

## FALLIBLE MANUSCRIPTS--INFALLIBLE AUTOGRAPHS

*by Roger Nicole*

Those who do not accept the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy frequently present the following three objections:

I) The fact that our various manuscripts are not absolutely identical indicates that God is not concerned with total inerrancy--otherwise he would have seen to it that no slip whatsoever should have occurred in the transmission process.

II) Since we do not possess the autographs in any case why should we insist on asserting the inerrancy of something that is not available to us?

III) The idea of the inerrancy of the autographs is simply a loophole devised by upholders of inerrancy in order to find an escape when they are confronted with difficulties in Scripture which they are unable to resolve. This is a modern argument which betrays lack of scholarly candor.

We certainly need to address these objections, preferably in inverse order.

1) The distinctions between autographs and the various forms in which the Scripture is available to us is by no means a recent development.

Augustine was mentioning this as an explanation of certain problems that he might be unable to resolve:

"I have learned to yield this respect and honour only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the MS is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it." (Letter to Jerome 82.3) Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, 1st Ser. Vol 1, Pg. 350.

2) In no way can it be claimed that the distinction between autographs and copies was a cheap device invented by upholders of inerrancy in order to avoid embarrassment. What is at the root of this distinction is the undeniable difference between various forms in which the text of Scripture has reached us. We are compelled to ask the question, "In which of these forms does the fact of inspiration manifest itself in the maximum manner?" The answer to this question is obvious; "It must be in the original form of Scripture rather than in some deformation which developed in the process of textual transmission." Hence the interest, value, and even necessity of the science of textual criticism.

3) Textual criticism provides for us strong evidence that the Bible has been preserved for us in a remarkably faithful manner. Of all the texts of antiquity, with the exception of those inscribed in stone or metal, there is none that can be compared to the Scriptures for ~~the~~ excellency in transmission. We possess also more manuscripts of the Bible than of any other book. One should not, therefore, lightly have recourse to the hypothesis of a corruption in the text in order to explain difficulties. Informed Evangelicals will rarely use this method of explanation, and that only when textual

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variance<sup>ts</sup> would indicate that there is a possibility of error or when the subject treated lends itself especially well to mistakes in copying (proper names, numbers, etc.). It is much wiser to leave certain difficulties presently unresolved than to cast doubt on the text of Scripture when the transmission has been so extraordinarily faithful. Hort, in his day, stated that not one word in a thousand in the New Testament was really subject to serious doubt, textually. This represents a 99.9 percent purity, superior even to that of ivory soap! This figure may reflect an undue confidence by Westcott and Hort in the accuracy of the Sinaiticus and Vaticanus codices but present day research has tended to confirm greatly our general confidence in the reliability of the transmission process.

4) It is this exceptional faithfulness which allows us to trust the Bible in our hands in the assurance that it is veritably the word of God insofar as it is conformed to the original. Some variant readings were in existence in the days of Jesus Christ and the apostles and yet this did not hinder them from quoting the Old Testament as the Word of God. The same would be true for us. If textual variance or difference in translations may leave some doubt as to the precise form or meaning of the original, it behooves us to couch our arguments with proper caution rather than to quote glibly without any reference to the fact that the Scripture advanced might not support our view. This, however, is not a very common occurrence and the faithful who do not know the original languages or who do not have an understanding of the principles of textual criticism are not so deprived by this lack that they cannot readily appeal to the authority of the Word of God.

5) The kind of errors which may creep in in the transmissional process are very different from errors which would have been present in the original composition. Textual criticism in the immense majority of the cases permits us to reconstruct the original text while a primitive error would not easily be subject to needed correction. Textual criticism proceeds according to

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principles that have been well established and in which individual vagaries are unlikely to prevail undetected. If original errors had to be corrected there would be no limit to arbitrariness.

6) The reason why Evangelicals insist on inerrancy is not because they assume that they have a need for an absolute norm, even though this need may indeed exist. The reason is rather to be found in the unquestionable fact that the denial of Biblical inerrancy inevitably clouds the reality of the divine authorship of Scripture. It is indeed unlikely, yea perhaps unthinkable, that God himself should be the author of a text whose truthfulness is subject to question. To be sure, unaided human authors may easily fall into error, but the very point of the doctrine of inspiration is that God is the author as well as the human writers and it is that authorship that makes an error unthinkable. This is the focus of the whole matter and it is the reality of the divine authorship that is at stake. One could hardly over-emphasize this point.

7) To secure the effect that all forms of transmission of Scripture should be perennially preserved from any slips, one should assume a continuous miracle of a stunning scope. This would involve assistance of the Holy Spirit whenever anybody would undertake to quote Scripture from Sunday School to sermons to learned writings! It would preclude any sculptor from making mistakes of any kind when engraving Bible passages on tombstones! It would even prevent political figures and other professional people from quoting out of turn in spite of the appalling ignorance of Scripture which their speeches often betray. It is sufficient for our faith that God should give us the warrant of the divine authority of the original text. The presence of variances in the transmissional forms does not imply on God's part a lack of interest in original inerrancy. It merely indicates that God has surrendered his own Word to the ordinary process of human transmission, *while preserving a supernatural guarantee that its truth be maintained.*

8) It is possible that if God had provided for our continued possession of the autographs, we would have surrounded them with a superstitious veneration. The use of relics in the Christian church does point to a human propensity in this direction, Hezekiah seems to receive commendation for breaking into pieces the bronze snake that Moses had made because it had become the object of idolatrous worship (II Kings 18:4). Then Bibliolatry might have taken place, of a very different kind than the one with which Evangelicals are sometimes charged, however wrongly.

In closing we might do well to emphasize that the idea of inerrancy does not rise as a result of an inquiry which would have attempted to check the truth of all the Biblical affirmations. To the contrary, this idea is the corollary of the truth that the Bible is the Word of God. Inerrancy, therefore, does not depend upon the ability of any one person, or even any group of persons, to resolve in a satisfactory manner all the difficulties that may be encountered. It is much better to acknowledge frankly the presence of some difficulties than to press forward artificial explanations which may raise doubts in the hearers about the sincerity of the defenders of inerrancy. The authority of Scripture does not depend upon the resourcefulness of any one scholar, but rests solidly on the fact that it is God himself who is the author thereof. As Augustine so rightly stated, as if God Himself were speaking to him:

"O man, that which My Scripture saith, I say." Confessions XIII 29.  
Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, 1st Ser. I, 205).

