

THE CREDIBILITY OF SCRIPTURE

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1. STATING THE PROBLEM

This paper is about the recent North-American evangelical discussion between errantists and inerrantists, i.e. around the "inerrancy" of Scripture (elsewhere I have analyzed this discussion more extensively; Ouweneel, 1993: § 2.5). I feel quite unhappy in this discussion because, to my mind, they both have fallen into scientism, and in this way endanger the possibility of a hermeneutics faithful to Scripture. In certain respects I choose at one time for the one party, at another time for the other. For instance, I maintain with the inerrantists over against the errantists:

- (a) that the way in which God has employed the human in the inscripturation must be sought in terms of adaptation, i.e., to human frailty and littleness, proper to the finiteness of creatures, not in terms of accommodation, if we have to understand by this some condescendence to human sinfulness and defectiveness, caused by the fall (cf. Rogers & McKim, 1979:9f; Hannah, 1984:28 - 30,52,146,157,166,186,226,402; and very extensively Berkouwer, 1967:62-113);
- (b) that the human "share" in the inscripturation does not, on the basis of the *errare humanum est*,² necessarily imply that the Bible contains errors in the fields of history and nature or wherever (cf. Brown, 1984:389f); *errare humanum est, sed homo non errandus est*;
- (c) that the Bible speaks truthfully and reliably, also when it - from the viewpoint of faith, not that of science! - speaks about nature and history.

With the errantists I maintain over against the inerrantists:

- (a) that the Bible is not a collection of nature- and historical-scientific

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2 Cf. Vawter (1972:169) with respect to the Bible: "To conceive of an absolute inerrancy as the effect of the inspiration was not really to believe that God had condescended to the human sphere but rather that He had transmuted it into something else. A human literature containing no error would indeed be a contradiction in terms, since nothing is more human than to err".

- "truths", i.e., truths about nature and history posited and formulated in a scientific way (as is implied in the Chicago Statements; see below);
- (b) that the inerrancy of Scripture has to be sought in its absolute truth and credibility, its being free of all misleading, error, and untruthfulness, and not so much in the field of (real or apparent) "technical" inaccuracies and discrepancies (see below);
 - (c) that the divine origin of Scripture does not necessarily imply that even no original (real or apparent) discrepancies are to be assumed between parallel Scriptures such as in Samuel and Kings on the one hand and Chronicles on the other (see below).

The inerrantists have defended themselves a little against (b) and (c) by article XIII of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (see Gesiler, 1979:496):

We further deny that inerrancy is negated by Biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.

On the other hand, Archer (1979:58) writes: "To Jesus Himself matters of technical accuracy were of real importance". With this point we come to the heart of the matter. The ultimate background, of inerrantism is the view, sympathetic in itself, that the honour, power, and priority of God or Jesus are at stake in the discussion around the inerrancy of the Bible (see Vander Stelt, 1978:229,323f). Thus, Brown (1984:389) writes:

the statement "The Scriptures are without error in the original writings" is essentially a confession of faith in the nature and character of God and consequently in the nature of Scripture as God's Word. We contend, therefore, that the doctrine of inerrancy is essentially a theological doctrine, pertaining of the character of God, and secondarily a bibliological one, pertain-

ing to the nature of the Bible. It is doxological in the sense that it is an expression of praise to the God whom we know as the author of Scripture.

Starting from an ontological dualism of the natural and the supernatural, inerrantism sees as the result of the operation from the supernatural sphere a factually infallible and verbally inerrant Bible. Now I want to call my own view "credibilistic", i.e., I believe in the credibility, the perfect reliability and the divine authority of Scripture.

Inerrantists, however, go a step further. They make the supernaturality of this perfect product of divine activity to depend on a rationalistic concept of inerrancy in such a way that even the smallest error - to put it more correctly: that which people view as such! (see below) - would ruin this supernaturality and credibility of Scripture. This "danger" has been pointed out by inerrantists in several ways. One may just think of the sixteenth-century adagium, *falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus*. That is, if Scripture is erroneous at one point, it is in principle erroneous at all points, for it cannot be trusted anymore at any point. Pannenberg (198:42,44) mentions Leydekker and Quenstedt as examples of this attitude. In our country, e.g., Edward Young (1957:103,123; also see 5,48,54,88,109,185,269) stated that Scripture is infallible in all that it says, or we cannot be sure that it is infallible in anything and that to maintain that there are flaws or errors in the autograph is the same as declaring that there are flaws or errors in God himself.

These are ideas with which, at the level of suprarational, pre-theoretical faith, I can warmly sympathize. I confess that the Word of God is as perfect as God himself.

However, as soon as such a statement of faith becomes an unflinching theological postulate, the heavily overestimated human reason will rule over the miracle of inspiration. Thus, Young (1957:64) explicitly states that the autographa are not only confessionally but also scientifically infallible and inerrant. In such an overestimation of science it is not only the dualistic idea of the infallible supernatural, miraculously operating in a fallible world, that is the issue, but particularly the scientific rationalism of this postulate. Out of a longing for logical-analytical, theoretical-scientific proof, every conceivable uncertainty is a priori excluded by

locating Scripture in the supernatural sphere. This is supposed to exclude every scientific error which human reason feels it might point out in the autographa (cf. Berkouwer, 1966:32f).

This scientific "certainty" is based upon the following syllogism: "God is perfect and cannot lie; God has revealed himself to mankind in Scripture; therefore, the written word must be perfect, i.e., free of errors" (in this way this view is described by Beegle, 1973:199). Pinnock (1984:158f) has therefore, not without reason, claimed with respect to Warfield's definition of inspiration - "What the Bible says, God says" - that Warfield's argumentation for this was rather founded in a deduction from theological aprioris than in a conclusion based upon Scripture.

2. UNVERIFIABILITY

I repeat that I speak here of a theological postulate, not of a view of faith. As believers, we accept Scripture as the authoritative, reliable Word of God. In our intercourse with Scripture, we read it as our daily food in order to better know and better serve God and his son, Jesus Christ. As such we are not concerned at all with the question as to whether there might be any scientific shortcomings in the Bible. Faith does not ever know that "problem". Even if shortcomings might be pointed out, these would not be the bones to be ground by the theologians' teeth, whereas the food is for the believers. Their conviction about the reliability of Scripture is not shaken at all by it (cf. Van Bruggen, 1986:98-101). However, as said before, in inerrantism it is not just a presupposition of faith that is at stake, but a scientific postulate, primarily founded in rationalistic aprioris and in an optimistic scientism. Not only these philosophical roots are invalid, but also methodologically they are flimsy. For the inerrantist postulate suffers under at least two methodological flaws:

- (a) it is neither verifiable nor falsifiable because the autographa are missing (see the rest of this §);
- (b) it is not falsifiable because of the lack of clear-cut criteria for inerrancy (see the next §).

As a third consideration I add that this inerrantist postulate is not what matters with respect to the Bible (see § 4).

The first flaw is not difficult to explain. The point is that the inerrantist postulate does not concern our Bibles, for they contain quite a few translating and printing errors. It does not even concern the original text on which this translation is based. As far as textual criticism has made out, we do possess a Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek text that is transmitted in a peculiarly accurate way. However, it is not perfect, since at several, though minor, points there are too many uncertainties about the correct text. Therefore, the inerrantist postulate only concerns the autographa (see, e.g., Bahnsen, 1979). These form the logical-theoretical certainty of the inerrantist. He therefore will not hesitate in certain cases of alleged errors in the Bible to take refuge in the autographa. He quietly claims that the error cannot have been there, even if the supposedly correct reading is not been contained in any extant manuscript.

However, the problem for the inerrantist is that these autographa do not exist anymore. Consequently, the absolute scientific inerrancy of these autographa can neither be proved nor refuted. They therefore form, on the one hand, the scientific certainty for the inerrantist, and on the other hand, the autographa are, as a cherished treasure, safely outside the reach of empirical science (see Loetscher, 1954:25). This is also scientism, a "science-faith", of which inerrantist (rightly) accuse liberal theology without realizing that they adhere to it themselves. Therefore, at the level of faith it is rather correct what Brown (1984:388) says but not at the theological level:

Inasmuch as inerrancy is unverifiable a posteriori, on the basis of evidence gathered from the existing, non-autographic texts, it must be defended a priori, on the basis of things we already know or to which we are committed by faith.

Please note: I do not say that because the autographa are not extant anymore it does not matter whether they are erroneous or not. This is what Archer (1982:28) wrongly suggests with respect to those who emphasize that the autographa is founded in a presupposition of faith, neither necessarily wrong nor necessarily correct, which because of its unverifiability can or should in no way serve as a scientific (i.e., theological) postulate.

But even as a presupposition of "faith", it is hardly more than a rational, not to say, rationalistic, conclusion from a long theoretical reasoning about the perfection of God, and the inerrancy of Scripture allegedly following from this perfection. Moreover, this is not at all the way in which Scripture itself speaks of its credibility. At any rate, Scripture does hardly or not point to autographa, leave alone erroneous autographa. Scriptures such as 2 Tim. 3:16f and 2 Pet. 1:19-21, *loci classici* for the doctrine of inspiration, point to copies of the Old Testament extant at that time, not to autographa which might differ from copies. Besides, a Scripture such as 2 Tim. 3:16 is not at all a theoretical statement about the nature and possible inerrancy of Scripture, but about its divine origin and its practical efficiency in the life of faith (Pinnock, 1984:XVIII, 40). One may also wonder, if the inerrant autographa are so crucial for our logical-theoretical certainty, why they have not been preserved by God's providence, or why God has not transferred this inerrancy to the transmitted manuscripts, or even to the translations. From my own experience, I know that this is precisely what the most extreme inerrantists in North-America do believe. They are convinced that, though God's miraculous providence, the text of the inerrant autographa has been 100 % accurately preserved in the Masoretic text of the Old, and the Byzantine text of the New Testament, and that the King James Bible is an absolutely inerrant translation of this text. I myself feel far more at home in the following words by Bavinck (1928:415f):

Scripture does not satisfy (the criterium of) exact knowledge, as we demand it in mathematics, astronomy, chemistry etc. It ought not to be judged by such a standard. That is the reason why the autographa are lost; why the text, in whatever small a measure, is corrupt; why the church, and certainly not only the layman, possesses Scripture only in a defective and fallible translation. These are facts that cannot be denied.³

- 3 "Aan exacte kennis, gelijk wij die in mathesis, de astronomie, de chemie enz. eischen, voldoet de Schrift niet. Zulk een maatstaf mag aan haar niet worden aangelegd. Daarom zij de autographa ook verloren; daarom is de tekst, in welke geringe mate dan ook, corrupt; daarom bezit de gemeente, en waarlijk de leek niet alleen, de Schrift slechts in eene gebrekkige en feilbare vertaling. Dat zijn de feiten, die niet te loochenen zijn".

3. UNFALSIFIABILITY

According to epistemological standard, the theory of the inerrant autographa, as a theory, is unscientific, therefore theologically useless, since because of the lack of the autographa, it is neither verifiable nor falsifiable. However, there is an even more important reason why the theory is unfalsifiable, and therefore unscientific. That is the lack of clear-cut criteria as to the question what exactly is supposed to be an "error". The inerrantist should a priori indicate the criteria according to which "errors" are allowed to occur in the Bible without affecting its inerrancy, and according to which certain other "errors" are definitely not allowed to occur in the Bible because they would affect its inerrancy. In so doing, the inerrantist would have to indicate very precisely what is the essential difference between these two categories of (alleged) errors: inerrancy-threatening errors and non-inerrancy-threatening errors.

To illustrate this, let us think, e.g., of what was quoted above from article XIII of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (also cf. Feinberg, 1979:299-302). According to this article, the following non-inerrancy-threatening (apparent) "errors" are allowed to occur in the Bible (I represent them rather freely, and add a few examples which the authors have apparently in mind):

- (a) the lack of modern technical precision. Here one might think of 1 Kin. 7:23, where it is said of the "sea" of bronze in Solomon's temple that its diameter was 10 cubits, and its circumference 30 cubits. This yields for π a value of 3; indeed quite inaccurate.
- (b) irregularities of grammar spelling. In the Apocalypse in particular a number of striking grammatical "errors" occur, which sometimes can be easily explained, sometimes not (cf. Ouweneel, 1988:8f, 1990:36,39,72,121,160).
- (c) observational descriptions of nature. Scripture's speaking about nature is not to be judged after scientific standards. Such descriptions are not necessarily anything more than everyday parlance, or poetic phraseology, such as the "pillars" of the earth (Job 9:6; 38:6; Ps. 75:4) and of heaven (Job 26:11), the orbit of the sun at the sky (Ps. 19:7), the foundation of the earth upon the seas and the waters (Ps. 24:1f),

the four "corners" of the earth (Isa. 11:12), the "circle" of the earth, and the heavens stretched out over it like a tent (Isa. 40:22; 48:13; 51:13, 16). However, according to modern cosmology, these would all be "errors".

- (d) the topical arrangement of material. On the basis of a comparison with Matthew, and especially Mark, we presume that Luke in particular often does not present the chronological order of the events, whereas he sometimes does tie up the stories in such a way as to give the erroneous impression as if they do chronologically follow each other (e.g., 23:45f).
- (e) variant selections of material in parallel accounts. Of this too we find many examples in the gospels, as well as in the parallel portions in Samuel and Kings on the one hand, and Chronicles on the other. The consequence of this fact is that sometimes erroneous suggestions are given. In Act 9:26 it seems as if Paul's visit to Jerusalem followed very shortly upon his conversion, whereas we know from Gal. 1:15-18 that there was three years in between. I also refer here to the famous word by Kuyper (1909:505; quoted, e.g., by Bavinck, 1928:415, and Berkouwer, 1966:218) concerning the *ipsissima verba* of our Lord:

If namely in the four gospels words are ascribed to Jesus at the same occasion, words that are unidentical in the form of expression, Jesus of course cannot have used four forms at the same time, the Holy Spirit only has the purpose to impose an impression upon the church which perfectly answers to what went out from Jesus.⁴

- (f) the use of free citations. Some striking examples of this are "citations"

4 "Als toch in de vier Evangeliën aan Jezus bij eenzelfde gelegenheid woorden in den mond worden gelegd, die in vorm van uitspraak ongelyk zijn, kan Jezus natuurlijk niet vier vormen tegelyk gezeigd hebben, maar beoogt de Heilige Geest slechts het doel, om op de kerk een indruk te weeg te brengen, die volkomen beantwoordt aan wat van Jezus uitging". An example: Mark 10:18 vs. Matth. 19:17; Luke 18:19. In the same category fall other problems of "harmonizing" parallel Biblical records. E.g., Lindsell (1976:174-176) has suggested that the discrepancies in the accounts of Peter's denial can be reconciled by an "additive" harmonization based on the assumption of no less than six denials! This conflicts with the Lord's prophecy that Peter would deny Him three times. See on the problem of harmonization, Blomberg (1986).

in Joh. 7:39; 1 Cor. 2:9; 2 Cor. 6:18, for which only vaguely resembling originals can be found in the Old Testament. Purely seen as citations they are simply erroneous (cf. for a reply, Silva, 1983; Nicole 1984).

Now what do I want to say with this enumeration? There are two things that I do not want to say with it. First, I do not argue that, for the "errors" mentioned, and dozens of others, no sound - be it often over-ingenious - explanations could be given. In most, be it by far not in all, cases this is quite possible, as Archer's voluminous and helpful encyclopedia (1982) shows. Secondly, I do not want to say that errors apparently do occur in the Bible, as if this were in the interest of my argument. On the contrary, the Bible is to me the absolutely trustworthy Word of God. What I do want to say is that he who constructs a theory in which the reliability of the Bible is linked with the non-occurrence of "errors" in the Bible, simply makes a theologically non-sensical statement. For any opponent who chooses so could designate all the points enumerated as "errors" in the Bible. The inerrantist will categorically contradict him, but without a scientific basis. I.e., he cannot falsify this assertion since no inerrantist as far as I know has ever supplied scientific criteria for the demarcation line between "errors" that do, and errors that do not threaten the Bible's inerrancy.

The well-known philosopher of science, Karl Popper, has sought in the falsifiability of a theory the criterium of good science. Verified theories do not exist, for verification would demand an infinite number of tests. A good theory is a theory which is falsifiable in principle, i.e., which enables "risky" because they might not come true. Now, inerrantism is an unfalsifiable theory. If it is merely a question of presupposition of faith, I too believe in an inerrant, absolutely reliable Bible. However, the inerrantist elevates this into a scientific theory, and then it is simply an unfalsifiable, and therefore bad theory. It can prove anything the inerrantist likes, and therefore proves nothing. At the level of faith the believer has not the slightest difficulty with the unevenness he encounters in the Bible. [This is not because the believer simply believes "anything". On the contrary, he would find the Bible highly unreliable if it would tell him that the earth is carried on the back of elephants standing on a large turtle swimming in the cosmic ocean, as a Hindu tradition teaches.

He would find the Bible highly unreliable if the Biblical story of the Noachic flood would look like the Babylonian version, with its quarrelling, immoral gods, and man elevated into a god; if the Bible would demand us to believe that the earth has the shape of a pancake, etc. etc. It is simply a miracle that the Bible, in contrast with so many other antique writings, is void of this kind of errors. Faith infallibly feels the difference between the unevenness encountered in Scripture and the kind of nonsense encountered in so many antique writings, and finds in this all reason to corroborate the absolute credibility of Scripture.

However, for the inerrantist this is not enough. To him, this difference has to be formulated in a theoretical-scientific way. And in doing so he cannot allow the smallest "discrepancy" because any "error" would, to his mind, annihilate all the credibility of the Bible. It is important to imagine what this entails. Take, e.g., the numerical "contradictions" between the royal histories. In 2 Sam 8:4, David takes 700 or 1700 horsemen of Hadadezer captive (depending on the interpretation of the text), but in 1 Chron. 18:4 they were 7000 horsemen. According to 2 Sam. 10:18, he kills 700 Syrian charioteers, but according to 1 Chron 19:18 they were again 7000. In 2 Sam. 24:9, Joab counts 800.000 Israelites, and 500.000 men of Judah, but in 1 Chron. 21:5 they are 1.100.000 and 470.000. According to 1 Kin. 7:26, the sea of bronze had a content of 2000 baths, but according to 2 Chron. 4:5 it was 3000 baths. And in this way I could go on (cf. Blomberg, 1986:162-166, for other discrepancies between Kings and Chronicles).

It is obvious that inerrantists cannot simply wipe off this kind of discrepancies, for in their view just one of these little contradictions would hazard the whole trustworthiness of the Bible. Therefore, in such cases they take refuge either in (over-)ingenious interpretations or in the assumption of transcription errors - usually without any manuscript evidence whatsoever - and inerrant autographa, which is rather cheap because these cannot be consulted anymore. Archer (1979:60) says: "there is nothing to prove that [such discrepancies] existed in the original manuscripts of Samuel and Chronicles." Entirely correct - but the opposite is so too: there is nothing to prove that such (seeming) discrepancies did not exist in the autographa. Therefore this argument is hardly of any help.

That which strikes me in the whole reasoning of the inerrantist is that their rationalistic view of inerrancy seems to lead them to some sort of spasmodic attitude. At all costs, every unevenness has to be smoothed out with arguments, and sometimes even with an appeal to inaccessible sources. Over against this, Van Bruggen (1986:103-105) rightly pleads a certain soberness. Because of the great distance in time and culture, it should not amaze us if many unevenness are problematic to us which were not necessarily so to the original readers. This is an essential point. Over against the inerrantists, who apparently believe that the reliability of Scripture stands or falls with the smallest unevenness: "As if that faith [in the canon] would really have to disappear if even one single error were encountered"⁵. I would rather not put it this way for that matter. It is better to speak of alleged errors, and emphasize the fact that it is a priori impossible to trace an error which would falsify the inerrancy of Scripture in the epistemological sense. Because this point is so important I summarize why this is the case:

- (a) It is impossible because we can never know for sure whether we really have to do with a genuine error in the autographa (this is the main argument of the inerrantists themselves).
- (b) It is impossible because no criterium can be given to distinguish between errors which threaten and errors which do not threaten the Bible's inerrancy.
- (c) It is impossible because for any (alleged) error which is encountered, not matter how "serious", an explanation - no matter how over-subtle - could be construed so that its inerrancy threatening character is annihilated.

In short, the theory of inerrancy, taken in the sense of the inerrantists, is, epistemologically speaking, a non-theory because it cannot be falsified. In this sense, it belongs to the same category of theories as marxism, darwinism, psychoanalysis - with an apology for the comparison - because marxism, darwinism, and psychoanalysis too are able to explain any phenomenon in such a way that it agrees with their theories. These theories are unfalsifiable, and therefore useless. A theory which explains

5 "Alsof dat geloof [in de canon] werkelijk zou móeten verdwijnen wanneer ook maar één fout werd aangetroffen".

everything, explains nothing. Inerrantism is an unscientific theory, and therefore, as a theological theory, worthless.

Now my point is that I do not see this as a problem. On the contrary, the postulate of the inerrancy of the Bible is an estimable presupposition of faith. If it can be freed of all rationalistic stains, I can whole-heartedly live and die with it. But I cannot live, and particularly not die, with any theory about the inerrancy of Scripture whatsoever. My problem with the inerrantists is their scientism, i.e., their belief that they can shut up this presupposition of faith in a closely-reasoned scientific theory. In this way they manoeuvre themselves in a scientifically untenable position, in which they expose someone's faithfulness to the Scriptures by the standards of this theory. Faith and faithfulness can never be judged by human, defective theological theories.

The credibility of Scripture, then, is a very delicate matter. What could happen with it is the same that happened, e.g., with the Aquina's proofs for the existence of God. By pretending that God's existence could be established *scientifically*, and by undertaking to do this, Thomas exposed himself to *scientific* criticism. Indeed, David Hume and Immanuel Kant have *scientifically* wiped the floor with his "proofs" (cf. Pannenberg, 1988:95 - 108). Now if these "proofs" were scientifically invalid, this is not so serious. But the serious collateral consequence was that some people supposed that this refutation therefore proved that God does *not* exist. This is a logical blunder, yet it did happen. And the same might happen with the reliability of Scripture. By elevating the inerrancy into a scientific postulate, the inerrantists render it a bad service. For if it is shown that this postulate is unscientific - which, to my mind, is not so difficult - many might draw the conclusion that Scripture is therefore *not* reliable. That is an unwarranted conclusion, but the inerrantists would still be responsible for that fact that many would draw such a conclusion.

4. THE CREDIBILITY OF SCRIPTURE

Several authors have made attempts to undo the notion of inerrancy, as used by inerrantists, of its scientific load. Berkouwer (1967:90; also cf. 124-126) argues that we should make a sharp distinction between error

in the sense of formal "inexactitude", "incorrectness", and error in the sense of "sin", "misleading", or "falsehood". He feels that not the (supposed) occurrence of factual inaccuracies but the "undeceitfulness" (*onbedrieglijkheid*) of Scripture should be the criterium of inerrancy. According to him, possible unevenness would not make the Bible a sinful, false, misleading book. The inerrantists themselves also see this as the primary criterium of inerrancy for that matter (art. XII of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy; Geisler, 1979:496): "We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit" - but this inerrancy is then extended to "the fields of history and science"; note: not nature, but (natural) *science!*

David Hubbard (1977:167f) has argued that such a view of error in the sense of deliberate misleading, instead of deviation from formal (scientific!) standards of accuracy, far more agrees with Scripture itself. As Vawter (1972:150) puts it: "The root idea of Biblical truth is thus reliability, permanency, steadfastness. Its opposite is not error, but deliberate lying" (also cf. Pannenberg, 1967:203). Scripture is "inerrant" in the sense that it never carries us away from the will of God or from the knowledge of the truth in Christ. Taylor (1980:33f) distinguishes three types of inerrancy:

- (a) the adherent of "salvation inerrancy" only recognizes inerrancy in matters of faith (e.g., dialectical theologians, neo-evangelicals);
- (b) "total inerrancy" is the view that "to concede any error at all of any kind is fatal to the authority of the whole" (thus, e.g., the inerrancy movement [WJO]);
- (c) "qualified inerrancy", i.e., inerrancy in all matters concerning salvation, cosmos, man, but not necessarily in every chronological, numerical or grammatical detail (thus e.g., René Pache and the well-known evangelical Statement of Lausanne).

Clark Pinnock (1984:127) apparently ties up with point (a) in pleading for the notion of a "focused inerrancy", i.e., inerrancy with respect to the "focus" of Scripture as a covenantal book, whose primary aim is to bring people into a salvational relationship with God. This seems to be the same as what others have referred to as the *scopus* of Scripture. But he would possibly also accept Taylor's "qualified inerrancy". That is, Scripture is not concerned to supply us with the precise value of π , to give us

geological instruction about the foundations of the earth, or to present us with historiography according to the scientific criteria of exactitude (cf. the examples in § 3).

For all these matters do not contribute to our salvation or the deepening of our knowledge of God or of man. Where Scripture, in the context of salvation, speaks of our nature and history - and it does so always from a pistical (or, fiduciary), not from a physical or historiographic standpoint - it always speaks trustworthy, i.e., with that truthfulness demanded with respect to salvation, but not necessarily with the precision demanded by modern scientific and historiographic criteria (cf. Bavinck, 1928:416f; Weber, 1955:264f).

The notion of a Bible "inerrant" with respect to its scopus but not necessarily in all kinds of factual details has aroused fierce resistance from the inerrantists. They fear that a dualism is introduced here between centre and periphery, between contents and form. This objection is often perfectly warranted; a clear example can be found in the report *God met ons* (1981). However, Berkouwer (1967:57; cf.77-100) argues that we should not generalize here. He points out that inspiration itself, as an act and a gift of the Spirit of Christ, refers to such a centrality, a divine concentration in the person and the work of Christ.

This concentration is very different from a reduction of the contents of Scripture, implying that certain "peripheral" parts would fall outside this reduction, and therefore could be full of errors. This is not necessarily, and out not to be, implied in the notion of the scopus of Scripture. This notion does not involve a flight from some fallible form to an infallible content (the kerygma), but involves the infallible, transcendent Word, manifesting itself in the immanent words (cf. Berkouwer, 1967:97f). See further in § 5.

I myself would prefer a qualified form of Taylor's "qualified inerrancy" (type c), i.e., with the explication that I would not hold that correctness in "every chronological, numerical, and grammatical detail" does not matter, but that such an exactitude is simply neither verifiable nor falsifiable. It therefore falls outside the field of theological testing. I believe that Scripture is perfectly reliable, even in its details. But this is presupposition of faith, not of a scientific nature, a presupposition which cannot be scientifically verified, nor falsified for that matter.

For faith it is self-evident that we have a perfect Scripture in our hand, but also that it does not matter at all whether we are capable of smoothing out, e.g., the numerical differences between Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. There are not "common" believers to whom such unevenness form a difficulty of faith. It is the inerrantists who theoretically make them into such a difficulty. They elevate these unevenness into scientific "problem", which they want to sell us as a "problem" of faith. Or rather, they do not do that on purpose; they simply seem to be too little conscious of the philosophical differences between concrete-practical experience (in this case, the practical faith-intercourse with Scripture) and the abstract-theoretical attitude of thought and knowledge (in this case, that of theology). Theoretical research creates "problems" - that is even it task - which for faith do not exist at all, not because faith is "naive" but because it is not characterized by the abstract-theoretical thought-attitude.

Therefore, such theological "problems" should not be imposed upon the believers, as if it is their concern whether all kinds of (alleged) discrepancies in Scripture can be smoothed out. Their faith does not depend on them. The inerrantist is not entitled to impose his (unconscious) scientism on the believers, and even make the total credibility of Scripture to depend on his theoretical reasoning. He will not "save" the faith of simple believers with his "scientific defense of inerrancy", but rather threaten it because his science does not hold water.

For the Christian, the credibility of Scripture is not an abstract-theoretical matter, but a matter of faith-confidence, by which, through the power of the Holy Spirit, he entrusts himself to the Word of God. Inerrantists do their best to prove that Christ and the apostles have extensively witnessed to the inspiration and the infallibility of the Old Testament (see, e.g., Archer, 1982:21f; Wenham, 1979; Blum, 1979), and I agree immediately. However, this does never concern "chronological, numerical, and grammatical details", but always exclusively those matters which are involved in the believer's daily faith-intercourse with Scripture: matters concerning salvation, God and man, strength, consolation, instruction, admonition, edification, deepening and enrichment of our faith.

In connection with this, Heyns (1988:31; also cf. 1976:116-118) rightly remarks:

To the Greek, truth is rather the pure representation of the objective reality, but in the Bible, truth is that quality of reality which addresses me so evidently that I have confidence in it, and know it will not disappoint me but will lead me to my God-given goal. We could also represent this as follows: to the Bible, truth is not simply truth in the pure establishment of facts, i.e., a truth statement is not necessarily identical with a reality statement. Only when the reality statement also includes a destinator statement, we have to do with truth. (...) God did not want to scientifically instruct us in Scripture about reality around and in us, but He wanted to show the proper relationship of this reality with respect to Him.⁶

The inerrantists' notion of truth is more related to the Greek than to the Biblical notion of truth. Is it not typically scientific form of logic to conclude, e.g., from the Lord's witness to the reliability of the Old Testament that *therefore* the discrepancies between Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles cannot have existed in the autographa? The testimony of Christ and the apostles lies on the *practical* level, under the viewpoint of the *pistical* aspect. The conclusions of the inerrantists lie on the *theoretical* level, under the viewpoint of the *logical-analytical* aspects.

It is predictable what the inerrantists' reaction is to counter-arguments as just given. Here is such a reaction, viz. by Millard Erickson (1982:391):

Attempts to reconcile these difficult passages [i.e., in the parallel Scriptures mentioned] are then regarded [by opponents] as "rationalism". As theologians and Biblical exegeses have become more familiar with the motifs of existentialism,

- 6 "Vir die Griek is waarheid eerder die suiwer weergawe van die objektiewe werklikheid, maar in die Bybel is waarheid daardie kwaliteit van die werklikheid wat my so evident aanspreek dat ek daarin vertrou het, en weet dat dit my nie sal teleurstel nie, maar my tot my Godgegewe doel sal lei. Ons sou dit ook soos volg kon weergee: vir die Bybel is die waarheid nog nie waarheid in die blote konstatering van feite nie, dit wil sê 'n waarheidsuitspraak is nie sonder meer identies met 'n werklikheidsuitspraak nie, eers wanneer die werklikheidsuitspraak ook 'n bestemmingsuitspraak insluit, het ons met waarheid te doen. (...) God wou ons in die Skrif nie wetenskaplik onderrig aangaande die werklikheid om en in ons nie, maar Hy wou die juiste relasie van hierdie werklikheid tot Hom laat sien".

however, it has become apparent that underlying such objections is the common existentialist emphasis on the paradoxicality of reality, the absurdity of the universe, and the impossibility of capturing reality within the hard and tight categories of logic.

Thus Erickson wants to impose upon us the simplistic alternative: either inerrantism or modern liberal, existentialist logic. But things are not that simple. I fully reject "modernism" with its anti-Biblical, humanistic, existentialistic, and scientistic roots. But the tragic of inerrantism is that it does not see that it is caught in the same scientism, as well as in a scholastic dualism, i.e., "-isms" that are not of Biblical but of a secular origin. Just as simplistic as the scheme inerrantism - modernism is the scheme rationalism - irrationalism. Where Erickson hears the reproach of "rationalism" he immediately strikes the ball back with the reproach of "existentialism", i.e., irrationalism. Apparently he feels that only an irrationalist could make him the bizar reproach of being a rationalist. Thus he too, like most of his opponents, remains caught in the ancient contrast of reason and feeling.

How are such contrasts (inerrantism - modernism; reason - feeling) ever to be overcome? Through a radical-Christian ontology and epistemology, which moreover is able to unmask all kinds of false philosophical roots, also within orthodoxy, and all kinds of false posing of problems, arising from false presuppositions. The forced smoothing out of "errors" in the Bible is an example of such a false problem, based upon such scientistic presuppositions. We have seen that, through his unconscious scientism, the inerrantist even wants to make the Bible's whole reliability to depend on his theoretical reasoning. This shows us how far also orthodox theology can drift away from our everyday faith as a consequence of its rationalism.

Without a radical-Christian ontology, theologians will time and again feel forced to choose either a theoretical-*rational*-conceptual approach, as in inerrantism, or an theoretical-*irrational*-conceptual approach, as in existentialist theology.

Reformational ontology shows a different way. The problem of inerrantia can only be approached in a way that is both rational and *supraconceptual*, viz., "ideal" (*ideematig*). That is, we cannot form a

concept but can only form an *idea* of inerrantia. This is not primarily a theoretical matter but surpasses theoretical, and ultimately rational, thought. It is a matter of our transcendent, central-religious faith, which can only *a posteriori* be accounted for with, but not enclosed in, rational-theological arguments.

To our "simple" supra-theoretical, suprarational faith, as long as it is not spoilt by false theoretical reasonings imposed upon it, it is a literal folly that certain unevenness would take anything away from the inspiration, the divine authority, and the absolute credibility of Scripture. To faith, such (alleged) inaccuracies can never be a danger to the scopus of the Bible: the salvation which God has prepared for fallen man, and which He accomplishes throughout history through promise and fulfilment, redemption and consummation. This salvation is realized in the person of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, by Whom man is eternally restored by faith in the communion with, and the service of, God. Of this salvation, Scripture is drenched "word by word". Therefore we still confess by God's Spirit the infallibility and reliability of the whole Bible.

I quote here whole-heartedly some words by Hughes (1983:193f) against scientism. My whole-heartedness may be an excuse for the length of the quotation:

(...) much thought we would like to have the original autographs, we are not at a disadvantage for not having them. No good purpose is served by taking refuge in unavailable autographs, and it is much healthier for us to speak simply, positively, and confidently of the Bible as the word of God without any qualification.

Rather than stretch our arm of our human reason to steady the ark of Scripture when it seems to be in danger of falling, we should approach the Bible with simplicity, reverence, and expectancy, and always with thankfulness, knowing it to be that inexplicable mystery that is the Word of God written. As such we acknowledge its teaching to be absolutely true and supremely authoritative. We shall not depend on our limited powers of logic or on the testimonies of experts and scholars (valuable though these may be in their place) for our persuasion that Scripture is indeed the Word of God, for it is only

by the inner working and witness of the Holy Spirit that this conviction becomes unshakably established in our hearts and minds. (...)

We who cherish the orthodox and evangelical faith have become too defensive about the Bible; we have grown accustomed to jumping from a worthy premise: "The Bible is the Word of God," to a conclusion negative in form: "... therefore it is inerrant." This, of course, is not wrong in itself, but I suggest that it reflects the position into which we have allowed ourselves to be maneuvered. We must move on to the offensive, boldly wielding this powerful weapon that we know to be the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17), as we positively (and, I believe, more biblically) proclaim to the world that the Bible is the Word of God and therefore is living, dynamic, penetrating, and unfailingly effective as it cuts with the edge of redemption for the believer and with the edge of condemnation for the unbeliever (Heb. 4:12).

5. THE SCOPUS OF SCRIPTURE⁷

In the previous § the notion of the "scopus" of Scripture was again mentioned. I add here a few remarks concerning this scopus.⁸ There have been many suggestions as to how to formulate this scopus (cf. Heyns, 1976:69f; 1977:171; Coetzee, 1984; Duvenage, 1985:21-24). Dooyeweerd speaks of "creation - fall - redemption". Others add to this the notion of "consummation". Some see "Christ" as the scopus of Scripture, others "the Self-revelation of God", or "the covenant", or "the kingdom" or "the theocentric and Christocentric motif", etc.⁹ Each of these is just a defective-human formulation, which is never really able to "catch" the suprarational, transcendent scopus of Scripture in some

7 Cf. on this § extensively Bavinck (1928:415-420); Berkouwer (1966:178-180; 1967:56-59,85-87,95-100).

8 The term is quite old. It was used both by Luther (WA 24,16: *Christus universae scripturae scopus est*) and by Calvin (Corp. Reform. 52,382: *Proinde non immerito nos ad fidem Christi revocat, tanquam ad scopum atque adeo summam*; also cf. *Ibid.* 47,321f; 50,45) (quoted by Rossouw, 1963:191,193).

9 One I would like to emphasize is the formulation by Heyns (1976:70): "the centre of Scripture is God's kingdom, and the centre of the centre is Jesus Christ."

modal-logical concepts but at best can approximate it by means of "ideas" (or, "supraconcepts").

At any rate this emphasis upon "central topics" should never lead to a distinction within the Bible of "more" and "less important" parts. The distinct identification of a *scopus* is to be sharply distinguished from a dualism, unfortunately introduced to modern theology, between centre and periphery, or between contents and form. Scripture is concentrated in the person and work of Christ but this concentration is something essentially different from a reduction of the Scriptural contents, in which certain "peripheral" Bible portions would fall outside this reduction, and therefore allegedly could very well be "unreliable in the historical- or natural-scientific sense". The *scopus* is not a reduction or summary of Scripture but the transcendent direction, the intention, the specific aim of the Bible as this aim expresses itself in each of the immanent words separately, viewed in their context of course, and in the coherence of all words of Scripture together. In this *scopus* we do not have to do with some "infallible contents" safely wrapped in some "fallible form" but with the infallible Word manifesting itself in the distinct words (cf. Berkouwer, 1967:77-100 especially 97). Every Bible portion is related to the *scopus* of Scripture, and has to be handled as such.

This matter of the distinction between concentration and reduction is of the most importance, and therefore I will try to formulate it a little more sharply in terms of transcendent vs. immanent, or supratemporal vs. temporal. Just like human existence should not be split into two temporal, hypostatized function complexes: the soul (with the mental functions, from the arithmetic to the sensitive one), Scripture, the temporal form of the eternal Word of God, should not be split into two temporal portions: the centre (the salvation-relevant part) and the periphery (the salvation-irrelevant part). In a radical-Christian anthropology, the soul or heart is the supratemporal concentration point of all temporal functions, not only the "natural" but also the mental functions, which are all seen as aspects of temporal human corporeality. In an analogous way, the *scopus* is the supratemporal concentration point of Scripture, the "kernel", the eternal Word of God, just like, conversely, this eternal Word comes to expression in all the separate temporal words of Scripture, with no exception.

It therefore must be clear that no Bible portion whatsoever could be severed from the scopus of Scripture, as is often attempted in modernism. On the other hand, fundamentalism sometimes wants to emphasize that the Bible speaks reliably about nature and history in such a strong way that it gives the impression as if this were the explicit aim of the Bible portions concerned. In this way, it actually makes precisely the same mistake as modernism: severing a portion of Scripture from its scopus. It gives the impression as if the Bible speaks at one moment of salvation in Christ, and at another moment of nature and history. The Bible is always concerned with salvation, in the widest sense of the word, and always with faith, in the widest sense of the scopus of Scripture. Nature is described in the Bible in so far as it is touched upon within the framework of salvation and faith in Christ, and is therefore exclusively considered from that viewpoint. In the Bible, history is exclusively referred to as salvation history. The Bible is always concerned with the development of God's counsels, and with the pathways along which these counsels are realized in Christ within history here on earth. The centre of the Bible is always Jesus Christ, and the realization of God's counsels in Him. Only within this scopus the Bible also often speaks of history, the cosmos, nature, and of course, we take these portions perfectly seriously, i.e. in the practical sense of faith. It is not the intention of Scripture, however, that we should derive historical or physical "data" from it apart from its scopus.

Heyns (1977:172f) has emphasized that the notion of the scopus underlines the organic character of Scripture, and *a priori* fully excludes any atomistic or mechanistic interpretation of Scripture. Fundamentalism often seems to see Scripture as an encompassing arsenal of texts which simply can be directly applied to all circumstances of life. (cf. Hodge, 1872:10, who calls Scripture the theologian's "storehouse of facts"). The notion of the scopus, if properly understood, can help us to show that such an approach and use of Scripture addressed us through its scopus, the latter expressing itself in the various statements of Scripture; but it does not address us through isolated statements of Scripture, naively and biblicistically severed from its scopus. Scripture does not offer us a systematic treatment of science, art, politics, economics, etc. Isolated Bible verses can never settle any purely special-scientific, political, eco-

nomical, or ethical problem as such. However, it touches directly upon each of these matters through the universal perspective of its scopus. It is in the latter that the dynamics of the reforming and transforming powers of the gospel messages lies enclosed.

I repeat: this scopus never implies a narrowing-down of the contents of Scripture in whatever way, but underlines the "radical" meaning of Scripture as it diverges in all the variety and multiplicity of its words and phrases. This does not mean that all words and phrases of Scripture stand in the same vital relationship to its scopus, just like, e.g., arms and legs in the human body are not equally vital to human existence as, e.g., hearts or lungs (cf. Heyns, 1976:67). On the other hand, arms and legs are not superfluous or incidental; they are my members, vital to my full identity. In the same way, some matters in Scripture are more central, others more peripheral. But in all of them, the "identity" of Scripture expresses itself through its scopus.

It is of interest to point out that the fundamentalist tendency to sever portions of Scripture from its scopus threatens to cause precisely that effect which the fundamentalist wants to avoid at all costs, viz. to endanger the inerrancy of Scripture. At least, this is argued by Lohfink as represented by Miskotte (1966:158):

Each book, each text is free of error, but only if it is read in the framework of the large totality. As soon as one isolates a word or a sentence from the board context, however, there exists no guarantee for the inerrancy anymore.¹⁰

10 Ieder boek, iedere tekst is vrij van dwaling, mits zij gelezen wordt in het raam van het grote geheel. Zodra men echter een woord of een zin isoleert uit dit brede verband, bestaat er voor de inerrantie geen garantie meer".

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