

## The Inerrancy of the Autographa

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## Chapter Summary

While the Bible teaches its own inerrancy, the inscripturation and copying of God's Word require us to identify the specific and proper object of inerrancy as the text of the original autographa. This time-honored, common-sense view of evangelicals has been criticized and ridiculed since the days of the modernist controversy over Scripture. Nevertheless, according to the attitude of the biblical writers, who could and did distinguish copies from the autographa, copies of the Bible could serve the purposes of revelation and function with authority only because they were assumed to be tethered to the autographic text and its criteriological authority. The evangelical doctrine pertains to the autographic text, not the autographic codex, and maintains that present copies and translations are inerrant to the extent that they accurately reflect the biblical originals; thus the inspiration and inerrancy of present Bibles is not an all-or-nothing matter. Evangelicals maintain the doctrine of original inerrancy, not as an apologetic artifice, but on sound theological grounds: (1) the inspiration of copyists and the perfect transmission of Scripture have not been promised by God and (2) the extraordinary quality of God's revealed Word must be guarded against arbitrary alteration. The importance of original inerrancy is not that God cannot accomplish His purpose except through a completely errorless text, but that without it we cannot consistently confess the veracity of God, be fully assured of the scriptural promise of salvation, or maintain the epistemological authority and theological axiom of *sola Scriptura* (for errors in the original, unlike those in transmission, would not be correctable in principle). We can be assured that we possess the Word of God in our present Bibles because of God's providence; He does not allow His aims in revealing Himself to be frustrated. Indeed, the results

of textual criticism confirm that we possess a biblical text that is substantially identical with the autographa. Finally, contrary to recent criticisms, the doctrine of original inerrancy (or inspiration) is not unprovable, is not undermined by the use of amanuenses by the biblical writers, and is not contravened by the New Testament use of the Septuagint as "Scripture." Therefore, the evangelical restriction of inerrancy to the original autographa is warranted, important, and defensible; further, it does not jeopardize the adequacy and authority of our present Bibles. Accordingly, the doctrine of original inerrancy can be commended to all believers who are sensitive to the authority of the Bible as the very Word of God and who wish to propagate it as such today.

## The Inerrancy of the Autographa

In addressing the household and friends of Cornelius, Peter rehearsed how the anointed, or messianic, ministry of Jesus of Nazareth eventuated in His death and resurrection (Acts 10:36-40). After the Resurrection, Christ appeared to chosen witnesses, whom He charged to preach to the people and to testify that He was ordained of God as the eschatological Judge of mankind (vv. 41-42). According to Christ Himself, all the prophets bore witness to Him, that through His name all who believe on Him should receive remission of sins (v. 43). Here we see the heart of the gospel proclamation rehearsed and the vital commission given to have it publicized abroad for the eternal well-being of men. It should be obvious that the proclamation of this message in correct form was crucial if its hearers were to escape the wrath to come and enjoy genuine remission of their sins through Christ. A different or perverted gospel was, accordingly, nothing short of anathema; the life-giving good news could not have come from man but had to have originated in the revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:6-12).

Thus Peter informs us that the preaching of the gospel (of which the spirit of Christ testified in the Old Testament) by the New Testament apostles was performed by means of the Holy Spirit sent forth from heaven (1 Peter 1:10-12). As with all genuine prophecy, this gospel proclamation did not come by the will of men, but men spoke from God, being carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). In accord with the promise of Christ, this spirit sent from heaven to inspire the preaching of the gospel guided the apostles into *all truth* (John 16:13). As the spirit of truth He would not generate error in the life-giving good news of Christ as publicized by the apostles; their message was made inerrant. Furthermore, the apostles spoke *words* taught by the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:12-13), and the Spirit speaking in them directed both *what* was said and *how* it was said (cf. Matt. 10:19-20). Therefore, according to Scripture's own witness, the verbal form and content of the apostolic publication of the gospel message should be deemed wholly true and without error.

Throughout its record the Bible presupposes its own authority. For instance, the Old Testament is often cited in the New Testament with such formulas as "God says" or "the Holy Spirit says" (as in Acts 1:16; 3:24-25; 2 Cor. 6:16). What Scripture says is identified with what God says (e.g., Gal. 3:8; Rom. 9:16). For that reason all theological arguments are settled decisively by the inherent authority signified in the formula "it stands written" (literal translation). The same authority attaches to the writings of the apostles (1 Cor. 15:1-2; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:14), since these writings are placed on a par with the Old Testament Scriptures (2 Peter 3:15-16; Rev. 1:3). Apostolic Scripture often has the common formula "it stands written" applied to it (e.g., John 20:31). Therefore the Old and New Testaments are presented in the Bible itself as the authoritative, written, Word of God.

Because of their divine origin the Scriptures are entirely trustworthy and sure (cf. 1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; Titus 3:8; Heb. 2:3; 2 Peter 1:19), so that by means of them we are able to discern between what is true and what is false (cf. 1 Thess. 5:21; 1 John 4:1). The Scriptures are the standard of trustworthiness (Luke 1:1-4) and will never ail us or bring us embarrassment (Isa. 28:16; John 19:35; 20:31; Rom. 9:33; 1 Peter 2:6; 1 John 1:1-3). Their accuracy extends to every minute detail, as our Lord said – to every “jot” and “tittle” (Matt. 5:18) – in such a way that the indestructible endurance of any minor part is coextensive with that of the whole (cf. Isa. 40:8; Matt. 24:35; 1 Peter 1:24-25). Every single word of the Bible is, by its own witness to itself, infallibly true, god’s own declaration is: “I, the LORD, speak the truth; I declare what is right” (Isa. 45:19). Accordingly, the psalmist can say, “The sum of thy word is truth” (Ps. 119:160), \*[In this chapter, Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version, unless otherwise indicated.] and the wisdom literature can counsel us, “Every word of God is tried [proven, true, flawless]” (Prov. 30:5). If our doctrinal outlook is informed by the Word of God, then, we must confess that Scripture is entirely truthful, or inerrant. The unchallengeable testimony of Jesus was, “Thy word is truth” (John 17:17).

The Westminster Confession of Faith has good warrant for calling “all the books of the Old and New Testament” in their entirety “Holy Scripture or the Word of God written” (I.2), “all which are given by inspiration of God,” who is “the author thereof,” being Himself “truth itself” (I.40). These books of the Old and New Testaments, therefore, are in their entirety “of infallible truth and divine authority” (I.5), so that “a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein” (XIV.2). According to this grand confession of the church, no error can be attributed to the Bible at any place. After all, if God sets forth false assertions in minor areas where our research can check His accuracy (such as in historical or geographical details), how do we know that He does not also err in major concerns like theology? 1[1] If we cannot believe the Lord’s Word when He speaks of earthly things, how can we believe Him when He tells us of heavenly things? (cf. John 3:12).

In this vein Archibald Alexander wrote, “And could it be shown that the evangelists had fallen into palpable mistakes in facts of minor importance, it would be impossible to demonstrate that they wrote anything by inspiration.” 2[2] Likewise Charles Hodge declared that the bible was “free from all error whether of doctrine, fact or precept”; inspiration, according to him, was “not confined to moral and religious truths, but extends to the statements of facts, whether scientific, historical, or geographical.” 3[3] Alexander, Hodge, and B. B. Warfield all firmly maintained that the Bible is “absolutely errorless” in any of the subjects it touches on in teaching – whether statements about history, natural history, ethnology, archaeology, geography, natural science, physical or historical fact, psychological or philosophical principle, or spiritual doctrine and duty. 4[4] This doctrine of scriptural inerrancy, whether presented in the pages of the Bible itself, in church confessions, or by stalwart theologians, is never an academic curiosity or aside; it goes to the very heart of the trustworthiness and truth of the life-giving message of the gospel found in God’s written Word. If the Bible is not wholly

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1[1] E. J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 88-89.

2[2] Archibald Alexander, *Evidences of the Authenticity, Inspiration, and Canonical Authority of the Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1836), p. 229.

3[3] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (1872-73; reprinted., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), pp. 152, 163.

4[4] Archibald A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, “Inspiration,” *The Presbyterian Review* 7 (April 1881), pp. 27, 236, 238.

true, then our assurance of salvation has no dependable and divine warrant; it rests rather on the minimal and fallible authority of men. Warfield saw this clearly:

The present controversy concerns something much more vital than the bare “inerrancy” of the Scriptures, whether in the copies or in the “autographs.” It concerns the trustworthiness of the Bible in its express declarations, and in the fundamental conceptions of its writers as to the course of the history of God’s dealings with his people. It concerns, in a word, the authority of the Biblical representations concerning the nature of revealed religion, and the mode and course of its revelation. The issue raised is whether we are to look upon the Bible as containing a divinely guaranteed and wholly trustworthy account of God’s redemptive revelation, and the course of his gracious dealings with his people; or as merely a mass of more or less trustworthy materials, out of which we are to sift the facts in order to put together a trustworthy account of God’s redemptive revelation and the course of his dealings with his people.<sup>5[5]</sup>

The church, following God’s Word, confesses the entire inerrancy of Scripture as a crucial and inalienable aspect of the authority of God’s revelation, by which we come to a genuine knowledge of Christ and the assured enjoyment of eternal life (cf. 2 Tim. 3:15-16).

## Inscription and Distinction

For the sake of preserving the apostolic testimony and extending the fellowship of the church around the “word of life” (1 John 1:1-4), the proclamation and teaching of the apostles has been reduced to written form. Such inscription of God’s revelation was required if the church was to teach it until the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20). Van Til points out that inscription of God’s word gives it the greatest possible permanence of form, being less liable to perversion than oral tradition would be.<sup>6[6]</sup>

The great attribute of the written word is *objectivity*. The oral word too has its measure of objectivity, but it cannot match either the flexibility or the durability of the written word. Memory is imperfect. The desire to change or pervert is ever present.<sup>7[7]</sup>

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<sup>5[5]</sup> B. B. Warfield, “The Inerrancy of the Original Autographs,” reprinted in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 2, ed. John E. Meeter (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), pp. 581-2.

<sup>6[6]</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), p. 27.

<sup>7[7]</sup> Bernard Ramm, *special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), pp. 134-135.

The drawback to having revelation in oral form (or tradition) is that it is much more subject to various kinds of corrupting influences that stem from man's imperfect abilities and sinful nature (e.g., lapses of memory and intentional distortion). To curb these forces, taught Kuyper, God cast His word into written form – thereby achieving greater durability, fixity, purity, and catholicity.<sup>8[8]</sup> A written document is capable of universal distribution through repeated copying, and yet it can be preserved in various kinds of depositories from generation to generation. As such it can function both as a fixed standard by which to test all doctrines of men and as a pure guide to the way of life.

Yet this admirable feature of inscripturation itself generates a difficulty for the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy – a difficulty that we must now face. A written word may have great advantages over oral tradition but it is not immune from what Kuyper called “the vicissitudes of time.” The spreading of God's Word by textual transmission and translation opens up the door to variance between the original form of the written word and secondary forms (copies and translations). This variance requires a refinement of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, for now we must ask what constitutes the proper object of this inerrancy that we attribute to Scripture. Does inerrancy (or infallibility, inspiration) pertain to the original writings (autographa), to copies of them (and perhaps translations), or to both?

To be sure, in answering such a question some have gone to unscholarly excess in the interest of protecting the divine authority of Scripture. Certain superstitious stories led Philo to postulate inspiration of the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. Some Roman Catholics, following the declaration of Pope Sixtus V that the Vulgate was the authentic Scripture, attributed inspiration to this translation. Some Protestants have argued for the inspired infallibility of the vowel points in the Hebrew Old Testament (e.g., the Buxtorfs and John Owen; the Formula Consensus Helvetica more cautiously spoke of the inspiration of “at least the power of the points”). The errorless transmission and preservation of the original text of Scripture has been taught by men such as Hollaz, Quenstedt, and Terretin, who failed to recognize the significance of textual variants in the copies of Scripture that have existed throughout the history of the church.<sup>9[9]</sup>

Notwithstanding such positions, the view that has persisted throughout the centuries and is common among evangelicals today is that the inerrancy (or infallibility, inspiration) of the Scriptures pertains only to the text of the original autographa. In a letter to Jerome (letter 82), Augustine said about anything he found in the biblical books that seemed contrary to the truth: “I decide that either the text is corrupt, or the translator did not follow what was really said, or that I failed to understand it.” Here the distinction between the autographa and copies of Scripture is clear, as is also the restriction of inerrancy to the former. Likewise, in his conviction that the original was free from error, Calvin

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<sup>8[8]</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), pp. 405ff.

<sup>9[9]</sup> Henry Preserved Smith, *Inspiration and Inerrancy* (Cincinnati: Robert Clark, 1893), pp. 97-98, 107-12; R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), p. 87; Jack Rogers, “The Church Doctrine of Biblical Authority,” in *Biblical Authority*, ed. Jack Rogers (Waco: Word, 1977), pp. 30, 31, 35; Clark Pinnock, “Three Views of the Bible in Contemporary Theology,” in *Biblical Authority*, ed. Rogers, p. 62; Clark Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), p. 156; Dewey M. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), pp. 163-64.

showed concern about textual corruption; see his commentaries at Hebrews 9:1 and James 4:7. 10[10] Luther labored diligently as a translator and exegete to recover the original reading of the scriptural text. 11[11] Richard Baxter said, "No error or contradiction is in it [Scripture], but what is in some copies, by failure of preservers, transcribers, printers, and translators." Warfield quotes this statement and goes on to allude to the work of other men such as John Lightfoot, Ussher and Walton, and Rutherford, illustrating how the question of restricting inspiration to the autographa was a burning question in the age of the Westminster Assembly. 12[12] He also expounded the Westminster Confession of Faith 1.8 as teaching that immediate inspiration applies only to the autographa of Scripture, not to the copies, that the original text has been providentially kept pure in the transmitted texts (but not, as Smith and Beegle contended, in every or in any one copy), 13[13] and that present translations were adequate for the needs of God's people in every age. 14[14]

For themselves, A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield asserted:

Nevertheless the historical faith of the church has always been, that all the affirmations of Scripture of all kinds . . . are without error, when the *ipsissima verba* of the original autographs are ascertained and interpreted in their natural and intended sense . . . No "error" can be asserted, therefore, which cannot be proved to have been aboriginal in the text. 15[15]

Edwin Palmer cites Kuyper and Bavinck to the same effect and he quotes Dijk as saying that the authority of the Bible "pertains always and only to the original (and not to the translation) and to the pure text that is to be found in the autographa." 16[16] Others who can be readily quoted as distinguishing between the autographa and copies of Scripture and as restricting inerrancy (or infallibility, inspiration) to the autographa include J. Gresham Machen, W. H. Griffith Thomas, James M. Gray, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Loraine Boettner, Edward J. Young, R. Surgurg, J. I. Packer, John R. W. Stott, Carl F. H. Henry, et al. 17[17] What Henry says is representative:

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10[10] Cf. John Murray, *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), pp. 27-28.

11[11] Cf. M. Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures* (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg, 1944), pp. 57-59.

12[12] Warfield, "Inerrancy of the Original Autographs," pp. 586-87.

13[13] B. B. Warfield, "The Westminster Confession and the original Autographs," in *Selected Shorter Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 591-92; Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, p. 144.

14[14] Warfield, "The Inerrancy of the original Autographs," pp. 580-82, 586-87; "The Westminster Confession and the Original Autographs," pp. 588-94.

15[15] Hodge and Warfield, "Inspiration," pp. 238, 245.

16[16] Edwin H. Palmer, Response to Editor, *The Banner*, vol. 112, no. 43 (Nov. 11, 1977): 25.

17[17] J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian Faith and the Modern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1936), pp. 38-39; W. H. Griffith Thomas, "Inspiration," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 118,

Inerrancy pertains only to the oral or written proclamation of the originally inspired prophets and apostles. Not only was their communication of the Word of God efficacious in teaching the truth of revelation, but their transmission of that Word was error-free. Inerrancy does not extend to copies, translations or versions, however.

It is evident that H. P. Smith and C. A. Briggs were quite mistaken when they alleged that the assertion of an original inerrancy for Scripture was a new doctrine generated by "Modern scholastics."<sup>18</sup>[18] Warfield's response was, as usual, appropriate:

This is a rather serious arraignment of the common sense of the whole series of preceding generations. What! Are we to believe that no man until our wonderful nineteenth century, ever had acumen enough to detect a printer's error or to realize the liability of hand-copies manuscripts to occasional corruption? Are we really to believe that the happy possessors of "the Wicked Bible" held "thou shalt commit adultery" to be as divinely "inerrant" as the genuine text of the seventh commandment – on the ground that the "inerrancy of the original autographs of the Holy Scriptures" must not be asserted "as distinguished from the Holy Scriptures which we now possess"? . . . Of course, every man of common sense from the beginning of the world has recognized the difference between the genuine text and the errors of transmission, and has attached his confidence to the former in rejection of the latter.<sup>19</sup>[19]

The time-honored and common-sense perspective among Christian believers who have considered the inescapable question raised by the inscription of God's word (viz., do inspiration, infallibility, and/or inerrancy pertain to the autographa, to copies of it, or to both?) has been that inerrancy is restricted to the original, autographical text of Scripture.

Nevertheless, this basic evangelical doctrine of Scripture has come under severe ridicule and criticism from many quarters in recent years, thus calling us to a defense of it. H. P. Smith charged that the doctrine of original inerrancy is speculative and is concerned with a text that no longer exists

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no. 469 (Jan.-Mar., 1961), p. 43; James M. Gray, "The Inspiration of the Bible," in *The Fundamentals*, vol. 2 (Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1917), p. 12; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Dallas Seminary press, 1947), p. 71; Loraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 14; E. J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth*, p. 55; R. Surburg, *How Dependable is the Bible* (Philadelphia and New York: Lippincott, 1972), p. 68; J. I. Packer, "Fundamentalism" and the Word of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), p. 90; John R. Stott, *Understanding the Bible* (Glendale: Gospel Light, 1972), p. 187; Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 2 (Waco: Word, 1976), p. 14.

<sup>18</sup>[18] Smith, *Inspiration and Inerrancy*, p. 145; C. A. Briggs, *The Bible, the Church, and the Reason* (New York: Scribner, 1892), p. 97.

<sup>19</sup>[19] Warfield, "Inerrancy of the Original Autographs," p. 585.

and cannot conceivably ever be recovered.<sup>20[20]</sup> David Hubbard reiterates that the standard evangelical view contends for the inerrancy, not of any present texts, but of the original autographs to which no generation of the church has ever had access.<sup>21[21]</sup> Accordingly, the approach to scriptural inerrancy that restricts it to the autographa is held to be trivial and without value, as charged by C. A. Briggs nearly a century ago: “We will never be able to attain the sacred writings as they gladdened the eyes of those who first saw them, and rejoiced the hearts of those who first heard them. If the external words of the original were inspired, it does not profit us. We are cut off from them forever.”<sup>22[22]</sup> The distinction between inspired or infallible autographa and uninspired or fallible copies was characterized by Brunner as useless, idolatrous, and untenable in the light of textual criticism.<sup>23[23]</sup> The distinction is irrelevant or of no practical value, he believes, since the praiseworthy quality (be it inspiration, infallibility, or inerrancy) applies to no extant text. It is absurd because it is impossible to define the character of a text that has disappeared. The originals are unimportant since we cannot completely restore them, and obviously God does not think that it is necessary for us to have them. Moreover, we can still receive spiritual blessing from errant copies, so we could as well receive such a blessing from errant originals. It turns out, so the argument goes, that restriction of inerrancy to the autographa is simply an intellectually dishonest escape from embarrassment or an apologetical “cop-out.” Such a line of reasoning is often encountered, <sup>24[24]</sup> and a large dose of sarcasm is often mixed with it.

Their [the assailants of the trustworthiness of the Scriptures] contention has ever been twofold: that God never gave an errorless Bible, and if he did, that errorless Bible is no longer in the possession of men. The air has been thick with satirical references to autographic copies which no man has ever seen, which are hopelessly lost, which can never be recovered. And the defenders of the trustworthiness of Scripture have been sarcastically asked what the use is of contending so strenuously for the plenary inspiration of autographs which have thus forever passed away.<sup>25[25]</sup>

Great mirth has been evoked in this vein over the so-called “lost Princeton Bible.” Lester DeKoster has gone to the limit of his reach in pressing sarcasm into service against those who restrict inerrancy to the autographa: nobody can use those lost autographa; the Bible on our table is not the inerrant and infallible word of God, and so today the church has no inerrant bible by which to live, and preaching is thereby made impossible because it would be founded on the uninspired word of man.<sup>26[26]</sup> It now appears that the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, which at first appeared so clearly in

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<sup>20[20]</sup> Smith, *Inspiration and Inerrancy*, p. 144.

<sup>21[21]</sup> David Hubbard, “The Current Tensions: Is There a Way Out?” in *Biblical Authority*, ed. Rogers, p. 156.

<sup>22[22]</sup> C. A. Briggs, “Critical Theories of the Sacred Scriptures in Relation to Their Inspiration,” *The Presbyterian Review*, vol. 2 (1881): 573-74.

<sup>23[23]</sup> Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946), p. 274.

<sup>24[24]</sup> Cf. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, pp. 85-86; Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, p. 81.

<sup>25[25]</sup> Warfield, “The Westminster Confession and the original Autographs,” p. 588.

<sup>26[26]</sup> Lester DeKoster, editorials in *The Banner* for August 19, 26, and September 2, 1977.



accord with the Scripture's own witness, is threatened with a necessary qualification or restriction that vitiates the significance and importance of the doctrine. What can we say in response?

In the following sections we will explore the *biblical attitude* toward autographa and copies, which should be the starting point of all genuinely Christian theological commitments. From that platform we go on to *explain* the evangelical restriction of inerrancy to the autographa, indicating that our evaluation of copies and translations is not an all-or-nothing affair. The *rationale* for the evangelical restriction is then reviewed, followed by various indications of the *importance* of this doctrine regarding Scripture. Different aspects of the *assurance* that we can have with respect to possessing God's Word today will subsequently be broached. Finally, we will conclude with an examination of some explicit *critique* of the evangelical restriction of inerrancy (or infallibility, inspiration) to the scriptural autographa. We will conclude that the doctrine of original inerrancy is both warranted and defensible, and is a doctrine to be commended to all believers who are sensitive to the authority of the Bible as the very Word of God.

## The Biblical Attitude

Scripture has scattered indications of interest in or recognition of copies and translations of God's Word in distinction from the autographical manuscripts. We can also draw useful inferences from various passages that tell us something of the scriptural attitude toward the then-extant copies and subsequent translations. What we primarily learn is that these nonautographical manuscripts were deemed adequate to perform the purposes for which God originally gave the Scriptures. What King Solomon possessed was obviously a copy of the original Mosaic law (cf. Deut. 17:8), and yet it was considered to contain, truly and genuinely, "the charge of Jehovah . . . according to that which was written in the law of Moses" (1 Kings 2:3).<sup>27[27]</sup> The book of Proverbs pauses at one point to draw clear attention to the fact that "these are more proverbs of Solomon, copied by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah" (Prov. 25:1). The copies are themselves held to be canonical and divinely authoritative. The law of God that was in the hand of Ezra was obviously a copy, but nevertheless it functioned as the authority in his ministry (Ezra 7:14). When Ezra read from this law to the people, so that divine guidance might be given for their lives, he apparently read to them by way of translation, so they could understand the sense in the Aramaic to which they had become accustomed in exile: And they read in the book, in the law of God, distinctly [with interpretation]; and they gave the sense, so that they understood the reading: (Neh. 8:8).<sup>28[28]</sup> In all of these examples the secondary text does the work of God's written Word and shares its original authority in a practical sense.

The New Testament also evidences an interest in secondary copies of God's written Word. Paul was most concerned that he be brought the "books, especially the parchments" (2 Tim. 4:13). In the practice of collecting New Testament Epistles for the various churches (cf. Col. 4:16), encouragement would naturally be given to copying the original manuscripts. There is every reason, given the examples of Jesus and the apostles, to assume that these copies were held to be profitable for teaching and for instruction in righteousness (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16b). When New Testament writers appeal to the authority of the Old Testament, they used the texts and versions that were at hand, just

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<sup>27[27]</sup> I am dependent for some of these examples on J. Barton Payne, "the Plank Bridge: Inerrancy and the biblical Autographs," *United Evangelical Action* 24 (December 1965): 16-18.

<sup>28[28]</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, trans. and ed. Jack Rogers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 217.

as we do today.<sup>29</sup>[29] Jesus preached from the existing scrolls and treated them as “Scripture” (Luke 4:16-21). The apostles used the Scriptures that were in hand for arguing (Acts 17:2) and demonstrating points (Acts 18:28). Their hearers checked the apostolic proclamation by searching the Old Testament Scriptures that they then possessed (Acts 17:11). Because their opponents shared a belief in the functional authority of the available manuscripts of the Scriptures, Jesus and the apostles confronted them on the common ground of the extant copies, without fretting about the autographa themselves.<sup>30</sup>[30] This is illustrated in the present imperative given to search the Scriptures as testifying of Christ (John 5:39) and in the rhetorical and leading questions: “Have you read . . . ?” and “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” (e.g., in Matt. 12:3, 5; 21:16, 42; Luke 10:26). It may very well be true that the “holy Scriptures” that Timothy had known from his childhood were not only copies of the Scripture, but the Septuagint translation, at that.<sup>31</sup>[31] Still they could make him “wise unto salvation.”

These illustrations show that the *message* conveyed by the words of the autographa, and not the physical page on which we find printing, is the strict object of inspiration. Therefore, because that message was reliably reflected in the copies or translations available to the biblical writers, they could be used in an authoritative and practical manner. Contrary to the extreme and unfounded inferences drawn by Beegle,<sup>32</sup>[32] the exhortation and challenges based on the copies of Scripture pertain to the conveyed *message* and tell us nothing about the extant texts per se. Much less do they demonstrate that the biblical authors made no distinction between the original text and its copies. Otherwise the unique and unalterable authority of the biblical message would not be guarded so strenuously by these same authors.

Because Christ raised no doubts about the adequacy of the Scriptures as His contemporaries knew them, we can safely assume that the first-century text of the Old Testament was a wholly adequate representation of the divine word originally given. Jesus regarded the extant copies of His day as so approximate to the originals in their message that He appealed to those copies as authoritative.<sup>33</sup>[33] The respect that Jesus and his apostles held for the extant Old Testament text is, at base, an expression of their confidence in God’s providential preservation of the copies and translations as substantially identical with the inspired originals. It is thus fallacious to argue that inerrancy was not restricted by them to the autographa and to say that their teaching about inspiration had reference to the imperfect copies in their possession.<sup>34</sup>[34]

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<sup>29</sup>[29] F. F. Bruce, “Foreword” to Beegle’s *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup>[30] Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, p. 156.

<sup>31</sup>[31] Cf. Berkeley Mickelsen, “The Bible’s Own Approach to Authority,” in *Biblical Authority*, ed. Rogers, pp. 83, 95.

<sup>32</sup>[32] Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, Chapter 7.

<sup>33</sup>[33] John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill.; InterVarsity, 1972), p. 164; Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 2, p. 14.

<sup>34</sup>[34] As suggested by Pinnock in “Three Views of the Bible in Contemporary Theology,” p. 63.

The fact is that, although present copies and translations had a practical authority and adequacy for the purposes of divine revelation, the Bible evidences a pervasive concern to *tether current copies to the autographical text*. There is, as one would expect, no explicit biblical teaching regarding the autographa and copies of them, but the point being made is still abundantly illustrated in the course of Scripture's teaching and statements. We therefore have an answer to the question of Pinnock, Is the restriction of inerrancy to the autographa strictly scriptural? And have a rebuttal to the allegation of Chapman that it is not biblical to restrict inspiration to the autographa.<sup>35[35]</sup> According to Beegle, there is no explicit teaching in the New Testament that distinguishes between autographa and copies; the original writings are not set apart in a special position, for the authors of Scripture deemed the extant errant manuscripts inspired.<sup>36[36]</sup> Our examination of the scriptural passages pertinent to this issue will undermine such claims as these.

We can begin our survey in the Old Testament, where we soon discover that:

Most of the references to inspiration that are found in the Old Testament concern the Semitic autographa. The majority relate to the biblical writers' own compositions, which they identify, not as products of divine dictation, but as the equivalent of God's own words: e.g., David, "The spirit of Jehovah spake by me" (II Samuel 23:2); Isaiah, "Seek ye out . . . (this) book of Jehovah, and read" (Isaiah 34:16); Jeremiah, "(God's) words . . . even all that is written in this book" (Jeremiah 25:13, cf. 30:2, 36:2), or perhaps even Solomon in Ecclesiastes 12:11.

Others concern writings that were still fresh enough to imply the original manuscripts either as present, e.g., Joshua's referring to Moses' writings as "the book of the law of God" (Joshua 24:26), or as immediately accessible, e.g., Joel's quoting the contemporary (?) prophecy of Obadiah 17, "as Jehovah hath said" (Joel 2:32).<sup>37[37]</sup>

The assumption throughout Scripture is that we are obliged to follow the original text of God's written Word. Present copies function authoritatively because they are viewed as reflecting the autographa correctly. This foundational perspective comes to the surface from time to time. For instance, Israel was required to do what God "commanded their fathers by Moses" (Judg. 3:4). This reference implicitly points to the original message, which came from the author himself. Isaiah was explicitly told to write, and his book was to be a witness forever (Isa. 8:1; 30:8); the autographical text was the permanent standard for the future. Daniel "understood by the books" (which we can assume to have been copies), but these very books indicate that the God-given words were "the word of Jehovah [which] came to Jeremiah" (Dan. 9:2). The perfect aspect indicates completed action with respect to the coming of the word of God to Jeremiah specifically.

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<sup>35[35]</sup> Ibid., p. 64; Sidney Chapman, "Bahnsen on inspiration," *Evangelical Quarterly*, vol. SLVII, no. 3 (July-September 1975): 167.

<sup>36[36]</sup> Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, pp. 154-55, 164-66.

<sup>37[37]</sup> Payne, "Plank Bridge," p. 17.

Likewise the New Testament assumes that correct teaching can be found in copies of Scripture then in existence because they trace back to the autographical text. Matthew 1:22 quotes Isaiah 7:14 as “spoken by the Lord through the prophet” (cf. 2:15). Jesus taught that we are to live by “every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4), thus tethering the authority of the Scriptures in hand to the original utterance given by divine inspiration. What people read as “Scripture” in the books of Moses was thought of as “spoken unto them by God” (Matt. 22:29-32; Mark 12:24-26). The inspired David himself spoke to them in the copy of the Book of Psalms that they possessed (Matt. 22:43; Mark 12:35; Luke 20:42), just as when one reads the copy of Scripture he will see that which was spoken by Daniel the prophet himself (Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14). In each case the autographical text is assumed to be present in the extant copy that is consulted. When Christ asked, “Have you not read . . . [in extant copies, no doubt]?” (Matt. 19:4; cf. v. 7), He was actually seeking what Moses himself commanded the Jews (Mark 10:3). The Mosaic words that He quoted from Genesis 2:24 were viewed by Him as fully equivalent to what “God said” as the original author of Scripture (Matt. 19:4-5). Those who possess existing scrolls “have Moses and the prophets” themselves, who, accordingly, should be heard as such (Luke 16:29).

The actual distance between the autographa and the copies can be for present purposes ignored, because the original text is thought to appear in these copies. After all, it is the things written by the prophets themselves that bind us (Luke 18:31). In expounding the extant Scriptures Christ actually expounded what the prophets had spoken and He could therefore condemn those who were slow to believe what the prophets themselves had spoken (Luke 24:25-27). In the Scriptures as they were then written, Christ’s followers could find what is fulfilled by Him, namely, all things “which were written” in all the Old Testament (Luke 24:44-46, author’s translation). The “writings” that were then in hand, and that indicted their hearers, were assumed to be identical with what Moses wrote (John 5:45-47), and the law that was cited as relevant to a current controversy was understood to be given by Moses (John 7:19; cf. v. 23).

John 10:34-36 is particularly instructive. Jesus said, “Is it not written in your law . . . ?” thereby indicating their own manuscript copies of the Old Testament. He then quotes Psalm 82:6, resting the thrust of His argument on one word in that text. The premise of His argument is that God “called them ‘gods,’ unto whom the word of God came.” That is, God called the judges “gods” who were contemporary with Asaph, the psalm writer, and they were the ones to whom the word of God came. It is thus Asaph’s original that is equated with the word of God. Jesus was able to accept, and work on the foundation of, the Jews’ belief in the authority of “their law” (copies) because He deemed these to reflect the original accurately. The “Scripture” to which He appealed in this controversy is intimately connected with what was actually said to those “to whom the word of God came.” The inscripturated word of God that originally came to the Israelites is not found written in their present-day law books. Here we find quite an explicit indication that the authority of present copies is traced to the autographa lying behind them.

The importance of the autographa for the new Testament Scriptures is already hinted at in Jesus’ promise that the Holy spirit would take His original words and bring them to the remembrance of the apostles for the sake of their writings (John 14:25-26). When the apostles cited the Old Testament in their preaching and writing, it was with the assumption that they were propounding the initially composed Scripture. Accordingly, Peter described “this Scripture” (i.e., Ps. 69:25) as that “which the Holy spirit spake before by the mouth of David” (Acts 1:16; cf. 4:25). The earlier autograph, given beforehand by the Holy Spirit, is the primary referent of his preaching from present copies of the Psalm. Similarly Paul cited Isaiah 6:9-10, saying, “Well spake the Holy spirit through Isaiah the prophet unto your fathers . . .” (Acts 28:25; cf. Rom. 3:2), and he proceeded on the understanding that his quotation was true to the original deliverance given many years previously. The citation of Jeremiah 31 in Hebrews 10 is viewed as a rendition of what the Holy Spirit originally said through the prophet (Hebrews 10:15). Indeed, the comfort that could be gained from the then-present copies of the Scriptures was tethered to “whatsoever things were written aforetime,” the original text written in former days (Romans 15:4). In a similar way, that for which Paul claimed inspiration was his

autographical text – “The things which I write unto you . . . are the commandment of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37; cf. 2:13).

Over and over again we are confronted with the obvious fact that the biblical writers made use of existing copies, with the significant assumption that their authority was tied to the original text of which the copies are a reliable reflection. It is especially important to note this fact with respect to two key verses that teach the inspiration of Scripture. In 2 Timothy 3:16 Paul stresses that all the Scriptures were God-breathed, placing obvious emphasis on their *origin*, and thus on their autographic form. The reason why the sacred writings known to Timothy (perhaps the Septuagint) could make him wise unto salvation is found in the fact that they were rooted in the original, divinely given Scripture – those writings that were the direct result of inspiration and that Paul here associated with Scripture’s original form as coming from God. Likewise, in 2 Peter 1:19-21 we are told that “we have the prophetic word” (presumably in copies) and must heed it and treat it as authoritative. Why is this so? Because men spoke from God, being “carried along” by the Holy Spirit. The sufficiency and function of the extant biblical manuscripts is not divorced from, but rather explained in terms of, the original manuscripts, which were divine products.

We have noted a long list of illustrations that point to the fact that, the adequacy of existing copies of the Bible was countenanced in terms of the autographical texts that are presumed to stand behind such copies.

The importance and criteriological authority of the autographical texts of Scripture are brought out in four specific Old Testament situations. Each shows us that the inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy of the Bible must be found in the autographical text, which is normative for God’s people and for identifying anything that would lay claim to the title of “God’s Word.”

The first known case of the need for textual restoration is related in Exodus 32 and 34. The first tablets of the law were written by God Himself (Exod. 32:15-16) but were subsequently destroyed by Moses in his anger (v. 19). God provided for the rewriting of the words of the original tablets (Exod. 34:1, 27028), and Scripture makes the point that these second tablets were written “according to the first writing” (Deut. 10:2, 4). Here is a significant model for all later copying of the biblical autographs; they should reproduce the words that were on the first tablet or page in order to preserve the full divine authority of the message they convey.

So also, in Jeremiah 36:1-32 it is said that the prophet dictated the word of God to Baruch, who wrote it in a scroll. When this scroll, with its unfavorable message, was read to King Jehoiakim, he cut it into pieces and burned it. The word of God then came to Jeremiah, instructing him to make a new copy of the Scripture, and we see quite plainly that the standard for the copy was the original text: “Take another scroll and write on it all the words that were on the first scroll” (v. 28). As common sense tells us, a reliable copy ought to reproduce the original text accurately.

The paradigmatic or criteriological nature of the autographic text of Scripture is also taught in Deuteronomy 17;18. Although the Mosaic autograph as placed by the Levites next to the ark of the covenant (Deut. 31:24-26), a copy of this law was to be written by the king in a book, “out of that which is before the priests and the Levites.” The copy would offer authoritative guidance only as it correctly reflected the original. Without studied concern for a copy that accurately transmitted the autograph,

the king could not be sure of himself in refraining from turning aside to the right or to the left from God's commandment (Deut. 17:19-20). Copies of Scripture, then, were not to deviate in the slightest from the original text.

The fourth key Old Testament situation that manifests the esteem and deference the Jews gave to the autographic text is recorded in 2 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 34, which relate the recovery of the temple copy of the book of the Law during the reign of Josiah. The existence of the book of the Law was previously known; it had been placed by the side of the ark of the covenant and used for public reading from time to time (Deut. 31:12, 24-26; 2 Chron. 35:3). However, though there were likely private copies of the Law in the hands of some priests and prophets,<sup>38[38]</sup> The official, autographical copy had been lost from sight. Chronicles indicates that Josiah had already begun to follow the law in a hazy fashion, probably according to a traditional knowledge of it (34:3-7). Subsequently the temple began to be repaired, during which time the book of the Law was found by Hilkiah, the high priest. Josiah's desire to repair the temple already demonstrated his disposition to foster the worship of Jehovah, and Hilkiah's discovery generated great excitement. In time Josiah became quite concerned about the words of "this book that is found" (2 Kings 22:13). Apparently it brought to his attention material (most likely the curse-threats of the covenant: 2 Kings 22:11, 13, 15, 18-19; cf. Deut. 28; Lev. 26) that was not found in the other available copies or traditions of the law.

What is relevant for our concern here is that this recovered Book of the Law, which corrected and supplemented Josiah's theological outlook, was, I believe, the original, officially preserved mosaic autograph.<sup>39[39]</sup> What was found was not simply "a book" (a copy of some generally known volume) but "*the* book of the law" – a manuscript somehow different from others (2 Kings 22:8). In particular, it was the book of the law "by the hand of Moses" (2 Chron. 34:14, literal translation). While the evidence is not fully decisive and the recovered book was not necessarily the autograph, the weight of evidence favors this interpretation; there is little obvious counterevidence.

This Old Testament incident magnifies the value, corrective function, and normative authority of the autographic text of Scripture over all copies or traditional understanding of what God had said. The sufficiency of a copy is proportionate to its accurate reflection of the original. Deviation from the autograph jeopardizes the profit of a copy for doctrinal instruction and for direction in righteous living.

The biblical writers clearly knew how to distinguish, then, between autographa and copies and they perceived the significance of the difference. Josiah's recovery of the autographic Scripture was a momentous occasion, not merely the addition of one more copy, among many manuscripts, to an undifferentiated repository of Bibles!

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38[38] C. F. Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of the Kings*, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 478.

39[39] Such is the view of many expositors; cf. Lange's Commentary, vol. 6; Karl Chr. W. F. Bähr, with Edwin Harwood and W. G. Sumner, *The Books of the Kings* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong and Co., 1872), book 2, p. 258; Payne, "Plank Bridge," p. 17.

There are yet other ways in which Scripture teaches or illustrates the explicitly recognized or assumed normativity of the autographa for subsequent copies. First, the Bible warns us throughout against altering the text of God's Word. According to God's command, it is not to be added to or diminished (Deut. 4:2; 12:32). Proverbs counsels, "Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar (30:6); honesty requires that one stick to the originally given message of God without supplementing it with new features. Otherwise the permanent norm of judgment could hardly be expressed in these words: "To the law and to the testimony! If they speak not according to *this word*, surely there is no morning for them" (Isa. 8:20).

The New Testament Scriptures evidence the same jealousy for the unaltered purity of the original text, as seen in the well-known warning of the book of Revelation (22:18-19). The normativity of the autographic message is the presupposition underlying the conflict with tradition pursued by Christ and the apostles (e.g., Matt. 15:6; Col. 2:8). As evidenced in Matthew 5:21ff., tradition conveyed the Old Testament text to some extent, but it was not to be allowed to *obscure* the authentic Word of God (Mark 7:1-13). Accordingly, we see Christ condemning Pharasaical teaching when it altered the text of the Old Testament Scriptures – e.g., with respect to hatred (Matt. 5:43) and with respect to divorce (Matt. 19:7). In the same vein with Old Testament warnings, Paul instructs Christians not to tamper with the Word of God (2 Cor. 4:2). The New Testament lays great stress on not accepting teachings that run counter to the apostolic message (e.g., Rom. 16:17; Gal. 1:8; 1 John 4:1-6). We find, even as we would expect, strong warning against departing from what is said in the apostolic text (2 Thess. 3:14, where the norm is "the word by this epistle"). Believers are to be on guard against what purports to be Scripture but is not. Do not be troubled, Paul says, by "an epistle as though from us" (2 Thess. 2:2). Paul usually wrote his own authentic letters by means of an amanuensis (e.g., Rom. 16:22) – an arrangement that created ripe conditions for forgery. However Paul's custom was to add his own authenticating signature to his letters, as he notes in 2 Thessalonians 3:17: "The salutation of me Paul with mine own hand, which is the token in every epistle: so I write" (cf. 1 Cor. 16:21; Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18).<sup>40</sup> Significantly Paul makes this statement in the same Epistle in which he warns against spurious apostolic epistles. Here Paul draws attention to the quite literal "autograph" as authenticating the message that is to be believed and obeyed by Christ's people!

Criteriaological textual authority, we conclude, is uniformly presented in Scripture as being the original, autographic texts of the biblical books. Copies are to be evaluated and heeded in the light of the autographa, which ought to be reflected in them. Their authority derives from the original text, whose own authority derives from God Himself.

We may now summarize the attitude that the Bible itself displays to the autographa and copies in this fashion. The authority and usefulness of extant copies and translations of the Scriptures is apparent throughout the bible. They are adequate for bringing people to a knowledge of saving truth and for directing their lives. Yet it is also evident that the use of scriptural authority derived from copies has underlying it the implicit understanding, and often explicit qualification, that these extant copies are authoritative in that, and to the extent that, they reproduce the original, autographic text.

Biblical writers understood the distinction between the original and a copy and they manifest a commitment to the criteriaological authority of the original. These two features – the adequacy of extant copies and the crucial and primal authority of the autographa – are rather nicely combined in

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<sup>40</sup>[40] Cf. Richard N. Longenecker, "Ancient Amanuenses and the Pauline Epistles," in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), pp. 288-92.

the standard formula used in the New Testament for citing Scripture to clinch an argument: “it stands written.” This form (the perfect tense) appears at least seventy-three times in the Gospels alone. It signifies that something has been established, accomplished, or completed and that it continues to be so or to have enduring effect. “It stands written” expresses the truth that what has been written in the original Scripture remains so written in the present copies. Conversely, that to which the writer appeals in the present copies of Scripture as normative is so because it is taken to be the enduring witness of the autographic text. New Testament arguments based on a phrase (as in Acts 16:13-17), a word (as in John 10:35), or even the difference between the singular and plural form of a word (as in Gal. 3:16) in the Old Testament would be completely emptied of genuine force if two things were not true: (1) that phrase, word, or form must appear in the present copies of the Old Testament, or else the argument falls to the ground with the intended opponent because it is spurious to begin with (i.e., there is no evidence to which appeal can be made against him), and (2) that phrase, word, or form must be assumed to have been present in the original text of the passage cited, or else the argument loses its authoritative foundation in the Word of God (i.e., such an element of the text would have no more authority than the word of any mere human at best and would be an embarrassing scribal error at worst). If the New Testament authors are not appealing through their extant copies of the original text, their arguments are futile.

We see, then, that the Bible demonstrates two points. First, the permanent need of God’s people for the substantial reliability of the extant biblical text is satisfied. We *can* believe our copies of Scripture and be saved without having the autographic codex, for the Bible itself indicates that copies can faithfully reflect the original text and therefore function authoritatively. Second, the paramount features and qualities of Scripture – such as inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy – are uniformly identified with God’s own original word as found in the autographic text, which alone can be identified and esteemed as God’s own word to man.<sup>41</sup>[41]

A brief postscript to this section can be added regarding the use of the Septuagint in the New Testament and the problem of New Testament quotations of the Old Testament that appear to deviate from the original. Neither one of these practices undermines our previous conclusions. The Septuagint was used to facilitate the communication of the New Testament message. It was the popular version of the day. This fact, however, does not confer inspiration on it (a view held by men such as Philo and Augustine). Even Beegle admits that if the New Testament writers considered the Septuagint inspired, it was so “in a secondary or derivative sense.”<sup>42</sup>[42] As Jerome maintained in his dispute with Augustine over this matter, only the Hebrew text was strictly inspired. The authors of the New Testament, we must assume, used the Septuagint only to the extent that this translation did not deviate essentially from the Hebrew text. Just as people can write in their own vocabularies without introducing falsehoods and can quote questionable sources without incorporating erroneous portions from them,<sup>43</sup>[43] so also the New Testament writers could use the vocabulary and text of the Septuagint without falling into error. Being carried along by the Holy spirit in their work (cf. 2 Peter 1:21) they were shielded from such error, for that spirit is the “spirit of truth” (John 16:13). Textual diversity was recognized by the New Testament writers, but it was not a source of perplexity, since they were directed by the Spirit. They could select the reading that best carried the divine

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41[41] Cf. Payne, “Plank Bridge,” p. 18.

42[42] Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, pp. 170-71, cf. p. 173.

43[43] Cf. Payne, “Plank Bridge,” p. 17.



meaning,<sup>44</sup>[44] often quoting the Septuagint as the Word of God and yet sometimes even correcting the Septuagint rendition!

A greater difficulty is found in the fact that the Septuagint is sometimes quoted in a way that initially appears to be contrary to the Hebrew text and as hardly permissible.<sup>45</sup>[45] This relates to the problem posed by many critics, that the way in which the New Testament sometimes quotes the Old Testament seems to show little concern for accurate rendering of the original.<sup>46</sup>[46] Foitzmyer says, "To modern critical scholarship their [the New Testament writers'] way of reading the Old Testament often appears quite arbitrary in that it disregards the sense and the content of the original."<sup>47</sup>[47]

This is not the place to launch into a full discussion of the well-known, difficult passages related to this issue, some of which call for further study in the light of the broader attitude that Scripture itself teaches toward the issues of inerrancy and the original text. As always, the biblical phenomena must be considered in terms of the basic and background testimony of Scripture about itself – that is, in the light of Scripture's own given presuppositions. Suffice to say here that an artificial standard of precision that would have been foreign to the culture and literary habits of the day in which Scripture was penned need not be imposed on the Bible in the name of inerrancy or of fidelity to the autographa. Methods of quotation were not as precise in that age as they are today, and there is no reason why New Testament citations had to be verbally exact. The issue is whether the meaning of the autographic text is or is not assumed to lie behind the extant texts and translations used by the New Testament writers. I have given grounds above for adopting this as the assumption of the biblical witness. In focusing on a particular (sometimes narrow, sometimes general) point or insight, New Testament quotation of the Old Testament need only embody an accuracy that suits the writer's purpose. Preachers today are not being unfaithful to Scripture when they mix passing allusion with strict quotation from the Bible, when they rearrange biblical phrases, or when they paraphrase contextual matters in getting to their specific target statement, phrase, or word. Their scriptural point can be communicated in a way that is true to the sense without being a pristine rendition of the specific text.

Therefore, the New Testament use of the Septuagint or of inexact renditions of the Old Testament does not belie the commitment of the involved writers to the criteriological authority of the autographa. The practice does, however, underline their unanxious acceptance of texts or versions that were not strictly autographic as being adequate for the practical purposes at hand in their teaching. These were adequate precisely because they could be assumed to portray the true *sense* of the original.

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<sup>44</sup>[44] See Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, p. 83.

<sup>45</sup>[45] See Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 223, 225.

<sup>46</sup>[46] See L. I. Evans, "Biblical Scholarship and Inspiration," in Smith, *Inspiration and Inerrancy*, pp. 47, 66=67; Mickelsen, "the Bible's Approach to Authority," pp. 85ff.

<sup>47</sup>[47] J. A. Fitzmyer, "The Use of Explicit Old Testament Quotations in Qumran Literature and in the New Testament," *New Testament Studies*, (1961), p. 332.

## Explanation and Rationale for the Restriction

Given the previously explored biblical attitude toward the autographa and copies of them, we can proceed to explain the sense in which evangelicals correspondingly restrict inerrancy to the scriptural autographa and offer reasons for that restriction.

There is circulating at present a rather serious misunderstanding of the evangelical restriction of inerrancy (or inspiration, infallibility) to the autographic text and of the implications of that restriction. DeKoster claims that there are only two options: either the Bible on our pulpits is the inspired Word of God, or it is the uninspired word of man. Because inspiration and inerrancy are restricted to the autographa (which are lost, and therefore not found on our pulpits), then our bibles, it is argued, must be the uninspired words of man and not the vitally needed word of God.<sup>48</sup>[48] Others have misconstrued an epistemological argument for biblical inerrancy as holding that, if the bible contains even one mistake, it cannot be believed true at any point; we cannot then rely on any part of it, and God cannot use it to communicate authoritatively to us.<sup>49</sup>[49] From this mistaken starting point the critics go on to say that the evangelical restriction of inerrancy to the autographa means that, because of errors in all present versions, our Bibles today cannot be trusted at all, cannot communicate God's word to us, and cannot be the inspired Word of God. If our present Bibles, with their errors, are not inspired, then we are left with nothing (since the autographa are lost).

Such a dilemma rests on numerous fallacies and misunderstandings. In the first place, it confuses autographic *text* (the words) with autographic *codex* (the physical document). Loss of the latter does not automatically entail loss of the former. Certain manuscripts may have decayed or been lost, but the words of these manuscripts are still with us in good copies. Second, evangelicals do not, by their commitment to inerrancy, have to commit the logical fallacy of saying that if one point in a book is mistaken, then all points in it are likewise mistaken. Third, the predicate "inerrant" (or "inspired") is not one that can be applied only in an all-or-nothing fashion. We create a false dilemma in saying that a book either is totally inspired or totally uninspired (just as it is fallacious to think a book must be either completely true or completely false). Many predicates (e.g., "bald," "warm," "fast") apply in degrees. "Inerrant" and "inspired" can be counted among them. A book may be unerring for the most part and yet be slightly flawed. It can have inspired material to some measure and uninspired material to some measure. For example, an anthology of sacred texts from world religions would be inspired to the degree that it includes selections from the Bible. This is not to say that inerrancy or inspiration as qualities admit of degrees, as though some passages of the Bible could be "more inspired" than others, or some passages of the Bible could be "more inspired" than others, or some statement with a given sense in Scripture could be a mixture of truth and error. Rather, the objects (viz., certain books) of these predicates have elements or parts to which the predicates completely apply and elements or parts to which the predicates do not apply. That baldness can be applied in degrees means that certain objects (e.g., heads) may have hairy areas and nonhairy areas, not that there is some quality that itself is a cross between hair and nonhair.

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48[48] DeKoster, editorial in *The Banner* (September 2, 1977), p. 4.

49[49] See Smith, *Inspiration and Inerrancy*, pp. 135-36, cf. pp. 62-63; Pinnock, "Three Views of the Bible in contemporary Theology," p. 65; Stephen T. Davis, *The Debate About the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), pp. 79-81; Paul Rhees, Foreword to *biblical Authority*, ed. Rogers, p. 12.

It needs to be reiterated quite unambiguously that evangelical restriction of inerrancy to the autographa (1) is a restriction to the autographic *text*, thereby guarding the uniqueness of God's verbal message<sup>50[50]</sup> and (2) does *not* imply that present Bibles, because they are not fully inerrant, fail to be the Word of God. The evangelical view does not mean that the inerrancy, or inspiration, of present Bibles is an all-or-nothing matter. My Old Cambridge edition of a Shakespearean play may contain mistaken or disputed words in comparison with the original text of Shakespeare, but that does not lead me to the extreme conclusion that the volume on my desk is not a work of Shakespeare. It *is* Shakespearean – to the degree that it reflects the author's own work, which (because of the generally accepted high degree of correlation) is a qualification that need not be explicitly and often stated. So also my American Standard Version of the Bible contains mistaken or disputed words with respect to the autographic text of Scripture, but it is still the very Word of God, inspired and inerrant – to the degree that it reflects the original work of God, which (because of the objective, universally accepted, and outstanding degree of correlation in the light of textual criticism) is a qualification that is very seldom in need of being stated.<sup>51[51]</sup> As virtually anybody would understand, a copy counts as the words of a work only to the extent that it has not altered the very words of the author of that work.<sup>52[52]</sup>

Therefore, let us clearly explain the implication of the evangelical view of inerrancy's restriction to the autographa. Francis Patton put it this way: "Just so far as our present Scripture text corresponds with the original documents is it inspired . . . . Have we a correct text? If we have not, then just in proportion to its incorrectness are we without the word of God."<sup>53[53]</sup> Many contemporary evangelicals have made the same kind of statement. Pinnock writes, "Our bibles are the Word of God to the extent that they reflect the Scripture as originally given,"<sup>54[54]</sup> and "a good copy of an original work can function like the original itself, to the extent to which it corresponds to the original and is in accord with it."<sup>55[55]</sup> In the same way translations, as observed by Henry, "may be said to be infallible only to the extent that they faithfully represent the copies available to us."<sup>56[56]</sup> Palmer accordingly answers DeKoster's false dilemma about having or not having the inerrant and inspired Word of God on his desk by pointing out that copies and translations are inspired, infallible, and inerrant to the

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50[50] See the discussion of word groups over against parchment and ink in Greg L. Bahnsen, "Autographs, Amanuenses, and Restricted Inspiration," *Evangelical Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 2 (April-June 1973): 101-3.

51[51] Cf. John Warwick Montgomery, "Biblical Inerrancy: What Is at Stake?" in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. J. W. Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), pp. 36-37.

52[52] B. B. Warfield, *An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1887), p. 3.

53[53] Francis L. Patton, *The Inspiration of the Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1869), p. 113.

54[54] Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, p. 86.

55[55] Clark H. Pinnock, *A Defense of Biblical Infallibility* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), p. 15.

56[56] Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority 2*, p. 14.

extent that they have faithfully reproduced the original text. To the extent that they add to, subtract from, or distort the original, they are not the inspired Word of God.<sup>57</sup>[57]

Is there any good reason for this point of view? What rationale can be offered by evangelicals for restricting inerrancy (inspiration, infallibility) to the biblical autographa? Critics have often assumed that inerrancy is restricted to the autographa for apologetical reasons and they have condemned this restriction as desperate weaseling and an “apologetical artifice” (to use Brunner’s words), an intellectually dishonest cop-out arising from embarrassment.<sup>58</sup>[58] Rogers attacks the evangelical restriction of inerrancy to the autographa as an attempt to secure an “unassailable apologetic stance” (which, Pinnock observes, would produce a position that is unfalsifiable yet meaningless).<sup>59</sup>[59] Such abuse is misplaced. Evangelicals appeal to the missing autographa in a limited and specific fashion, where independent evidence (quite apart from apologetical embarrassment) supports the suggestion of transcriptional error.<sup>60</sup>[60] Inerrancy critic Stephen Davis recognizes that restriction of inerrancy to the autographa is seldom a ridiculous apologetical maneuver on the part of evangelicals, because textual criticism has, for the most part, firmly established the biblical text.<sup>61</sup>[61] Since that which the apologist defends is the teaching of the autographic *text* (apart from the presence or absence of the autographical manuscripts), he can hardly be charged with tactical retreat if he holds, with Warfield, that “the autographic text of the New Testament is distinctly within reach of criticism in so immensely the greater part of the volume, that we cannot despair of restoring to ourselves and the Church of God, His book, word for word, as He gave it by inspiration to men.”<sup>62</sup>[62] The restriction of inerrancy to the autographa does not leave the evangelical with only a chimera to defend. Moreover, evangelicals such as Warfield are not so deluded as to think that recovery of the autographic text would (though impossible with absolute perfection) rid them of all biblical difficulties for which to give an answer.

That some of the difficulties and apparent discrepancies in current texts disappear on the restoration of the true text of Scripture is undoubtedly true. That all the difficulties and apparent discrepancies in

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<sup>57</sup>[57] Palmer, reply to editor, *The Banner* (November 11, 1977), p. 24. Norman Geisler and William Nix express this point of view in terms of a contrast between actual inspiration (reserved for the autographs) and virtual inspiration (applied to good copies or translations) in *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), p. 33.

<sup>58</sup>[58] E.G., Smith (and Evans), *Inspiration and Inerrancy*, pp. 63, 14; Harry R. Boer, *Above the Battle? The Bible and Its Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 84; Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, pp. 148-149; Gerstner also cites Briggs, Loetscher, and Sandeen in “Warfield’s Case for Biblical Inerrancy,” in *God’s Inerrant Word*, ed. Montgomery, pp. 136-37.

<sup>59</sup>[59] Rogers, “The Church Doctrine of Biblical Authority,” p. 39; Pinnock, “Three Views of the Bible,” p. 65.

<sup>60</sup>[60] Montgomery, “Biblical Inerrancy: What Is at Stake?” p. 36.

<sup>61</sup>[61] Davis, *The Debate About the Bible*, p. 25.

<sup>62</sup>[62] Warfield, *Introduction to Textual Criticism*, p. 15.

current texts of Scripture are matters of textual corruption, and not, rather, often of historical or other ignorance on our part, no sane man ever asserted.<sup>63</sup>[63]

Explaining evangelical restriction of inerrancy to the autographa by the supposed motivation to have an easy apologetical escape from difficulties can be safely dismissed. It simply is not so.

If evangelical rationale is not apologetical, then what is it? It is quite simply theological. God has not promised in His Word that the Scriptures would receive perfect transmission, and thus we have no ground to claim it a priori. Moreover, the inspired Word of God in the Scriptures has a uniqueness that must be guarded from distortion. Consequently we cannot be theologically blind to the significance of transmissional errors, nor can we theologically assume the absence of such errors. We are therefore theologically required to restrict inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy to the autographa.

There is nothing absurd about holding that an infallible text has been fallibly transmitted, and the fact that a document is a copy of Holy Writ does not entail that it is wholly right. Although we can agree with Beegle that there is no inherent reason why God could not have preserved from defects the scribes who copied the Bible, he is certainly mistaken to think we should assume that copies of Scripture were the result of inspiration unless the Bible explicitly teaches us that they were not.<sup>64</sup>[64] The fact is that inspiration is an extraordinary gift or predicate, which cannot be assumed to apply to just anybody. If one wishes to maintain that the scribes of the Bible were inspired in their work and automatically infallible in their results, then the burden of theological proof lies on him. As things stand in Scripture, however, inspiration refers to the original words produced under the Holy Spirit and not to the production of scribal copies.<sup>65</sup>[65] Again contrary to Beegle, the fact that the original Scripture had its origin in God does not mean that the copies, as textual copies, also have their origin in God, but that the *message* they embody traces ultimately back to some measure of God's given revelation.<sup>66</sup>[66] E. J. Young's reasoning is more cogent:

If the Scripture is "God-breathed," it naturally follows that only the original is "God-breathed." If holy men of God spoke from God as they were borne by the Holy Spirit, then only what they spoke under the spirit's bearing is inspired. It would certainly be unwarrantable to maintain that copies of what they spoke were also inspired, since these copies were not made as men were borne of the spirit. They were therefore not "God-breathed" as was the original.<sup>67</sup>[67]

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<sup>63</sup>[63] Warfield, "Inerrancy of Original Autographs," p. 584.

<sup>64</sup>[64] Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, pp. 163, 165.

<sup>65</sup>[65] Pinnock, *Defense of Biblical Infallibility*, p. 15.

<sup>66</sup>[66] Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, pp. 154, 155.

<sup>67</sup>[67] Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, pp. 56-57.

It should now appear clear that restriction of inerrancy to the autographa is based on the unwillingness of evangelicals to contend for the precise infallibility or inerrancy of the transmitted text,68[68] for Scripture nowhere gives us ground to maintain that its transmission and translation would be kept without error by God.69[69] There is no scriptural warrant for holding that God will perform the perpetual miracle of preserving His written Word from all errors in its being transcribed from one copy to another.70[70] Since the Bible does not claim that every copier, translator, typesetter, and printer will share the infallibility of the original document, Christians should not make such a claim either. The doctrine is not supported by Scripture, and Protestants are committed to the methodological principle of *sola Scriptura*. Here then is the basic rationale for restricting inerrancy to the original, prophetically and apostolically certified document of God's Word: there is biblical evidence for the inerrancy of the autographa, but not for the inerrancy of the copies; the distinction and restriction are therefore theologically warranted and necessary.71[71]

Everybody knows that no book was ever printed, much less hand-copied, into which some errors did not intrude in the process; and as we do not hold the author responsible for these in an ordinary book, neither ought we to hold God responsible for them in this extraordinary book which we call the Bible.72[72]

This quote from Warfield indicates the common-sense nature of restricting the evaluative qualities of a literary work to its autographic text. Common sense tells us that the identity of a literary text is determined by its original autograph ("the first completed, personal or approved transcription of a unique word-group composed by its author").73[73] When a slight mistake or distortion creeps into a copy of a literary work, it thereby creates a somewhat different literary text, with some degree of originality. Choosing to ignore minor changes, we can continue to label the original and the slightly distorted copy in similar fashion, but that does not mean we can afford to be indifferent to an accurate text.

What modern author would view with equanimity an edition of one of his plays that substituted several hundred words scattered here and there from the corruptions of typists, compositors, and proof-readers? . . . One can no more permit "just a little corruption" to pass unheeded in the transmission of our literary heritage than "just a little sin" was possible in Eden.74[74]

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68[68] Gertsner, "Warfield's Case for Biblical Inerrancy," p. 137.

69[69] Montgomery, "Biblical Inerrancy: What Is at Stake?" p. 35.

70[70] Patton, *Inspiration of the Scriptures*, p. 112; Gray, "Inspiration of the Bible," pp. 12-13.

71[71] Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, p. 82.

72[72] Warfield, "Inerrancy of Original Autographs," p. 582.

73[73] Cf. Bahnsen, "Autographs, Amanuenses, and Restricted Inspiration," pp. 104-5.

74[74] Fredson Bowers, *Textual and Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1966), p. 8.

The actual value of an author's literary production cannot be safely estimated if one is not sure whether the text before him represents the author's work or the "originality" of a scribe. Say you are evaluating what you take to be Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and you come across the phrase "solid flesh" in the famous line "O! that this too too solid flesh would melt" (Act I, Scene 2). On the basis of this reading you might well give a more or less favorable evaluation of this work supposedly by Shakespeare; but if you did, you would not only be embarrassed, you would actually be unfair to Shakespeare. Shakespeare wrote "sallied [i.e., sullied] flesh," despite the widespread replication of the "solid flesh" reading.<sup>75[75]</sup> Shakespeare has Hamlet reflect on the fact that his natural or inherited honor has been soiled by the taint of his mother's dishonorable blood, as the original reading indicates, thereby making quite a difference to the sense of the line. The merit or demerit of the "solid flesh" reading belongs to some copyist or editor, not to the author. Common sense keeps us from attributing secondary alterations in the text and their value (or lack of it) to the author, for he is responsible only for the autographic text of his literary work.

This principle is equally true of God's Word. What we say about it by way of evaluation should be restricted to what God actually originated in the text and should not include the "originality" of intermediate scribes. As Warfield notes, "It is *the Bible* that we declare to be 'of infallible truth' – the bible that God gave us, not the corruptions and slips which scribes and printers have given us."<sup>76[76]</sup> Absolute truth can be attributed to God's Word but not to the words that are the results of errors by scribes and printers.

The identity of the bible, or the Scriptures, then, must certainly be determined by the autographic text, and the evaluative predicate of "inerrancy" can be legitimately applied only to *that text* (regardless of how many manuscripts contain it).<sup>77[77]</sup> Where we cannot be certain that a manuscript reflects that autographic text, we must refrain from judgment and reserve the evaluation for the original.<sup>78[78]</sup> This is especially true with respect to God's word in the Scriptures, because they are uniquely the communication of God to man in human language. They have the extraordinary status of not being merely human in quality (cf. Gal. 1:12; 1 Thess. 2:13). The isolation of these writings as specially inspired is the very basis of the church's distinction between canonical and noncanonical compositions. Only what God Himself has said constitutes the standard for verifying Christian truth-claims as theologically authoritative.<sup>79[79]</sup> And for this reason the textual readings that result from scribal mistakes cannot be elevated to divinely authoritative status simply because the transferred title of "Holy Scripture" is placed over them. What constitutes God's own Word is not thus elastic and changing but, rather, unique and standardized.

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<sup>75[75]</sup> Fredson Bowers, "Hamlet's 'Sullied' or 'Solid' Flesh," *Shakespeare Survey* IX (1956): 44-48. The embarrassment that can come to a literary critic who assimilates copyist errors is illustrated by the case of Matthiessen's John Nichol's "Melville's 'Soiled' Fish of the Sea," *American Literature* XXI (1949): 338-39.

<sup>76[76]</sup> Warfield, "Inerrancy of Original Autographs," p. 582.

<sup>77[77]</sup> Bahnsen, "Autographs, Amanuenses, and Restricted Inspiration," pp. 102-3.

<sup>78[78]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>79[79]</sup> Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* 2, p. 13.

Even evangelicals who deny inerrancy must surely be sensitive to this rationale, for they too will want to protect the unique quality of God's inspired and infallible (although errant) Word. If they did not, they would be committed to the superstitious and absurd consequence that anything that is placed between the covers of a book formally labeled "The Bible" is God's inspired Word. Successive copying errors could conceivably destroy the message of God completely; would it then still qualify as "inspired"? Obviously not.

Evangelicals who believe the Scripture is not inerrant can offer no reason for thinking that copying mistakes must always be restricted to matters of history and science, while being absolutely precluded from texts touching on matters of faith and practice (the alleged exclusive domain of "infallibility" according to many theorists). The infamous "Wicked Bible" of 1631 rendered the seventh commandment as "Thou shalt commit adultery" (omitting the crucial word *not*), and for this scandalous misprint the printers were severely fined by the archbishop. Can any evangelical seriously hold that this reading is inspired and infallible? If not, then *all* evangelicals are committed in some sense to *restrict their bibliology to the autographa*. Even errancy evangelicals speak of the *unique* quality of God's written and inspired Word,<sup>80[80]</sup> admitting that although salvation and instruction can come through a less than perfect translation, "it is the word of God only to the degree that it reflects and reproduces the original text."<sup>81[81]</sup> Those who, like Davis, say that "these manuscripts [the autographs] play no particular role in my understanding of the Bible. I believe that presently existing Bibles are infallible works that constitute the word of God for all who read them"<sup>82[82]</sup> are simply being shortsighted or naïve. Restriction to the autographic text is a common-sense move made at some point by all evangelicals, for all want to guard the extraordinary quality of God's written Word.

## The Importance of the Restriction

We have now rehearsed the biblical understanding of the relation of the autographa to copies and the significance of each. We have explained the sense in which evangelicals restrict inerrancy to the autographa and the implication this has for current copies, and we have established the theological rationale for that restriction. But the question quickly arises as to whether this is not, after all, just a trivial discussion, since the autographa are beyond our reach. Piepkorn declares, "Since the original documents are inaccessible and apparently irrecoverable, the ascription of inerrancy to these documents is in the last analysis *practically* irrelevant."<sup>83[83]</sup> Evans rhetorically asks, how does it affect the value of today's errant record that the error was not there originally?<sup>84[84]</sup>

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80[80] Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration*, p. 200.

81[81] Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God*, p. 207.

82[82] Davis, *Debate About the Bible*, p. 116.

83[83] A. C. Piepkorn, "What Does 'Inerrancy' Mean?" *Concordia Theological Monthly* XXXVI (1965): 590.

84[84] Evans, "Biblical Scholarship and Inspiration," p. 62.



The direct response to this perspective is that restricting inerrancy to the autographa *enables us to consistently confess the truthfulness of God* – and that is quite important indeed! Inability to do so would be quite theologically damaging. Only with an inerrant autograph can we avoid attributing error to the God of truth. An error in the original would be attributable to God Himself, because He, in the pages of Scripture, takes responsibility for the very words of the biblical authors. Errors in copies, however, are the sole responsibility of the scribes involved, in which case God’s veracity is not impugned.

Some years ago a “liberal” theologian . . . remarked that it was a matter of small consequence whether a pair of trousers were originally perfect if they were now rent. To which the valiant and witty David James Burrell replied that it might be a matter of small consequence to the wearer of the trousers, but the tailor who made them would prefer to have it understood that they did not leave his shop that way. And then he added that, if the Most High must train among knights of the shears He might at least be regarded as the best of the guild, and One who drops no stitches and sends out no imperfect work.<sup>85[85]</sup>

If the Scriptures, like the works of Homer and others, came to us merely by God’s general providence in history, then errors in the original might make little difference to us, but inspiration is another thing altogether. “Amazing indeed is the cavalier manner in which modern theologians relegate this doctrine of an inerrant original Scripture to the limbo of the unimportant,”<sup>86[86]</sup> exclaimed Young, for the veracity of God<sup>87[87]</sup> and the perfection of the Godhead<sup>88[88]</sup> are involved in that doctrinal outlook.

He, of course, tells us that His Word is pure. If there are mistakes in that Word, however, we know better; it is not pure . . . He declares that His law is the truth. His law contains the truth, let us grant Him that, but we know that it contains error. If the autographa of Scripture are marred by flecks of mistake, God simply has not told us the truth concerning His Word. To assume that he could breathe forth a Word that contained mistakes is to say, in effect, that God Himself can make mistakes.<sup>89[89]</sup>

And the minute that we say that, we have in principle lost our ultimate foundation of theological knowledge. Our personal assurance of salvation, as objectively grounded in the Scriptures, is swept away – for God’s well-meant promises of such might still be in error.

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<sup>85[85]</sup> Gray, “Inspiration of the Bible,” p. 13.

<sup>86[86]</sup> Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>87[87]</sup> Ibid., pp. 86, 89; cf. Rene Pache, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), p. 135.

<sup>88[88]</sup> Gray, “Inspiration of the Bible,” p. 13.

<sup>89[89]</sup> Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, p. 87.

The fact that we cannot now see the inerrant autographa does not destroy the importance of the claim that they existed as such. As Van Til remarks, when one is crossing a river that has swollen to the point of placing the surface of the bridge under a few inches of water, he might not be able to see the bridge but he is very glad nonetheless that it is there!<sup>90[90]</sup> He would not think for a moment that this unseen bridge is without any significance and try to cross the river arbitrarily at just any other point. In looking at my present Bible I cannot see the autographa exactly, but I am most glad that inerrant originals undergird my walk and constitute a bridge that can bring me back to God. I would not arbitrarily try to be reunited with Him by just any other course. The value of my present Bible derives, in the long run, from its dependence on the errorless original, as is illustrated by R. Laird Harris:

Reflection will show that the doctrine of verbal inspiration is worthwhile even though the originals have perished. An illustration may be helpful. Suppose we wish to measure the length of a certain pencil. With a tape measure we measure it at 6 ½ inches. A more carefully made office ruler indicates 6 9/16 inches. Checking it with an engineer's scale, we find it to be slightly more than 6.58 inches. Careful measurement with a steel scale under laboratory conditions reveals it to be 6.577 inches. Not satisfied, we send the pencil to Washington, where master gauges indicate a length of 6.5774 inches. The master gauges themselves are checked against the standard United States yard marked on a platinum bar preserved in Washington. Now, suppose that we should read in the newspapers that a clever criminal had run off with the platinum bar and melted it down for the precious metal. As a matter of fact, this once happened to Britain's standard yard! What difference would this make to us? Very little. None of us has ever seen the platinum bar. Many of us perhaps never realized it existed. Yet we blithely use tape measures, rulers, scales, and similar measuring devices. These approximate measures derive their value from their being dependent on more accurate gauges. But even the approximate has tremendous value – if it has had a true standard behind it.<sup>91[91]</sup>

We conclude that even though we can be blessed without an errorless text and can formulate the great doctrines of the faith, the inerrant autographa are not thereby rendered unimportant, and the claim that God did not have to give the scriptural originals inerrantly is specious.<sup>92[92]</sup> God can work through our errant copies to bring us to saving faith, but that does not diminish the qualitative difference between the perfect original and imperfect copy – just as an imperfect map may bring us to our destination, but it is nevertheless qualitatively different from a strictly accurate map (e.g., in fine details).

There is tremendous importance in confessing the doctrine, and in drawing the distinction implicit in it, that inerrancy is restricted to the scriptural autographa. We can admit, with Davis, that God did not keep the copyists from error and that nevertheless the church has grown and survived

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<sup>90[90]</sup> Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (syllabus, Westminster Theological Seminary, reprinted 1966, now published by the den Dulk Christian Foundation as part of the series “In Defense of the Faith”), p. 153.

<sup>91[91]</sup> Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>92[92]</sup> Cf. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, p. 158; Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, p. 89.

with an errant text,<sup>93[93]</sup> but to infer from these facts that an inerrant autograph was not vital to God or necessary for us would be to commit the fallacy of hasty generalization. The importance of original inerrancy is that it enables us to confess consistently the truthfulness of God Himself. We thereby can avoid saying that the one who calls Himself “the Truth” made errors and was false in His statements.

However some may still ask, “If God took the trouble and deemed it crucial to secure the entire accuracy of the original text of Scripture, why did He not take greater care to preserve the copies errorless? Why did He allow it to be corrupted in transmission?”<sup>94[94]</sup> Numerous evangelicals have suggested that God has done so in order to prevent His people from falling into idolatry with respect to the errorless manuscripts.<sup>95[95]</sup> In so saying, however, they make the same mistake made by many critics of original inerrancy in regard to other points – namely, of confusing the autographic text with the autographic codex. The original manuscripts might well have perished, thereby preventing an idolatry of them, but the main question is why the *text* of the autographa has not been inerrantly preserved.<sup>96[96]</sup> Perhaps a more convincing answer would be that the need for textual criticism, due to an errant text of Scripture, would have the effect of drawing attention away from trivial details of the text (by which, e.g., it could be used as a magic amulet or cabbala) and toward its conveyed message.<sup>97[97]</sup> In the long run, however, we simply have to turn away from such questions, which presume to have an a priori idea of what to expect from God, and confess, “Why God was not pleased to preserve the text of the original copies of the Bible, we do not know.”<sup>98[98]</sup> “The secret things belong unto Jehovah our God, but the things that are revealed belong unto us” (Deut. 29:29). And God has not chosen to share with us His motivation for allowing the text of the autographa to become slightly corrupted in particular copies of the Scripture. Possession of an answer as to why God permitted this is surely not a necessary condition to holding to the restriction of inerrancy to the autographa, if the position is maintained on independently sufficient grounds.

Some evangelicals have written as though two very different kinds of restriction on the inerrancy of Scripture are equally damaging to the doctrine and are virtually on a par. Errancy evangelicals restrict the utter trustworthiness of Scripture to revelational matters that make us “wise unto salvation,” whereas inerrancy evangelicals restrict inerrancy to the autographic text. Since it is thought that these two kinds of restriction have the same practical effect, errancy evangelicals sometimes maintain that opposition from inerrancy evangelicals to their viewpoint is trivial. After all, it is alleged, the epistemological status of the two views is the same, since errors in our present copies of Scripture must be recognized, thereby jeopardizing the unchallengeable authority of these

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<sup>93[93]</sup> Davis, *Debate About the Bible*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>94[94]</sup> E.g., Pinnock, “Three Views of the Bible,” p. 66.

<sup>95[95]</sup> E.g., Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* III, p. 67; Pache, *Inspiration and Authority of Scripture*, pp. 138-39; Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, p. 186; Geisler and Nix, *General Introduction to Bible*, pp. 32-33; E. Sauer, *From Eternity to Eternity* (London: Paternoster, 1954), p. 110; Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, p. 83; Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p. 36.

<sup>96[96]</sup> Cf. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, p. 159; Davis, *Debate About the Bible*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>97[97]</sup> E.g., Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, p. 186.

<sup>98[98]</sup> Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, p. 61.

manuscripts. Careful attention to the issue, however, will show that the importance of original inerrancy is not undermined by such reasoning. If the *original* manuscripts of Scripture were errant, then we could not possibly know the *extent* of error in them. The range of possible faults is virtually unbounded, for who can say at what point an errant God stops making mistakes?99[99] Who could presume to know how to set God's "mistakes" in order? (Compare Romans 3:4; 9:20; 11:34; 1 Corinthians 2:16.) On the other hand, errors in *transmission* are, *in principle, correctable* by textual criticism. Wenham has grasped the point here:

It has been said that, since there is no need for a guaranteed inerrancy now, there is no reason to suppose that inerrancy was ever given. But the distinction between the Scripture as it was originally given and the Scripture as it is now is not mere pedantry. We must hold, on the one hand, to the absolute truth of direct divine utterance. God does not approximately speak the truth. Human expositions of what God has said, on the other hand, do approximate to truth, and one can speak meaningfully of different degrees of approximation. If the term 'essential infallibility' is applied to a divine utterance, it has no precise meaning. It is like a medicine that is known to be adulterated, but adulterated to an unknown degree. When, however, 'essential infallibility' is referred to Scriptures once inerrant but now slightly corrupt, the meaning can, within limits, be precise. We know to a close approximation the nature of the tiny textual adulterations. The bottle is, as it were, plainly labeled: "This mixture is guaranteed to contain less than 0.01% of impurities." And our Lord himself (in the case of the Old Testament) has set us an example by taking his own medicine. A man's last will and testament is not invalidated by superficial scribal errors; no more are the divine testaments in the Bible.100[100]

An inerrancy restricted to matters of faith and practice (assuming for the moment that these can be separated from historical and scientific details of God's Word) is not after all on the same epistemological footing with an inerrancy extending to everything taught in God's Word but restricted to the autographic text.

It is impossible to maintain the theological principle of *sola Scriptura* on the basis of limited inerrancy, for an errant authority – being in need of correction by some outside source – cannot serve as the only source and judge of Christian theology.101[101] The philosophical basis for certainty, Christ speaking inerrantly in the identifiable historical revelation of God's written Word, is in principle preserved by the doctrine of original inerrancy but is vitiated by a doctrine of limited inerrancy whereby God can speak mistakenly about some issues. The former view provides a starting point and final authority than is conceivably provided in pagan literature.102[102] From a theological standpoint, why

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99[99] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 88; Pache, *Inspiration and Authority of Scripture*, pp. 135-36; L. Gaussen, *The Divine Inspiration of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1941; reprint edition, 1971), pp. 159-60.

100[100] Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, p. 186.

101[101] Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, p. 74.

102[102] Cornelius Van Til, "Introduction" to B. B. Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), p. 46; Van Til, *The Doctrine of Scripture* (den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1967), p. 39; Van Til, *Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Nutley, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), pp. 34-36.

should we diligently seek the autographic text if the unerring word from God would not thereby be secured? “If error had permeated the original prophetic-apostolic verbalization of the revelation, no essential connection would exist between the recovery of any preferred text and the authentic meaning of God’s revelation.”<sup>103</sup>[103]

By way of summary, the doctrine of original inerrancy permits doubts only about the *identification* of the text – doubts that can be allayed by textual critical methods. In this case God’s Word remains innocent of error until proven guilty; that is, what I find written in my present Bible is assumed to be true unless someone has good reason to doubt the integrity of the text *qua* text. The doctrine of limited inerrancy, however, which asserts aboriginal textual errors in historical or scientific matters, elicits corrosive doubt about the *truth of God’s Word*, such that its statements cannot be fully trusted until verified or cleared of error by some final, outside authority. To put matters another way, the difference between those who maintain original inerrancy and those who hold to limited inerrancy is indicated in the divergent outcomes of textual criticism for the two. When the proper text has been identified by someone holding to original inerrancy, he has an *incontestable truth*. However, someone holding to limited inerrancy who identifies the original text has simply found something that is only *possibly* true (and thus possibly false).<sup>104</sup>[104]

We have seen, then, that the doctrine of restricting inerrancy to the biblical autographa is far from trivial or irrelevant. It has tremendous importance, not because inerrancy is necessary for God to use, and the reader to profit from a copy of Scripture but in order to maintain the veracity of God and the unchallengeable epistemological authority of our theological commitments.

## The Assurance of Possessing God’s Word

Throughout the previous discussion we have insisted on and defended the restriction of inerrancy to the autographic text of the Bible. The question might now arise as to whether we actually can be sure of possessing the genuine Word of God in our present copies and translations of the Bible. After all, the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture is reserved for the original text and applies to the current text only to the extent that it reflects the original. How can we know that our extant copies are substantially correct transcriptions of the autographa? The answer here is twofold: we know it from the providence of God and from the results of textual science.

If we do not assume that God has spoken clearly and given us an adequate means of learning what He has actually said, then the entire story of the Bible and its portrayal of the plan of God for man’s salvation makes no sense whatever. As James Orr observed, because the preservation of the text of Scripture is part of the transmission of the knowledge of God, it is reasonable to expect that God will provide for it lest the aims of His revealing Himself to men be frustrated.<sup>105</sup>[105] The

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<sup>103</sup>[103] Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* 2, p. 14; cf. Van Til, “Introduction” to *Inspiration and Authority of Bible*, p. 4.

<sup>104</sup>[104] Robert Reymond, “Preface” to Pinnock, *Defense of Biblical Infallibility*.

<sup>105</sup>[105] Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration*, pp. 155-56.

providence of God superintends matters so that copies of Scripture do not become so corrupt as to become unintelligible for God's original purposes in giving it or so corrupt as to create a major falsification of His message's text. 106[106] Scripture itself promises that God's Word will abide forever (Isa. 40:8; Matt. 5:18; 24:35; Luke 16:17; 1 Peter 1:24-25), and by His providential control God secures the fulfillment of such a promise.

John Skilton gives a helpful response to our current question:

We will grant that God's care and providence, singular though they have been, have not preserved for us any of the original manuscripts either of the Old Testament or of the New Testament. We will furthermore grant that God did not keep from error those who copied the Scriptures during the long period in which the sacred text was transmitted in copies written by hand. But we must maintain that the God who gave the Scriptures, who works all things after the counsel of his will, has exercised a remarkable care over his Word, has preserved it in all ages in a state of essential purity, and has enabled it to accomplish the purpose for which he gave it. It is inconceivable that the sovereign God who was pleased to give his Word as a vital and necessary instrument in the salvation of his people would permit his Word to become completely marred in its transmission and unable to accomplish its ordained end. Rather, as surely as that he is God, we would expect to find him exercising a singular care in the preservation of his written revelation. 107[107]

Faith in the consistency of God – His faithfulness to His own intention to make men wise unto salvation – guarantees the inference that He never permits Scripture to become so corrupted that it can no longer fulfill that end adequately. We can conclude theologically that, for all practical purposes, the text of Scripture is always sufficiently accurate not to lead us astray. 108[108] If we presuppose a sovereign God, observes Van Til, it is no longer a matter for great worry that the transmission of Scripture is not altogether accurate; God's providence provides for the essential accuracy of the Bible's copying. 109[109]

We maintain, therefore, that the Bible which we have in our hands is fully adequate to bring us to Christ, to instruct us in His doctrine, and to guide us in righteous living. It is obvious that God has done His work in and through the church for centuries, despite the presence of minor flaws in the extant copies of the Scripture. Consequently it is clear that the necessity of restricting inerrancy to the autographa is not of the necessity-for-effectiveness kind. "It does not follow . . . that only an errorless

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106[106] Cf. Kuypers, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* III, pp. 68-69; Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, p. 83.

107[107] John Skilton, "The Transmission of the Scriptures," in *The Infallible Word*, rev. ed., ed. N. B. Stonehouse and P. Woolley (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946), p. 143.

108[108] Packer, "*Fundamentalism*" and the Word of God, pp. 90-91.

109[109] Van Til, *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, p. 28. The critical implications of not presupposing God's sovereign control of all things are pressed in this regard by Van Til against those who would question original inerrancy: for instance, Beegle (cf. *Doctrine of Scripture*, pp. 72-91) and Brunner ("Introduction" to *Inspiration and Authority of Bible*, pp. 46ff.).

text can be of devotional benefit to Christians, nor do those who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture maintain such a position.”<sup>110</sup>[110] The copies we now possess are known to be accurate and sufficient in all matters except minor details.<sup>111</sup>[111] As the Westminster Confession of Faith goes on to say, having restricted immediate inspiration to the original text of Scripture, the ordinary vernacular Bibles in use among Christians are adequate for all of the purposes of the religious life and hope (1.8). We can usually ignore the distinction between the autographa and copies, being bold about the Word of God; yet when we engage in detailed study of Scripture, we must reckon with the distinction and remain teachable as to a more precise text.

The adequacy of our present copies and translations does not, of course, dismiss the need for textual criticism. “The truth and power of Scripture are not annulled by the presence of a degree of textual corruption. This fact, however, does not give grounds for complacency. An imperfect text should be replaced by a superior one.”<sup>112</sup>[112] After all, “if holy men spoke from God, as the Christian faith claims, then it is the account of their words that will concern us, and not a series of glosses interpolated by a medieval scribe.”<sup>113</sup>[113] Out of respect for God and the uniqueness of His Word, the church, as part of its stewardship of the Bible, seeks to do its best to correct the extant copies of Scripture so as to preserve the full impact of what was originally given and to be faithful in specific issues of faith and practice.<sup>114</sup>[114]

People have, as we said earlier, asked, Of what use is an inerrant original if it is totally lost from recovery? “This is the problem of textual criticism,” says Harris.<sup>115</sup>[115] It is not possible in the short space afforded here to rehearse the principles, history, and results of textual criticism.<sup>116</sup>[116] However, the outstanding quality of our existing biblical texts is well known. The original text has been transmitted to us in practically every detail, so that Frederick Kenyon could say:

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<sup>110</sup>[110] Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, p. 87.

<sup>111</sup>[111] Geisler and Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible*, p. 32.

<sup>112</sup>[112] Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, p. 85; cf. Skilton, “Transmission of the Scriptures,” p. 167.

<sup>113</sup>[113] *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>114</sup>[114] Cf. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, p. 87.

<sup>115</sup>[115] Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, p. 96.

<sup>116</sup>[116] See Skilton, “Transmission of the Scriptures;” Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, chapter 7; Geisler and Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible*, part III, for competent surveys.

The Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear or hesitation that he holds in it the true Word of God, handed down without essential loss from generation to generation, throughout the centuries. 117[117]

Textual criticism of the copies of the Scripture we possess has brought immensely comforting results to the church of Christ. Vos concludes that 'we possess the text of the Bible today in a form which is substantially identical with the autographs.' 118[118] Warfield's words also bear repeating here:

On the other hand, if we compare the present state of the New Testament text with that of any other ancient writing, we must render the opposite verdict, and declare it to be marvelously correct. Such has been the care with which the New Testament has been copied, – a care which has doubtless grown out of true reverence for its holy words, – such has been the providence of God in preserving for His Church in each and every age a competently exact text of the Scriptures, that not only is the New Testament unrivaled among ancient writings in the purity of its text as actually transmitted and kept in use, but also in the abundance of testimony which has come down to us for castigating its comparatively infrequent blemishes. The divergence of its current text from the autograph may shock a modern printer of modern books; its wonder approximation to its autograph is the undisguised envy of every modern reader of ancient books.

The great mass of the New Testament, in other words, has been transmitted to us with no, or next to no, variation; and even in the most corrupt form in which it has ever appeared, to use the oft-quoted words of Richard Bentley, "the real text of the sacred writers is competently exact; . . . nor is one article of faith or moral precept either perverted or lost . . . choose as awkwardly as you will, choose the worst by design, out of the whole lump of readings." If, then, we undertake the textual criticism of the New Testament under a sense of duty, we may bring it to a conclusion under the inspiration of hope. The autographic text of the New Testament is distinctly within the reach of criticism in so immensely the greater part of the volume, that we cannot despair of restoring to ourselves and the Church of God, His Book, word for word, as He gave it by inspiration to men. 119[119]

Elsewhere Warfield said that those who ridicule the "lost autographs" often speak as though the Bible as given by God is lost beyond recovery and that men are now limited to texts so hopelessly corrupted that it is impossible to say what was in the autographic text. Over against this absurd and extreme view Warfield maintained that "we have the autographic text" among our copies in circulation and the restoration of the original is not impossible. 120[120]

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117[117] Frederic Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, rev. (New York: Harper, 1940), p. 23.

118[118] Johannes G. Vos, "Bible," *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 1, ed. Edwin Palmer (Delaware: National Foundation of Christian Education, 1964), p. 659.

119[119] Warfield, *Introduction to Textual Criticism*, pp. 12-13, 14-15.

120[120] Warfield, "Inerrancy of Original Autographs," pp. 583-84.



The defenders of the trustworthiness of the Scriptures have constantly asserted, together, that God gave the Bible as the errorless record of his will to men, and that he has, in his superabounding grace, preserved it for them to this hour – yea, and will preserve it for them to the end of time . . . . Not only was the inspired Word, as it came from God, without error, but . . . it remains so . . . . It is as truly heresy to affirm that the inerrant Bible has been lost to men as it is to declare that there never was an inerrant Bible. 121[121]

The charge that God did not apparently deem the preservation of the original text important is pointless because, far from being hopelessly corrupt, our copies virtually supply us with the autographic text. 122[122] All the ridicule that is heaped on evangelicals about the “lost autographa” is simply vain, for we do not regard their text as lost at all! As Harris says,

To all intents and purposes we have the autographs, and thus when we say we believe in verbal inspiration of the autographs, we are not talking of something imaginary and far off but of the texts written by those inspired men and preserved for us so carefully by faithful believers of a long past age. 123[123]

The doctrine of original inerrancy, then, does not deprive believers today of the Word of God in an adequate form for all the purposes of God’s revelation to His people. Presupposing the providence of God in the preservation of the biblical text, and noting the outstanding results of the textual criticism of the Scriptures, we can have full assurance that we possess the Word of God necessary for our salvation and Christian walk. As a criticism of this evangelical doctrine, suggestions that the autographic text has been forever lost are groundless and futile. The Bibles in our hands are trustworthy renditions of God’s original message, adequate for all intents and purposes as copies and conveyors of God’s authoritative Word.

## Concluding Criticisms

Before ending our discussion, we will examine three different remaining types of direct attacks on the doctrine of restricting inerrancy to the autographic text. The first alleges that the doctrine is unprovable, the second that it cannot be consistently maintained along with other evangelical doctrines and truths about the Bible, and the third that it is simply untrue to the teaching of Scripture itself.

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121[121] Warfield, “Westminster Confession and the Original Autographs,” pp. 589, 590.

122[122] Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, pp. 56-57.

123[123] Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, p. 94.

First, there are those who would attempt to make much of the unprovable character of original inerrancy because the autographa are now gone. Since the original biblical manuscripts are not available for inspection, it is thought that taking them to have been without error is groundless speculation. After all, nobody today has actually seen these allegedly inerrant autographa. This criticism, however, misunderstands the nature and source of the doctrine of original inerrancy. It is not a doctrine derived from empirical investigation of certain written texts; it is a theological commitment rooted in the teaching of the Word of God itself. The nature of God (who is truth Himself) and the nature of the biblical books (as the very words of God) require that we view the original manuscripts, produced under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit of truth, as wholly true and without error. To the charge that the errorless autographa have not been seen we can reply that neither have errant autographa ever been seen; the view that the biblical originals contained errors is just as much divorced from direct empirical proof as the opposite view.<sup>124[124]</sup> The basic question remains biblically oriented and answered. What is the nature of Scripture as it came from the very mouth of God? Evangelicals do not believe that their answer to that question is unprovable, but rather that it is fully demonstrated from the Word of God itself.

A second direct criticism of the restriction of inspiration (and thereby inerrancy) to the autographa comes from George Mavrodes,<sup>125[125]</sup> who challenges evangelicals to be guided by the principle of *sola Scriptura* and to explicate a definition of “autograph” that applies to all of the biblical books and does not deny the use of uninspired amanuenses in the production of those autographic manuscripts<sup>126[126]</sup> (thus discounting the notion of a literally handwritten copy by the author).<sup>127[127]</sup> Moreover, the view must not arbitrarily restrict inspiration to the manuscripts produced by such amanuenses.

I have responded to this challenge in the same journal,<sup>128[128]</sup> arguing that inspiration is not arbitrarily, but rather practically, restricted to the autographic text because we cannot be sure – without the actual autographa to use for comparison – that copies that are prone to error (since God has not promised inerrant copying of His Word) will be strictly accurate. In saying this I understood an autograph to be the first completed, personal, or approved transcription of a unique word-group composed by its author. In that sense we can see that every biblical book had an autograph, and we can accommodate the fact that amanuenses were used in their production, without attributing inspiration to the amanuenses. The fact that the *finished product* is designated “God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16) guarantees inerrant copying by the amanuensis without placing him in the same category as the author, who was moved by the Holy spirit (cf. 2 Peter 1:21). Accordingly, the restriction of inspiration to the autographic text can be maintained consistently, along with important theological

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<sup>124[124]</sup> Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, p. 82; Pinnock, *Defense of Biblical Infallibility*, p. 15; Geisler and Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible*, p. 32; Lindsell, *Battle for the Bible*, p. 27; Lindsell, *God’s Incomparable Word* (Wheaton: Victor, 1977), p. 25.

<sup>125[125]</sup> George Mavrodes, “The Inspiration of Autographs,” *Evangelical Quarterly*, vol. 61, no. 1 (1969): 19-29.

<sup>126[126]</sup> Cf. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, pp. 152, 160; Smith, *Inspiration and Inerrancy*, p. 122.

<sup>127[127]</sup> Cf. Bruce, “Foreword” to *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>128[128]</sup> Bahnsen, “Autographs, Amanuenses, and Restricted Inspiration,” pp.100-110.

principles (such as *sola Scriptura*) and with obvious facts about the Bible (such as the use of amanuenses in its production).<sup>129</sup>[129]

In response to my article, Sidney Chapman took another tack in criticizing the restriction of inspiration to the autographa.<sup>130</sup>[130] He ends up contending for the implausible thesis that the Septuagint was inspired, arguing simply that, since “all Scripture is inspired” (2 Tim. 3:16) and Paul treated a virtual quote from the Septuagint as “Scripture” (in Rom. 4:3), therefore the Septuagint is inspired.<sup>131</sup>[131] Chapman, however, falls into various logical fallacies in his argument. First, there is an obvious equivocation on the word *Scripture* as it is found in the two different texts cited. In Romans 4:3 Paul is simply interested in the sense or meaning of the scriptural teaching of the Old Testament at Genesis 15:6. This teaching can be conveyed by any accurate copy or translation, and, in view of his audience, Paul readily used the available Septuagint version. In 2 Timothy 3:16, however, Paul is reflecting on the specific Scripture as it originated from God, and thus on the autographa alone (or identical texts in subsequent manuscripts).<sup>132</sup>[132] Thus the Septuagintal reading can be called “Scripture” in virtue of its expressing the sense of the original, whereas the autographa is strictly and literally “Scripture” in and of itself. The fact that I can casually call my American Standard Version the “Scripture” (because I assume its essential accuracy in conveying the original) can hardly be grounds for concluding that I do not distinguish between this English translation and the Hebrew-Greek original, or that I do not differentiate between the autographa and its copies.

Second, Chapman needs to take account of the fact that Paul does not directly state that the Septuagint or any part of it is in fact “Scripture.” He does not even mention the Septuagint as such. Moreover, Paul does not illustrate or imply that the Septuagint is “Scripture” in the same sense as 2 Timothy 3:16, for his reading is not strictly identical with the Septuagintal word-group or text.

Third, even if the Septuagint reading at this point were “Scripture” in the full sense (and not simply *scriptural*), one could confer the same status on *all* of the Septuagint texts only by the fallacy of composition or hasty generalization. Therefore, we must conclude that Romans 4:3 does not teach or illustrate the inspiration of the Septuagint as a version. Chapman has not presented a successful counterexample to the thesis that inspiration is restricted to the autographic text of Scripture.

Chapman’s second line of argument against the restriction of inspiration to the autographa states that this restriction would also have to restrict the *profitableness* of Scripture (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16) to the autographa, in which case our present translations would not benefit us for doctrine and instruction in righteousness. However, this line of thought does not take account of the facts that (1) a present-day translation can be scriptural in its thrust as long as it conveys the original sense of God’s Word;

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<sup>129</sup>[129] Cf. Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, p. 83; Longenecker, “Ancient Amanuenses and the Pauline Epistles,” p. 296; Warfield, *Limited Inspiration* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d.), p. 18-19.

<sup>130</sup>[130] Sidney Chapman, “Bahnsen on Inspiration,” pp. 16267.

<sup>131</sup>[131] Cf. Davis, *Debate About the Bible*, pp. 64-65. Beegle uses a similar argument from linguistic labels to conclude that the Septuagint copies in the NT age were inspired; see Payne, “Plank Bridge,” p. 17.

<sup>132</sup>[132] I argue this on pp. 102-3 of my article “Autographs” but Chapman confuses the argument about the original *text* with another one about the original *manuscripts*. A rebuttal to Chapman’s critique of elements of my own argument is not relevant here, although significant misunderstandings of that argument and fallacious attempts to undermine it would be noteworthy.

(2) because the predicates “profitable” and “inspired” are not mutually implicative, a present translation can be profitable because it conveys God’s Word and still not be an inspired text as such; and (3) the inspired and/or profitable quality of a copy or translation of the Scriptures can be applied by degrees (as was explained earlier in this chapter). Therefore, the fact that inspiration or inerrancy is restricted to the autographa need not deprive our present copies and translations of genuine profit to us in our Christian experience.

By way of summary, the present study has maintained that, while the Bible teaches its own inerrancy, the inscription and copying of God’s Word requires us to identify the specific and proper object of inerrancy as the text of the original autographa. This time-honored, common-sense view of evangelicals has been criticized and ridiculed since the days of the modernist controversy over Scripture. Nevertheless, according to the attitude of the biblical writers, who could and did distinguish copies from the autographa, copies of the Bible serve the purposes of revelation and function with authority only because they are assumed to be tethered to the autographic text and its criteriological authority. The evangelical doctrine pertains to the autographic text, not the autographic codex, and maintains that present copies and translations are inerrant to the extent that they accurately reflect the biblical originals; thus, the inspiration and inerrancy of present Bibles is not an all-or-nothing matter. Evangelicals maintain the doctrine of original inerrancy, not as an apologetical artifice, but on the theological grounds that: (1) the inspiration of copyists and the perfect transmission of Scripture have not been promised by God, and (2) the extraordinary quality of God’s revealed Word must be guarded against arbitrary alteration. The importance of original inerrancy is not that God cannot accomplish His purpose except through a completely errorless text, but that without it we cannot consistently confess His veracity, be fully assured of the scriptural promise of salvation, or maintain the epistemological authority and theological axiom of *sola Scriptura* (since errors in the original, unlike those in transmission, would not be correctable in principle). We can be assured that we possess the Word of God in our present Bible because of God’s providence; He does not allow His aims in revealing Himself to be frustrated. Indeed, the results of textual criticism confirm that we possess a biblical text that is substantially identical with the autographa.

Finally, contrary to recent criticisms, the doctrine of original inerrancy (or inspiration) is not unprovable, is not undermined by the use of amanuenses by the biblical writers, and is not contravened by the New Testament use of the Septuagint as “Scripture.” Therefore, the evangelical restriction of inerrancy to the original autographa is warranted, important, and defensible. Further, it does not jeopardize the adequacy and authority of our present Bibles. Accordingly, the doctrine of original inerrancy can be commended to all believers who are sensitive to the authority of the Bible as the very Word of God and who wish to propagate it as such today.

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