

THE LIMITS OF BIBLICAL INNERRANCY

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Unlike other dogmas of the Church, the dogma of biblical inerrancy was not defined in special historical circumstances and in opposition to heretical views; it was the professed doctrine of the Church from the very beginning. The early Church Fathers certainly experienced difficulties in tackling some obscure biblical texts but this did not shake their faith; all dutifully adhered to the unshakable belief in biblical truth while admiring the liberty that the Holy Spirit permitted to the sacred authors.¹

The example of St. Augustine is enlightening. He would acknowledge his own incapacity for catching the fleeting manifestations of divine thought when he could not find a reasonable solution to the scriptural problems that tormented him.² But the clearest interpretation of the Church's mind is the testimony of St. Thomas Aquinas. He declared that it would be heretical to say that anything false is contained in some canonical Scripture.³

Thus, the Church has not found it necessary to make inerrancy the object of a separate dogmatic definition. The Roman pontiffs have, from time to time, called the attention of exegetes to this undisputed doctrine;⁴ in addition, the Pontifical Biblical Commission⁵ and the Holy Office⁶ have promptly intervened when some opinion threatened to obscure it.

By its very nature, the notion of biblical inerrancy is universal. That is to say, it would be impossible to posit a mistake anywhere in the inspired text; the inerrancy of the text is coextensive with the divine inspiration of the text. The Church

1 The principal difficulties are discussed in G. Courtade, "Inspiration et Inerrance," in *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplément*, ed. Louis Pirot, André Robert, Jacques Briend, and Édouard Cothenet (Paris: Létouzey et Ané, 1926), 4:526.

2 St. Augustine, *Epistle* 82, 1, 3, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: Garnier and J. P. Migne, 1844–1864), 26:417A. Hereafter abbreviated PL.

3 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Job*, chap. 13, 1. Compare Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [Summary of Theology], pt. 1a, q. 68, art. 1; *Quaestiones Disputatae De Potentia Dei* [Disputed Questions on the Power of God] (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1952), q. 4, art. 1, contra. 4; *Quaestiones Quodlibetales* [Miscellaneous Questions], q. 12, art. 26, reply obj. 1.

4 *Enchiridion Biblicum: Documenti della Chiesa sulla Sacra Scrittura* [Documents of the Church Concerning Sacred Scripture], 4th ed. (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1961), 44, 46, 124–127, 205, 450, and 538–540. Hereafter abbreviated EB.

5 EB 420.

6 EB 499.

reproves all efforts to "limit" the scope of inerrancy⁷ or to restrict it to certain texts or expressions in the Scriptures.⁸

As the word implies, inerrancy is a negative concept that involves the exclusion of errors;⁹ to this negative concept, there corresponds a positive one that involves the assertion of the truth of Scripture. But these two concepts, as applied to a given writing, are not necessarily coextensive, for they are governed by different conditions. It is sufficient for the former that nothing is said against truth, but it is required for the latter that truth itself be positively expressed. And since not everything that is free from error contains truth, it could happen that a particular text fulfils the requirements of negative inerrancy without implying the positive one.

The magisterial documents of the Church, always intent on safeguarding the truth of the inspired Word, acknowledge negative inerrancy, but do not deal directly with "positive inerrancy," which must be established in each case by the principles of sound exegesis. The difference between the absence of error and the position of truth is a commonsense principle that has been given a forceful wording by Pierre Benoit. Benoit emphatically asserts that positive inerrancy is not coextensive with inspiration, insofar as not all of the inspired text is the bearer of a particular truth.¹⁰ It is the "limits" of positive inerrancy, or rather the extension of biblical truth, that interests us in this article.

The Study of Literary Forms

In attempting to attain the truth of the Bible and defend it against attack, the exegete relies on the Church's official interpretation and the unanimous teaching of the Fathers.¹¹ Where this secure lead cannot be found, the surest means of encompassing the divine truth is to employ the method of "literary forms," according to the principles of sound interpretation set out by the Church. As G. Courtade has stated, since the Bible does not err, it is enough to understand it well in order to reach its truth and uncover its inerrancy.¹²

In fact, difficulties with the Church's belief in biblical inerrancy have generally proceeded from a new appraisal of the biblical literature spurred on by the progress of modern science. In other words, with the advance of scientific under-

7 EB 124, 455.

8 EB 454.

9 Hildebrand Hopfl and Louis Leloir, *Introductio Generalis in Sacram Scripturam* [A General Introduction to Sacred Scripture], 6th ed. (Rome: Neapoli 1958), n. 130.

10 Pierre Benoit, "L'Inspiration," in *Initiation Biblique: Introduction à l'Étude des Saintes Écritures*, 3rd ed., ed. André Robert and Abbé Tricot (Paris: Desclee & Cie, 1954), 6–45, at 35; Eng.: *Guide to the Bible: An Introduction to the Study of Holy Scripture* (Rome: Society of St. John the Evangelist, 1951).

11 EB 565.

12 Courtade, "Inspiration et Inerrance," 4:533.

standing, we are becoming ever more conscious that familiar biblical ideas express more the heritage of the ancient culture than the findings of scientific truth as we now know it. However, at the same time, the historical and literary methods for studying the ancient "forms" or genres of the biblical texts permits us to separate the divine message from the baggage of outdated ideas that often accompany it. In this way, inerrancy is reduced to its proper boundaries where it can ward off any possible attack.

The study of literary forms is neither peculiar to the Bible nor is it a modern invention. The biblical texts have been clothed in an apparatus that lies far away from us, both in time and in mentality. The Semitic mentality, more or less shared by the various ethnic groups of the ancient Near East, was already at variance in biblical times with the mentality of the Western civilization of which we are heirs. The gap between the Semitic and the Western mentality has not decreased in the ensuing millennia; in fact, it has grown wider. We continue to use the same biblical terms, but we have different notions; we continue to employ the same idioms, but for different categories; we discuss the same reality but with different evaluation.

The Bible will remain forever what it has been from the very beginning—perennial divine truth incorporated in a fixed literary apparel that obeys predetermined literary laws. We will never be able to separate the biblical message from the literary form in which it is conveyed to us. We will never be able to drop this literary apparatus and transpose the biblical imagery into our own context. The concordists of the last century made a last try to read contemporary science into the Bible, but their efforts evoked the disapproval of biblical scholars¹³ and a call to order by Church authorities.¹⁴ We cannot conform the Bible to our mentality; it is we, as scholars and believers, who must conform ourselves to the mentality of the Bible if we are to catch its message.

This fundamental principle of interpretation was already traced by Augustine, who had to steer a difficult way between two different but equally erroneous currents. On the one hand, he confronted those who wanted by all means to bridge the gap between the sacred text and their scientific ideas by imposing these ideas on the Bible. Augustine rejected this as an exercise in "pulling the Scriptures to one's own opinions, while we should rather conform ourselves to the sense of the Scriptures."¹⁵ On the other hand, Augustine had to rebuke those who questioned the truth and inerrancy of the Scriptures because they could not find confirmation for their scientific knowledge in the holy books. To these, Augustine counseled humility and recognition that the Bible is susceptible to multiple interpreta-

13 Ferdinand Prat, *La Bible et l'histoire* [The Bible and History], 5th ed. (Paris: Desclee, 1908), 23–25.

14 *EB* 330.

15 Augustine, *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis*, bk. 1, chap. 18, 37 (*PL* 34:260), also in *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1946), 41:41. Hereafter abbreviated ACW.

tions: "They should keep low, who stigmatize as ignorant and rough the words of Scripture, chosen as they are to nourish all pious spirits."¹⁶

It is no wonder, then, that the Church in our day calls on the exegetes to look upon the study of literary forms as a grave duty. Pope Leo XIII had already insisted that biblical teachers and theologians know the original languages of the Bible and be well versed in the art of biblical criticism. These tools are important for defending against those who would impugn the biblical truth. For the same reason, exegetes and theologians should study the physical sciences and be familiar with the historical sciences.¹⁷ Although Leo did not mention expressly the study of the literary forms, his words laid down fundamental principles for this study. It was Pope Pius XII who gave definitive authorization for the study of the literary forms, declaring this study not only acceptable to the Church but also imperative to biblical scholars.¹⁸

When first introduced, form study was presented as a remedy for apparently insoluble difficulties with select texts of the Bible. Especially as it was developed by the Jesuit exegete, Franz von Hummelauer,¹⁹ the emphasis on the human authors' use of literary genres seemed to admit some sort of diminished truth in the inspired writings. This led to long discussion as to which literary forms are admissible, with some authors distinguishing between worthy and unworthy forms.²⁰ When the discussion threatened to get out of hand, Pope Benedict XV tightened the reins and called for moderation.²¹

Pius looks at the problem from a different point of view and beats another track. These literary genres or manners of expression, as he calls them,²² are simply a means of communicating one's ideas; all of them can be admitted provided that the holiness and truth of the Bible are not jeopardized.²³ In the same way, modern scholars no longer try to fix beforehand what forms could have been employed by God.²⁴ They rather search for the forms actually employed by the sacred writer.

The interpreter must, as it were, go back wholly in spirit to those remote centuries of the East and accurately determine what modes of writing, so to speak,

16 Augustine, *Meaning of Genesis*, bk. 1, chap. 20, 40 (PL 34:262; ACW 41:44).

17 EB 118–123.

18 EB 560.

19 Franz von Hummelauer, *Exegetisches zur Inspirationsfrage*: Mit besonderer Rücksicht auf das Alte Testament [Exegetical Questions of Inspiration: With Respect Especially to the Old Testament] (St. Louis: Herder, 1904).

20 Louis Billot, *De Inspiratione Sacrae Scripturae: Theologica Disquisitio* [The Inspiration of Sacred Scripture: A Theological Inquiry], 4th ed. (Rome: Society of the Propagation of the Faith, 1929), 141–166.

21 EB 461.

22 EB 558–560.

23 EB 559.

24 Courtade, "Inspiration et Inerrance," 4:538.

the authors of that ancient period would be likely to use and in fact did use. For the ancient peoples of the East, in order to express their ideas, did not always employ those forms or kinds of speech which we use today; but rather those used by the men of their times and countries.²⁵

By way of example the pontiff mentions "certain fixed ways of expounding and narrating, certain definite idioms, especially of a kind peculiar to the Semitic tongues, so-called approximations, and certain hyperbolic modes of expression, nay, at times, even paradoxical."²⁶ He singles these out without excluding other possible genres, as appears clearly from the general comparison established between the written and the substantial Word of God.

Form Study and Objections to Biblical Inerrancy

Widely used by modern commentators, the study of literary forms has borne abundant fruit and has dissipated many of the objections once levelled against the inerrancy of the Bible. The most famous of these objections stems from the Scriptures' use of outdated terms based on unreliable visual observation of such objects as the movement of the heavenly bodies, the peculiar qualities of animals, and the like. In these matters, the biblical terminology reflects the first impressions which may not always correspond to the intimate nature of things.

Leo²⁷ quoted Aquinas's remark that Moses described the movement of the heavenly bodies as it appears to the external senses,²⁸ and the pontiff added that our modern scientific age has retained the same expressions. One could also mention in this connection that we continue to speak of people being affected by a "bad spirit," which is the source of all ailments in ancient literature.²⁹ Today we are perhaps better able to diagnose the pathological state of King Saul and can perhaps give a better classification of the ailments of so many people grouped together as demoniacs in the New Testament.³⁰

The point is that the Scripture's use of this and similar terminology does not invalidate our belief in its inerrancy. The same is true for its use of numbers and numerology. Mathematical accuracy has never been a Semitic strong point or priority. Figures are generally rounded and may be used as conventional expressions of determined durations and quantities. A generation can be described as a passage of forty years, regardless of its actual length. Grandeur is also communicated by numbers. We read that after only a few generations, and notwithstanding the

25 EB 558.

26 EB 559.

27 EB 121.

28 Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 1a, q. 70, art. 1, reply obj. 3.

29 Compare Olegario García de la Fuente, *Los Dioses y el Pecado en Babilonia* [The Gods and Sin in Babylon] (El Escorial: Madrid Centro Bíblico Hispano-Americano, 1963), 135–140.

30 Courtade, "Inspiration et Inerrance," 4:535.

oppressive measures of Pharaoh, the insignificant group that entered Egypt under Joseph had soared up to more than six hundred thousand men-at-arms,³¹ which would postulate a population of more than two million. This great figure stands to prove the exceptional protection of God who led the people safely through all their troubles.

More than large figures or quantities, it is totality itself that bears out clearly the idea of exceptional greatness. This is why we so often find such expressions as “not one escaped,”³² and “every nation under heaven.”³³ A special emphasis on a given thing could be expressed by a denial of its opposite. The importance of the inner love of God is illustrated by the rejection of external cult,³⁴ and the strong attachment to Christ implies the hate of all that is outside him.³⁵ Here the attention should be focused on what is affirmed; the denial is of secondary importance.

Another literary form is the use of stereotyped pictures and old traditions; these play a great part in the biblical descriptions of events. Jeremiah gives a vivid depiction of the fall of Babylon. The details are borrowed from typical siege stories—demolition of the ramparts,³⁶ burning of the gates,³⁷ followed by a general devastation.³⁸ We know, however, from other sources, that Babylon did not suffer any harm under the Persian conqueror, King Cyrus. In other instances, literary figures are taken from old mythological traditions, such as the prophet’s mention of Rahab,³⁹ or from apocryphal story, as that used in the epistle of Jude.⁴⁰

Also, we know from the study of ancient forms that lengthy actions and elaborate speeches are often used to signal and enhance the importance of a message being conveyed. The prophet Ezekiel must have gone through laborious acting the better to express the coming siege of Jerusalem; the author of Job expresses his doctrine in the form of a protracted discussion by which he gradually demolishes the theological views against which he is reacting. In these cases it is not the highly finished presentation that should attract our attention, but rather the divine message hidden therein.

The principle of literary forms has also proven useful for answering objections to inerrancy in historical narratives. Pius is very positive on this matter:

31 Num. 1:46.

32 1 Macc. 7:47.

33 Acts 2:5.

34 Hos. 6:6.

35 Luke 14:26.

36 Jer. 50:15; 51:44, 58.

37 Jer. 51:58.

38 Jer. 50:3, 13; 51:3, 37.

39 Isa. 51:9.

40 Jude 9.

Not infrequently—to mention only one instance—when some persons reproachfully charge the sacred writers with some historical error or inaccuracy in the recording of facts, on closer examination it turns out to be nothing else than those customary modes of expression and narration peculiar to the ancients, which used to be employed in the mutual dealings of social life and which in fact were sanctioned by common usage.⁴¹

The same pontiff later applied this principle in his encyclical letter *Humani Generis*, where he confirmed that the first eleven chapters of Genesis contain real history, but not as that history is presented in Greek, Roman, or modern historiography.⁴² The poetical descriptions throughout the Bible are also to be interpreted according to their literary form, especially when they deal with the interventions of God in favor of his people.

An honest appraisal of the biblical message arrived at through the study of the literary forms eliminates those difficulties that flow from a faulty interpretation of the text itself. But Pius has not presented it as the primary rule for defending the truth of the Bible; it is just one principle of interpretation, one means of understanding the literal sense of the text. He has written:

What is the literal sense of a passage is not always as obvious in the speeches and writings of the ancient authors of the East, as it is in the works of the writers of our own time. . . . The interpreter must . . . accurately determine what modes of writing, so to speak, the authors of the ancient period would be likely to use, and in fact did use.⁴³

In this way “many difficulties” can be solved, because “not infrequently” apparent inaccuracies are only the result of special literary forms peculiar to the ancients.

By bracketing together interpretation and inerrancy, Pius makes it clear that the limits of inerrancy can be only established by determining, with the help of the literary study, the literal sense of the text. Once we know what the sacred writer has in mind, we are able to mark the limits of inerrancy, for “all that is contained in the sacred Scripture is true.”⁴⁴

41 EB 560.

42 EB 618.

43 EB 558.

44 Aquinas, *Quodlibetales*, q. 12, art. 26, reply. obj. 1.

What is the "Formal Object" of Scripture?

Some modern scholars advocate a different means for establishing the limits of Scripture's inerrancy. They search for what they call the "formal object" of the Bible.⁴⁵ This has some immediate appeal and much can be said in favor of this method. Setting out the object of any judgement is the basic requirement for comprehension, and it is quite clear that the limits of truth have to be measured according to the limits of the object in question. It is also clear that along with the object of an affirmation one could find many secondary developments that serve to illustrate this object without forming a part of the affirmation itself; these secondary developments fall under the judgement only insofar as they are connected with the object. In themselves, they remain outside the sphere of the judgement.

The actual limits of the object of the Bible can be established by the study of the literary forms.

Augustine articulated this principle in his polemic against Felix the Manichean. Teaching about the constitution and origin of the world falls outside the scope of divine revelation, he argued: "It is enough for men to know about these things what they learned at school, for their own use." He added: "It is not written in the Gospel that the Lord said: 'I shall send you the Paraclete who will teach you about the courses of the sun and the moon.' He wanted to form Christians, not mathematicians."⁴⁶

Some modern scholars would widen this principle and apply it as an independent general rule in conjunction with the study of literary forms.⁴⁷ They insist on the fact that God has given us our natural faculties by which we can attain the knowledge of natural objects. The divine inspiration is not intended to replace our investigation of the natural world through our natural faculties; inspiration intends to elevate the intellect to a higher level in order to grasp a supernatural truth. The Bible is written in view of this higher truth, which in turn, they argue, forms the object of inspiration and inerrancy; everything else in the sacred text falls under inerrancy only insofar as it is connected with this object.

Thomas Aquinas on Prophecy and Sacred Writing

This general limitation of inerrancy to a predetermined biblical object, while superficially attractive, cannot be squared with the Church's traditional understanding and leads to numerous theological difficulties. Thomas Aquinas followed Augustine's lead in excluding the fashioning of the heavenly bodies from the object

45 Compare Paul Synave and Pierre Benoit, *Prophecy and Inspiration: A Commentary on the Summa Theologica II-II, Questions 171–178* (New York: Desclee, 1961), 134–137.

46 Augustine, *Against Felix the Manichee*, bk. 1, chap. 10 (PL 42:525).

47 André Baruco and Henri Cazelles, "L'inerrance des Livres Inspirés" [The Inerrancy of the Inspired Books], in *Introduction à la Bible*, 2 vols., ed. André Robert and André Feuillet (Tournai: Desclee, 1959), 1:58–68, at 61–65.

of the Bible.⁴⁸ But he did not present this restriction as a general principle. He offers only one limitation: God reveals to the prophets what is necessary for the instruction of the faithful.⁴⁹ But the extension of this doctrine cannot be established beforehand.

Thomas places prophecy midway between the beatific vision and faith. In the beatific vision, the human intellect is elevated by a supernatural light through which it can see the divine essence and other objects in it. No human intellect, adorned with this light can totally penetrate the divine essence; each one comprehends God in proportion to the participation in this divine light granted to him, according to God's degree of charity.⁵⁰ And the extent of the other objects visible in the divine essence varies with one's comprehension of the divine essence.⁵¹ Thus, while the divine light is not of itself limited to determined objects, it is actually restricted by one's degree of participation in that light, which in turn depends on the divine charity.

The limits of the object of faith are established by different criteria, for the act of faith is governed by different rules. The believer does not see the truth in which he believes: he assents to a truth visible to others.⁵² All that Thomas would concede is that the believer perceives by some external signs that a given truth is to be believed, and that faith itself confirms this credibility;⁵³ but this perception does not bear on the truth itself.⁵⁴ The object of faith is God; many other things fall under faith because of their connection with God and insofar as they help man in his trend toward the fruition of God.⁵⁵ This general statement is elsewhere limited by two negative qualifications. Speaking about heresy, Thomas distinguishes those matters that directly or indirectly pertain to faith from the "questions of geometry and suchlike topics which cannot belong to the faith by any means."⁵⁶ Then, since faith is an assent to an invisible truth, it cannot bear on any object that is either seen or known.⁵⁷ To be noted, however, is that for Thomas all that is contained in the Scriptures falls under the object of faith,⁵⁸ at least indirectly.⁵⁹

48 Aquinas, *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate* [Disputed Questions on Truth], q. 12, art. 2, reply, in *Truth*, 3 vols. (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1952–1954).

49 Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 171, art. 4 reply obj. 1; Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 12, art. 2.

50 Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 1a, q. 12, art. 6.

51 Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 1a, q. 12, art. 8.

52 Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 2, art. 1.

53 Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 1, art. 4, reply obj. 3; compare pt. 2a–2ae, q. 1, art. 5, reply obj. 1.

54 Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, art. 4, reply obj. 2.

55 Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 1, art. 1.

56 Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 11, art. 2.

57 Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 1, arts. 4, 5.

58 Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, art. 5.

59 Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 1a, q. 32, art. 4.

These two restrictions do not apply to the object of prophecy. Unlike the believer, the prophet does not assent to invisible truth: he sees it.⁶⁰ Under this aspect prophecy comes very near to the beatific vision, from which it is distinguished by the fact that it is not a permanent habit but a transitory passion:

The divine essence cannot be seen by a created intellect save through the light of glory, of which it is written (Ps. 36:9): *In Thy light we shall see light*. But this light can be shared in two ways. First by way of an abiding form, and thus it beatifies the saints in heaven. Secondly by way of a transitory passion . . . of the light of prophecy.⁶¹

It follows that the act of prophecy can stand together with the habit of faith but not with the act of faith.⁶² Since therefore in prophecy the intellect is perfected for its own sake, and not in view of its subjection to the will,⁶³ there is no ground for limiting its object to those matters which are unattainable by human activity.

Thomas does seem to restrain the object of prophecy to invisible things, as he does when he deals with the object of faith. Starting from the fact that prophecy is a knowledge of what is remote from us, he mentions the following possible objects of prophecy: First, the future contingencies that are in themselves unknowable and are the chief matter of prophecy and belong to it most properly.⁶⁴ Second come the divine mysteries that are unattainable by our intellect because of its weakness. Finally come those things that are within reach of some men, and remote from others. In this way, what is known to one can be communicated to another through a prophetic revelation. These things are not of themselves the object of prophecy, but only with reference to those who ignore them.⁶⁵

In this case, however, Aquinas is speaking of prophecy in a restricted sense. Prophecy has a wide range of degrees, and not all that is said of a special degree can be applied to the whole range. Sometimes Aquinas considers prophecy only as a prediction of future events;⁶⁶ at other times he widens his perspective to include all those things that cannot be known except by revelation,⁶⁷ thus excluding what

60 Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 173, art. 4; compare *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 171, art. 5.

61 Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 175, art. 3, reply obj. 2; compare *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 171, art. 2; pt. 2a–2ae, q. 173, art. 1.

62 Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 175, a. 3, reply obj. 3.

63 Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 12, art. 1, reply.

64 Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 171, art. 3.

65 Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 12, art. 2.

66 Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, chap. 154, art. 10, in *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith (Summa Contra Gentiles)*, 5 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1955–1957); *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 171, art. 3, reply obj. 1.

67 Aquinas, *Summa*, 2a–2ae, q. 171, art. 3, reply obj. 2.

is already known by human investigation; but generally he includes within the object of prophecy all that can fall under divine cognition,⁶⁸ even if it is attainable by human reason.⁶⁹ The restriction that he construes by analogy with the object of faith does not apply to prophecy as such, but to a special kind of prophecy.

The limitation of the object of prophecy to what is useful for our salvation is very misleading. Thomas admits that those matters which cannot have any relation to our salvation are alien to the object of prophecy,⁷⁰ but when he explains what is required for something to be useful to the faithful he drops every shadow of discrimination. Among the natural truths which he accepts, he mentions first of all such facts as the incorruptibility of the intellect, which is postulated by other revealed truths, and is admitted in the Bible because of its connection with them. Then he passes on to other matters which are not postulated by higher truths, but are handed down through prophecy because they induce us to admire God's wisdom and might.⁷¹ Now, there is no natural truth that could not lead to this admiration of God, and therefore no truth can of itself be excluded from prophecy.

It is also to be noted that when prophecy bears on a topic that can be attained by human reason, the truth that is in the mind of the prophet does not differ from that which is possessed by the ordinary man. For the divine power can produce without the collaboration of the natural qualities and faculties the same effects that are normally produced by these qualities and faculties.⁷² It follows that it is not necessary to be always searching for higher meanings hidden under the cover of natural events. Very often the natural facts are admitted in the Bible as conveyors of a supernatural message, but this is not always the case. Sometimes a modest natural truth is transmitted to the prophet, and falls under inerrancy for its own sake, because it occupies a peculiar place in God's plan of salvation.

One cannot, therefore, determine in advance the boundaries of the object of prophecy and inerrancy.

Distinguishing Inspiration in Prophets and Hagiographers

The distinction between prophet and hagiographer, or sacred writer, has also been harnessed to the cause of setting the limits of inerrancy; this is the object of an important treatise by Pierre Benoit.⁷³ He presents this distinction as the

68 Aquinas, *Summa*, 2a–2ae, q. 171, pref.

69 Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 12, art. 12; *Summa*, 2a–2ae, q. 174, art. 2, reply obj. 3.

70 Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 12, art. 2.

71 Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 12, art. 2; compare q. 12, art. 2, reply obj. 3.

72 Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 12, art. 2, reply obj. 4.

73 Synave and Benoit, *Prophecy and Inspiration*, 103; see also the shorter discussion by Benoit, "L'Inspiration," 34–35. Some useful remarks upon this theory may be found in Michel Labourdette, "Les Charismes: La Prophétie les Problèmes Scripturaires" [The Charisms: The Problem of Prophecy in Scripture], *Revue Thomiste* 50 (1950): 404–421. Joseph Coppens, "L'Inspiration et L'Inerrance Bibliques" [The Inspiration and Inerrancy of the Bible], *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 33

fundamental principle for judging the inerrancy of the Bible, in that it separates the practical judgement from the speculative one, which is the sole guarantee of truth and inerrancy. Discarding his earlier categories,⁷⁴ he now distinguishes three possible formalities in the divine charism: *revelation*, *cognitive inspiration*, and *scriptural inspiration*.

According to Benoit's schema, these may be found either singly or united together in different combinations.⁷⁵ *Revelation* is the characteristic of the prophet and does not necessarily include a speculative judgement and inerrancy. *Scriptural inspiration* is an impulse to compose a book or a discourse. Of itself this charism does not include an inerrant judgement; it belongs most properly to the sacred writer. *Cognitive inspiration* is a light that illuminates the speculative judgement; it carries with it truth and inerrancy, and is the normal case with the genuine prophet. Cognitive inspiration may also be found in the sacred writer if he is moved to form a speculative judgement, just as scriptural inspiration could also be found in a prophet if he is called to compose a book. It follows that the genuine prophet has a speculative judgement with inerrancy, while the sacred writer as such requires only practical judgement without inerrancy, but can at times be graced, for the sake of his book, with the inerrant speculative judgement proper to the prophet.

Benoit bases his distinction in part on the different roles incumbent on the prophet and the sacred writer; he also cites some expressions found in Aquinas that seem to affirm this duality of function. The author observes that in addition to the different functions that St. Paul ascribed to the Scriptures,⁷⁶ the biblical writings also function to threaten and console, encourage and call to penance, delight and entertain. Sometimes they intend to simply transmit to posterity a recollection of past events without intending to inculcate them or to teach them.

Benoit concludes that these different tasks can be grouped in two categories. First, there are those that deal with the transmission of the truth. These require a speculative judgement and fall to the lot of the prophet, who does nearly nothing of his own initiative. Second, there are those intended to produce some determined effect; these are left to the sacred writer, to whom is assigned the laborious task of literary composition.

In this regard we might distinguish two distinct vocations, as it were: the first one impels one to *repeat an oracle* which has come down from heaven; the other

(1957): 36–57; J. Terrance Forestell, "The Limitation of Inerrancy," *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 20:1 (January 1958), 9–18.

74 In the original French edition of his commentary on the section on prophecy in Thomas ("La Prophétie" [Prophecy], in *Somme Théologique*, ed. Paul Synave and Pierre Benoit [Paris: Desclee, 1947], 319), he had adopted the following terms: *révélation prophétique* [prophetic revelation], *inspiration prophétique* [prophetic inspiration], *inspiration scripturaire* [scriptural inspiration]; compare the English translation, Synave and Benoit, *Prophecy and Inspiration*.

75 Synave and Benoit, *Prophecy and Inspiration*, 110.

76 2 Tim. 3:16.

impels one to *compose a book*. We shall designate them by the two standard terms, “*prophet*” and “*sacred writer*.”⁷⁷

This distinction, however, should not be reduced to a mere question of speaking or writing. Benoit continues:

The essential differentiating factor in these two typical cases . . . is the nature of the message which God confides to his representative. In the case of the prophet, God reveals to him supernatural truths which he could never have attained by himself and which he therefore has only to repeat. The sacred writer, on the other hand, retains the task of acquiring and ordering by himself—with God’s help, to be sure—natural truths, or even supernatural ones, which he has been able to learn by human methods of inquiry.⁷⁸

For Benoit, the most fundamental difference between sacred writer and prophet comes from the final cause. In prophecy, the inspiration first affects the intellect, for the prophet is sent to teach—his judgement is principally speculative. The sacred writer acts initially on the impulse of the will, for he has to attain more extensive and more varied ends: his judgement is principally practical.⁷⁹

As a result of Benoit’s imposing apparatus, one has to admit that the speculative judgement is not a universal characteristic of the Bible. We must not search for inspired truth in all that is said by the sacred writer, since some apparent judgements are incorporated in the Bible for practical reasons, and not as representing divine thought. This conclusion is sound, and it is exactly the duty of the exegetes to ascertain, by studying the literary forms, where the sacred writer expresses speculative judgements and to disclose their import.

However, one has to question the usefulness and advisability of presenting the prophet and the sacred writer as the principal beneficiaries of the speculative and the practical judgements, respectively. Benoit admits that normally both judgements appear together in Scripture,⁸⁰ and that the scriptural inspiration, and consequently the practical judgement, are found alone when “a sacred writer [is] quoting on the authority of another or writing about incidentals, without vouching for the truth of the matter.”⁸¹ One fails to see why this rare phenomenon of scriptural inspiration should be given as a fundamental distinction for biblical interpretation.

77 Synave and Benoit, *Prophecy and Inspiration*, 106.

78 Synave and Benoit, *Prophecy and Inspiration*, 109.

79 Synave and Benoit, *Prophecy and Inspiration*, 110.

80 Benoit, “*L’Inspiration*,” 22.

81 Synave and Benoit, *Prophecy and Inspiration*, 111.

The distinction between prophet and sacred writer, based on a difference in their respective judgement, is indeed hard to justify. Benoit considers the practical judgement as the principal requirement for the composition of a book. And it is true that not every writing is composed with the intention of communicating a speculative truth. A book may be written with the exclusive intention of entertaining the reader, and in this case the writing of the book does not entail more speculative activity than the sketching of a portrait or the composition of a symphony.

But this is not the case of the Bible. The scriptural message leads man to God by instructing him in the faith and by guiding him in his actions.⁸² The latter function of Scripture presents no difficulty: God guides us by his precepts, entreaties, and the like. Here nobody has ever searched for speculative truth—the object of this message is practical truth. The difficulty lies in the first object of God's Word, which is often attained through narratives and descriptions that do not always tally with reality. Can we get around this difficulty by supposing that in such cases the principal judgement applied by the writer is a practical one? Hardly ever. The biblical message is delivered in a human and pleasing way, and therefore the writer makes use of all his literary talent. But all his faculties are mobilized in view of the message he is delivering; this message remains the principal factor of the book, and brings with it the speculative judgement as his principal intellectual activity.

The study of the literary forms is very precious here. It shows us that to bring home his message, the writer may use poetical descriptions, old traditions, fictitious and parabolic narratives, and more. Even more, the sacred writer can relate false assertions and impious actions. We have to sift the divine truth that is carried by this great diversity of literary form; we do this by dropping out the literary apparel, whether good or bad, that is incorporated in the Bible not for its own sake but as a vehicle to convey this divine truth. But one cannot affirm that the judgement underlying the composition of such passages is principally a practical one. It is principally a speculative judgement, but it naturally postulates the practical judgement, without which the sacred writer cannot transmit his truth to others.

Nor is there any reason for Benoit to restrain the literary activity of the genuine prophet to a simple repetition of an oracle.⁸³ If Christ delivered his message in highly elaborate parables, why could not a prophet repeat his oracle in carefully developed literary forms? Supposing that the prophetic speeches preserved in the Bible are a reliable sample of prophetic oratory, one has to admit that the divine Spirit allowed great liberty in literary composition to the prophets. These speeches in fact show that the prophets made use of all their talent in handing down the

82 Compare Aquinas, *Summa*, 2a–2ae, q. 174, art. 6.

83 All that Benoit would admit here is that “at the very most he has to make a choice about the method of presentation, the form of his discourse.” But this activity does not extend itself to the composition of a discourse, which already surpasses the proper role of the prophet. *Prophecy and Inspiration*, 107, 110, n. 2.

divine revelation. Moreover, even under this supernatural impulse, the prophets normally retained their liberty of action:⁸⁴ they could accept or reject this charism, which shows that even in the case of the prophets the practical judgement plays an important part. One can admit, however, that the liberty left to the human instrument is susceptible of various degrees. Only that the difference between the prophet and the hagiographer should not be taken as a criterion for measuring the degree of the divine light and of the human initiative.

Thomas and the Grace of Inspiration

The authority of Thomas Aquinas cannot be called upon to confirm the distinction that Benoit would make between prophet and sacred writer. In some places⁸⁵ Thomas mentions them separately, and this has led some authors to think that he assigns a different role to each. Domenico Zancchia, for instance, thinks that for Thomas the sacred writer's role is to judge supernaturally and to consign to the Church natural truths obtained by human means. By contrast, the prophet's function consists not only of judging and transmitting, but also of receiving from God those truths which cannot be reached by the human intellect. In other words, the distinction is based on the provenance—and on the nature—of the truths in question. Whenever there is a revelation of a supernatural truth, there is also prophecy; otherwise there is only a scriptural inspiration.⁸⁶

The general lines of this distinction between revelation and biblical inspiration is universally accepted; everybody in fact admits that the sacred writer does not necessarily receive a revelation from God. But some authors proceed much further. Benoit thinks that Thomas did not examine the scriptural inspiration, because the condition of the biblical studies in his time did not demand it, and therefore we must be very cautious in applying to scriptural inerrancy what he says about prophecy. He notes Thomas's distinction between the prophets, who speak as representatives of God (*ex persona Dei*), and the sacred writers, who write in their own name (*ex persona propria*). For Benoit this suggests the difference in the messenger's initiative, which can be explained in terms of greater or smaller importance of the practical judgement.⁸⁷

84 Compare Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 12, art. 4: "But the use of any prophecy is within the power of the prophet. It is in keeping with this that the first Epistle to the Corinthians (14:32) says: 'And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.' Therefore, one can prevent himself from using prophecy. And the proper disposition is a necessary requirement for the proper use of prophecy, since the use of prophecy proceeds from the created power of the prophet."

85 Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 12, art. 12, obj. 10; *Summa*, 2a–2ae, q. 174, art. 2, reply obj. 3.

86 Domenico Zancchia, *Divina Inspiratio Sacrarum Scripturarum ad Mentem S. Thomae Aquinatis* [The Divine Inspiration of Sacred Scripture in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas] (Rome: F. Pustet, 1898), 96.

87 Synave and Benoit, *Prophecy and Inspiration*, 113; compare Aquinas, *Summa*, 2a–2ae, q. 174, art. 2, reply obj. 3.

Thomas, however, never dreamt of these distinctions, nor is it exact to say that he did not discuss the scriptural inspiration. Although he was not beset by the many problems that have to be tackled by present day exegetes and theologians, he did discuss biblical inspiration and not prophecy in general. The charism that falls under his scrutiny is the canonical prophecy, which is a *gratia gratis data*,⁸⁸ that is, an external grace granted principally for the utility of the Church.⁸⁹ All the examples of canonical prophecy given by St. Thomas are taken from the Bible, because he considers Scripture as the embodiment of this divine charism. One can therefore safely transfer to Scripture what he affirms about prophecy, without any risk of misrepresenting his thought. In fact, in his opuscula on the Bible,⁹⁰ he applies to Scripture the principles discussed in connection with prophecy.

The difference between prophets and hagiographers mentioned by St. Thomas⁹¹ does not correspond to our modern distinction. In the texts in question, Aquinas falls back on the *Prologus Galeatus* ("Helmeted Preface") of St. Jerome which, following the familiar Jewish division, distinguishes three orders in the Bible—the torah, the prophets, and the hagiographers—and in the end he mentions the apocrypha among which he includes the so-called deuterocanonicals. This distinction does not oppose the Scriptures to the prophets but separates different parts of Scripture itself. Thomas retains this Jewish distinction for practical purposes, but he does not feel himself bound by it. He departs from it in the question of the deuterocanonicals, which he brackets together with the last collection, and he prefers to admit Daniel into the second order instead of leaving him among the hagiographa.⁹² Moreover, when he speaks about the modalities proper to each order, he uses such terms as "more frequently" (*plures frequentius*)⁹³ and "all, or almost all" (*omnes, aut fere omnes*),⁹⁴ by which he shows that there is no clear cut distinction between the three orders.

In the first of his biblical opuscula, St. Thomas explains what he means by *ex persona Dei* and *ex persona propria*. This terminology in no way reflects the degree of the human initiative in prophecy, but simply alludes to the way in which the divine message is transmitted by the prophets. The first part of this message contains a coercive mandate, and therefore it is delivered under the form of a precept. The second part induces man to observe this mandate through the heralds and the messengers: these are the prophets who speak *ex persona Dei*. The

88 Aquinas, *Summa*, 2a–2ae, q. 171, pref.

89 Aquinas, *Summa*, 2a–2ae, q. 172, art. 4, reply obj. 1.

90 Aquinas, *De Commendatione et Partitione Sacrae Scripturae* [The Commendation and Division of Sacred Scripture], in *Selected Writings* (Penguin, 1998).

91 Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 12, art. 12, obj. 10; *Summa*, 2a–2ae, q. 174, art. 2, reply obj. 3.

92 Aquinas, *Commendatione et Partitione*.

93 Aquinas, *Summa*, 2a–2ae, q. 174, art. 2, reply obj. 3.

94 Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 12, art. 12, obj. 10.

third part contains a persuasive message, and is announced by the hagiographer in the form of a paternal instruction *ex persona propria*. The deuterocanonicals are grouped together with the hagiographers, because they also speak in a persuasive manner.⁹⁵ On the other hand, Daniel was a prophet: he received a divine revelation and predicted the future, but he did not speak *ex persona Dei* because he was not sent by God as a messenger. Joshua too was a prophet, but he can be placed among the hagiographers because he was not sent to prophesy to the people.

The distinction between prophet and hagiographer based on the provenance of their message does not render full justice to the texts of Aquinas. He never in fact said that what constitutes the hagiographer is the supernatural judgement, and that the eventual supernatural reception is proper to the prophet and accidental to the hagiographer. In the text quoted by Zanecchia,⁹⁶ Thomas does not distinguish between judging and receiving, but between an imaginative and a non-imaginative revelation;⁹⁷ Thomas further asserts that while the prophets received imaginative visions, the hagiographers were granted intellectual ones.⁹⁸ The revelation of divine truths does not therefore surpass the role of the hagiographers.

All of this stands to prove that for Thomas Aquinas there cannot be any real distinction between prophet and sacred writer. There is only one prophetic charism that is shared in different ways by different beneficiaries. Commenting on the distinction between the imaginative and the intellectual visions in Aquinas, Cajetan explains that one is more properly called a prophecy than the other, but both are properly called a prophecy.⁹⁹ And Thomas categorically affirms that there is only one kind of prophecy because all the prophets participated of the same divine light.¹⁰⁰ Whenever we find this divine light with the ensuing judgement there is also prophecy, for knowledge is accomplished in judgement;¹⁰¹ where this judgement is absent, there is no place for prophecy. The hagiographers possessed

95 "Because there is the same manner of speaking in them and in the hagiographical works, they are for now counted among them" (*Quia tanem idem modus loquendi in eis [the deuterocanonicals] et in agiographis observatur, ideo simul cum eis computentur ad praesens*). Aquinas, *Commendatione et Partitione*.

96 Zanecchia, *Divina Inspiration*, n. 96.

97 "But, of those whom he [St. Jerome] calls the prophets, all, or almost all, received revelation under the imagery of imagination. But many of those whom he calls writers of sacred books received revelation without imagery." (*Sed illi quos nominat prophetas, omnes, aut fere omnes, revelationem acceperunt sub figuris imaginativis; plures autem eorum quos inter agiographas nominat, sine figuris revelationem acceperunt.*) Aquinas, *De Verbis*, q. 12, art. 12, obj. 10.

98 "They, however, are called sacred writers who had only intellectual visions supernaturally, whether in judgment alone or in judgment and reception together." (*Agiographae autem dicuntur qui supernaturaliter solum visiones intellectuales habuerunt sive quantum ad iudicium tantum, sive quantum ad iudicium et acceptionem simul.*) Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 12, art. 12, reply obj. 10.

99 Cajetan, *Commentary in Summa Theologiae* (London: R & T Washbourne, 1914), pt. 2a–2ae, q. 174, art. 2.

100 Aquinas, *Summa*, 2a–2ae, q. 171, art. 3, reply obj. 3.

101 Aquinas, *Summa*, 2a–2ae, q. 173, art. 2.

the full charism of prophecy: they did not always receive intellectual revelations, but they always had a supernatural judgement.¹⁰²

The different manifestations of prophecy are to be explained within the framework of the same charism and are reduced by Thomas to different degrees of the same quality.¹⁰³ These distinctions remain totally outside the sphere of the supernatural judgement. As far as this is concerned, there is not the slightest difference between the different degrees of prophecy, nor should one present them as a possible means of determining the limits of inerrancy by separating the speculative from the practical judgement.

Literary Forms and the Delimiting of Inerrancy

The limits of inerrancy cannot be established by any general speculation about the object of inspiration, for every kind of truth may be manifested by God to his prophets. Nor does the distinction between prophet and hagiographer or between speculative and practical judgements help much here. The prophetic charism is absolutely uniform as far as the judgement is concerned. For those texts which have not yet been clarified by the interpretation of the Church, the only means of delimiting the object of biblical inerrancy remains the study of the literary forms. This study brings us in close contact with the sacred writer and qualifies us to understand his message.¹⁰⁴

102 Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 12, art. 12; q. 12, reply obj. 10; *Summa*, 2a-2ae, q. 173, art. 2; q. 174, art. 2, reply obj. 3.

103 Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 12, art. 13, reply obj. 2. The highest grade of prophecy is the rapture (*Summa* 2a-2ae, q. 171, pref.), which he treats separately because of its special object (*Commentary in Isaiah* 1; *Summa*, 2a-2ae, q. 175, art. 3), and its special way of attaining it (*Summa*, 2a-2ae, q. 175, art. 4). Of the other aspects of prophecy, the noblest is that in which a supernatural truth is contemplated in an intellectual vision, followed by the manifestation of a supernatural truth in an imaginative vision (*Summa*, 2a-2ae, q. 174, art. 2). Last of all comes the prophecy that deals with natural truths. But prophecy connotes some sort of obscurity and remoteness from the intelligible truth (*Summa*, 2a-2ae, q. 174, art. 2, reply obj. 2), and therefore the most proper kind of prophecy is that in which the truth is attained through an imaginative vision. The second member in order of nobility comes first in order of propriety.

104 This approach, however, will not solve all the difficulties. There is something in Scripture that cannot be directly attained by the literary forms, and that is the *plenary sense* of the text. Since the prophet is a defective instrument (Aquinas, *Summa*, 2a-2ae, q. 173, art. 4), he does not always catch the full import of his message; nor do we, who try to approach as much as possible to the level of the prophet. The plenary sense becomes manifest through successive revelation or through the interpretation of the Church. It falls under the study of the literary forms only in so far as the later revelation and interpretation are also made manifest by some literary mode of expression.