

I

The Bible and God

THE QUESTION OF VERBAL INSPIRATION

QUESTION: Are there errors in the Bible?

ANSWER: You will excuse me if I seem to be somewhat floored by this question and do not answer it at once. For the fact is that I have never heard the question put in this form and am familiar with it at most in the history of theology in connection with the doctrine of verbal inspiration as it was frequently put forward in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Would you be good enough to tell me a little more precisely what you mean by your question?

QUESTIONER: I believe that the Bible is God's Word. Therefore it cannot err. I had the impression that you regard some things in the Bible as being "bound to their time." Once that kind of thing begins, criticism breaks everything down. That's why I want from you a clear statement: Does the Bible contain errors or not? Please answer Yes or No!

ANSWER: Allow me first to ask you another question: Have you studied theology? This, after all, was supposed to be a meeting of ministers who have had theological training. In order to give you an answer I must know what I can assume as far as your background is concerned.

QUESTIONER: No, I have not studied theology. I am, indeed, a minister, but I attended a Bible School for a short time in England and am now delivering lectures in the United States just as you

are doing. But, quite frankly I do not understand the purpose of your question. I asked you to answer my question with a plain Yes or No. One certainly does not need to have studied theology to understand a Yes or a No.

ANSWER: Quite so. But the study of theology may be very useful to enable one to understand whether a question can be answered with a Yes or No at all. If you have asked me whether I am willing—to use the words of the *Heidelberg Catechism*—to confess Jesus Christ “as my only comfort in life and in death,” I would have been glad to answer you in terms of simple alternatives. But you asked a *theological* question, which must be answered in a way that must make differentiations. The purpose of my question with regard to your training was to determine whether I could assume a degree of understanding of a reply that makes certain distinctions. In other words, a simple Yes or No need by no means be evidence of a simple faith (which to me is of very great importance!); it may also be so crude that it bespeaks intellectual laziness and, for my taste, may even border upon denial. A person who cultivates his simplicity in order to escape the toils and the hazards of the search for truth is not being exactly respectful to the testimonies to the truth. And the consequence may be that he may also be simply following the law of least resistance.

QUESTIONER: Yes or No, please. [Considerable murmuring among the audience.]

ANSWER: Please note very clearly that I will not allow myself to be subjected to the pressure of a false and oversimplified way of putting the question. [Restrained murmurs and nods of approval from the audience.] One of the elementary teachings of any theological education is that one must first examine the question, for the very simple reason that every question already contains within itself a meaning which prejudices the possible scope of the answer given to it. Sometimes the way in which a question is put can show that a person is looking for an answer in a direction which is completely wrong. Then the questioner must first be urged to

allow himself to be put on the *right* path in asking his questions. Comparing something that is small with something very great, if you examine the pastoral dialogues of Jesus from this point of view, you will find that almost never did he give a simple answer to a question put to him, but rather replied with a counterquestion. In this way he compelled his interlocutor for one thing to change radically the *direction* in which he asked his question.

QUESTION BY ANOTHER LISTENER: I believe that for all of us it is not a pleasant thing to witness the situation into which you must now regard yourself as having been maneuvered. After all, it is exactly this relationship of question and answer, or better, question and counterquestion, in the pastoral dialogues of Jesus which has been repeatedly clarified for us in your meditations during the last few days.¹ At any rate I must confess that I really learned this and will take it away with me. Nevertheless, I would like to try and bring our discussion back to the point. If I rightly understood the Rev. Mr. X [the questioner], his question was whether the Bible and the Word of God are identical.

ANSWER: That is actually the decisive differentiation on which the answer depends, and to that I can give an answer. Naturally, we cannot here present a complete “doctrine of the Scriptures.” In order to do this we would have to discuss the relation of Word and Spirit, Scripture and tradition, and church and canon. When we proceed to select a few partial questions out of this whole complex—and certainly I cannot do more than that here—we must necessarily speak in terms that may not always be guarded. Allow me to state only two points with regard to this question of how the Bible and the Word of God relate to each other.

First: In Holy Scriptures the great acts and messages of God are proclaimed to us. They tell us that we come from him, with all that we are and have; but that we have become unfaithful to our origin and the purpose for which we were created and have

¹The author had been giving a series of interpretations of New Testament passages on these conversations of Jesus with inquirers.

gone off into a far country. They also tell us that God wants to bring us back home, to our salvation, and they tell us what he has expended and sacrificed in order to bring us to this his goal. This, as we have said before, is the *theme* of the Holy Scriptures. And we live by allowing the Scriptures to say this to us. For it is they alone that “bear witness” to this.²

Second: God communicates this to us by calling men into his service, by attesting himself to them, and by dealing with them. He makes them his peculiar instruments. This peculiar and special way in which he deals with those whom he has appointed to be bearers of his revelation is nowhere more beautifully expressed than in the account which says that the Lord used to speak to Moses “as a man speaks to his friend.”³

Thus the Bible gives us an account of a living history, a living encounter of living men with the living God. These men are constantly failing and falling down in this history; they misunderstand God, they are unfaithful to him, they go off on many wrong paths, and in exactly this way they have ever new experiences of the faithfulness of God, who holds fast to them despite everything. It is not only the believing *man* who says to God, “Nevertheless I am continually with thee,” when God’s way seems to lead into darkness and his footprints disappear in the waters; *God* also speaks to man and says, “Nevertheless—even though you are what you are—I am continually with thee.”⁴ One might even say that God also says to Jacob, “I will not let you go until I have blessed you.”⁵

Here this faithfulness of God is by no means an anthropomorphic expression for an indifferent metaphysical principle that stands unmoved above the antitheses of faith and unbelief, good and evil, embracing them all beyond all polarity. On the contrary, this is an exceedingly dynamic faithfulness: here we are dealing with the history of a living heart. One has only to consult

² John 5:39. Cf. 5:37 and 8:18.

³ Exod. 33:11.

⁴ Ps. 73:23 ff.; 77:19.

⁵ Gen. 32:26 ff.

a concordance of the Bible to see all the examples of how God can “repent” his ever having had anything to do with man with all his instability and egotistical cupidity, and then how he himself is sorry for this angry regret.

So here we are dealing not with the timeless principle of pure immutability, but rather with the affirmation that God bows down to enter into a *history* with us, that he is altogether “personal,” and that in goodness and severity he participates in all the ups and downs of our life story.

In the form in which the Bible speaks of God’s emotions, this may in fact often sound anthropomorphic. But the thing itself, the movement of God’s heart, the “history in God,” is by no means anthropomorphic. Anybody who nevertheless insists that it is anthropomorphic is simply missing the point of what happens to us in Jesus Christ. For it becomes completely clear, or better, here it actually happens, here it becomes an “event,” that God enters into our history, that he gives himself up to the temptation and the suffering of human existence and takes his stand at our side in full solidarity when he subjects himself *with us* to his judgment and descends into every depth into which we are dragged. How else can one understand the Cross of Calvary except that here God’s holiness is in conflict with his grace: he does not simply pass over man’s sin lightly, but rather throws himself into it, casts himself into the balance, by “giving his only begotten Son.” Golgotha is a pain in God’s heart. And even at the risk of its again sounding anthropological (or mythological!) I would say that this is a God overcoming himself, this is a struggle of God with himself. So emphatically is this the story of a living heart.

The slightest deviation from this thesis leads immediately to the idea of a “divine principle,” and thus into a wilderness where living faith can no longer grow. Here we must be in dead earnest about the mighty acts of God. It is not merely a matter of the “divine law” of an event; rather God *does* something. He speaks, and it comes to be. And in that he speaks and acts, he determines and

decides. Therefore his action never lies on the level of our postulates; he acts upon us in the name of his freedom. Therefore we are confronted with his sovereign will.

Because he thus enters into a history with us, he moves the hearts of his servants and is not content merely to guide their pen or goose quill for them. This is actually the way in which the advocates of the doctrine of verbal inspiration conceived it to have happened. What this was, expressed in modern terms, was a fantastic idea of a heavenly cybernetics in which God was the guide of a process of automatic writing.

But it is not the fantastic side of this conception that bothers me here. There is a sense in which we cannot get along without the category of the fantastic in matters of faith, at least when we mean by it the fact that God's speech and action, his working as the Lord of history and our own life history, lie beyond all that we can think or imagine. The Christian is and always will be an adventurer, who can never make long-range plans, but rather waits for God's decisions. He therefore expects that his own projects may be sovereignly thwarted and is content with the "lamp for our feet,"⁶ which illumines only the next step and allows him to walk like a child in the darkness.

The fantastic as such therefore need not necessarily frighten us off when we consider the idea that God guided the quills of the biblical writers and caused them to set down not only the Hebrew consonants but also—as was likewise affirmed—the subscribed vowels. (In a way this postulate concerning the consonants and vowels is even rather impressive, since it shows that these people of the older Orthodoxy at least had the courage to think an idea through to the end and be consistent.)

There is something else about this notion, however, which is far more alarming, and that is that it leads to a *legalistic* attitude toward the Holy Scriptures. How could I go on hearing in, and accepting from, a Scripture which came into being in this way the message of God's free grace, the message that I am his free child,

⁶ Ps. 119:105.

when at every step I am forced to “repress” something, forced to interpret and allegorize a meaning into the obscure passage, because, after all, it is *God* who has written this? How could I go on feeling that I have been called into God’s saving history, how could I go on thinking of myself as a spiritual son of the “fathers in the faith,” as a fellow citizen with all the saints, if the messages on the basis of which I am to do this are themselves not a part of this “history,” if it is no longer a matter of living testimony through living witnesses at all, but only of a book that has fallen from heaven? How then could there be any possibility of faith as trust? How could one avoid falling into a very slavish obedience, an obedience which would be just as mechanical as the way in which this Book is said to have come into being, an obedience which would be totally mechanical and indiscriminate, which would simply say yea and amen to everything without ever entering into a living dialogue with God in which decisions are made? Does God take any pleasure in this kind of slavish obedience (and all the repression and compulsion that goes with it)? Is this really doing justice to what he has done precisely in order to call us *away* from all servitudes and make us free children who learn to say “Abba, Father” with the spontaneity of a child? Where have we gotten to with all this?

Then there is something else connected with living faith which becomes impossible when we cling to this mechanical theory and that is that we can no longer distinguish within the Bible between that which it proclaims to us for our salvation *and* the contemporary means of expression which it uses to do this. For, naturally, these means of expression are conditioned by the time in which they were uttered. The scholar has little difficulty in seeing that the biblical account of creation, with all its differences from the mythical cosmogonies, employs some of the conceptual elements of these myths—such as those of Babylonian and Assyrian origin. It makes use, so to speak, of the pictorial material that exists in these human conceptions. But it takes the mosaic stones of these pictorial elements and constructs a completely *new* picture. It

forces the pictorial language of myth into its service (just as it does with the vocabulary of ancient philosophy, for example, in the case of the term *Logos*). And in doing so it renders powerless the *message* of those myths from which it takes these images. The Bible uses the myths and at the same time demythologizes them. So it also uses the cosmological concepts of its time. It would certainly be frightfully foolish to demand of the Bible a post-Copernican cosmology just so that it would prove itself to be the infallible Word of God! Naturally for the author of the first two chapters of the Bible the earth is a flat disk arched over by the glassy globe of the firmament.

Is not all of this the very sign of the miracle of the “humanity” of God—the sign that he makes his Word become flesh and that he comes into our history? This surely means that he wants to come and meet us where we are, just as the servants of the king in the parable went out into the market place, the highways, and the hedges in order to fetch the guests for the royal wedding.⁷ And the fact that he wants to find us, that he follows us into the far country, surely means that he wants to be right where we are, that he addresses us in our own language and “accommodates” himself to us. We can pray to him in our own language—no matter whether it be English, German, or Hottentot—and we can also hear his Word in our language.

Thus every generation brings out particular emphases of the message, because every generation is sought out and met by God at different points, in different ways of putting the question, and in different needs. This is also the reason why we cannot simply recite the famous old sermons in our pulpits, even though we know that Augustine or Luther or Wesley were far better preachers than we are. No, God wants to meet us on *our* streets and *our* lanes. In the atomic age we have to say these things in a different way from the way they had to be said in the sixteenth century. We have to say them differently simply because in our day too

⁷ Matt. 22:1-14. Cf. *The Waiting Father* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), pp. 182-192.

God wants to stand beside us and speak to us in our language. Is it not therefore a wonderfully comforting thing to realize that this is what God has always done and that he uses the images and the ideas which have existed in the minds and the imaginations of men?

We certainly would deprive this message of its most decisive element if we were to ignore this gracious accommodation on the part of God, that is, if we were to put the *means* of expression God uses on the same level as that which he wishes to say with the help of these means. For then, in theological language, we would be guilty of the heresy of Docetism, we would be robbing the Word of God of its fleshliness, its entry into history, and making of it a superearthy, timeless, and pseudocorporeal phantom.

Perhaps you have noted that in this polemic against the doctrine of verbal inspiration I have not used a single rationalistic argument. I have not said, for example, that this doctrine is so contradictory to the way we would rationally conceive of a written document coming into being that it constitutes too great a demand upon our reason. I would consciously dismiss such arguments myself, because reason can neither provide a basis for our faith nor take it away from it. I have also refrained from operating with the argument that our knowledge of how the biblical texts actually came into being makes it impossible for us to accept the idea of such an unhistorical dictating mechanism. This does not mean that I would simply brush aside this latter argument as irrelevant and immaterial. On the contrary, there are two reasons why I consider it to be altogether relevant and not something that one can snobbishly and pharisaically dismiss as rationalistic.

The *first* reason is that God, who has himself entered into the history of man, has by that token also sanctioned our historical concern with that history. Certainly it is impossible to say, "The Word became flesh" and "The Lord took on the form of a servant and entered into our history," and then immediately add, "But do not look at me too closely! Do not examine the 'flesh' and inves-

tigate the history! You must either accept the whole historical package unopened, accept the whole of it in faith just as it is handed out to you in this Book, or you have disowned me in unbelief." I repeat: God, who wants to meet us in history—not in history in general, but in *his* history—has thereby sanctioned the historical study of that history.

This statement is not at all contradictory to the fact that man is capable of pursuing this historical work on the history in a very godless and disobedient way, that he may, for example, seek in that history the confirmation of his own preconceived ideas (Hegel and Marx are only two of numberless examples), or that he may turn the condescension of God into a derogation of God by saying that this was not a case of the Logos having become flesh, but rather of the flesh having invented a Logos for itself. It would be a remarkable thing if man's sinfulness and self-sufficiency had seeped into all the works of man, but not into his *historical* work! Just as there is such a thing as a receptive and reflective reason (and not merely a rationalism that has run wild), so there is a kind of historical study based upon faith which explores the servant form of the Word of God and gratefully notes its accommodation (and which is therefore not a historicism that relativizes everything).

The *second* reason why I consider the reference to the historical origin of the biblical texts as theologically essential is that the regard for truth dare never become greater outside the church than it is in the church. What do we mean by that?

When I cling to the mechanistic doctrine of verbal inspiration I push the historical question out of the realm of faith and thus leave it to unbelief. And anybody who has even a little knowledge of the history of ideas knows what unbelief proceeds to do with this question and what happens to it "outside the gate."⁸ But we who think we are in the sanctuary and that we are serving God by refusing to have anything to do with the historical question are dishonoring the truth in an even more brutal way; we are

⁸ Heb. 13:12.

actually suppressing the truth. We are afraid that the historical truth which we may possibly discover will compromise our faith and thus become a danger to it.

Thus the very thing which at first may look like an act of faith, a sacrifice of the intellect, turns out to be nothing more than lack of faith. It would be pure fear, the foolish policy of sticking one's head in the sand, a betrayal of him who is the King of truth. How can anybody who is on the outside believe at all, if we proclaim the King of truth and at the same time are afraid that the first good historical discovery will expose him as a false king, an ordinary man dressed up like a king, or a projection of human fantasy?

But this would only be one side of our attempted assassination of the truth. The other would be that we would be denying an elementary effect of the truth of God, namely, that it makes us "free,"⁹ delivers us from all fear,¹⁰ and gives us the freedom of a child to move about in the Father's house. A person who has to repress things is really afraid and is by no means free. He is stuffed with complexes. In normal life he may be wide awake and critical, regarded as a sober businessman, a coolly objective engineer, a realistic newspaper reporter (who cannot be hoodwinked), but in the "religious sector" of his life he audibly shifts into another gear. Here he closes his eyes, and in this way he proceeds to "believe blindly." Here he looks away from things instead of at them. Here he faces taboos, and instead of being one who has been liberated by the Word, he becomes an idolater of the Word-fetish.

The result is a kind of spiritual schizophrenia, a split personality, which compels him to live in two strictly separated realms. Do you think that God takes any pleasure in this spiritual illness of his children, these cramping complexes, when, after all, his will is to make them free? Do you think that God enjoys having to look at the way we are willing to surrender only one side, the "pious" side, of our lives to him (but at what a price and in what form!), while we think we can go on all the more undisturbed

⁹ John 8:32.

¹⁰ Luke 1:74.

being objective and this-worldly in the other area, the “secular” realm? Certainly this not only perverts the “religious sector” but also makes the “secular realm” godless by the attempt to keep it out of the realm of God’s sovereignty.

We see, then, that the rational and historical arguments which can be directed against the doctrine of verbal inspiration are by no means merely rationalistic in character. They are by no means merely arguments with which a person tries to prove his own intellectual skill and thus seeks to evade the claim of the eternal Word. In any case, we must not allow ourselves to be frightened by the observation that it is possible to polemicize against theological positions even in this *questionable* way and then conclude that whenever anyone raises the question of truth at all (and then quite naturally must speak of the responsibility of reason), whenever anyone even brings up the historical problem, he has already deserted the cause and no longer stands within the obedience of faith. I would think that we have now seen how faith and reason interrelate with each other here and therefore how sadly we deny our faith if at *any* point we evade or prejudice the truth.¹¹

I have therefore tried at every point in my answer not to be “rationalistic” in the cheap sense, saying to the questioner: My dear friend, you will need only a modicum of historical and philosophical education to make you feel that the doctrine of verbal inspiration is an intellectual monstrosity and cause you to abandon it with horror. I believe that I (or better, an expert biblical scholar) could have enormously embarrassed my esteemed interlocutor by enumerating some very simple historical facts. I have not, however, made the slightest attempt to do this, not at all because my good manners forbid it, but above all because it would have led us away from our real theme. I wanted rather to lead to the theme and to show quite simply that verbal inspiration is not primarily in conflict with “reason” and “history” but with faith

¹¹ On the relation of reason and faith compare the chapter on “the freedom of reason over against the world (a theological ‘critique of reason’)” in *Theologische Ethik*, II, 1, §1321 ff.

itself, namely, that it denies the gracious condescension of God into our history, that it denies his accommodation to us, the incarnation of the Word, and besides that it must necessarily, because of its little faith, repress the question of truth and defame the work of the historical scholar as being antigod. Thus this doctrine actually allows the concern for truth to be greater *outside* the church than *in* the church. And besides, it intensifies the untruth "outside the gate."

I have therefore warned the advocates of verbal inspiration, not against having too much faith (this would be another question), but rather against having too little faith. I have therefore *consciously* refrained from putting myself on any other level than that on which the adherents of this doctrine wish to stand. I have not posed as one who is supposedly more enlightened theologically and historically and railed at a naïve faith. Rather, as one who wants to believe *along with* his interlocutor, I have wished to warn against piously disguised unbelief and to appeal for a deepening of faith. I would put to my interlocutor, who obviously presented his question whether the Bible contains any errors from the point of view of verbal inspiration, this counterquestion, whether he can really serve the faith, which he wants to serve, by means of this theory and whether this does not involve him in a profound self-contradiction.

Therefore my answer was intended, not to be polemical, but rather the word of a brother, though he really did not treat me very kindly. I wanted to oppose in the name and on the basis of faith the legalism, which comes in by the back door, disguised in a pious mask and posing as an "angel of light," and threatens to break down everything that is precious to us in the gospel. I hope that my fundamentalist brethren (for they certainly are my brethren) have noted that in everything I have said I have wished to be an advocate of the Holy Scriptures.