thing as John's language in Rev. 21:5 about word of God being *pistoi kai alethinoi* ("trustworthy and true").

The doctrine of inerrancy expresses a non-identical equivalence to what Scripture teaches about itself. The problem with concepts, however, is that they gradually acquire a medley of associations, each of which affects the core meaning. Although it expresses a biblical judgment, the concept of inerrancy also shows signs of its cultural and historical locatedness. The

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[36] See John Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

[37] Augustine believes that the Bible is "without error" [*sine errore*], but he also interpreted the Bible in ways that go beyond grammatical-historical exegesis.

[38] David Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," in Stephen Fowl, ed., *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 93.

challenge, then, is to affirm the underlying judgment together with the concept of inerrancy, provided that we can free the latter *from* unhelpful cultural accretions in order to free it *for* ministering the whole counsel of God.[39]

Well-versed inerrancy: an Augustinian theology of veracity

Augustine is the patron saint of well-versed inerrancy because (1) his thinking was thoroughly theological and he judged Scripture to be entirely true and trustworthy (2) he was not only familiar but proficient in the liberal arts, writing on the nature and interpretation of language, concerned for what he called the literal meaning of Genesis, but also alert and attentive to biblical figures of speech. Augustine would surely agree with the judgment expressed by my definition of inerrancy: *the authors speak the truth in all things they affirm (when they make affirmations), and will eventually be seen to have spoken truly (when right readers read rightly)*. In this section I want to frame my definition in biblical and theological terms, attending in particular to divine authorship, the nature of truth, the meaning of the literal sense, and the role of the reader in the economy of interpreting Scripture's divine communication.[40]

God and truth: covenantal correspondence ("speak the truth")

Augustine defines truth as "what is"[41] or "what which shows what is."[42] Scripture clearly affirms that God speaks the truth: "your words are true [*emeth*]" (2 Sam 7:28); "Thy word is truth [*aletheia*]" (Jn. 17:17); "Let God be proved true [*alethes*] (and every man a liar [*pseustes*])" (Rom. 3:4). What kind of truth is in view here? Does the Bible subscribe to a correspondence

[39] See the helpful survey by Jason S. Sexton, "How Far Beyond Chicago? Assessing Recent Attempts to Reframe the Inerrancy Debate," *Themelios* 34/1 (2009) 26-49.
[40] In terms of David Dockery's categories, my well-versed approach is a combination of his third and sixth types, hence, a "critically nuanced" inerrancy (see Dockery, "Variations on Inerrancy," 10-11).
[41] *Soliloquies* 2.5.8

theory of truth?

Before we answer that (and we will), we must pause to consider, and marvel, at inerrancy's most important presupposition: *God speaks*. Better: God is a communicative agent who employs human language and literature as means of communicative action. Moreover, because the works of the Trinity are undivided [*opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*], we must ultimately identify God's speaking as *triune discourse*, where discourse is "something someone says to someone about something in some way for some purpose."[43]

What is language for? Carl Henry was right to protest against the neo-orthodox attempt to avoid the cognitive nature of divine revelation. Yet he goes too far in saying of language that "its basic function is cognitive,"[44] that the "the minimal unit of meaningful expression is a proposition,"[45] that only propositions can be true or false,[46] and that most of the sentences in Scripture "are historical assertions or explanations of such assertions."[47] Given his view of the nature of language and truth, it is not surprising that he concludes that the Bible is propositional revelation, that is, that the Scriptures "contain a body of divinely given information actually expressed or capable of being expressed in propositions."[48]

In linking biblical authority with propositional revelation, Henry carries on a venerable theological tradition. I do not wish to be heard as affirming anything less, though I do want to say something *more*. While Henry is right to emphasize the cognitive nature of biblical

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[42] *On True Religion* 36.66.
[43] On the various elements of discourse, see my "The Apostolic Discourse and its Developments," in Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance, eds., *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 191-207.
[44] Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* vol. III (Waco, TX: Word, 1979) 401.
[45] Ibid., 453.
[46] Ibid., 456.
[47] Ibid., 456
[48] Ibid., 457.

revelation (i.e., that it conveys content that can be thought about and assented to), he tends to treat declarative sentences as "the privileged class" of biblical discourse.[49] By way of contrast, the words of Truth incarnate privilege "the poor" (i.e., forms of discourse that traditional philosophers and theologians typically neglect): the bulk of Jesus' earthly teaching consists of figures of speech, enigmatic sayings, and parables. To be sure, these forms too are cognitive, though it is harder to draw a straight line between individual sentences and the propositions they convey.

Whereas Henry thinks that the basic function of language is to transfer information, I believe that God gives us language to communicate, which is a broader category: "language never exists simply to state propositions: its primary role is a means by which one person acts in relation to others."[50] If we attend to all that the Bible depicts God as doing to engage human persons by means of language – if we give a well-versed account – we will see that both God and Scripture do more with propositions than teach or impart information.

Among the various divine speech acts we could consider, the *oath* is particularly important. God makes solemn promises out of words (i.e., God commits himself to doing things for others) and seal his commitments with an oath.[51] *God covenants*. A covenant is a communicative act that establishes or ratifies a personal relationship and aims at communion: "A *berit* is a relationship involving an oath-bound commitment."[52] All discourse, to the extent that it is a

[49] For views on propositions in Medieval and modern logic and rhetoric, see Gabriel Nuchelmans, *Late-Scholastic and Humanist Theories of the Proposition* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1980).
[50] Ward, *Words of Life*, 136. See also William Alston, *Illocutionary Acts & Sentence Meaning* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) 277-80.
[51] See Paul R. Williamson's, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's unfolding purpose* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).
[52] Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012) 132.

medium of social interaction, has a quasi-covenantal dimension.[53] Language is a divinely ordained institution, a rich and supple medium of communicative action oriented to communion. Of course, as with everything else God created, language too can be corrupted, and the peculiar corruption of language is the lie, leading not to communion but to alienation.

"Let God be proved true." Throughout the Scriptures, God proves himself true by keeping his word. He fulfills his promises; he does what he says. There is thus a *covenantal correspondence*, a faithful fit, between God's words and God's deeds. The Hebrew term that signifies this covenantal correspondence is *emeth*: "to be reliable, trustworthy, *true*." *Emeth* is paired with *hesed* ("steadfast love") in five of its eleven occurrences in the Pentateuch (e.g., Ex. 34:6). "Truth" here is not simply a quality of statements, but of a person: *faithfulness*.[54] We hear an echo of this in medieval marriage ceremonies where one pledges or swears by one's *troth* (cf. "betrothed"). The idea is that true words or words that can be relied on, words that provide firm ground on which to stand. Five other instances of *emeth* in the Pentateuch are in the context of a "trial" of truth, that is, determining whether or not something is the case (e.g., Dt. 13:14). Indeed, the criterion for recognizing false prophecy is that the false prophet's words do not come to pass (Dt. 18:22). There is this case "a fissure between thought and utterance,"[55] a lack of correspondence between what is said and what is, a breaking of the bond that binds true words to

[53] See further my "From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts: The Covenant of Discourse & the Discourse of the Covenant," *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002) 127-58.
[54] See Dennis T. Olson, "Truth and the Torah: Reflections on Rationality and the Pentateuch," in Alan G. Padgett and Patrick R. Keifert, eds., *But is it True? The Bible and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 16-33; Roger Nicole, "The Biblical Concept of Truth," in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 287-98.
[55] Paul Griffiths, *Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004) 25.

the world, and a damnable disruption in the covenant of discourse.[56]

Both the prophets and apostles are divinely commissioned spokesmen charged with putting the word of God into words. God speaks through human authors who nevertheless remain fully human. They speak on Christ's behalf, about Christ, through Christ's Spirit who guides them in the truth (Jn. 16:13-14). In addition to the other things they do with words, the prophets and apostles are *testifying to Christ* (Lk. 24:27). Testifying is a speech act that reports, and thus relates to others, the truth about something. Inerrancy is ultimately a matter of claiming that the biblical testimony is entirely trustworthy and true, and of trusting that it will eventually be seen to be true through enduring the process of critical testing and cross-examination.

Testimony plays an important role in both Testaments.[57] It features in the Ten Commandments: "You shall not bear false witness" (Ex. 20:16). Moses' law also requires the testimony of at least two witnesses in trials involving capital punishment (Dt. 17:6; 19:15). Testimony figures in the Gospels as well. John the Baptist "came for testimony [*martyrion*], to bear witness to the light" (Jn. 1:7). Jesus' works, the Scriptures, and the voice from heaven all bear witness to who he is (Jn. 5:30-39). Indeed, Jesus' whole life is a testimony to who he is and who God is, testimony that the Fourth Gospel frames into a kind of courtroom-trial drama. Jesus undergoes actual courtroom trials as well and was condemned by false testimony [*pseudomarturon*] (Mt. 26:60). How does this relate to inerrancy? It relates because at several points the author of the Fourth Gospel, who claims to be an eye-witness, explicitly says he is

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[56] See George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989). My own view corresponds (!) most closely to minimalist accounts of truth as correspondence as found in William Alston, *A Realist Account of Truth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996) 22-26. and David Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method in Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003) 380-82.

[57] See my "The Trials of Truth: Mission, Martyrdom & the Epistemology of the Cross," in *First Theology*, 337-73.

giving testimony – bearing true witness – about the things that took place in fulfillment of Scripture (Jn. 19:35-36) so that his readers may believe the best of all propositions: *that Jesus is the Christ* (Jn. 20:31).

Jesus is the truth (Jn. 14:6), God's own word expressed in time and space in the form of a human being. Jesus is God's own truth claim – but what is it about? Augustine compares the incarnation with the way in which we humans "beget" our thoughts in words. I submit that Jesus is the truth because he is God's true and trustworthy word, and because as God's word, he corresponds to God himself. The Son is the visible "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), the "exact imprint of God's very being" (Heb. 1:3, NRSV). The Son corresponds to deity in every way except that he is the Son rather than the Father. Jesus is God's promise made good. Jesus is the truth because he is the word that covenantally corresponds to, the one who faithfully fits or measures up to the reality of God. *Jesus is the truth because he communicates what God is*.[58] From this particular truth I derive the following about truth in general: *true words communicate what is*. Words that purport to communicate what is and but fail to do so are false: unreliable, untrustworthy, perhaps even lies. Correspondence is covenantal because "our word is our bond."[59] The lie is a breach of the bond that ties word and world together. It is a sundering of what God originally put together. God cannot lie, and hence neither does Scripture.[60] It remains to be seen, however, just what kind of testimony Scripture gives.

God and language: literal sense and literary sensibility ("in all things they affirm")

[58] If time and space permitted, I would reflect on 1 Jn. 5:6-10 to expand on the Spirit's role in the triune economy of testimony.
[59] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 10.
[60] Mark Thompson rightly identifies God's personal veracity as a pillar of the doctrine of inerrancy ("Toward a Theological Account of Biblical Inerrancy," 83-6).

Truth presupposes meaning. To understand what truth a given discourse communicates, we must first understand the type of discourse with which we have to do. A poem harbors truth in a different way than a physics manual, a narrative history, or a theology textbook. In William Alston's words: "*It is only after the proposition has been assigned that the question of truth value can be raised.*"[61] Truth is always about *what is*, but there are many kinds of reality and many ways of talking about it (e.g., to what do metaphors refer?). We must first discern what a passage or a text is *about*, and then ask *how* it is about it. As Aristotle commented: "Being may be said in many ways." The same goes for History. The issues are complex, but the following distinctions may help clarify matters.

Critics and commentators only confuse matters when they suggest that inerrantists believe in the literal truth of every word of the Bible. Individual words are neither true nor false for they do not *assert* anything. To assert something – to say what is the case – is something people do by using words. There is a difference between "sentence meaning" and "speaker meaning." It is therefore not enough to speak about the *semantics* of biblical literature (its propositional content; sentence meaning); one must also account for the *pragmatics* (kinds of communicative action; speech act meaning). This distinction is particularly important when we try to determine what precisely the authors are affirming (when they are affirming).[62] Well-versed inerrancy here comes into its own by calling attention to Scripture as composed of various kinds of discourse and to the necessity of asking *what is the author doing in his discourse and what is the discourse about*? For the proposition on the page (sentence content) may not be the proposition the author is affirming (speech act content).

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[61] Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth*, 260 (italics his).
[62] "Every statement accurately corresponds to truth *just as far forth as affirmed*" (A. A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, *Inspiration* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979] 29).

Proponents of inerrancy must take great care to distinguish the notion of literal truth from a literalism that runs roughshod over the intent of the author and the literary form of the text. Was Jesus *affirming botanic truth* when he called the mustard seed "the smallest of all the seeds" (Mk. 4:31), or was he *drawing an analogy* that his hearers would have understood in order to communicate a non-botanical truth? Here we may recall the Chicago Statement's call to take account of Scripture's literary forms and to avoid evaluating Scripture with standards of truth "that are alien to its usage or purpose" (Articles XVIII and XIII respectively).

For the sake of clarification, let us define *literalism* as the view that equates *what is said* (i.e., meaning) with *semantic content* (i.e., the proposition semantically expressed by the sentence regardless of context).[63] At the limit, literalism runs roughshod over figures of speech and forms of discourse like irony, where what one says is often the opposite of what one means.[64] Irony is an especially interesting case study for inerrancy: is the proposition it puts forward as truth the text or the sub-text, the sentence meaning or the speaker's meaning? To appreciate the irony in the book of Job or John's Gospel, one must do more than read for the semantic content or literalistic sense.[65] One must specify the author's communicative intent in order rightly to say what he is *doing* with his words. Inerrantists read for the *literal* sense, that is, for the *speech act content* of an author's discourse (i.e., the proposition pragmatically expressed by the sentence in its particular context). We need to know something about both the sentence (semantic) and the speaker's intention (pragmatics) in order rightly to discern the literal sense

[63] For a spirited defense of what I am calling literalism, see Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lapore, "A Tall Tale in Defense of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism," in Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter, eds., *Contextualism in Philosophy: Knowledge, Meaning, and Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), 197-219.

[64] See further François Recanti, "Literal and Contextualism: Some Varieties," in Preyer and Peter, eds., *Contextualism in Philosophy*, 171-96.

(i.e., what the author was saying in tending to his words in just this way).[66] Only in the context of its particular use can we determine *what is said*.

A well-versed approach to biblical discourse acknowledges that *what is said* is not always an affirmation. Authors can do many things with words, and can affirm things in many ways. Well-versed inerrancy thus takes special care with the qualification "in all things they affirm." Is every passing mention of something an affirmation? According to Alston, an author asserts *p* when he takes responsibility for explicitly presenting *p* in his discourse (i.e., by saying in so many words "*that p*"). Alston too wants to combine semantic and pragmatics, sentence and speaker meaning, and does so by defining sentence meaning as "illocutionary act potential."[67] An illocution refers to what a speaker *does* in speaking (e.g., promise, command, assert, etc.). The sentence provides the propositional content that the author then uses to mean something, that is, "to perform *acts* of a certain sort."[68] I propose that we *identify the literal sense with the illocutionary act an author is performing*.[69] In sum: the literal sense of what we say is not the sentence content (the words considered apart from the context of their use) but the speech act content.

"In all things *they* affirm." These words represent an important qualification – or rather, *specification* – of my definition of inerrancy. The "they" refers not to sentences but to authors.

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[65] E. M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1981); Paul Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1985).
[66] Strictly speaking, semantics (the dictionary meaning of words) depends on pragmatics (how speakers *use* words in various contexts). The meaning of a word or a sentence is its capacity to be used to do certain things in communication (Alston, *Illocutionary Acts*, 154).
[67] Alston, *Illocutionary Acts*, 160.
[68] Ibid., 162.
[69] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, who defines the literal sense as "that which the author intends, and the author of Holy Scripture is God" (*Summa Theologiae* I, 1, 10). See Adina Miriam Yoffie, "Biblical Literalism and Scholarship in Protestant Northern Europe, 1630-1700" (unpublished PhD dissertation in History at Harvard University, 2009) chapter 1.

Consider, again, Jesus' claim about the mustard seed. The proposition semantically expressed – the claim taken out of the context of Jesus' (and Matthew's) use – is false, prompting this response from the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry: "No, the mustard seed is not the smallest of all seeds. Jesus was speaking proverbially. That is, he wasn't making a statement of absolute fact but using a proverbial style of communication."[70] In the terms of the present essay, Jesus was not *affirming* as scientific fact the proposition semantically expressed by his sentence. The subject matter of Jesus' authoritative teaching was not mustard seeds but the kingdom of God, and he was communicating truth about the kingdom in terms his audience could understand. Jesus was not making a *literalistic* truth claim (about mustard seeds), but he was speaking the *literal* truth (about the kingdom).[71] This is no game of semantic smoke and mirrors; it is the way linguistic communication works.

What is true of Jesus' teaching applies to all the other forms of biblical discourse as well. In order to know what the biblical authors are affirming, we need to determine the nature of their discourse: what are they talking about and in what way are they talking about it? Warfield puts it well: "no objection is valid which overlooks the prime question: what was the professed or implied purpose of the writer in making this statement?"[72] What complicates matters is that, with a few exceptions, the biblical authors typically write in longer forms of poetry and prose, and to determine what is said in, say, a narrative, one has to do more than consider isolated sentences. For the proposition(s) an author expresses may be a function not of one sentence only, but of a

[70] http://carm.org/is-mustard-seed-smallest-of-all-seeds.
[71] Hodge and Warfield helpfully distinguish "exactness of statement," which they equate with absolute literalness (my "literalistic"), from accuracy (my "literal"), which is a measure of authorial intent (*Inspiration*, 28-29). Similarly, Reformation commentators trained in the humanist tradition distinguished between *scriptum* and *voluntas*: what was *written* and what was *intended* (Kathy Eden, *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and its Humanist Reception* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997] 6-8).

whole paragraph, many paragraphs, or perhaps the whole story. That to which we ascribe truth may not be the propositions semantically expressed in serial sentential form, but the proposition(s) expressed by the discourse taken as a whole.[73]

The moral of this story is that we have first to discern the literal sense before saying "true or false." And it helps to discern what is being affirmed ("what someone says about something") when we attend to the form of the discourse and literary genre ("in some way"). Moises Silva identifies a problem with un-versed approaches to inerrancy when he notes that traditionally "grammar books have stopped at the sentence level when describing syntax."[74] The best way to discover what sentences are being used for is to determine the literary form of which they are a part. Stated differently: the literary form is part of the context of use, and thus stands at what we could view as the intersection of the semantics and pragmatics of meaning and truth. Interpreters need literary sensibility in order to determine which proposition(s) a discourse explicitly expresses or affirms.

The best biblical examples of sentences that correspond to propositions in a one-to-one relationship are probably the aphorisms in Proverbs and certain doctrinal one-liners from the epistles and elsewhere (e.g., "God is light"). Yet even the book of Proverbs has a distinctive literary form that affects the way we take its propositions: "The biblical books were meant to be read as wholes and that is the way we should read them."[75] "Strong propositionalists" are tone-deaf to everything in Scripture but the truth content conveyed, however, and seem not to feel the

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[72] Hodge and Warfield, *Inspiration*, 42.
[73] I say *proposition(s)* to leave open the possibility that narratives may convey neither a single macro-proposition, nor a series of one-per-sentence micro-propositions, but rather several propositions "nested" at different levels of the discourse (a clarification I owe to Daniel Treier).
[74] Silva, *God, Language, and Scripture: Reading the Bible in the light of general linguistics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 118.
[75] Ibid., 125.

difficulty of extracting propositions from complex forms of discourse. Gordon Clark's comment is representative: "aside form imperative sentences and a few exclamations in the Psalms, the Bible is composed of propositions."[76] Such a view is simply unable to appreciate the significance of, say, the narrative form as anything other than packaging for a series of propositions ("and then, and then, and then"). "Tone deaf" may be too strong: strong propositionalists hear the music, but only the melody. They therefore think that they have assimilated Beethoven's truth when they can whistle the tune of the Fifth Symphony. Strong propositionalists resemble C. S. Lewis's "unliterary reader" who looks only for the Event: "[such a reader] ignores nearly all that the words before him are *doing*; he wants to know what happened next."[77]

A rhetoric (and hermeneutic) of truth:
inerrancy and literate interpretation ("when right readers read rightly")

Well-versed inerrancy puts a premium on the responsibility of the interpreter to understand the text correctly. The reader is part of the economy of biblical discourse. Is the Bible's truth somehow dependent on the activity of interpreters? Hardly. The Bible teaches truth whether or not its students learn their lesson. Nevertheless, a certain degree of biblical literacy is required for Scripture's truth to be appreciated for what it *is* rather than something else. Scripture ultimately tests us, revealing how "true" (i.e., sound) our eyes, ears, and hearts are. Are we the kind of right-minded and right-hearted people who can recognize and receive the truth, not simply bits of information but truth's "robust presence" – the collective testimony of the Scriptures to Jesus Christ?[78]

God's word can be relied upon to accomplish the purpose for which it has been sent, and

[76] *Karl Barth's Theological Method* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1963) 150.
[77] C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961) 30.

when this purpose is *making affirmations,* it does so inerrantly. As we have seen, however, texts can be "about" reality in different ways (there is more than one kind of map), and they can focus on different aspects of reality – from the smallest details to the big picture. Rightly to interpret Scripture means recognizing what *kinds* of things the biblical authors are doing with their words. Are we reading history, story, apocalyptic, wisdom, science, or something else? We must not underestimate the importance of rightly determining the literary genre, or the challenge of rightly discerning the proposition(s) a narrative or parable or psalm explicitly presents.

In sum: God's words are wholly reliable; their human interpreters, not so much. God's words do many things, and while its affirmations are critical to Christian faith ("He is risen!"), we must also remember that God uses language to communicate for other purposes than to transmit information. Finally, we must be realistic about how far inerrancy takes us as interpreters. While inerrantists believe that biblical discourse ultimately coheres, inerrancy itself "does not set down any principle that requires certain sections of Scripture to be treated as intended to be either largely historical or largely metaphorical."[79] Inerrancy is compatible "with widely varying views about what (if any) propositional messages are asserted or conveyed by biblical texts."[80] Truth may be said in many ways, by story and history, direct and indirect teaching, maxims and metaphors. What the authors are doing with their words must be discerned through right biblical interpretation. Inerrancy alone does not a hermeneutics make, as the following case studies will no doubt show.

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[78] I take the phrase "robust presence" from Kurt Pritzl's "Aristotle's Door," in Pritzl, ed., *Truth: Studies of a Robust Presence* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University Press of America, 2010) 15-39.
[79] Ward, *Words of Life*, 134.
[80] Rea, "Authority and Truth."

Well-versed inerrancy in the dock: three counts of aggravated textual assault

We turn now to an examination of three difficult texts, each of which represents, in its own way, a "hard saying" of Scripture, and hence a test for well-versed inerrancy.

The poetics of biblical narrative: Jericho, Joshua 6, and the question of a historical "fall"

How can we hold to the inerrancy of the Bible if the archaeological data contradicts what the text says actually happened? Joshua 6 depicts a key moment in the outworking of God's plan of salvation, and is thus an excellent proving ground for would-be biblical interpreters, presenting a number of challenges on the literary, historical, and theological levels. Our primary focus is on the historical level, but as we shall see this cannot be neatly separated from the other two.

Was there, in fact, a historical fall of Jericho? Many, though not all, scholars believe that the archaeological record is at odds with Joshua's account. One colleague refers to the problem of Israel's entry into Canaan as the "mother of all current debates" in biblical archaeology.[81] That the issues are complex is no reason not to engage them. Stephen Williams rightly observes, "the historical facticity of the grant of land to an exodus people is a foundational piece of history and grounds the claim of both Testaments to be speaking truly of the God who acts."[82] One proposition that Joshua 6 explicitly affirms, then, is that it is *God* who gives Jericho into Israel's hand (Joshua 6:2). The truth not only of Joshua but also of the divine promise therefore hinges on this being historically the case.

The underlying question concerns the nature of Israel's emergence in Canaan. Archaeologists have gone back and forth on this issue. W. F. Albright proposes a "conquest

[81] John M. Monson, "Enter Joshua: The 'Mother of Current Debates' in Biblical Archaeology," in Hoffmeier and Magary, eds., *Do Historical Matters Matter To Faith?* 427-57.

model" that correlates the Joshua narrative with archaeological evidence for the thirteenth-century destruction of various Canaanite cities.[83] Score one for the inerrantist. The problem, however, is that most contemporary scholars reject Albright's model, not only because new archaeological evidence has come to light but "because of its literal, simplistic reading of Joshua."[84] Albright's reading was poorly versed; like other literalists, he was too concerned with establishing what happened (the "Event"). There is good textual reason to question his conquest model. In order to do justice to Joshua 6, we need to attend not only to the *story* (what happened; the chronology of events) but also to the *discourse* (how the story is told; what it is about).[85]

Archaeology, like science, can neither confirm nor deny whether God acts, though it can lend credence to whether space-time events happened the way they were reported to have happened. The past leaves material "traces" that, like texts, call for interpretation. Archaeology deals with solid objects, yet it is not a hard but a hermeneutical science, and there is a conflict of interpretation over how to read the evidence. There is evidence at Jericho of collapsed city walls, but the dates do not seem right. There is evidence of grain amidst the burned-out city, which suggests to some that the city fell because of something other than a lengthy siege. Some of the fiercest debate concerns the dating of pottery. The long and short of it is that the evidence, taken on its own material terms, is inconclusive.[86] Given the complexity of the evidence, scholars

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[82] J. Gordon McConville and Stephen N. Williams, *Joshua* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 209.
[83] W. F. Albright, "The Israelite Conquest of Canaan in the Light of Archaeology," *BASOR* 74 (1939) 11-23.
[84] K. Lawson Younger, "Early Israel in Recent Biblical Scholarship," in D. Baker and B. T. Arnold, eds., *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 179.
[85] Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978).
[86] So Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003)174-76.

should use extreme caution before pronouncing the text to be in error.[87] It is also debatable how wise it is to engage in archeological apologetics given the underdetermined nature of the data. There is no need to ask, as one scholar does tongue-in-cheek, "If Jericho was not razed, is our faith in vain?"[88]

The prior question for a well-versed approach to inerrancy must rather be *what is the author of Joshua saying/doing with his words?* Specifically, is the main thrust of Joshua to give the kind of factual reporting that Americans came to expect of newspapers like the New York Times? We might expect this, but if we do it says more about us than about the biblical authors, who could hardly be considered journalists. Rather, what we have in Joshua is historical testimony, presented in an artful narrative way (i.e., as a story-shaped history), and intended to highlight certain theological themes, all for the purpose of shaping the identity of the believing community and of encouraging them (us!) to walk faithfully before God.

A well-versed approach to inerrancy thinks "*literary understanding is a necessary condition of historical understanding*."[89] One should not oppose literature to history; in many cases narrative is "true history artfully presented."[90] Narrative histories do more than convey pictures that correspond exactly to what actually happened; there is a *poetics* and *rhetoric* proper to historical narrative which help us appreciate what they do and how they work.[91] Just as we must first determine the meaning of a text before we assess its truth, so we must first appreciate Joshua 6 as narrative before we judge its historical truth or falsity.

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[87] See Bernard Ramm, "The Relation of Science, Factual Statements and the Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 21 (1969) 98-104.
[88] George W. Ramsey, *The Quest for the Historical Israel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981) 107.
[89] Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 81.
[90] Ibid., 88.
[91] Ibid., 91-3. See further Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985).

Some philosophers of history think that all sources are fallible due to "their inherent inability to provide anything but a partial, incomplete, and necessarily biased view of the events they ostensibly report."[92] But to hold a text to be an error simply because it does not give us a complete, unbiased account of events is an inordinately high, and arbitrary, standard. As with witnesses in court, textual testimony can tell the truth, and nothing but the truth, even if it is not the *whole* truth but rather a particular angle on the truth. Incompleteness is not necessarily a defect, especially when an author is narrating history with a particular purpose, as is John's Gospel, which admits that Jesus did "many other things" (Jn. 21:25) but contents itself with recording the events it does in order to inculcate belief in Jesus as the Christ (Jn. 20:30-21).

Well-versed inerrancy insists on reading Joshua 6 in canonical context while taking into account the literary conventions its authors employ. This involves recognizing "an intermingling of the texts' figurative and ideological aspects" typical of other ancient Near Eastern histories.[93] For example, the claim in Joshua 10:40 that Joshua utterly destroyed southern Palestine and "left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed" is likely hyperbolic and "should not be read in a flat, literalistic way, as if hard statistical information were intended."[94] Jericho's fall as depicted by the text owes less to a battle than a liturgical act that ends with a shout of jubilee.[95] Moreover, the conquest of Canaan may not have been as complete as a literalistic reading of the text might initially suggest, not least because later in Joshua the inhabitants of the land are still present. A careful reading of the whole of Joshua will perceive an intended tension between the initial *subjugation* of the land (a gift from God) and the later *occupation* of the land (Israel's

[92] Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) 2.
[93] K. L. Younger, Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing*, JSOTS 98 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990) 265.
[94] Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 153.

responsibility). The main proposition that Joshua 6 sets forth – what the text *affirms* – is that God has indeed made good on his promise to give Israel the land, and that the people on their part must respond to God's faithfulness in like manner.

Biblical narrative marches to the beat of a different drummer than the company of historians to which modern readers are accustomed. Indeed, reading Joshua simply to discover "what actually happened" is to miss the main point of the discourse, which is to communicate a theological interpretation of what happened (i.e., God gave Israel the land) and to call for right participation in the covenant. It does not follow, however, that the accounts in Joshua are myths, or even legends. On the contrary, Joshua 6 is artful narrative testimony to an event that happened in Israel's past, an event that reveals both who God is (faithful to his promise), and who Israel is to be in response (obedient to the covenant). Readers, especially those who believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, are within their epistemic rights to trust this testimony until shown otherwise.

Harmonizing on the Damascus Road: Acts 9:7 vs. Acts 22:9

There are three accounts of Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus in Acts (9:1-19, 22:6-11, 26:12-18), but we are concerned with the first two only and, in particular, with the apparent contradiction in the description of the experience of Paul's companions. In Acts 9:7 the narrator says they were speechless, "hearing the voice but seeing no one," while in Acts 22:9 Paul himself reports that his companions "saw the light but did *not* hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me." According to the law of non-contradiction, it cannot be true both that *A* and *non-A* (i.e., "they heard" and "they did *not* hear"). And this is not the only discrepancy (e.g., in 9:7 Paul's companions saw no one, but in 22:9 they saw the light).

[95] McConville and Williams, *Joshua*, 32-3.

As Fetherstone's sixteenth-century translation of Calvin's commentary on Acts 9:7 quaintly notes: "Yet it seemeth that this narration doth not in all points agree with that of Paul [in Acts 22:9]."[96] A more recent commentator goes further, asserting that these two passages "contain a formal contradiction."[97]

Modern biblical critics are willing to live with this contradiction, chalking it up to the fact that Luke may have used two conflicting sources. The typical inerrantist reflex, when confronted with intratextual wrinkles like this one, is to iron them out – to *harmonize.* (Thankfully we have been spared the suggestion that Paul met Christ *two times* on the Damascus road). Sure enough, the most popular "solution" to this contradiction is to point out that the Greek verb in question (*akouein*) means "to hear the sound" with a genitive and "to understand" with an accusative. Calvin anticipated this solution, suggesting that Paul's companions *heard the sound* of the voice but *could not understand what was said* (or who was speaking). J. H. Moulton says that this distinction "saved the author [Luke] from a patent self-contradiction."[98] A. T. Robertson agrees, and in his Greek grammar takes issue with the translators of the RSV who accentuate the contradiction by repeating "hearing" instead of substituting "understanding" for the second instance: "That is lack of good will or even respect for the Word of God. And it falsifies Luke's witness."[99] If only grammar books today were as feisty!

There are two problems with this solution. In the first place, many scholars question

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[96] Calvin, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844) 375.
[97] Horst R. Moehring, "The Verb *akouein* in Acts IX 7 and XXII 9," *Novum Testamentum* 3 (1959) 80.
[98] *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1882) 249.
[99] Robertson, *Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (NY: Hodder & Stoughton, 1914) 448-49.

whether the evidence supports the distinction.[100] But secondly, resolving the difficulty this quickly, and grammatically, short-circuits our attempt to plumb the depth of Luke's communicative intent and literary artistry.

A biblically literate reader will note parallels between the story of Paul's conversion and other incidents where the Lord appears to select individuals or groups in ways that stretch human auditory and visual sensibilities. Consider, for example, how Moses reminds Israel of God's appearing with thunder and lightning at Mount Horeb: "you heard the sound of words, but saw no form" (Dt. 4:12). *Phos* (light) and *phone* (voice) are standard features of biblical theophanies. In Acts 9 Paul's companion do not see the light; in Acts 22 they do not hear the voice. If the intent is to show that only Paul truly experienced the appearance of Christ, then the two accounts express essentially the same proposition: "Paul's companions had no share in his christophanic encounter." In one commentator's words: "it is only the means of expression which are changed, not the sense of the statement."[101]

The way forward, once again, is to ask not only what words Luke used, but what Luke was *doing* with them in the context of his overall narrative. Acts is a narrative history that recounts the history of the early church ("story") in a theologically significant manner ("discourse"). Repetition with slight variations was one of the rhetorical tools ancient authors had in their arsenal to reinforce their message or to highlight certain themes. I have already noted the allusion to Israel's encounter with God at Mount Horeb. Moses came away from that theophany with a shining face; Paul comes away blind. That his companions heard the voice (9:7) underscores the objectivity of the encounter.

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[100] See in particular Moehring, "The Verb *akouein* in Acts IX 7 and XXII 9" and Robert G. Bratcher, "*Akouo* in Acts 9:7 and 22:9," *Expository Times* 71.8 (1960) 243-45.
[101] Ernst Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 322.

Commentators agree that Luke hints at the structure and theme of his book – the expanding scope of Christ's witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth – in Acts 1:8. A case can be made that the three accounts of Paul's encounter on the road to Damascus serve the purpose of enhancing Paul's stature as a witness to the gospel "to the ends of the earth."[102] The change in wording ("they heard/they did not hear") serves Luke's purpose by progressively reducing the role of the companions, eventually excluding them altogether from the revelatory event, which turns out to be not merely a theophany but a commissioning service.[103] Paul *alone* is a witness to this Christophany; Paul *alone* will serve as Christ's witness. This literary repetition with a difference is Luke's way of ensuring that Paul's companions decrease so that Paul's stature as a witness to the Lord will increase.[104] In sum: the companion's hearing in Acts 9 confirms the reality of the Christophany, their not hearing in Acts 22 shows that the divine commissioning is intended for Paul alone.

Racial violence vs. radical love: Deut. 20:16-17 & Mt 5:33-48

A college student once told me that her professor often mentions the Bible, but never without the qualification "that handbook of racism, genocide, and oppression." Dt. 20:16-17 implicates God in what strikes many as evil, and is a good example of what Kenton Sparks calls the "dark side" of Scripture.[105] It also seems to fly in the face of the ethic Jesus taught his disciples: "love you enemies" (Mt. 5:43). There are two problems: first, that the Old Testament here depicts God as a "moral monster"; second, that Jesus teaches a different view of God.

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[102] So Ronald D. Witherup, "Functional Redundancy in the Acts of the Apostles: A Case Study," *JSNT* 48 (1992) 67-86.
[103] Charles W. Hedrick, "Paul's Conversion/Call: A Comparative Analysis of the Three Reports in Acts," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100/3 (1981) 424.
[104] Witherup notes that Acts 26 does not say whether the companions saw or heard anything; they simply fall to the ground (Acts 26:14).

This is not the place to undertake a doctrine of God; our topic is inerrancy, not theodicy. Nevertheless, the topics are related, as Wesley Morriston makes clear in an essay that argues that the "the genocide passages" in the Old Testament provide us with a strong *prima facie* reason to reject biblical inerrancy. Why? In short, because "that is not what a perfectly good God would do."[106] The longer argument is that the explanation Deuteronomy gives for God's commanding Israel to exterminate the various nations in Canaan does not constitute a morally sufficient reason for obeying.[107]

The challenge for the inerrantist is to resolve the apparent contradiction between what God commands Israel and what Jesus commands his disciples. This is a real difficulty, and there is a distinct temptation to want to make it go away. For example, Randall Rauser "solves" the problem by insisting that a morally perfect God would never order a human being to kill a human baby, and thus concludes that God did *not* command genocide. The cost of giving into temptation here, however, is the loss of biblical inerrancy.[108]

It was the Gnostics who first pitted the loving God of the New Testament against the "wrathful" God of the Old. This will not do: first, because the Old Testament affirms the love and mercy of God (Ex. 34:6-7); second, because the New Testament affirms the wrath and judgment of God; and third, because Jesus himself never distances himself from the way in

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[105] Kenton L. Sparks, *Sacred Word; Broken Word: Biblical Authority & the Dark Side of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).
[106] Wesley Morriston, "Did God Command Genocide? A Challenge to the Biblical Inerrantist," *Philosophia Christi* 11.1 (2009) 8.
[107] See Paul Copan, "Is Yahweh a Moral Monster? The New Atheists and OT Ethics," (*Philosophia Christi* 10 [2008] 7-37).
[108] "'Let Nothing that Breathes Remain Alive': On the Problem of Divinely Commanded Genocide," *Philosophia Christi* 11 (2009) 27-41.

which the Old Testament depicts God.[109] This latter point is the most important, and the clue to the way forward. Why did Jesus himself not find Deuteronomy's depiction of God abhorrent? Probably because he was not working with a concept of "morally perfect being." I find it interesting that Rauser and Morriston treat their own moral intuitions about what a perfect being *must* do as more reliable (dare I say *inerrant*?) than the biblical text. As Christians they should know that the wisdom of the world is the foolishness of God.[110]

Our task, again, is not (in this context) to justify the ways of God but, rather, to explain how Jesus could have promulgated his law of love and not have felt a tension with the Old Testament depiction's of God as Divine Warrior. I submit that it was because Jesus saw himself as fully a part of the same story of what happens when holy love meets unholy rejection, or when the Creator-Redeemer engages the forces of chaos. Stated differently: Jesus read the Old Testament not literalistically (as do some of its critics) but in a literal-typological manner that keeps the overarching plot (i.e., salvation history) in view at all times. I can here only provide a brief sketch of the redemptive-historical hermeneutical framework that Christians need to bring to such difficult passages.

If we view Scripture with the widest of wide-angle lenses, we see that God finally succeeds in forming a fit habitation in which to dwell: a cosmic-temple. A number of commentators have pointed out that Ancient Near Eastern kings typically built temples to commemorate victory in battle, and Yahweh does something similar, creating a garden-temple in Eden after subduing

[109] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 77.
[110] The concept of "perfect being" carries a heavy theological load. Whence its authority? Moral intuitions are fickle, as we are learning from the national debate about same-sex marriage. My worry is that "perfect being" foists culturally-conditioned notions of perfection onto God.

chaos.[111] That garden-temple becomes corrupt, however, and so begins a long restoration project that concludes only with the establishment of new heavens and a new earth: the cosmic temple. This may seem miles away from our immediate textual issue, but it is not.

Israel's entry into the Promised Land hearkens back to the exodus from Egypt: in both cases God enables Israel to pass through the waters (symbolic of chaos) and anticipates the consummation of God's drama of redemption at the final judgment, when the last battle will be fought by the Divine Warrior and Satan and his minions defeated forever. This is the overarching framework that puts God's command in Deut. 20 into right perspective: it's all about cleansing a temple space for God to dwell with his people (i.e., not ethnic but *ethic* cleansing). The *herem* – the requirement to "dedicate" the Canaanites to destruction – ultimately pertains to holiness, not hostility: "It was not driven by genocidal or military considerations, but the need to eradicate evil and prevent evil from spreading to the new population."[112] It is noteworthy that the divine command strictly circumscribed the *herem* in space and time, that God threatened Israel with the same fate in case of disobedience (and made good his threat - see Jer. 25:9), and that it is a type of the ultimate destiny of those who oppose God.[113] Jesus can say "love your enemies" without condemning the Old Testament because the conquest of Canaan was a unique and limited event – a single scene, now past – in the drama of redemption. Wright is correct when he says that the conquest of Canaan "was never meant to become a model for how all future generations were to behave towards their contemporary enemies."[114]

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[111] See, for example, G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A biblical theology of the dwelling place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).
[112] Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012) 483.
[113] Ibid., 476-86.
[114] Wright, *The God I Don't Understand*, 90.

The violence we see in the Old Testament, though real, is also typological, an anticipation of the bloody violence (the *herem*?) directed to Jesus on the cross, and thence to peace for all the nations. A biblically literate interpreter ought to hear overtones of the conquest narrative in the Passion narrative as well; here too God spares nothing that breathes. The definitive battle over evil is indeed accomplished on the cross, where Jesus "*breathed his last*" (Mt. 27:50). Jesus worked some violence himself when he "cleansed" the temple, driving out and overturning those who profaned it with their money (Mk. 11:15-16). In other words, *Jesus himself displayed the same jealous zeal* for the house of God as Yahweh had earlier for his land and people. What is God's must be consecrated to God and him alone. I believe the difficulty we moderns have with the *herem* stems from an anemic sense of holiness and an underestimation of the scandal of idolatry, but that is a matter for another time.

The divine command (to a specific generation of Israelites) to kill the Canaanites, when properly interpreted in its redemptive historical context and viewed in the shadow of the cross, no more contradicts Jesus' teaching (to his disciples, playing a different scene in the drama of redemption) than God's holiness contradicts God's love. The "answer" is simplicity itself: *divine simplicity*, namely, the idea that the divine attributes do not name "parts" of God but offer a perspective on the *whole* of God's being. The two passages under consideration threaten inerrancy only if they contradict one another theologically, but they no more cancel each other out than does the holy love God displayed on the cross.

Conclusion: the cost of inerrancy

"Prefer the more difficult reading" is tried and true advice in the realm of text criticism, where the aim is to discern the most reliable manuscripts. The reasoning is straighforward: scribes and copyists are more likely to smooth out textual wrinkles, not introduce them.

The three case studies above are indeed difficult and, in each case, what generates the difficulty is the doctrine of inerrancy. If it were not for inerrancy, we could simply remove the difficulty by pronouncing the text to be in error: there was no historical fall of Jericho; Luke corrected himself and got his account of Paul's conversion right the second time; God did *not* command Israel to exterminate the Canaanites. To be sure, inerrantists too sometimes seek to alleviate the difficulty by adducing historical "proofs" or resolving theological tensions. By contrast, a well-versed inerrancy, while it does not take pleasure in textual difficulties, is nevertheless willing to engage and, if need be, *endure* them.

We must beware "cheap inerrancy" that merely professes belief in biblical truth but stops short of *doing* or *enduring* it. To insist that the doctrine of inerrancy is all that matters is but a half-truth. Implicit in my definition of inerrancy is that we be not only literate readers who rightly see what proposition an author is proposing for our consideration (the literal sense) and what kind of attention to this proposition is required (literary sensibility), but also right-minded and right-hearted readers who respond rightly to each and every communicative act in Scripture (Spirit-given literacy). Ultimately, a well-versed approach to inerrancy constitutes nothing less than a standing requirement that the community of Scripture's interpreters become persons capable of understanding, loving, and participating in the truth (Eph. 4). To know the truth, in the deep biblical and covenantal sense, is not merely to comprehend intellectually that to which the language corresponds, but to respond in such a way that one's life corresponds or conforms to the truth. We must be passionate truth-seekers, truth-tellers, truth-doers *and* truth-sufferers: interpreters who bear truthful witness to the truth of Scripture, not least by enduring its difficulties.

The last word in a well-versed, Augustinian approach to inerrancy belongs to Augustine:

"If you chance upon anything in Scripture that does not seem to be true, you must not conclude that the sacred writer made a mistake; rather your attitude should be: the manuscript is faulty, or the version is not accurate, or you yourself do not understand the matter."[115] Indeed.[116]

[115] *De Potentia* IV.1.8.

[116] My thanks to Dan Treier, Ike Miller, James Gordon, and David Moser for their comments on an earlier draft.