

**TEXT VERSUS WORD:
C. S. Lewis's View of Inspiration and the Inerrancy of Scripture**

“Remember the signs. Say them to yourself when you wake in the morning and when you lie down at night, and when you wake in the middle of the night. And whatever strange things may happen to you, let nothing turn your mind from following the signs. . . . Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly: I will not often do so down in Narnia.”¹

C. S. Lewis was the greatest apologist, and one of the greatest Christian thinkers, of the Twentieth Century. Sixty years after his death he is still highly popular with American Evangelicals, and rightly so. His influence has been positive in almost every area. There are however a few areas of doctrine in which his approach was less than fully biblical, and this is one of them. Instead of repeating his mistakes, I hope we can learn from them. Lewis was such a great thinker that even his mistakes are highly instructive.

Theology begins from the fact that God has revealed Himself in Christ through nature, history, mythology (for Lewis), and Scripture. For historic Christians, Scripture has always had a privileged place in that constellation of sources. Nature is cursed, corrupted by the human fall, and thus no longer reflects her Maker perfectly. History contains no events unrelated to God's Providence and His interactions with humanity, but it has many events not directly or obviously connected to the central salvific-historical core of creation, fall, and redemption in Christ. And history not interpreted by revelation has no rubrics of its own to point us to those mighty acts as especially significant, i.e., as *being* that central salvific core. Mythology, even if Lewis was right to view it as a source of revelation, is by his own accounting at best gleams of truth falling on corrupt human imaginations. Those sources of revelation therefore can only speak with full clarity and power if there is a key, a Rosetta Stone, as it were, to focus our attention in them and interpret what they give us. Scripture is admirably fitted to take that role. It contains not only words about God from people who were closest to the central events of salvation history, but also many sections which purport to deliver the words of God Himself. And for even the human reportage of and commentary on those words there is claimed a kind of “inspiration” that makes the whole Book and the Book as a whole not just words about God but the Word of God. It is therefore authoritative in a way that the other forms of revelation are not.

All historic Christians would affirm something like this about the Bible. But significant questions remain. What is the precise nature of the “inspiration” claimed for the biblical writers? What are the grounds of that claim? What is the nature and extent of the authority that it grants them? How far does it guarantee the accuracy, even the inerrancy and the infallibility, of their words? How does that authority relate to the authority of the church? What does all this mean for how we should read Scripture and use it in our theology? Lewis's perspectives on these questions are among his most insightful—and controversial.

INSPIRATION

The Bible is set apart from other human books by the claim that it is uniquely *inspired*. Where does the concept of “inspiration” come from? The Apostle Paul claimed of the Old-Testament writings that “All Scripture is inspired by God” and hence “profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). The word translated

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (1953; NY: HarperCollins, 1981), p. 25.

“inspired” is the Greek word **ΘΕΟΠΝΕΥΣΤΟΣ** (*theopneustos*), which literally means “breathed (*pneustos*) or spoken by God (*theos*).” That which is inspired according to the Apostle is the **γραφή** (*graphe*), the writings themselves (not just the thoughts or ideas in them). So the human words written by the Prophets are in some sense also being attributed by Paul to God. Then Peter indicates that the writings of the Apostles also count as Scripture, referring to Paul’s writings as belonging with “the rest of the Scriptures” (2 Pet. 3:16), which is generally taken by historic Christians as extending the claim for inspiration to the New Testament as well.

The question is, *in what sense* can we say that the words of Scripture are the words of God Himself as well as the words of Moses, Isaiah, Paul, etc.? The claim made by the Greek text of 2 Timothy 3:16 is a very strong one, and the earliest of the Church Fathers tended to take it strongly, picturing the human authors as flutes played by the Holy Spirit or as secretaries taking dictation from Him. This is known as the “mechanical dictation” theory of inspiration. However, because the personalities and styles of the individual human authors come through in their individual works so strongly, few Christians (even Fundamentalists) hold that theory today, except for specific passages such as the Ten Commandments which are actually presented as dictated or written by God directly. The opposite extreme would be to see inspiration as essentially no different from the elevated state of mind in which any literary genius writes. In this sense we could say that Shakespeare was “inspired.” No historic Christian would hold that biblical inspiration as described by Paul was nothing more than that.

The historic doctrine as held by both conservative Protestants and traditional Catholics is called “plenary verbal inspiration.” The words (*verbal*), all of them (*plenary*) are *inspired*, or breathed by God. As one popular systematic theology text summarizes it very succinctly, “All the words of Scripture are God’s words.”² Nineteenth-century Princeton theologian Charles Hodge defined inspiration more fully as “an influence of the Holy Spirit on the minds of certain select men which rendered them the organs of God for the infallible communication of his mind and will.”³ Contemporary Evangelical Millard Erickson in a similar vein calls it “that supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit on the Scripture writers which rendered their writings an accurate record of the revelation, or which resulted in what they wrote actually being the Word of God.”⁴ Or as I have expressed it, inspiration is “that work of the Holy Spirit by which He produced the Word of God using human minds as instruments, so guiding, influencing, and superintending their activity that the words they wrote were the very words of God.”⁵

The standard doctrine is more subtle than mechanical dictation, then. God influenced and guided the minds of the human authors so that the words they wrote fully expressed their own personalities and were their words, generated by their thought processes, but equally were the very words God chose and wanted to express His meaning and convey His revelation to human beings.

LEWIS ON INSPIRATION

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 75.

³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols (1871-3; rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 1:154.

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), p. 225.

⁵ Donald T. Williams, *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994; rpt. Wipf & Stock), p. 25.

C. S. Lewis was not a professional theologian, so we cannot expect the same kind of precision in his concept of inspiration. This is a weakness and also (potentially) a strength; wrestling with the idea without using the traditional language might produce some interesting insights. He wrote to Lee Turner on 19 July 1958:

The main difficulty seems to me not the question *whether* the Bible is inspired, but what exactly we mean by this. Our ancestors, I take it, believed that the Holy Spirit either just replaced the minds of the authors (like the supposed “control” in automatic writing) or at least dictated to them as secretaries. . . . I myself think of it as analogous to the incarnation—that, as in Christ a human soul and body are taken up and made the vehicle of Deity, so in Scripture a mass of human legend, history, moral teaching, etc. are taken up and made the vehicle of God’s word.⁶

It is clear that Lewis rejected the mechanical dictation theory. It is not clear who the “ancestors” are to whom he is referring. Much more nuanced views of inspiration existed by the time of the Reformation, but Lewis does not interact with them, and as we shall see, his statements about “Fundamentalists” show no direct knowledge of their actual views, which he presents in a caricatured form typical of those not actually part of their circle. These broad brush strokes make us suspect that Lewis had never encountered a nuanced statement of the classic doctrine that would allow him to distinguish it from mechanical dictation.

The analogy with the incarnation is suggestive, but raises the question how far it is to be pushed. In the incarnation, God actually became man. But Lewis stops short of saying that the legend, history, etc. actually become the word of God; they become its “vehicle.” What exactly does that mean? Human literature is “taken into the service” of the Word of God.⁷ Again, this is a small step back from affirming with Paul that the writings are inspired in a sense that makes them actually breathed by God, makes them His words. And this small step may have huge consequences as the doctrine of inspiration is worked out, as we shall see.

Lewis agrees with the classical doctrine that inspiration involves the influence of the Holy Spirit on the minds of the biblical authors, but he is somewhat vague about the nature and extent of that influence. He writes, “On all of these [forms of literature] I suppose a Divine pressure.”⁸ “Pressure” is an interesting metaphor. The human authors are being pushed, in the direction of truth, we may suppose—but how effectively and how far? Lewis wrote to Janet Wise on 5 Oct. 1955, “I believe the composition, presentation, & selection of all the books to have been guided by the Holy Ghost. But I think He meant us to have sacred myth and sacred fiction as well as sacred history.”⁹ Given Lewis’s explication of “myth become fact,”¹⁰ there is not necessarily any departure from classic doctrine here. But we wonder what counts as “fiction.” And other statements open up more definite rifts.

For example, we are told that “All Holy Scripture is in some sense—though not all in the same sense—the word of God.”¹¹ In similar words,

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, 3 vols., ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004) 3:960-61.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1958), p. 111.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Lewis, *Letters*, 3:653.

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, “Myth Become Fact,” *World Dominion* XXII (Sept.-Oct. 1944), pp. 267-70; rpt. *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 63-7.

¹¹ Lewis, *Reflections*, p. 19.

The whole Old Testament consists of the same sort of material as any other literature—chronicle (some of it obviously pretty accurate), poems, moral and political diatribes, romances, and what not; but all taken into the service of God’s word. Not all, I suppose, in the same way.¹²

This raises all sorts of questions: In what sense/way? What are the different senses/ways? How do we know which one we are dealing with in any given passage? Because Lewis is answering *ad hoc* questions and not writing a treatise on how we should receive and use the Bible, he does not answer such questions. But the nebulousness of his concept of inspiration raises them, and does so insistently. For Lewis, the words of Scripture convey the Word of God, they are the vehicle of the Word of God, they are in the service of the Word of God. But he never says they *are* the Word of God. The difference is not trivial. In fact, what we affirm at this point controls how everything else in our doctrine of Scripture will develop.

SCRIPTURE, MYTH, AND HISTORY

Almost all Christians recognize that Scripture contains many genres: history, poetry, law, prophecy, biography, epistle, apocalyptic, etc. Each has something to contribute to the overall message, and they make their contributions in different ways, each needing to be read according to its own nature. Lewis as a literary scholar was of course sensitive to this aspect of the biblical text. He is especially good at helping us read the Psalms as what they are, poetry, in *Reflections on the Psalms*. He also has much to say about the two genres that may be most critical for accurately understanding the Bible: history and myth.

History is crucial because the ultimate form of revelation for Christians is the incarnation, where God actually enters into human history in Christ. Deed and Word coincide in the biblical text in such a way as to make the Bible the key to understanding God’s revelation in history, highlighting and elucidating the central events that show Him to us. But biblical history does not begin with the life of Christ. The birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ are the climax of a sequence of God’s interventions in history that stretch from the expulsion from the Garden to the call of Abraham, the Exodus, the Davidic/Solomonic kingdom, and the exile and return of Judah from exile, all setting the stage for God’s ultimate visitation of our earth in the coming of Christ.

Lewis understood the importance of biblical history, but was not willing to commit himself to the accuracy of every detail of it as reported. He wrote to Clyde S. Kilby on 7 May 1959, “The value of some things (e.g. the Resurrection) depended on whether they really happened: but the value of others (e.g. the fate of Lot’s wife) hardly at all. And the ones whose historicity matters are, as God’s will, those where it is plain.”¹³ Conservative believers will appreciate the emphasis on the reality of the resurrection, and the plainness of that reality. But they might wonder what about the other narrative, other than its greater remoteness, makes it somehow less historical. The fate of Lot’s wife is certainly of trivial importance compared to the resurrection; but, then, so is everything. And the text itself does not indicate any hesitancy about its actually having happened. If the New-Testament history is not something that just happened to occur, but is the fulfillment and completion of a *series* of events beginning in the Old

¹² Lewis, *Reflections*, p. 111.

¹³ Lewis, *Letters*, 3:1045.

Testament, it may not be so easy to dismiss certain events as not needing to have happened. And how do we determine which events needed to have happened and which did not? The small gap that opened up between text and Word in Lewis's view of inspiration opens up space for many questions and creates room for uncertainty. This crack in the door may not be easy to close once it has opened.

Lewis makes some conservative readers bristle when he talks about myth in Scripture, because most people who employ that language use it to mean that the Bible is not essentially different from other ancient religious writings, and that we can dismiss its historicity much more cavalierly than Lewis does. But if we understand how Lewis used that language, there is nothing inherently problematic about it, nothing inherently contradictory to historicity. Biblical myth is "myth become fact." "Just as God is none the less God by being Man, so the Myth remains Myth even when it becomes Fact. The story of Christ demands from us, and repays, not only a religious and historical, but also an imaginative response."¹⁴ This is a positive contribution to our appreciation of biblical revelation.

But the gap between text and Word opens up room for problems here as well. Not all that is mythical in Scripture seems to have made the full transition to "fact" in Lewis's mind. He wrote to a Mrs. Johnson on 14 May 1955:

If you take the Bible as a whole, you see a process in which something which in its earliest levels (those aren't necessarily the ones that come first in the Book as now arranged) was hardly moral at all, and was in some ways not unlike the pagan religions, is gradually purged and enlightened until it becomes the religion of the great prophets and of Our Lord Himself.¹⁵

We need not argue about the process itself as described here. God's people were surrounded by paganism and not unaffected by it. But was this gradual purging completed by the influence of the Spirit in inspiration, or is some of the Old Testament still hardly moral and not unlike paganism? What does this do to our picture of Jahweh before the "great prophets" appeared? The answers are unclear at best.

Lewis has a lot to say about the role of myth in Scripture in his brilliant book *Miracles*. There too we have much intriguing insight but also many unanswered questions.

The Hebrews, like other people, had mythology: but as they were the chosen people, so their mythology was the chosen mythology—the mythology chosen by God to be the vehicle of the earliest sacred truths, the first step in that process which ends in the New Testament where truth has become completely historical.¹⁶ (M 129)

The chosen mythology, chosen to give us the right picture of God, is a wonderful way of putting it. But this time the assumed religious evolution itself raises troubling questions. So Genesis, we presume, is pretty much simply myth? Myth has not completely become fact until the New Testament? What does that say about the Exodus? Where do we draw the line, when Christ is presented as the Passover Lamb and the Lord's Supper is clearly a re-application of the Passover meal? It is all one seamless history to the biblical writers. But, to Lewis:

¹⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1947), p. 139.

¹⁵ Lewis, *Letters*, 3:608.

¹⁶ Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 129.

Just as, on the factual side, a long preparation culminates in God's becoming incarnate as Man, so, on the documentary side, the truth first appears in mythical form and then by a long process of condensing or focusing becomes incarnate as History. This involves the belief that Myth in general is . . . at its best, a real though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination.¹⁷

How far does inspiration focus it? How far can we *trust* inspiration to have focused myth for us? If the same God worked in history all along, and inspired the Prophets as well as the Apostles to write about that history, why should myth not be taken as fact all the way along? The gap between text and Word then raises issues of trust, and that leads us to the next topic: the doctrine of inerrancy.

INERRANCY?

The classic doctrine of inspiration, because it follows the Apostle Paul in not positing any distance or distinction between the words of Scripture and the words of God, any gap between text and Word, draws the conclusion that because God is a God of truth, therefore the Bible teaches only truth; its statements when rightly interpreted are true in all that they affirm. The technical term for this doctrine is *inerrancy*. Scripture has no errors; it teaches only the truth; it doesn't get anything wrong.

The doctrine of inerrancy applies of course only to what the text *affirms* or *asserts*. A biblical character, for example, who notes that the sun has risen is not in error because he is not making a statement affirming Ptolemaic cosmology; he might well have believed it, but that is not his topic now; he is simply using a common expression to assert that it is morning. When the trees of the field clap their hands, the Psalmist is using poetic language; he is not making a scientific statement about oak or cedar anatomy. The Bible speaks truth, and only truth, in all that it *affirms*.

Many modern people assume that the complete factual accuracy of Scripture has long been exploded by research, but in fact the case is very different. The Bible, where it can be checked, proves to be remarkably accurate. Not every individual statement can be independently verified, and there do remain discrepancies that have not been explained; but when one comes to the text without an anti-supernatural bias, they are surprisingly few. The doctrine of inerrancy cannot be established by inductive study of the external evidence because discrepancies will always remain; you cannot prove a negative (*no errors*) that way. "Remarkably accurate" will always be the most that can be proved by the inductive method. But it is not unreasonable for conservative believers to attribute the remaining problems always to their own ignorance, not to the text. (That is the practical meaning of inerrancy.) It is a reasonable conclusion, a reasonable and consistent act of faith, for those who accept the Bible as the Word of God on the testimony of Paul and Jesus.¹⁸ They do not claim in a circular manner that the Bible is inspired because it says it is; they extend their trust to cover the gaps left by empirical study because they trust Jesus, whom God raised from the dead. And they have found that trust to be justified over and

¹⁷ Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 139.

¹⁸ See John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1972) for a classic exposition of Christ's own teachings on Scripture. It is on the authority of Christ, established by His resurrection, that Evangelicals have traditionally affirmed the inerrancy of Scripture.

over again.

But when there is any distance at all, even a small one, between the words of the Bible and God's words, then all error cannot logically be excluded, and the believer's implicit trust in the text is unavoidably compromised. So we should not be surprised to find that Lewis, who leaves such a gap, does not affirm inerrancy. In fact, he trusted the Bible far more than most liberal scholars who deny inerrancy, sometimes sounding as if he did believe in the doctrine. For example, he wrote to Dom Bede Griffiths on 28 May 1952, "Yes, Pascal does directly contradict several passages in Scripture and must be wrong."¹⁹ He wrote to Mrs. Emily McLay on 3 Aug. 1953 that "I take it as a first principle that we must not interpret any one part of Scripture so that it contradicts other parts; and specially we must not use an Apostle's teaching so that it contradicts that of Our Lord."²⁰ Both of these statements logically entail inerrancy. If there are errors in the text, then clearly some few passages (those which contain them) at least could contradict other passages (those that don't). To presuppose complete consistency among the biblical writers is to imply that they all share the same truth. If Scripture ever errs, then it is theoretically possible that Pascal could disagree with one of those erring passages and still be right. One is tempted to say that Lewis typically treated the New Testament at least as if it were for all practical purposes inerrant. Indeed, in most of his writings he seems to uphold a high view of Scripture and to encourage his readers to trust the Bible over the conclusions of its modern critics. "I do not wish to reduce the skeptical element in your minds. I am only suggesting that it need not be reserved exclusively for the New Testament and the Creeds. Try doubting something else."²¹

Nevertheless, Lewis could not say that the Bible was inerrant, and indeed does say the opposite: After all that inspiration as he understood it could do, "Errors of minor fact are permitted to remain."²² Which, we wonder, are the minor facts? But it gets worse than that:

The human qualities of the raw materials show through. Naivety, error, contradiction, even (as in the cursing Psalms) wickedness are not removed. The total result is not "the Word of God" in the sense that every passage, in itself, gives impeccable science or history. It carries the Word of God; and we (under grace, with attention to tradition and to interpreters wiser than ourselves, and with the use of such intelligence and learning as we may have) receive that word from it not by using it as an encyclopedia or an encyclical but by steeping ourselves in its tone or temper and so learning its overall message.²³

Whatever we may conclude about Scripture itself, Lewis was at least on occasion inconsistent. One logically cannot believe that "contradiction" is "not removed" and then also give the advice that we must never interpret Scripture in such a way that it contradicts itself. If any contradiction remains, then there must be at least one set of passages for which "contradiction" is the correct, the only accurate, interpretation.

Even more shocking to many of Lewis's fans would be the inclusion of "wickedness."

¹⁹ Lewis, *Letters*, 3:195.

²⁰ Lewis, *Letters*, 3:354.

²¹ C. S. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), pp. 152-66; p. 164.

²² Lewis, *Letters*, 3:961.

²³ Lewis, *Reflections*, pp. 111-12.

Now, the stoutest inerrantist believes that there is wickedness in the Bible, in the sense that human sin is discussed very frankly and the wickedness of evil people such as King Ahab is reported accurately. But Lewis means something quite different. Commenting on David's statement in Psalm 23, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies," Lewis explains, "The poet's enjoyment of his present prosperity would not be complete unless those horrid Joneses (who used to look down their noses at him) were watching it all and hating it. . . . The pettiness and vulgarity of it, especially in the surroundings, are hard to endure."²⁴ The cursing (or "imprecatory") Psalms contain hate and vindictiveness according to Lewis: "I think that even in the Psalms this evil is already at work."²⁵ This is not just evil being described, explained, or reported; these are real evil attitudes on the part of biblical writers, part of their "raw material" that inspiration has not completely removed, and which remains in our Bibles as part of the *content* of their writing.

There are other ways of understanding those passages, less unflattering to the writers.²⁶ Our purpose here is to see that Lewis's doctrine of inspiration allowed him to view them as, not just reporting, but embodying evil. It is little wonder that he had to appeal away from specific passages to the "overall message" in order to find the "word of God" in the Bible. Once again, the inadequacy of this approach to the text is revealed on the level of practical advice. What good is it to "steep ourselves" in the "tone or temper" of Scripture if that tone and temper include jealousy, hate, and vindictiveness? Someone has to choose which passages we are to believe and which we are not, which we are to steep ourselves in and which we are not. Once the text only *conveys* the Word of God, rather than *being* the Word of God, the authority is inevitably transferred from the text to the interpreter, whether the reader or someone else, some "expert" to whom the reader defers.

The inerrancy of Scripture and the authority of Scripture are then inevitably linked, because our view of both flows from our understanding of inspiration. Lewis would have been loath to transfer divine authority from the text to the critic, because he understood how little the critics deserve our trust.²⁷ But the gap he posits between text and Word cannot help but have that effect. "The scriptural imagery has authority. It comes to us from writers who were closer to God than we, and it has stood the test of Christian experience down through the centuries."²⁸ Well, yes. But you could say the same thing about many of the Christian writers of the patristic era. You could say the same thing about Pascal, who must nevertheless be wrong when he disagrees with Scripture, while other biblical passages are not to be interpreted as doing so. This statement does nothing to explain the unique authority that all branches of Christendom give the biblical text. Lewis cannot explain it, because words about God, however venerable and profound they may be, cannot have the same authority as God's Word.

LEWIS AND "FUNDAMENTALISM"

²⁴ Lewis, *Reflections*, p. 21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁶ See for example Donald T. Williams, "An Apologist's Evening Prayer: Reflecting on C. S. Lewis's *Reflections on the Psalms*," *C. S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy*, 4 vols, ed. Bruce L. Edwards. (London: Praeger, 2007): 3:237-56.

²⁷ Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism."

²⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (pub. in England under the title *Transposition and Other Addresses*), ed. with an Introduction by Walter Hooper. (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1949; rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965; expanded edition, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1980), p. 33.

In the doctrine of Scripture, particularly with reference to its inspiration, authority, and inerrancy, then, Lewis comes short of teaching the historic doctrine of the church. He does not seem to be aware that this is the case; indeed, it was never his intention so to fall short. As he said in *The Problem of Pain*, “If any parts of the book are ‘original’ in the sense of being novel or unorthodox, they are so against my will and as a result of my ignorance.”²⁹ This is a promise he usually keeps admirably. How then did Lewis manage to be unorthodox on this point? I think it was precisely as a result of his ignorance. His statements about what he called “Fundamentalism” help us to pinpoint exactly where this ignorance lay. Here is what I mean:

I have been suspected of being what is called a Fundamentalist . . . because I never regard any narrative as unhistorical simply on the ground that it includes the miraculous. Some people find the miraculous so hard to believe that they cannot imagine any reason for its acceptance other than a prior belief that every sentence in the Old Testament has historical or scientific truth.³⁰

In a similar vein, Lewis wrote to Janet Wise on 5 Oct. 1955, “My own position is not Fundamentalist, if Fundamentalism means accepting as a point of faith at the outset the proposition, ‘Every statement in the Bible is completely true in the literal, historical sense.’”³¹ Also relevant is Lewis’s assumption about the ubiquity of commitment to the mechanical dictation theory on the part of our “ancestors.”³²

Lewis understood that Fundamentalists see the Bible as infallible and inerrant. “One can respect, and at moments envy, both the Fundamentalist’s view of the Bible and the Roman Catholic’s view of the Church.”³³ But he also equated Fundamentalism with literalism, mechanical dictation, and a naïve approach to genre, reducing every statement in Scripture to history or science. Now, Lewis knew that not all of the Bible is history and that none of it is science, in the modern sense of that word. He knew that mechanical dictation is not a credible theory of inspiration capable of dealing with the full complexity of the biblical text. So “Fundamentalism” did not seem a viable option to him.

This is all well and good—except that “Fundamentalists” (and their living heirs, Evangelicals, as well as conservative Roman Catholics) will feel that their position in being rejected has been horribly caricatured, since their more informed teachers have never held any such thing. The notion, for example, that “plenary verbal inspiration” and “the mechanical dictation theory” are synonymous is simply ignorant. The so-called Fundamentalists’ actual tradition as summarized in the 1978 “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” maintains that “We must pay the most careful attention to [the Bible’s] claims and character as a human production.” As a result,

History must be treated as history, poetry as poetry, hyperbole and metaphor as hyperbole and metaphor, generalization and approximation as what they are, and so forth. Differences between literary conventions in Bible times and in ours must also be observed: Since, for instance, nonchronological narration and imprecise citation were

²⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1967), p. viii.

³⁰ Lewis, *Reflections*, p. 109.

³¹ Lewis, *Letters*, 3:652.

³² *Ibid.*, 3:960-61.

³³ Lewis, *Reflections*, p. 112.

conventional and acceptable and violated no expectations in those days, we must not regard these things as faults when we find them in Biblical writers. When total precision of a particular kind was not expected nor aimed at, it is no error not to have achieved it. Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed.³⁴

This passage simply summarizes what “Fundamentalist” theologians had held all along, since Hodge and Warfield at least, and definitely what they were saying in the 1950’s. For an example of a British Evangelical who establishes this point, see J. I. Packer’s seminal book *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, which was published in 1958.³⁵

How did this happen? Lewis was part of an intellectual environment in which “Fundamentalism” was not considered intellectually respectable, one, more importantly, in which real Fundamentalists were just not read. Thus it simply never seems to have crossed his mind that Scriptural inerrancy could be held apart from other positions that he knew to be false. He falsely and mistakenly *equated* it with mechanical dictation and literalism. How Lewis would have responded to a more nuanced version of the doctrine of inerrancy than he was apparently ever exposed to we will never know. The point here is to understand that in rejecting that doctrine he was rejecting a straw man, a caricature of what Fundamentalism (and its modern heir, Evangelicalism) actually taught, or teaches. So in an uncharacteristic logical and informational hastiness, Lewis let the infallible and inerrant baby slip away with the literalist bathwater.

READING SCRIPTURE

Lewis is at his weakest as a theologian in his treatment of inspiration and inerrancy. Yet, unlike many who say superficially similar things, Lewis was basically a man of faith. His failings were motivated by misunderstanding, not unbelief. This plus his unsurpassed expertise as a student of literature enabled him often to be an excellent practical guide to the art and skill of reading the Bible. Reading in general was after all something Lewis was very good at! His faith, his rejection of chronological snobbery, and his sheer common sense combined to produce practical advice that is often consistent with a higher view of Scripture theologically than he was able to affirm.

Lewis for example realized that basic to any other kind of reading of the Bible we might do is the grammatico-historical approach. Any passage, in other words, means not what it happens to mean “to me,” but what it would have meant to its original audience. Any personal application we make must start with that. In other words, the passage means what the words mean in the light of their literary context, their grammatical constructions, and their historical setting. “Any saying is to be taken in the sense it would naturally have borne in the time and place of utterance.”³⁶ Each individual passage should also be understood in the light of the whole. We have seen that Lewis forbade the interpretation of any passage in such a way as to

³⁴ Quoted in J. I. Packer and Thomas C. Oden, *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p. 50..

³⁵ J. I. Packer, *“Fundamentalism” and the Word of God* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1958).

³⁶ C. S. Lewis, “Why I Am Not a Pacifist,” *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1980): p. 87.

make it contradict any other.³⁷ In order to follow this rule we must know what the other passages say. It is dangerous to build any doctrine on a single isolated proof-text. Lewis takes that commonplace injunction one step further: each genre needs to be seen in the light of the contributions of the others. In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, History tells John that "The pictures alone are dangerous and the Rules alone are dangerous."³⁸ Here "pictures" refers to myth, and "rules" to Law, to Torah.

Proof-texting is a common mistake made by people who trust the Bible implicitly without understanding the necessarily prior role of context in understanding its texts. Lewis wrote to a Mrs. Johnson on 8 Nov. 1952,

It is Christ Himself, not the Bible, who is the true word of God. The Bible, read in the right spirit and with the guidance of good teachers will bring us to Him. . . . But we must not use the Bible (our forefathers often did) as a sort of Encyclopedia out of which texts (isolated from their contexts and not read with attention to the whole nature and purpose of the books in which they occur) can be taken for use as weapons.³⁹ (3:246)

An even more pernicious form of proof-texting is bibliomancy, which adds a dangerous subjectivity to the context-free zone which is personal interpretation. Lewis wrote to a Mr. Green on 18 June 1962, warning that "The habit of taking isolated texts from the Bible and treating the effect they have on one in a particular mood at a particular moment as direct messages from God is v. misleading."⁴⁰

We might quibble with the stark dichotomy Lewis draws between Christ and the Bible as the "true" Word of God. He is trying to make a legitimate point: Christ, not the Bible, is the *ultimate* Word of God. Nevertheless, according to the New Testament authors, both are in their way truly the Word of God. But the advice itself is sound and foundational. Paul's identification of the very words of Scripture as God-breathed explains why the actual words as they were actually written, including both their literary and historical context, are so important; accepting that identification should commit us to respecting the original text and its form as Lewis urges. His faithful instincts allowed him to point us in the right direction here even without that support.

Lewis wrote to Clyde S. Kilby on 7 May 1959, "That the over-all operation of Scripture is to convey God's Word to the reader (he also needs His inspiration) who reads it in the right spirit, I fully believe. That it also gives true answers to all the questions (often religiously irrelevant) which he might ask, I don't."⁴¹ Two important points are to be noted here. First is that reading the Bible for a believer is not a purely human enterprise. The same Spirit who inspired the writers also is present to help humble readers who trust Him with a teachable attitude. They are not on their own. Technically, Lewis should have used the word *illumination* here instead of *inspiration* for the aid the Spirit gives the reader. The theological tradition carefully distinguishes the two, and for good reason: Illumination, though real, does not carry the same promise of infallibility as inspiration does. Second, illumination does not overturn the importance of sound grammatico-historical hermeneutics. The Spirit will not lead us to a

³⁷ Lewis, *Letters*, 3:354.

³⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress: an Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism* (London: Bless, 1933; rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 152.

³⁹ Lewis, *Letters*, 3:246.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:1353.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 3:1046.

meaning or application that is not consistent with what He inspired in the beginning when He influenced the original writers to choose the words they did. We must be asking the same question as the writer in order to get the right answer. It is another reason why naive prooftexting is such a dangerous practice.

Finally, Lewis would have us resist a premature accommodationism in our reading of the New Testament, especially the words of our Lord. It is a tendency of liberal-leaning theologians to try to evade any teaching that does not fit their modernist paradigms by dismissing it as merely a reflection of First-Century culture. Jesus did not really represent the Father when he taught about Hell, for example—he was just reflecting, or accommodating Himself to, beliefs that were current at the time, because otherwise people would not have understood Him. Lewis's chronological snobbery detector must have gone off with sirens and flashing red lights at such a ploy. He also realized that in an event so momentous as the Incarnation, nothing could be left to chance.

If we once accept the doctrine of the Incarnation, we must surely be very cautious in suggesting that any circumstance in the culture of first-century Palestine was a hampering or distorting influence upon his teaching. Do we suppose that the scene of God's earthly life was selected at random?—that some other scene would have served better?⁴²

Though his statements about inspiration are sometimes lacking, Lewis's practice often took the inspiration of Scripture more seriously than some Evangelicals do. Everything in the text, even the choice of metaphor, is there for a reason, and theology has to reckon with the revelation as God gave it, not brushing any detail of it aside for ideological reasons. These are supremely important points. Lewis's practice at this point is often a better guide than his theorizing.

CONCLUSION

Lewis is at his weakest as a theologian when expounding the doctrine of inspiration and its corollaries such as inerrancy. He has good things to say about genre and interpretation and about trusting the text over its negative critics. But an unfortunate lack of interaction with the actual biblical teaching on this topic, not only of Paul (as outlined above) but also of our Lord,⁴³ left him vulnerable to some of the prejudices of the educated class and kept him from overcoming them as well as he did in most other areas. He was unable to distinguish the historic doctrine of the church from a caricature of Fundamentalism. Not seeing the biblical identification of the words of Scripture as the Word of God, he left a gap between text and Word that unintentionally compromises the Bible's authority. He had a high view of Scripture but one that stopped short of affirming its inerrancy. Fortunately, his practice in interpretation and obedience was often better than his doctrine.

APPLICATIONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Why have we taken such a critical look at Lewis's teaching in this area? A better

⁴² C. S. Lewis, *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1960), p. 97..

⁴³ See John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1972) for a good exposition of Christ's own teachings on Scripture.

understanding of inspiration and inerrancy can help us see the importance of devoted reading and faithful interpretation leading to loving obedience. If we surpass Lewis in understanding at this point, let us not fall behind him in reading and obedience. For he realized that obedience is the bottom line, even when it is costly. As Puddleglum tells the children, “Aslan didn’t tell Pole what would happen. He only told her what to do. That fellow [the prince] will be the death of us once he’s up, I shouldn’t wonder. But that doesn’t let us off following the sign.”⁴⁴

What would a person understanding and practicing a fully biblical doctrine of inspiration look like? In the words of the Psalmist, “His delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night” (Ps. 1:2). Or as Moses expresses it more fully,

And these words which I am commanding you today shall be on your heart. And you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead and you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:6-9)

Or, as Lewis puts it, “Remember the signs. Say them to yourself when you wake in the morning and when you lie down at night, and when you wake in the middle of the night. And whatever strange things may happen to you, let nothing turn your mind from following the signs.”⁴⁵

Amen.

NOTE: For more on Lewis’s theology, see *Deeper Magic: The Theology behind the Writings of C. S. Lewis* (Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2016).

⁴⁴ Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, p. 175.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.