

VATICAN II AND THE TRUTH OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

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Biblical inspiration is intimately connected with the question of the firmness and faithfulness with which it hands down to man the great treasure of revelation.

Dei Verbum, the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on Divine Revelation, says of the divine books: "Inspired by God and committed once and for all to writing, they impart the Word of God himself without change"¹). The intimate connection between this faithfulness and certainty of Holy Scripture—called by theologians "inerrancy"—and its divine inspiration is also noted in the Constitution. Indeed, the inerrancy of Scripture is presented as the logical conclusion of the doctrine on inspiration: "Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation" (no. 11).

Let us consider briefly the composition of this passage. It clearly consists of two parts: the premise and the conclusion to be deduced from it. The premise is this: "Everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit." This statement is in its turn presented as a conclusion derived from what has gone before, for it is introduced with "therefore." The previous argument is that if God has so moved the inspired authors that, although writing as true authors, they nevertheless wrote "all and only those things which he wished to be written,"² then there can be no doubt that all that these authors assert is to be considered as asserted by the Holy Spirit which has inspired them.

The second part of our text, the conclusion deduced from the premise, is this: "The books of Scripture . . . teach firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation." This conclusion presupposes a self-evident truth—that God surely obtains what he desires, and that he cannot make a mistake or cause a mistake to be made. This obvious presupposition is explicitly formulated further on in this same chapter of the Constitution where it is affirmed that when God condescends to speak to men in a human manner through an inspired book, his truth and holiness must always remain inviolable.³

Concerning the proof of the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture, the document itself quotes as its foundation passages from St. Augustine, St. Thomas

1 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* [The Word of God], Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (November 18, 1965).

2 *Dei Verbum*, 11.

3 *Dei Verbum*, 13.

Aquinas, and the Council of Trent, and some recent documents of the supreme magisterium of the Church.

The doctrine of inerrancy was put forward and expounded chiefly by Leo XIII in his encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, which is largely dedicated to establishing and defining this doctrinal point. The encyclical first expounds the doctrine of inspiration in order to affirm that of inerrancy, asserting: "Therefore it is so impossible for divine inspiration to contain any error that, by its very nature, it not only excludes even the slightest error but must of necessity exclude it, just as God, the Supreme Truth, must also necessarily be absolutely incapable of promoting error."⁴

The encyclical therefore concludes: "Consequently, any who were to admit that there might be error in the authentic pages of the sacred books must certainly either betray the Catholic concept of divine inspiration or make God himself the author of error."⁵ The encyclical bases this teaching on the doctrine of the popes, from among whom it quotes largely St. Gregory and St. Augustine. The same theme of inerrancy is fully dealt with also in the encyclical *Spiritus Paraclitus*, which illustrates with particular care St. Jerome's doctrine about this. The teaching of Leo XIII on this question is recalled by Pius XII's encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*.

The Inerrancy of Scripture in Scripture

The source and foundation of this conviction held by the first Fathers of the Church and the magisterium concerning the inerrancy of Scripture is Scripture itself—or more precisely the way in which Christ and the apostles used and quoted it.

According to the New Testament, there exists a collection of writings which are called "Scripture"⁶ or "the Scriptures,"⁷ or the "Holy Scriptures."⁸ This collection is considered by both Christ and the apostles to be of divine origin and to it is attributed divine authority. With the words "it is written," Christ repeatedly appealed to the Scriptures as to an irrefutable authority.⁹ So did the apostles.¹⁰

The divine origin of these Old Testament books is also implied by their being called simply "oracles of God"¹¹ or described as "prophetic" and their words as "prophecies"¹²—prophetic being the term used to describe a man who brings to other men the message, the Word of God.

4 Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* [The God of All Providence], Encyclical Letter on the Study of Scripture (November 18, 1893), 20.

5 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 21.

6 See John 2:22; 10:35; Gal. 3:8; 1 Pet. 2:6; 2 Pet. 1:20.

7 Matt. 21:42; 22:29; John 5:39; Acts 17:2, 11; 18:24; Rom. 15:4.

8 Rom. 1:2.

9 Matt. 4:4–10; 22:31, 43; John 10:34–35.

10 Acts 15:15–18; Rom. 1:17.

11 Rom. 3:2

12 See Matt. 13:14; 15:7; Rom. 16:26; 1 Pet. 1:10; 2 Pet. 1:19–20.

Moreover, in a series of texts, Christ and the apostles, referring to the Old Testament, affirm that God himself is present in these writings because he himself speaks in them, or because the human authors speak “in the Holy Spirit” or are “inspired by the Holy Spirit.”¹³ Hebrews introduces a quotation from Psalm 95 with the words: “the Holy Spirit says.”¹⁴ Moreover, in Matthew, quotations from the Old Testament are introduced with the words: “All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.”¹⁵ Because God was considered the Author of Scripture, it was considered necessary and inevitable that the Scriptures should “be fulfilled.”¹⁶ This argument from Scripture is summed up in the encyclical *Spiritus Paraclitus*:

Who is there who does not know and remember that when speaking to the people, either on the mountain by the lake of Genazareth, in the synagogue of Nazareth or in the city of Capernaum, Jesus our Lord drew the principal points and proofs of his doctrine from the sacred books? Was it not from these that he took invincible weapons for his discussions with the Pharisees and the Sadducees? Whether he was teaching or discussing he always derived his assertions and examples from every part of holy Scripture; he refers, for example, to Jonah, to the inhabitants of Nineveh, to the Queen of Sheba and Solomon, to Elijah and Elisha, to David, Noah, Lot, the inhabitants of Sodom, and Lot’s own wife.¹⁷

“For the Sake of Our Salvation”

Let us now proceed to determine the meaning of the Constitution’s doctrine on inerrancy. We have already said that it does not use here the theological term itself, but instead, for greater precision, says that the Scriptures “teach firmly, faithfully and without error.” The basic idea of the absolute truth of the Scriptures is always the same, although it may be differently expressed. The Constitution expresses most forcefully the notion that Scripture absolutely guarantees the faithful transmission of God’s revelation.

On the other hand, it is more difficult to define another point of our text—that is, the object of the infallible teaching of Scripture, “the truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.”

13 Acts 1:16–18; 2:30–31; Matt. 22:31–32, 43; 2 Pet. 1:19–21; 2 Tim. 3:16–17.

14 Heb. 3:7; 4:4–5; 9:8; 10:15.

15 Matt. 1:22; see also 2:15.

16 Matt. 5:18–19; Luke 24:44; Acts 1:16.

17 Pope Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus* [The Holy Spirit, the Comforter], Encyclical Letter Commemorating the Fifteenth Centenary of the Death of St. Jerome (September 15, 1920), 29.

At first sight, the meaning of these words seems clear and obvious. In fact, the whole Constitution illustrates the truth—the revelation of God is intended to bring about man's supernatural salvation. It is therefore to be expected that the truth taught by Scripture should be with reference to this salvation. Nevertheless, there is a certain difficulty here which needs to be explained.

In order to understand this point let us reconsider the preparatory work for this Constitution. An earlier *schema* or draft (the third in succession), said that the sacred books teach "truth without error." The following *schema*, the fourth, inspired by words of St. Augustine, added the adjective "saving,"¹⁸ so that the text asserted that the Scriptures taught "firmly, faithfully, wholly and without error the saving truth." In the voting which followed, one hundred and eighty-four council fathers asked for the adjective "saving" to be removed, because they feared it might lead to misunderstandings, as if the inerrancy of Scripture referred only to matters of faith and morality, whereas there might be error in the treatment of other matters. The Holy Father, to a certain extent sharing this anxiety, decided to ask the drafting commission to consider whether it would not be better to omit the adjective, as it might lead to some misunderstanding. After a long and wearisome debate, with much discussion and several ballots, the present text was accepted, the adjective "saving" being omitted: "the truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation."

This incident concerns us only in so far as it helps us to understand more precisely the meaning of the present definitive text of the Constitution. The actual question is as follows: It is evident that the purpose which God wished to be expressed in Scripture was the revelation of God to man, in the fullest sense, a revelation by means of "deeds and words," which aims at man's eternal salvation. Now we must consider whether the "truth" (that is, the truth "which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation") implies some limit set to the inerrancy of Scripture—meaning that it taught "without error," not everything that it asserts, but only all that concern our salvation (or those things also which closely and directly affect our salvation).

Let us explain at once what we mean. In order to describe those manifestations of God occurring in "deeds and words," which form the "history of salvation" (see no. 2), Scripture must necessarily set them in an authentic historical framework. Our question, therefore, about the possible existence of a limit set to inerrancy refers, not to the events in which God truly reveals himself, but to those events which form their historical setting and which Scripture frequently describes in great detail. Does the inerrancy asserted in this document cover also

18 We mention that this is a question of principle which does not admit of any compromise such as would, for example, be inherent in a declaration that only those events which are "closely connected" with the history of salvation are described without error, and not those where the connection is somewhat fragile. This distinction is, at least in practice, impossible to maintain.

the account of these historical events? In other words, is the historical background also described “without error”?

In the “Background” of Salvation History

For my own part I think that this question must be answered affirmatively, that is, that these “background” events also are described without error. In fact, we declare in general that there is no limit set to this inerrancy, and that it applies to all that the inspired writer, and therefore all that the Holy Spirit by his means, affirms.

Our reasons are these. First of all, the Constitution itself says that in holy Scripture the truth and holiness of God must always remain inviolable.¹⁹ This thought, which reoccurs in various forms in the documents of the magisterium of the Church,²⁰ is here clearly understood in a sense which excludes the possibility of the Scriptures containing any statement contrary to the reality of the facts.

In particular, these documents of the magisterium require us to recognize that Scripture gives a true account of events, naturally not in the sense that it always offers a complete and scientifically studied account, but in the sense that what is asserted in Scripture—even if it does not offer a complete picture—never contradicts the reality of the fact.

If therefore the Council had wished to introduce here a new conception, different from that presented in these documents of the supreme teaching authority, which reflects the beliefs of the early Fathers, it would have had to state this clearly and explicitly.

Let us now ask whether there may be any indications to suggest such a restricted interpretation of inerrancy. The answer is decidedly negative. There is not the slightest sign of any such indication. On the contrary everything points against a restrictive interpretation.

First of all: even at that stage of the discussion when the Conciliar Theological Commission put forward the term “the saving truth,” it explained that by this expression it did not mean to restrict the inerrancy of the Bible to matters of faith and morals. In order to show that this had not been its intention, it explained that the text spoke of “truth” in the singular, not of “truths,” as if it had wished to discriminate between those which are necessary for salvation and others which are not. Moreover, in spite of this prudent explanation, the word “saving” was finally eliminated from the text and replaced with another expression—in order to prevent any possibility of implying that the inerrancy was restricted.

Does the text of *Dei Verbum* we have before us now imply a restrictive interpretation of inerrancy? Here also the answer is firmly negative. The first proof

19 *Dei Verbum*, 2.

20 See also *Enchiridion Biblicum: Documenti della Chiesa sulla Sacra Scrittura* [Documents of the Church Concerning Sacred Scripture], ed. Alfio Filippi and Erminio Lora, 2nd ed. (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1993), 124, 279, 450, 539, 559.

of this is seen in the fact that all those (and in the first place the pope himself) who had been anxious to prevent the possible misunderstandings that might have arisen from the expression "the saving truth" have instead accepted the present form. This means that they consider that this does not present the same danger of misunderstanding. In fact, the phrasing we now have does not admit of any such interpretation because the idea of salvation is no longer directly linked with the noun "truth," but with the verbal expression "wanted put into the sacred writings." In other words, the phrase in which the text speaks of salvation explains God's purpose in causing the Scriptures to be written, and not the nature of the truth enshrined therein.

Let us then conclude: all that the inspired writers assert is asserted through them by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, in all their assertions the sacred books teach "firmly, faithfully and without error, what God wanted put into them for the sake of our salvation." The paragraph we are commenting upon (no. 11) ends with St. Paul's words: "All Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproving, for correcting and, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, equipped for every good work."²¹

21 2 Tim. 3:16–17, Greek text.