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The Question of Revelation Through Sacred Scripture

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ABSTRACT: This paper provides a critical examination of the concept of divine revelation through sacred scripture, focusing primarily on the Christian Bible. It addresses the fundamental question of whether the universe possesses an overall purpose and how various religious traditions, particularly Christianity, claim that God provides a special revelation to interpret religious experiences. The analysis begins by exploring theories that assert the Bible's infallibility and inerrancy, namely the **Perfect Wording Theory**, which posits that every word is divinely intended, and the **Perfect Meaning Theory**, which allows for stylistic variation while maintaining the inerrancy of the core message. Subsequently, the paper investigates alternative perspectives that concede the presence of errors in the scripture. The **Essential Truth Theory** is presented as a view that, while acknowledging minor inaccuracies, upholds the Bible's trustworthiness on essential matters of faith and salvation. The discussion then moves to more interpretive and existential approaches, including the **Key Images Theory** and the **Sacred Encounter Theory**, the latter heavily influenced by Rudolf Bultmann's program of "demythologizing." This theory views the Bible not as a repository of historical facts but as a medium for a personal encounter with the divine. Ultimately, the paper concludes by

positioning the Bible as a "seedbed of interpretations"—a complex collection of human documents that should be subject to critical inquiry rather than being accepted as a supernaturally infallible text.

Keywords: *Biblical Inspiration, Divine Revelation, Infallibility, Inerrancy, Perfect Wording Theory, Essential Truth Theory, Sacred Encounter Theory, Rudolf Bultmann, Demythologizing, Hermeneutics, Theology.*

INTRODUCTION

DOES THE UNIVERSE HAVE OVERALL PURPOSE AND DESIGN?

In Chapter I you saw that experiences that are taken to be religious have to, be interpreted if they are to have any cognitive meaning. One of the knotty problems with "religious experience" is the fact that there are so many different interpretations. In the attempt to cut this knot, various traditional religions assert that God reveals in a special way what the religious experience means. Or to state the matter somewhat differently, they claim that God has provided a special revelation that informs people regarding the proper way to relate both to him and to their fellow men. Of course, this claim that there is special revelation recorded in Scripture is itself an interpretation, hypothesis, or conjecture. Whether it is a warranted conjecture or assumption is a matter of dispute.

In this chapter you will be introduced to various views of the inspiration of the Bible. As you know, various traditional religions have reached the conclusion that there is a God who has provided them with a set of written documents that -they take to be holy Scripture. Inasmuch as we will not be able to examine all these various Scriptures, I have chosen to deal with the claim that Christians make that God inspired the Bible to be written and that he preserved it as a written record of his self-revelation. The Jews had earlier made this claim for the Hebrew Bible, which the Christians call the Old Testament. Christians add the New Testament as the final books of the Bible. Followers of the Islamic faith regard the Old Testament, the New Testament, and especially the Qur'an as divine revelation. Those who follow the Mormon faith accept the Old Testament and New Testament as holy Scripture. In

addition, they believe that God has revealed himself in the Book of Mormon, but not in the Qur'an.

In this chapter the question to be dealt with is this: "What do Christians mean when they say that the Bible—the Old and New Testaments—was inspired by God and given as trustworthy revelation of his will?" In dealing with this question about the Bible you will be able to take much of what you learn and apply it in understanding the claims about various other Scriptures in both the East and the West.

We turn now to explore some of the more explicit views pertaining to the Bible as "inspired revelation". The first two views take the Bible to be infallible and inerrant in the original documents or autographs. To say that Scripture is infallible means that it has the "quality of never deceiving or misleading and so [is] 'wholly trustworthy and reliable'. Thus, an infallible and inerrant Bible would be one in which "all its teachings are the utterance of God". This is not to say that the Bible sefs forth opinions on every topic. Rather, "it claims in the broadest terms to teach all things necessary for salvation". Those affirming that the original documents of the Bible are inherently inspired are making a very bold claim: namely, that every writer in the Bible is considered "free of logical, historical, psychological, theological, and philosophical mistakes".

THE BIBLE AS A PERFECTLY WORDED DOCUMENT

The Infallible Terms of Salvation. A great number of Christians believe that the human race is in deep trouble. The most desperate need that people have is to gain salvation. The whole human population is declared to be suffering from "soul-sorrow". In other words, everyone is "lost" and in need of direction by which he may be reconciled to God and gain entrance to heaven. There are all sorts of opinions as to how to gain this "salvation" and "reconciliation," but numerous Christians believe that God has graciously revealed "the exact terms which must be met for our own reconciliation". However, if these terms are not perfectly spelled out and are not written down infallibly (i.e., without error), then people might be misled as to what they are.

Those who regard the Bible as a perfectly worded document believe that because God is perfect, he would certainly not set forth his divine document in an imperfect manner. Hence, they regard every word in the Bible to be exactly and precisely as God intended it. This means that there is nothing trivial or incidental in the Bible. Every syllable is as God designed it. To be sure, those holding to the Perfect Wording theory agree that God used human prophets, apostles, and the like to write the Bible; but God, they insist, was the real author. He simply selected various individuals and controlled them in such a way as to obtain his desired end, namely, a Scripture that reveals inherently the road to salvation and the truths necessary for the development of Christian doctrines. It turns out that these doctrines have to do with a great number of topics, ranging all the way from the nature of God and Satan to the outline of things to take place at the end of the world.

Not One Error Can Be Admitted. Those defending the Perfect Wording theory of the Bible contend that if Christians admit that the Bible asserts even one false statement, then they are faced with the possibility that the Bible asserts *numerous* false statements. Indeed, where would the line be drawn between truth and falsity? To be sure, there are false statements throughout the Bible, and the Perfect Wording theorists acknowledge this fact; But what they deny is that these statements are *asserted* as true. They are, rather, simply recorded and *exposed* as examples of false statements. The point that the Perfect Wording theorists wish to emphasize, however, is this: "If the original manuscript [of the Bible] already had mistaken in it, who can say now how far this element of error goes, and how are we to get the errors sorted out? We would be in complete confusion".

The Perfect Wording theorists utilize many analogies in order to get their point across that a perfect God would provide a revelation free of all errors and mistakes in the original documents or autographs written down by the prophets and apostles. What could be said of an expert who engineers the construction of a great dam whose very foundation has a few small cracks in it? The trouble with small cracks in a dam is that they may become major cracks. A Scripture that has some mistakes in it is compared to a dam with cracks or to a scale that is inaccurate. Or it is like a legal contract that omits a few words here and there and even contains improper wording.

A God who permits errors to creep into his Scripture is regarded as being a thousand times more irresponsible than, say, a man who, desiring to control the size of his family, neglects now and then to use the proper contraceptive device, or a woman who is negligent about taking her pill.

God's Honor and Human Dignity Are at Stake. God's honor is declared by the Perfect Wording theorists to be at stake. They insist that a perfect God simply would not reveal himself in a Scripture containing errors. "We/believe," writes a Perfect Wording theorist, "that it is in keeping... with the nature and honor of God... that in inspiring each sacred author, He jealously guarded His original manuscript to preserve it from error". Not only is God's honor thought to be at stake, but man's dignity also. In the words of one defender of the Perfect Wording theory,

God has revealed to us his word. What are we to think of him if this word is glutted by little annoying inaccuracies? Why could not the omnipotent and omniscient God have taken the trouble to give us a Word that was free from error? Was it not a somewhat discourteous thing for him to have breathed forth from his mouth a message filled with mistakes? Of course, it was discourteous; it was downright rude and insulting. The present writer finds it difficult to have much respect for such a God.

Now, a person tends to feel insulted if he has certain expectations, the satisfaction of which he thinks he has a right to. Indeed, in the above quotation the writer seems to *demand* that God give him a Scripture free of all errors. Of course, demands, rights, and expectations do not exist in the abstract. They develop according to certain concrete conditions and circumstances. We will postpone discussing the question as to whether the circumstances of life can justify the Perfect Wording theorists' demand for an infallible Scripture whose very wording is precisely as God would desire it.

Some critics of this theory might say that God simply could not give this kind of infallible revelation to finite and fallible human beings—whether they be prophets like Jeremiah or apostles like Paul. Once God created human beings to be finite, he ruled out the possibility of giving them infallible revelations free of all error. God could no more give us an infallible Scripture than he could make a circle into a

square without simply eliminating the circle. Some Christians try to meet the criticism by saying that God could give infallible information to fallible and finite human beings without overriding the unique personality of each individual person who receives God's special revelation. So, we turn now to consider the theory that allows for more flexibility in the process of divine inspiration. Most Christians who hold that the Bible is God's infallibly revealed revelation seem to move back and forth between the view presented above and the one that we are now going to explore.

THE BIBLE AS A PERFECTLY REVEALED MEANING

One Message with Many Arrangements. It is important to keep in mind that those who hold the Bible to be infallible revelation presuppose not only that there is a God interested in revealing an infallible document, but also that there is a crucial *need* for such a document. The assumption is that people are on their way to hell and therefore need some kind of information that will show them how to avoid eternal damnation. Of course, if this assumption of everlasting torment is not warranted, then the need for an infallible Scripture is reduced considerably. Indeed, it is certain portions of the Bible itself which assert that people are going to hell. It is the Bible which informs them that they absolutely need divine special revelation to save them from everlasting torment. We will consider later whether there is any good reason to regard as trustworthy those parts of the Bible that speak of hell. Indeed, we will consider whether—or to what extent—-we can regard as trustworthy any of the Bible's claims regarding various religious topics.

More than the Perfect Wording theorists, those Christians who affirm what may be called the *Perfect Meaning theory* are prepared to say that the wording in the Bible might have been somewhat different from what it in fact is. What is important, they claim, is that God's meaning or message did come across without error. They believe that there was some flexibility in the way the message was set forth. This Perfect Meaning theory tries to make greater room for the personal background and traits of the individual writers of the Bible. The theme of Salvation as well as doctrinal and moral teaching are regarded as expressible in a great variety of forms and styles. A piece of music may be set forth in a number of different arrangements, according to

the unique personalities of the arrangers. According to proponents of the Perfect Meaning theory, if one musical theme can have many arrangements, then God's message can have been arranged in a variety of ways. Indeed, some of the writers of the Bible apparently used bad grammar, or less-than-elegant sentence structure, or even imperfect literary style. Nevertheless, according to this view, the message came through without error or loss of meaning. The gospel of salvation and the great theological doctrines shine forth despite the weakness of the human writers. God is thought to have used imperfect human beings as instruments to produce a Scripture free of error and sufficient to inform the human race of salvation, morality, and theological truths. This view is sometimes called the "Dynamic theory" of inspiration, because it emphasizes that the Biblical writers were able to write according to their own special talents and weaknesses. But the theory does "not mean to say [of the Bible] that there is falsity or error here". In a number of ways a woman may tell a man that she loves him. Similarly, those holding to the Perfect Meaning theory reason that God could have revealed his message in a variety of literary arrangements and forms so long as the essential message was not lost.

Emphasis on the Whole of Scripture. No musical composition or literary work can be judged by isolated passages taken out of context. The composition must be judged as a whole. Similarly, the Perfect Meaning theorists insist that the Bible is infallible as a whole work. But the Perfect Wording theorists, while agreeing with this point, are eager to add that a perfect whole cannot be made of imperfect parts. A chain can be no stronger than its links, a building no stronger than the bricks and beams that compose it.

Perhaps these two views of the inspiration of the Scriptures differ mostly on the weight to be given to the various parts of the Bible. Both regard the Bible as infallible, but not exactly in the same way. Because of its emphasis upon every word in the Bible being exactly as God intended it to be, the Perfect Wording theory tends to draw more detailed revelations from the Bible than does the Perfect Meaning theory. While the former theory sees the Bible as a whole, it also tends to see within this larger whole a number of smaller systems of revelation. Everything in the Bible must have some very significant truth. As might have been expected, great

theological disputes have erupted among those who strongly emphasize the Perfect Wording theory. After all, if God himself is the author of every single word, then it is important not to overlook the significance of each word.

By contrast, the Perfect Meaning theory stresses that the Bible has a few major and crucial truths to get across. Everything else in the Bible is subservient to these major truths. Hence, it is not so important to worry about certain minute details, which may be simply the *human* aspects of the Bible. To worry about such insignificant details is to fail to emphasize the broader and loftier message of God that comes through human means. "Cultic mentality" is the title that one Christian writer attaches to those who he thinks emphasize the minor parts of the Bible at the expense of the major infallible message.

The Debate regarding the Nature of the Unity. It is one thing to claim that the Bible is infallible revelation. But it is another to know how to interpret it infallibly. Protestant Christians do not process to have infallible interpretation, although it is fair to say that many of them seem to take for granted that in practice their own interpretations are mostly infallible. Even among those Christians, whether Protestant or Catholic, who emphasize the overall unity of the Bible and underplay the sub-unities within the totality—even among them, a considerable amount of debate continues regarding what exactly the unifying message of the Bible is. They agree that whatever it is, it is infallibly revealed in the Bible, but they cannot agree as to what it is.

The reason for regarding the Bible as an organic unity is that it is supposed to reflect the harmonious mind of God, God's mind is thought to be a perfect and rich organic unity. The apostle Paul is thought to have identified the Old Testament with God. "Paul not only personifies the Old Testament but he hypostatizes it". Unfortunately, even if the "mind" of the Bible is taken to be one infallible whole or unity, the fact remains that there are all sorts of claims as to what exactly the unity is. Can all the sub-unities be worked together into one overriding unity? Various sub-unities have been set forth—for example, structural unity as well as historic, dispensational, prophetic, personal, symbolic, and organic unities.

If we take one of these sub-unities and examine it, we find that it is in fact a source of great *disharmony and disunity* among Christians. The "dispensational" unity has created enormous conflicts among and within Christian churches. In 1913 one of the foremost dispensationalists had worked out an ingenious scheme of what he took to be the Bible's clear teaching regarding what would happen near the "end of time". Fifteen years later, this same author repudiated all his former dispensational views. He is quoted by a later Christian as saying:

It is mortifying to remember that I not only held and taught these novelties myself, but that I even enjoyed a complacent sense of superiority because thereof, and regarded with feelings of pity and contempt those who had not received the "new light".

This is certainly not to criticize Christians or anyone else for changing their minds; changing one's mind is a mark of intellectual growth. The point here is that among those Christians who speak glowingly about "infallible revelation" and the "unity of the Bible" we may discover a large amount of disunity and conflict of opinions, Such disappointment is to be expected among Freudians, humanists, and others, for they boast of no infallible Scripture to guide them. But Christians are as divided among themselves as if they had no infallible Scripture which raises the possibility that perhaps they do not.

There is a multiplicity of "unities" that Christians see in the Bible. In addition to the structural, historic, dispensational, prophetic, personal, symbolic, and organic unities mentioned above, the following may be added: "the mediational unity of Scripture" (i.e., Christ); "thematic unity" (including such motifs as man, creation, providence, sin, etc.); "conceptual unity"; and "formal unity". All these unities presuppose the "unity of the life of God," which the Bible is said to reveal to some extent.

Why Are Christians Concerned about the Nature of the Unity of Scripture? It is crucial for many Christians to identify the highest unifying theme of the Bible, because that unifying theme will touch the Bible's every verse and chapter. That unifying theme will be the tinted glasses through which each passage is read and understood. One set of glasses will see the people of Israel as God's select people

serving the cause of Jesus Christ, whom present-day Jews do not even regard as their Messiah. The sensuous poetry of the Song of Songs will be seen, not as the utterances of human beings making love to one another, but as an allegory of the spiritual relationship between Christ and his church.

The gist of the issue is this: even among those who take the Bible to be an infallible message, great disagreement exists as to how to *rank* the various parts and themes of the Bible. All Christians inevitably give greater weight to some parts of Scripture than to others. But by what higher principle or standard is this done? Usually the answer given is that either the Bible itself indicates how to rank its passages or the Holy Spirit gives directions to the sincere believer. Unfortunately, those who *differ* in the weight that they give to the various parts of the Bible are quite eager to claim, nevertheless, that they are following the directions of the Bible and the Holy Spirit. There seems to be no way to resolve these controversies in any infallible way, which means that the thesis of infallibility has been made somewhat ineffective. Perhaps, then, infallibility is something that many people desire to have but never seem able to realize—not even in a book that they take to be a repository of divine truths, propositions, and utterances.

THE BIBLE AS A REPOSITORY OF ESSENTIAL REVELATION

Defining the Issue of Infallibility. Desiring to disentangle themselves from much of what they regard as secondary and tertiary aspects of the Bible, an increasing number of Christians seem to be moving toward a view that may be characterized as the *Essential Truth theory*. These Christians believe it is disastrous to try to defend as true those parts of the Bible that are clearly in error. In other Words, the notion that the Bible is infallible or free of all errors is being given up by a number of Christians. The previous two theories (i.e., the Perfect Wording and Perfect Meaning theories) affirm that the Bible is infallible. They differ only in what respect it is infallible. But the Essential Truth theory concedes that there are errors in the Bible. Furthermore, those advancing this Essential Truth theory believe that it is also a waste of time and effort to try to obtain divine revelation from some Biblical passages. If no divine revelation is there, then it is fruitless to "read it into" certain parts of the Scripture.

You recall that those adhering either to the Perfect Wording theory or to the Perfect Meaning theory insist that the Bible is infallible and inerrant. Together they strongly attack any theory that—like the Essential Truth theory—professes to give up the notion of the Bible's complete infallibility. The Essential Truth theorists and other theorists are just as forceful in attacking the assumption of the Bible's total infallibility. The question for us is, "What is this tense debate really about?"

First, something ought to be said about the word 'theorists'. There are still those in every religion who insist that they do not waste time with theories. What they want to do is to "give witness to the truth". Or, in the case of some Zen Buddhists, they want to speak simply of "facts" and not theories. What this attitude fails to appreciate is the point that every statement about facts or truth is made against a background of theory. Every claim to be experiencing God (or whatever) is riddled through with theoretical assumptions. This in itself does not make the assumptions necessarily wrong, but neither are they necessarily right. The point is that all claims, whether we call them opinions or basic convictions, are one and all convictions to be tested. This includes the conjecture just stated.

The second point about the debate is this: the contestants are trying to resolve what, to them, is a critical problem loaded with profound consequences for their lives. The problem may be stated in this way: On the one hand, if the Bible contains errors regarding some things, then how can Christians trust it to give them divine revelation regarding salvation? Perhaps the Bible is in error on this topic also. On the other hand, there do seem to be some errors that threaten the claim that the Bible is the *infallible* revelation of God. Honesty would demand that these errors be admitted. The infallibilists usually respond to this dilemma in one of two ways. Either they assert that the errors have all been exposed as not errors at all, or they believe that the *apparent* errors will *eventually* be shown not to be errors. Speaking for the second alternative, one infallibilist states, "We walk by faith and not by sight". But this is simply a way of saying that he *strongly hopes* that his belief in infallibility will pay off.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Pope Pius IX arranged to get himself and every other pope declared infallible when they were speaking officially (or ex

cathedra) on matters of faith and morals. What was overlooked is the fact that no way could be found to guarantee the infallibility of the procedures for setting up this arrangement. The quest for infallibility in theology may be compared to the fruitless quest for a perpetual motion machine. There seems always to be a gap in the armor, an Achilles' heel. Pope John XXIII seemed somewhat embarrassed about the doctrine of papal infallibility. He is quoted by a leading Roman Catholic theologian as having said the following: "I'm infallible only when I speak ex cathedra. But I'll never speak ex cathedra". Apparently, Proponents of the Essential Truth theory as well as a number other Christians feel equally uncomfortable in asserting the Bible to be infallible and inerrant.

Clarifying the Essential Truth Thesis. Professor Dewey M. Beegle, a modern biblical scholar and leading spokesman of the Essential Truth theory, writes: "In all essential matters of faith and practice . . . Scripture is authentic, accurate, and trustworthy". Whenever something is said to be "essential," the question implied is, "Essential to what?" The Essential Truth theory of inspiration says that the Bible provides "sufficient truth" for directing people toward salvation and toward loves of God and fellow human beings. Combined with work of the Holy Spirit, the Bible is said to be sufficient to "achieve God's purpose for each generation as well as for extrapolating into the future". Of course, this presupposes that we can know what God's purpose is. The Essential Truth theorists claim that God's purpose is revealed in the Bible. But the infallibilists ask the following embarrassing question: If the Bible contains errors regarding certain historical and other details, how can anyone certain that it does not contain errors, regarding either what God's purposes are or what is the true way to fulfill those purposes?

Partial Infallibilism Implied. The answer that the Essential Truth theorists finally provide is very simple. They assume that the Bible accurately reveals God's purpose (or purposes) and gives trustworthy directions for human moral behavior. They take for granted that “men were chosen [by God], each one in his own particular situation, to speak, or to write, or to do, whatever was essential to further the redemptive movement". What this boils down to is a theory of the *partial* infallibility of the Bible. The Bible is said to contain some "minor errors" and various irrelevancies, but

the essential truth about God's directions regarding how to obtain "salvation" and how to lead a moral life is "authentic, accurate, and trustworthy".To be sure that words 'infallible', or 'inerrant' are not usually used by the Essential Truth theorists. But just beneath the surface the assumption seems to be that the Bible does infallibly reveal God's mind regarding such significant matters as everlasting salvation, Christ's resurrection and saviorhood, and certain moral guidelines for mankind. What the Essential Truth theorists are not prepared to call into question is their assumption that the Bible is free of error in what it teaches regarding such topics as the following: heaven and hell, the necessity of salvation of a special kind, views about certain moralities and immoralities, Jesus as the Son of God, and certain other "essential truths".

Let me give an example. In challenging the infallibilists to give up their insistence that every part of the Bible is infallible, Professor Beegle assures them that their new doubts will not destroy their faith. Why? 'Because, he says, "*the truth will always lead to Christ*". But Professor Beegle's bold assertion and reassuring words are based on the *assumption* that the Bible does reveal infallibly that "the truth will always lead to Christ".Beegle seems to realize that his position is in trouble, and he goes to great lengths to call into question increasingly more areas in which claims of infallibility have been made. He even denies that the Bible can give "certain protection against false doctrine." What is left, then? His answer is very simple: "sufficient protection for salvation". In other words, the Bible is infallible revelation regarding only salvation and the things necessarily connected with it. Regarding other things, however, the Bible is apparently not infallible.

What is interesting is the fact that the way for Beegle's making this move seems to have been already prepared in his own thinking. He points out that it is very "likely that the disciples confused some of Jesus' statements about the destruction of Jerusalem with some of his remarks about the second coming". Professor Beegle acknowledges that the writers of the New Testament did not see "eye to eye in all the doctrinal details related to eschatology i.e., the end of the world]". Indeed, Beegle believes that the New Testament authors lacked perfect agreement regarding such important doctrines as Christ's atonement for sin or the nature of the Trinity.

However, what he cannot yet call into question is the doctrine that Jesus is the Son of God and that people need salvation if they are to avoid hell and gain heaven.

One can only admire Professor Beegle's attempt to hold dearly to the basic commitment of his religious faith while at the same time seeking truth and eliminating errors wherever he finds them. In my own opinion, the infallibilists were right to fear that once the Bible is admitted to be not infallible in some minor parts, then it might very well turn out to be not infallible or trustworthy in any of its *major* doctrines At the same time, I think that Professor Beegle and a great many other biblical scholars have pretty well shown that there are errors in the Bible. The conclusion, I regret to say, is that the Bible seems not to be authoritative as a guide to such meta physical doctrines as salvation, life after death, God's existence, and various other matters. Indeed, Professor Beegle desperately concerned to hold to his conviction about Chris and salvation, nevertheless seems determined not to ignoring altogether what must to him be painful conclusions. Of the biblical passages dealing with the resurrection of Jesus, Beegle says plainly that they "swarm with difficulties, some details of which cannot be harmonized". He takes solace in "the historical core back of the accounts". Indeed, he goes so far as to say that he cannot even assert that disbelief in Jesus' physical resurrection or in his virgin birth will exclude a person from "saving faith". He concludes that "God recognizes the sincere doubts of men and he undoubtedly saves men who do not have enough faith to believe certain teachings of the Scripture".

Naturally the infallibilists will accuse Beegle of surrendering to "subjectivism". But the infallibilists have never grasped the point that they may well be the most subjective of all. To keep asserting the infallibility of a book, many of whose claims have been seriously challenged, to say the least, is to take refuge in wishful thinking, which is the essence of subjectivity. The atheist Ayn Rand boldly refers to her philosophy as "Objectivism". But this in itself does not make her view any more objective (i.e., true and credible) than any other view. Each view— including that of the infallibilists—must be tested and critically examined. If the theological and metaphysical claims of the Bible are true, then they are objective. But if they are *not*

true, then belief in them is indeed only subjective—even when the believer announces three times daily that his faith is objectively grounded.

In the final paragraph of his controversial book, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, Professor Beegle writes, "Ultimately, authority is an individual, personal matter because everyone will be judged according to his *willingness* to know God's will and to obey it". This is but a short step from saying that the honest seeker of truth will not be harshly judged by God. Indeed, what could be said of a God who would damn a person for being willing to follow the evidence wherever it leads? Of course, many infallibilists hold that a person cannot be honest-minded and still disagree with them. Some of their opponents have, in turn, accused them of moral and spiritual blindness. Of more importance than these charges and counter-charges, however, is the need to keep in good repair the lines of communication between all "theorists".

Why the Last-Ditch Stand? There is no need to hold back the hard question that Dr. Beegle must deal with. It is this: Why do the Essential Truth theorists still cling to the assumption of the Bible's trustworthiness regarding salvation? Why do they refuse to entertain the possibility that the Bible may even be mistaken about salvation or about Christ? Beegle's answer seems to be that the Essential Truth theorists simply start with the assumption that the Bible could not be mistaken in these matters. The infallibilists have openly asserted that their Own assumption is that *every part* of the Bible is infallible. Beegle advances a number of arguments showing why he cannot accept this particular assumption or conjecture. The question, then, remains as to whether Beegle is prepared to bring his own assumption out in the open and examine it critically. Indeed, he has already admitted to "shifting the line of defense from 'absolute truth' to 'essential truth'" . acknowledging that the Bible is "fallible in minor details," he must now move to face the question as to whether it is fallible in *major* details, namely, the details about "salvation" and the person of Jesus.

THE KEY IMAGES THEORY

Very close to the Essential Truth theory is the view that in the Bible, as well as in the history of Israel and the Christian church, God has caused certain key images to

emerge and toil be preserved. As men and women experienced God, they came to express their experiences in certain great images or symbols. Some of these predominating images of God and his relationship with Israel and the Church are: the Kingdom of God, the Son of Man, the Suffering Servant, and the messiah.

Now, this *Key Images theory* is popular among those who are already convinced that there is a God who has been work ing in a special way with Israel and the Christian church Those who are not convinced of this position, however, may take the images as tentative conjectures with which to experiment. In that sense, they may be seen as possible leads that might, for the honest seeker, open up avenues of religious exploration. Of course, if the believer is justified in asking the seeker to think along the lines suggested by the great key images, then the seeker is justified in asking the believer to consider thinking along new lines and with fresh categories, images and conjectures. Sometimes, new "models" or "images" do open up fresh ways of experiencing and believing. Unless it assumes its own infallibility, no one group can rightly assume that it can learn nothing by experimenting with the images and categories of other groups. In many ways, we are especially ignorant if we can never view our own dearest convictions through the eyes, of at least one other perspective very different from our own.

THE BIBLE AS A PLACE IN WHICH TO ENCOUNTER GOD

The Bible As a Place in Which to Encounter God. Christians who have been influenced by the philosophical movement called existentialism tend to see the Bible as a vital and sacred temple wherein the individual sometimes meets God. It is as if the Bible contains a number of sacred cues and symbols that increase the likelihood of opening up reconciliation between God and the human individual. According to this view, he who reads the Bible is in a sense walking through a cathedral. God's presence may suddenly become "real" to the reader. God breaks in upon him in a divine-human encounter.

Those who hold to this *Sacred Encounter theory* believe that the biblical stories, poems, teachings, proverbs, etc., focus on the essential elements of religious concern. The question as to whether Jesus did in fact rise from the grave becomes, for the

Sacred Encounter theorists, a secondary question. Being concerned with the historicity of Jesus is like being concerned with the question as to whether there actually was a literal prodigal son behind the parable. To concern one with such questions is to miss the crucial point of the biblical stories. What is thought to be important is that the early Christian disciples came to see "God in Christ". To read about Jesus in the Gospels, therefore, is to make yourself open to the possibility of appropriating for yourself the early disciples' sense of “new being” that came through the love and fellowship they experienced. Hence, the stories of an alleged historical Jesus are regarded ns only occasions for lifting the human inquirer to a new level of awareness of "the Christ". According to this view, Jesus is the Christ in the sense that the biblical stories open the mind and heart to the possibility of encountering God in Christ. The stories provide the occasion of experiencing forgiveness, grace, acceptance, hope, and resolution. What is significant in the stories? It is not that there once was a Jewish rabbi named Jesus, but that in the first century a community of fellow sinners were brought to the point of experiencing forgiveness, fellowship, and new courage to thrive lovingly in the face of unfavorable odds.

To be sure, there doubtless were historical realities behind what happened in the lives of those early Christian disciples. Hut the Sacred Encounter theorists doubt that we can ever have sufficient data to piece together the historical truth about the spatial and temporal details of the life of Jesus. Nevertheless, it is often good to inquire into these details, for in doing so one often "encounters the living Christ". It is as if a repairman were going to work each day at the cathedral. He is not going there to "meet God" but rather to repair the roof. But while there one day he hears the grand organ and is profoundly moved as he has never been before.

What the Sacred Encounter theorists are implying is that the reality beyond mankind is such that human beings can be raised to new heights of love and made sensitive to new dimensions of being. They can find new hope, resolution, self-acceptance other-acceptance, and "meaning" for their existence. The term 'the Christ' refers to that dimension of divine reality that evokes in us "new being," "new power," and greater sensitivity to a context that is infinitely wider and deeper than our everyday environment. Or, to say it in another way, our everyday reality is seen to be not a

closed little drama of its own; it stands, rather, as the possibility of receiving "new power and being" and new dynamic relationships from beyond itself.

Faith beyond the Historical Jesus: Rudolf Bultmann's Program of "Demythologizing." The leading and highly controversial New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann believes that as a *project of historical research* the quest for the historical Jesus is quite irrelevant to Christian faith. He claims that the original Jesus is lost in the obscurities of a mixture of fact and fantasy, myth and reality. Christian faith, Bultmann holds, cannot wait around to see what the latest archaeologist will up, or what news will come from New Testament research regarding the person of Jesus of Nazareth. No, as existential beings we must make our decisions *now*; we must proceed to *live today*. The Bible, thus, cannot serve as an unquestioned guide to the footprints of a Jesus of the first century. Rather, the Bible serves to expose us to ourselves. It is a challenge to see oneself as a creature "incapable of redeeming himself from the world and the powers which hold sway in it". Far from taking us back to times past, the Bible, says Professor Bultmann, calls attention to our present arrogance and pride, and to the possibility of our own death at any moment.

The Bible also brings us the promise of-redemption and grace. But Bultmann offers an *existential* version of "redemption and "salvation". Hell is not seen as some final cosmic ghetto into which all sinners are herded for eternity. Nor is heaven place where people go to eat superb food and sing hymn forever. The concepts of hell and heaven must, therefore, be demythologized. That is, they must be viewed neither as locations in outer space nor as states of being in the remote future. Instead, they are to be understood as modes of finite human existence here and now. Similarly, redemption and salvation are, for Bultmann, the realization that a life of legalism and the treadmill can be *changed*. We are not wholly prisoners of our past. Grace is a major theme of the Bible, says Bultmann, and he sees it as a promise of a new chance to live meaningfully in the present life. Faith is the glad acceptance of this new chance—this new possibility—to live in gratitude and freedom.

'Christ' is understood to be far more than the obscure Jesus of Nazareth. Christ' is God in his mode of encountering the sinner and Bringing into play the grace of new life here and now. To be sure, prepositional statements may be used to describe what

this new encounter of freedom means to the "redeemed" person. But that is an after-the-fact enterprise. Basically, for Bultmann, the Bible serves as the occasion by which God reveals, not so much prepositional truths, as his own gracious and liberating presence. The "second coming of Christ," therefore, is not some future astronomical event, but rather is, when demythologized, an existential experience. It takes place when God as the Christ of grace breaks in upon the believer in the form of a new power to cope with the absurdities, trials, and opportunities of existence. The story of the Creation is de-mythologized to mean the new power that is brought into a person's life in such a way as to make it possible for him to love and to be loved, to accept and be accepted. What, then, is the Bible's inspiration? It is its power to serve as the instrument through which people are themselves inspired, empowered, liberated, and forgiven by "God in Christ".

Existential philosophy, says Bultmann, can teach, but it cannot empower and inspire to love. That is a matter of divine grace. It is not surprising; therefore, that Bultmann's favorite biblical passages emphasize divine initiatives in moving and motivating sinners to accept both forgiveness and new possibilities of freedom and moral responsibility.

Historical Claims of the Bible. Writing in the same existential vein as Bultmann, another Sacred Encounter theologian makes the following cryptic statement: "The truth that Jesus Christ rose from the dead is of a different order from the fact that water boils at one hundred degrees centigrade at sea level". This same theologian refers to "Jesus Christ as the Word of God". Sometimes the writings of existential Christians are very confusing to Christians raised in an orthodox setting. For the orthodox, to hear or see the words 'Jesus' or 'Christ' is perhaps to recall some notion of a bearded Hebrew who turned out to be far more than a great teacher. But for existential Christians, the historical Jesus and the events of his life are not very important. 'Jesus Christ' means to them what they take to be the other side of the personal and sacred encounter with God. And for those existential Christians, such an encounter is declared to be far more "real" than any Palestinian figure who might have lived two thousand years ago. To state it bluntly, existential Christians think it is foolish to place one's deepest faith in the historical claims of a book— even the

Bible. Tales and legends grow up too quickly and are soon taken to be actual facts. For all we know, say the existential Christians, most of the biblical stories of Jesus are myths, fictions, or half-truths. Trust in the biblical reports if you like, but existential Christians place their faith in what they take to be the "contemporaneous Christ" whom they meet and know here and now.

In considering the precariousness of placing your faith in reports of historical happenings, consider the following:

Mircea Eliade tells of a legend in a small village in Maramures in Romania, in which a young suitor had been bewitched by a fairy, and a few days before he was to be married, the fairy threw him from a cliff. Shepherds found the body, and when they returned it to the village, his fiancee poured out a beautiful funeral lament. Investigating the legend, a folklorist discovered that the story had *taken place only forty years earlier* and *that the heroine was still alive*. He spoke with her, and she described a quite commonplace tragedy. One evening, her lover had slipped and fallen off a cliff; he was not killed instantly, but was carried to the village, where he soon died. At the funeral, the fiancee participated in the customary ritual lamentations. Popular memory had stripped the story of almost all historical authenticity in spite of the presence of the principal witness and many other villagers who were contemporaries. "When the folklorist drew the villagers' attention to the authentic version, they replied that the old woman had forgotten; that her grief had almost destroyed her mind.

It was the myth that told the truth; the real story was already only a falsification".

Most Christian and Jewish believers who accept putative, reports in the Bible merely *because they are in the Bible* would ask people to regard as superstitious nonsense the midrash that claims that at the Red Sea "God assumed the shape of a mare and decoyed the ruttish Egyptian stallions into the water". Yet the same believers ask people to believe the following story, simply because it is set forth in the Bible:

When the ass saw the angel of the Lord, she lay down under Balaam; and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the ass with his staff. Then the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have

struck me these three times?" And Balaam said to the ass, "Because you have made sport of me, I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you." And the ass said to Balaam, "Am I not your ass, upon which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Was I ever accustomed to do so to you?" And he said, "No".

This charming story continues by saying that the prophet Balaam finally came to see the angel, who held a sword in his hand. The angel explained that had the ass not turned aside, Balaam would now be dead because the angel had in mind to cut the prophet down.

There is no need to overreact to the Bible by insisting that every historical and geographical notation is inaccurate. The Bible is a collection of ancient pieces of literature, some of which were first formulated orally. It should not be surprising that the Bible would combine a mixture of some very accurate reports with some inaccurate ones. And, of course, there are numerous theological and metaphysical *interpretations* that, like the other Scriptures of the world, are a matter of debate and serious inquiry.

THE BIBLE AS A SEEDBED OF INTERPRETATIONS

It is easy to forget how very rich, variegated, and complex the Bible really is. In it may be found poetry, songs, historical reports, legends, myths, psychological insights, religious biography, metaphysical and theological theories, parables, predictions, dreams, as well as other forms of religious literature. It is also easy to forget the fact that the Bible was not simply written as one book. It is a collection of materials composed by numerous authors. Sometimes the materials were edited and reworked.

What is crucial to keep in mind is that the Hebrews wrote a considerable amount of literature over a number of centuries, but only some of it was *selected* by later Jews to be classified as sacred Scripture. For example, when they eventually settled on the material to be included in their Bible (which Christians call the "Old Testament") the Jews did not select materials in a random way. Rather, they took those pieces of Hebrew literature that were thought to have been written by prophets and other esteemed ancients. Furthermore, those in charge of the final judgment as to what to

include in the Hebrew Bible seemed to have in mind what they wanted and did not want. They tended to select the literary materials that fitted with their assumption that throughout Hebrew history God had been providentially caring for the people of Israel in a very special way. Hence, when people today speak of the "unity of the Bible," they sometimes forget that there was a deliberate attempt to weed out materials that did not fit with the unifying theme of God's special care for Israel. The influential early Christians adopted this view of Hebrew history and added to it the qualification that the Christian movement was the true heir of the Hebrew faith.

There is no great supernatural mystery to the view that many ancient Hebrews, as well as Christians, wrote and spoke about what were crucial matters of concern to them. Like people of other religious traditions, they confronted problems, responded to them, had experiences, and wrote down some of their interpretations of what was going on about them. Indeed, like us and people from every part of the globe, they believed that their interpretations were true. Some of them even felt that they were speaking on behalf of God. In many parts of the world, people have thought of themselves as receiving messages from the deity. For example, about four centuries before the time of Moses, the noted Babylonian king Hammurabi believed that the great code of law that he instituted in his land was inspired by the deity Shamash, the guardian of law and justice. In A.D. 1901 a copy of this remarkable code was discovered 150 miles north of the head of the Persian Gulf. This sensational discovery was made by the French archaeologist Jacques de Morgan. "The code was inscribed on a round-topped stele of black diorite, some six feet in height, which now is in the Louvre. At the top is a bas-relief showing Hammurabi standing before the enthroned sun-god Shamash". Beneath this bas-relief is a prologue in cuneiform characters stating that Hammurabi had been divinely called to administer righteousness and justice. It would be surprising if the ancient Hebrews had not shared the rather common supposition that the leaders of the people were "called" to receive God's message and to carry out his directions.

Much of the Bible may be seen as expressions of individuals' trying to make sense of their world (or some aspect of it) and trying to respond to it in some intellectual, moral, emotional, or ritualistic manner. It may very well have been that a prophet

named Balaam thought he had a conversation with his animal companion. A man who could see an angel and converse with it could probably hear an ass speak Hebrew. But as we saw in Chapter I, people can have all sorts of extraordinary experiences. The critical question is: How are these experiences to be taken, understood, and interpreted in a broader setting? I have sometimes had very vivid and powerful dreams. But I cannot claim that they are "real" in the same sense that my neighbor's black cat is real or that Japan is real. As for Balaam's conversation with the ass and the angel, the following tentative hypothesis is suggested: if there is any substance at all to the story, it is possible that the prophet had a vision or dream, or simply enjoyed an interesting, although hardly supernatural hallucination. The Bible seems not always to draw a clear line between visions, dreams, and those actual events belonging to a realm wider than the individual's private experience only. Indeed, the bible often says that the Lord came to someone in a dream or vision. Perhaps there is more truth here than most Jews and Christians would care to admit.

Some orthodox Jews are quite eager to believe that numerous dreams and visions set forth in the Old Testament were and are quite reliable and trustworthy as messages from God. A less super-naturalistic interpretation is that people have often dreamed up theological and metaphysical views of God. But Galileo and Newton also dreamed up theories about much of the universe, as did Einstein and Darwin. The issue then is not that people dream up their theories. Rather, once the dreams and visions are verbalized and made public, can their assertions be tested and critically examined? In the sixth chapter of Isaiah, the prophet Isaiah claims that he saw the Lord. Perhaps he did; perhaps he did not. If there is no God, or if God is not the sort of reality that can be seen in visions, then we must say that Isaiah only *thought* he saw God. You and I have sometimes been mistaken in what we thought we experienced, although at the time we might have been absolutely convinced that we were not mistaken. Perhaps Isaiah was mistaken in his interpretation of what he experienced. But soon we must turn to make serious inquiry into the evidence and arguments for the existence of God (or at least of the God in which many Christians and Jews profess to believe).

The prophet Isaiah may have been a very truthful person. But the issue that we must confront is not that of Isaiah's moral integrity. After all, he may have been very *honestly* mistaken. Our faith in *God* must be distinguished from our faith in Isaiah's opinions and interpretations. True, many people have presumed to speak on his behalf. (A couple of decades ago a Methodist bishop wrote a book entitled *Who Speaks for God?*) If we cannot simply take as infallible the word of human beings even finite human beings of the Bible or of some other Scripture—-we must look wherever we can for "signs and evidence" of God. If the Bible, the Quran, or any other Scripture turns out to be more-or-less accurate in its claims about the existence and nature of God, we will then have reason for learning more from it and putting its other numerous claims to the test. But if these claims fail to test out, then we will have to live our lives according to the light and evidence that we do have.

Conclusion

This analysis of various perspectives on biblical revelation reveals a theological spectrum ranging from absolute inerrancy to existential symbolism. The journey begins with the *Perfect Wording* and *Perfect Meaning* theories, which are rooted in the conviction that a perfect God must provide a perfect, error-free scripture to guide humanity towards salvation. However, these views face significant challenges, not least of which is the profound disunity among their own proponents regarding the interpretation of this supposedly perfect text, thereby undermining the practical utility of an infallible guide.

As the analysis progresses, a shift occurs towards views that accommodate textual and historical difficulties. The *Essential Truth Theory*, championed by scholars like Dewey M. Beegle, concedes "minor errors" while defending the Bible’s complete trustworthiness on "essential" matters of faith, effectively proposing a form of partial infallibility. While this approach attempts to reconcile faith with scholarly honesty, it raises the critical question of where to draw the line between essential and non-essential truths, and whether the major doctrines themselves might also be fallible.

The final theories examined—the *Key Images Theory* and the *Sacred Encounter Theory*—move away from propositional truth claims altogether. Influenced by

existentialism and Rudolf Bultmann's demythologizing project, these perspectives recast the Bible not as a book of historical facts or divine dictates, but as a sacred space for a transformative encounter with God. Here, the focus is on the power of biblical narratives to evoke a new sense of being, grace, and freedom in the present moment, rendering questions of historical accuracy secondary.

Ultimately, the paper argues for understanding the Bible as a "seedbed of interpretations". It is a rich, complex, and deeply human collection of documents, reflecting centuries of attempts to articulate experiences of the divine. Rather than being a monolithic, supernaturally dictated text, it is a product of human selection, editing, and interpretation. Therefore, its claims should not be accepted on faith alone but must be subjected to the same critical examination as any other historical or philosophical text, allowing individuals to live by the light and evidence available to them.

Recommendations for Future Inquiry

Based on the analysis presented in this paper, the following recommendations are proposed for scholars and students of theology and religious studies:

1. **Broaden Comparative Analysis:** The author rightly notes the impossibility of examining all scriptures within this paper's scope. Future research should apply the theoretical frameworks discussed here (Perfect Wording, Essential Truth, Sacred Encounter, etc.) to other sacred texts, such as the Qur'an and the Book of Mormon, to foster a deeper, cross-cultural understanding of the concept of scriptural revelation.

2. **Integrate Interdisciplinary Methodologies:** The tension between faith claims and historical evidence is a central theme. Further inquiry should actively integrate modern historical-critical methods, archaeology, and literary analysis to rigorously test the historical claims within the Bible. This would move the discussion beyond theoretical debate and ground it more firmly in verifiable evidence.

3. **Develop Modern Hermeneutical Models:** The paper highlights that the fundamental problem is one of interpretation. It is recommended that theological research focus less on defending the increasingly tenuous doctrine of infallibility and more on developing sophisticated hermeneutical models that honestly engage with the Bible's human and historical dimensions while still exploring its potential for spiritual meaning.

4. **Promote Ecumenical and Inter-Theoretical Dialogue:** The author points to the "charges and counter-charges" between different theological camps. It is recommended that academic and ecclesiastical forums actively promote constructive dialogue between proponents of infallibilist, essentialist, and existentialist views. Fostering communication can help dismantle intellectual silos and move toward a more nuanced and holistic understanding of scripture.

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