

## IS NEW TESTAMENT INERRANCY A NEW TESTAMENT CONCEPT? A TRADITIONAL AND THEREFORE OPEN- MINDED ANSWER

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The reason I put the question this way is the simple observation that the word “inerrancy” does not play any significant role in the NT. I know of just one possible exception in the teaching of Jesus. In his discussion with the Sadducees about the resurrection of the dead, Jesus says: “You are in error (πλανᾶσθε), because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God” (Matt 22:29 par. Mark 12:24, 27). In other words, the Sadducees would not have erred had they known the Scriptures which do not err, at least not in the section from Exod 3:6 and 15 which Jesus quotes.

Furthermore, nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus ever say or imply that the Scriptures can contain errors. According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus distinguished in his Bible between more important and less important sections,<sup>1</sup> but he is not reported to have differentiated between biblical passages with and without divine authority.

On the other hand, we do not have a logion in which Jesus explicitly states that his whole Bible is without error. In order to identify Jesus’ position on biblical inerrancy it is obviously not enough to do a simple word study or to rely on an argument from silence; it is necessary to ask if Jesus’ explicit understanding of his holy Scriptures was compatible with the concept of inerrancy.

When it comes to the inerrancy of the NT, we are in a still more difficult position. On this topic we do not have even a single statement from Jesus, nor do we have a comment by any of his apostles about the truth of the NT canon. But we can at least ask if the theological notion of inerrancy is in line with what the bearers of the NT revelation have to say about their teaching and their books.

### I. AN HISTORICAL REFLECTION: WHAT IS THE ESSENCE OF NT INERRANCY?

In order to understand what the post-biblical term “inerrancy” and the related concept means it is helpful to briefly recall what some of the most prominent of its proponents have had to say about the concept.

1. *Augustine’s 82<sup>nd</sup> Letter* (AD 405). My first example is the church father Augustine, who in one of his letters to his theological dialogue partner Jerome distin-

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<sup>1</sup> Matt 23:23: “You have neglected the weightier matters of the law.”

guished the inerrant books of the Bible from the errant theological treatises of his colleague:

For I confess to your Charity that I have learned to yield this respect and honor 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 manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it. As to all other writings, in reading them, however great the superiority of the authors to myself in sanctity and learning, I do not accept their teaching as true on the mere ground of the opinion being held by them; but only because they have succeeded in convincing my judgment of its truth either by means of these canonical writings themselves, or by arguments addressed to my reason. I believe, my brother, that this is your own opinion as well as mine. I do not need to say that I do not suppose you to wish your books to be read like those of prophets or of apostles, concerning which it would be wrong to doubt that they are free from error. Far be such arrogance from that humble piety and just estimate of yourself which I know you to have.<sup>2</sup>

2. *Martin Luther's Argument in Defense of all the Articles (1521)*. My second example is the German Reformer Martin Luther, who in 1521 in his *Argument in Defense of all the Articles* also distinguished between the errant teachers of the church and the inerrant teaching of the Bible. In support of his position, Luther quoted the section from Augustine's letter to Jerome, which I just cited and explained:

This is my answer to those also who accuse me of rejecting all the holy teachers of the church. I do not reject them. But everyone, indeed, knows that at times they have erred, as men will; therefore I am ready to trust them only when they give me evidence for their opinions from Scripture, which has never erred. This St. Paul bids me to do in 1 Thess. 5:21, where he says, 'Test everything; hold fast what is good.' St. Augustine writes to St. Jerome to the same effect.<sup>3</sup>

The statements by Augustine and Luther make it quite clear that traditionally the center of the notion of inerrancy concerned the conviction that humans err but God's word does not, not the question of how the many differences between the Synoptic parallel accounts can best be harmonized. This latter aspect was not regarded as irrelevant (see below) but was not the main emphasis of inerrancy.

3. *The Roman Catholic Constitution Dei Verbum (1965)*. The Roman Catholic dogmatic constitution on divine revelation *Dei Verbum* from 1965 referred (in a footnote) to the same statement by Augustine when it spoke about the Bible's inerrancy:

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error

<sup>2</sup> Augustine *Epist.* 82.1.3 (CSEL 34/2, 354, 3–11, ed. A. Goldbacher; trans. NPNF<sup>2</sup> 1:350).

<sup>3</sup> M. Luther, *Assertio omnium articulorum* (trans. C. M. Jacobs and G. W. Forell in *Luther's Works* [ed. J. Pelikan; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958] 32.11).

attribution is deceptive and incompatible with the Bible's truth claim. I therefore believe that, just as Luther did not recognize the canonical status of the Letter of James, we cannot award a literary forgery more than a deuterocanonical status.<sup>46</sup>

## VI. CONCLUSION

The main intention of the doctrine of inerrancy since the times of the ancient church and as it was rearticulated during the Reformation was to distinguish between the theological judgments of people who are fallible and the theological statements of the NT Scriptures which are regarded as inerrant and non-deceptive.

NT inerrancy is rooted in the inerrancy of God, who always tells the truth; of his Son Jesus Christ, who always told the truth; and of Christ's apostles, who told the truth whenever they preached and wrote in apostolic authority. While in Christian theology the inerrancy of God is generally uncontested, the inerrancy of Jesus Christ has been called into question by theologians since the Enlightenment and the inerrancy of the apostolic teaching even more so.

The inerrancy of the NT documents is an implication of the inerrancy of God, Jesus Christ, and his apostles. The doctrine of biblical inerrancy expresses the conviction that the NT Gospels are free from error and deceit, since they correctly transmit the divine and flawless words and deeds of the Son of God, and that the NT letters are free from error and deceit, since they contain the divinely inspired message which the apostles proclaimed. It must be recognized, however, that the Church Fathers did not define the inerrancy of the NT documents according to absolute standards of truth and error but were convinced that minor imprecisions and slips of memory did not call into question the truth of the NT.

While the doctrine of biblical inerrancy has its merits, it does not supply inerrant answers to text-critical questions, an inerrant delimitation of the NT canon, inerrant historical results about the origins of the NT, or an inerrant interpretation of the NT.

Although the inerrancy of God, Jesus Christ, the apostles, and the NT documents should not be abandoned without widespread and convincing evidence of its indefensibility (which, in my opinion, has not yet been offered), it must be acknowledged that belief in the inerrancy of the NT is a confessional stance, and as such is just as assailable and improvable as any other creedal statement.

I believe if inerrancy is interpreted along these lines, it is fully justified to call the inerrancy of the NT a NT concept.

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. E. E. Ellis, *The Making of the NT Documents* (Biblical Interpretation Series 39; Leiden: Brill, 1999) 294 n. 306; Baum, *Pseudepigraphie und literarische Fälschung* 179–81.