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Contents

Hermeneutics and Biblical Authority
James Packer

Inerrancy and New Testament Exegesis
R. T. France

Preaching from the Patriarchs: Background to the Exposition of Genesis 15
Robert P. Gordon

Book Reviews

Hermeneutics and Biblical Authority

James Packer

Dr Packer, Associate Principal of Trinity College, Bristol, is well known on both sides of the Atlantic as a leading exponent of the evangelical view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture. In this significant article, which first appeared in The Churchman, *vol.* 81 (1967), *and is reprinted by permission, he considers the implications of this doctrinal position for our approach to biblical interpretation, in the context of the modern debate on hermeneutical principles.*

The importance of my theme is obvious from the single consideration that biblical authority is an empty notion unless we know how to determine what the Bible means. This being so, I have been surprised to find how rare evangelical treatments of the relation between hermeneutics and biblical authority seem to be. Indeed, I do not know a single book or article by an evangelical writer that is directly addressed to this topic—though that may, of course, only indicate the narrowness of my reading! But my impression is that this is a subject on which fresh thought by evangelical Christians is very much needed; otherwise, we shall constantly be at a disadvantage, in at least two ways.

First, we shall be forced to remain (where we have long been!) on the edge of the modern Protestant debate about Holy Scripture; for in this debate the theme of my paper remains, as it always was, central. Since the age of rationalism in the eighteenth century, and of Schleiermacher in the nineteenth century, and more particularly since the work of Kähler, Barth, and Bultmann in the twentieth century, the relation between hermeneutics and biblical authority, and the meaning of each concept in the light of the other, have been constant preoccupations, and the mere mention, with Bultmann, of thinkers like Fuchs and Ebeling will assure us that this state of affairs is likely to continue for some time to come. Now, if we are going to join in this debate to any purpose, we must address ourselves seriously to the problem round which it revolves; otherwise, nothing we say will appear to be *ad rem.* One reason why the theology of men like Barth, Bultmann, and Tillich (to say nothing of J. A. T. Robinson!) has rung a bell in modern Protestant discussion, in a way no contemporary evangelical dogmatics has done, is that their systems are explicitly conceived and set forth as answers to the hermeneutical question—the question, that is, of how the real and essential message of the Bible may be grasped by the man of today. One reason why evangelical theology fails to impress other Protestants as having more than a tangential relevance to the ongoing theological debate of which we have spoken is that it does not appear to them to have tuned in on this wavelength of interest. That the interest itself is a proper one for evangelicals will not be denied, and it is not to our advantage when we appear to be neglecting it.

Then, second, in the absence of reflection on my present theme, we risk being contradicted in our own thinking by over-simplifications at more than one point. Let me set this out as I see it.

I am sure I need not spend time proving that over-simplification is a damaging form of mental self-indulgence, leading to shallow, distorted, and inhibited ways of thinking. I am sure that my evangelical readers have all had abundant experience of this particular evil. I am sure we have all had cause in our time to complain of over-simplifications which others have forced on us in the debate about Scripture—the facile antithesis, for instance, between revelation as propositional or as personal, when it has to be the first in order to be the second; or the false question as to whether the Bible is or becomes the Word of God, when both alternatives, rightly understood, are true; or the choice between the theory of mechanical dictation and the presence of human error in the Bible, when in fact we are not shut up to either option. I am sure we have all found how hard it is to explain the evangelical view of Scripture to persons whose minds have once embraced these over-simplifications as controlling concepts. Warned by these experiences, we shall be on our guard against allowing similarly cramping over-simplifications to establish themselves in our own thought.

The basic over-simplification that threatens us here, in my view, is that we should treat the relation between biblical authority and hermeneutics as a one-way relation, whereas in fact it is a two-way relation operating within a one-way system. Let me define my terms, and you will see what I mean.

Biblical authority

Biblical authority, as historically (and, in my judgment, rightly) understood by evangelicals, is a complex dogmatic construction made up of seven elements as follows.

The first is a view of *inspiration* as an activity whereby God, who in His providence overrules all human utterance, caused certain particular men to speak and write in such a way that their utterance was, and remains, His utterance through them, establishing norms of faith and practice. In the case of those written utterances which make up the canonical Scriptures the effect of inspiration was to constitute them as norms, not merely for that limited group of people to whom God's messengers directly addressed their writings, but for all men at all times. This, I judge, is the precise notion expressed by Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16, where he describes 'all Scripture' as *theopneustos* (literally 'God-breathed'), and therefore 'profitable' as a standard of intellectual and moral perfection for anyone who would be a 'man of God'.

The theological basis of biblical inspiration is the gracious condescension of God, who, having made men capable of receiving, and responding to, communications from other rational beings, now deigns to send him verbal messages, and to address and instruct him in human language. The paradigm of biblical inspiration (not from the standpoint of its literal types or of its psychological modes, which were manifold, but simply from the standpoint of the identity which it effects between God's word and man's) is the prophetic sermon, with its introductory formula, 'Thus saith the Lord'. The significance of biblical inspiration lies in the fact that the inspired material stands for all time as the definitive expression of God's mind and will, His knowledge of reality, and His thoughts, wishes, and intentions regarding it. Inspiration thus produces the state of affairs which Warfield (echoing Augustine) summed up in the phrase: What Scripture says, God says. Whatever Scripture is found to teach must be received as divine instruction. This is what is primarily meant by calling it the Word of God.

It is hardly possible to deny that what God says is true, any more than it is possible to deny that what He commands is binding. Scripture is thus authoritative as a standard of belief no less than of behaviour, and its authority in both realms, that of fact as well as that of obligation, is divine. By virtue of its inspiration the authority of Scripture resolves into, not the historical, ethical, or religious expertise of its human authors, however great this may be thought to have been, but the truthfulness and the moral claim of the speaking, preaching, teaching God Himself.

The second element in the historic evangelical account of biblical authority is a view of the principle of *canonicity*, as being objectively the fact, and subjectively the recognition, of inspiration. This follows from what has just been said. All Scripture was given to be the profitable rule of faith and practice. It is not suggested that all the inspired writings that God ever gave were for the church's canon; the Scriptures themselves show that some books of prophetic oracles, and some church epistles of Paul (to look no further) have, in God's providence, perished. What is suggested is not that all inspired writings are canonical, but that all canonical writings are inspired, and that God causes His people to recognise them as such. Accounts of canonicity which distort, or discount, the reality of inspiration, and rest the claims of Scripture on some other footing than the fact that God speaks them, misrepresent both the true theological situation and the actual experience of Christians. This leads to our next point.

The third element in the evangelical position is a belief that the Scriptures *authenticate themselves* to Christian believers through the convincing work of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to recognise, and bow before, divine realities. It is He who enlightens us to receive the man Jesus as God's incarnate Son, and our Saviour; similarly, it is He who enlightens us to receive sixty-six pieces of human writing as God's inscripturated Word, given to make us 'wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus' (2 Tim. 3:15). In both cases, this enlightening is not a private revelation of something that has not been made public, but the opening of minds sinfully closed so that they receive evidence to which they were previously impervious. The evidence of divinity is there before us, in the words and works of Jesus in the one case and the words and qualities of Scripture in the other. It consists not of clues offered as a basis for discursive inference to those who are clever enough, as in a detective story, but in the unique force which, through the Spirit, the story of Jesus and the knowledge of Scripture always carry with them to strike everyone to whom they come. In neither case, however, do our sinful minds receive this evidence apart from the illumination of the Spirit. The Church bears witness, but the Spirit produces conviction, and so, as against Rome, evangelicals insist that it is the witness of the Spirit, not that of the Church, which authenticates the Canon to us. So the fourth answer of the Westminster Larger Catechism declares: 'The Scriptures manifest themselves to be the Word of

God, by their majesty and purity; . . . by their light and power to convince and convert sinners, to comfort and build up believers unto salvation: but the Spirit of God bearing witness by and with the Scriptures in the heart of man, is alone able fully to persuade it that they are the very Word of God'.

Fourthly, evangelicals maintain that the Scriptures are *sufficient* for the Christian and the Church as a lamp for our feet and a light for our path—a guide, that is, as to what steps we should take at any time in the realms of belief and behaviour. It is not suggested that they tell us all that we would like to know about God and His ways, let alone about other matters, nor that they answer all the questions that it may occur to us to ask. The point of the affirmation is simply that, in the words of Article VI of the Church of England, 'Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation', and does not need to be supplemented from any other source (reason, experience, tradition, or other faiths, for example), but is itself a complete organism of truth for its own stated purpose. The grounds on which this position rests are, first, the sufficiency of Jesus Christ as Saviour; second, the demonstrable internal completeness of the biblical account of salvation in Him; third, the impossibility of validating any non-scriptural tradition or speculation relating to Christ by appeal to an inspired source.

Fifthly, evangelicals affirm that the Scriptures are *clear*, and interpret themselves from within, and consequently, in their character as 'God's word written' (Article XX), are able to stand above both the Church and the Christian in corrective judgment and health-giving instruction. With this goes the conviction that the ministry of the Spirit as the Church's teacher is precisely to cause the Scriptures to fulfil this ministry toward the Church, and so to reform it, and its traditions, according to the biblical pattern. It is also held that the ministry of the Spirit as interpreter guarantees that no Christian who uses the appointed means of grace for understanding the Bible (including worship and instruction, both formal and informal, in the Church—there is no atomic individualism here) can fail to learn all that he needs to know for his spiritual welfare. Not that the Christian or the Church will ever know everything that Scripture contains, or solve all biblical problems, while here on earth; the point is simply that God's people will always know enough to lead them to heaven, starting from where they are.

Sixthly, evangelicals stress that Scripture is a *mystery* in a sense parallel to that in which the Incarnation is a mystery—that is, that the identifying of the human and the divine words in the one case, like the taking of manhood into God in the other, was a unique creative divine act of which we cannot fully grasp either the nature or the mode or the dynamic implications. Scripture is as genuinely and fully human as it is divine. It is more than Jewish-Christian religious literature, but not less, just as Jesus was more than a Jewish rabbi, but not less. There is a true analogy between the written word and the incarnate Word. In both cases, the divine coincides with the form of the human, and the absolute appears in the form of the relative. In both cases, as we say, the divine in the human manifests and evidences itself by the light and power that it puts forth, yet is missed and overlooked by all save those whom the Holy Ghost enlightens. In both cases, it is no discredit to the believer, nor reason for rejecting his faith, when he has to confess that there are problems about this unique divine-human reality that he cannot solve, questions about it that he cannot answer, and aspects of it (phenomena) which do not seem to fit comfortably with other aspects, or with basic categories in terms of which it asks to be explained as a whole (sinlessness, for instance, in the case of Jesus; truthfulness, for instance, in the case of Scripture). When you are dealing with divine mysteries you must be prepared for this sort of thing; and when it happens, you must be quick to recognise that the cause lies in the weakness of your own understanding not in any failure on God's part to conform to His own specifications.

Seventhly, evangelicals hold that the obedience of both the Christian individually, and the Church corporately, consists precisely in *conscious submission*, both intellectual and ethical, to the teaching of Holy Scripture, as interpreted by itself and applied by the Spirit according to the principles stated above. Subjection to the rule of Christ involves—indeed, from one standpoint, consists in subjection to the rule of Scripture. His authority is its, and its is His.

Hermeneutics

Such is biblical authority; what, now, is hermeneutics? Hermeneutics as commonly understood, is the theory of biblical interpretation. Interpretation has been defined as the way of reading an old book that brings out its relevance for modern man. Biblical hermeneutics is the study of the theoretical principles involved in bringing out to this and every age the relevance of the Bible and its message. Evangelical practice over the centuries has reflected a view of the process of interpretation as involving

three stages; exegesis, synthesis, and application.

Exegesis means bringing out of the text all that it contains of the thoughts, attitudes, assumptions, and so forth—in short, the whole expressed mind—of the human writer. This is the 'literal' sense, in the name of which the Reformers rejected the allegorical senses beloved of medieval exegetes. We would call it the 'natural' sense, the writer's 'intended meaning'. The so-called 'grammatico-historical method', whereby the exegete seeks to put himself in the writer's linguistic, cultural, historical, and religious shoes, has been the historic evangelical method of exegesis, followed with more or less consistency and success since the Reformers' time. This exegetical process assumes the full humanity of the inspired writings.

Synthesis means here the process of gathering up, and surveying in historically integrated form, the fruits of exegesis—a process which is sometimes, from one standpoint, and at one level, called, 'biblical theology' in the classroom, and at other times, from another standpoint, and at another level, called 'exposition' in the pulpit. This synthetic process assumes the organic character of Scripture.

Application means seeking to answer the question: 'If God said and did what the text tells us He did in the circumstances recorded, what would He say and do to us in our circumstances?' This applicatory process assumes the consistency of God from one age to another, and the fact that 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yea and for ever' (Heb. 13:8, RV).

Now, it is already clear from what has been said that the principle of biblical authority underlies and controls evangelical hermeneutics. The nature of this control can conveniently be shown by adapting Bultmann's concept of the 'exegetical circle'—a concept springing from recognition of the truth (for truth it is) that exegesis presupposes a hermeneutic which in its turn is drawn from an overall theology, which theology in its turn rests on exegesis. This circle is not, of course, logically vicious; it is not the circle of presupposing what you ought to prove, but the circle of successive approximation, a basic method in every science. Without concerning ourselves with Bultmann's use of this concept of the 'exegetical circle' we may at once adapt it to make plain the evangelical theologian's method of attaining his hermeneutic. First, he goes to the text of Scripture to learn from it the doctrine of Scripture. At this stage, he takes with him what Bultmann would call a 'pre-understanding'—not, like Bultmann, a Heideggerian anthropology, but a general view of Christian truth, and of the way to approach the Bible, which he has gained from the creeds, confessions, preaching, and corporate life of the Church, and from his own earlier experiments in exegesis and theology. So he goes to Scripture, and by the light of this pre-understanding discerns in it material for constructing an integrated doctrine of the nature, place, and use of the Bible. From this doctrine of the Bible and its authority he next derives, by strict theological analysis, a set of hermeneutical principles; and then, armed with this hermeneutic, he returns to the text of Scripture itself, to expound it more scientifically than he could before. Thus he travels round the exegetical circle. If his exegetical procedure is challenged, he defends it from his hermeneutic; if his hermeneutic is challenged, he defends it from his doctrine of biblical authority; and if his doctrine of biblical authority is challenged, he defends it from the texts. The circle thus appears as a one-way system: from texts to doctrine, from doctrine to hermeneutic, from hermeneutic to texts again.

What control does the hermeneutic which derives from the evangelical doctrine of Scripture place upon one's exegesis? First, it binds us to continue using the grammatico-historical method; second, it obliges us to observe the principle of harmony. We will say a word about each of these, though brief formal discussion of them (which is all that our space allows) can scarcely give an idea of how far-reaching they really are.

The grammatico-historical method of approaching texts is dictated, not merely by common sense, but by the doctrine of inspiration, which tells us that God has put His words into the mouths, and caused them to be written in the writings, of men whose individuality, as men of their time, was in no way lessened by the fact of their inspiration, and who spoke and wrote to be understood by their contemporaries. Since God has effected an identity between their words and His, the way for us to get into His mind, if we may thus phrase it, is *via* theirs. Their thoughts and speech about God constitutes God's own self-testimony. If, as in one sense is invariably the case, God's meaning and message through each passage, when set in its total biblical context, exceeds what the human writer had in mind, that further meaning is only an extension and development of his, a drawing of implications and an establishing of relationships between his words and other, perhaps later, biblical declarations in a way that the writer himself, in the nature of the case, could not do. Think, for example, how messianic prophecy is declared to have been fulfilled in the New Testament, or how the sacrificial system of Leviticus is explained as typical in Hebrews. The

point here is that the *sensus plenior* which texts acquire in their wider biblical context remains an extrapolation on the grammatico-historical plane, not a new projection on to the plane of allegory. And, though God may have more to say to us from each text than its human writer had in mind, God's meaning is never less than his. What he means, God means. So the first responsibility of the exegete is to seek to get into the human writer's mind, by grammatico-historical exegesis of the most thoroughgoing and disciplined kind—always remembering, as Calvin so wisely did, that the biblical writer cannot be assumed to have had before his mind the exegete's own theological system!

As for the principle of harmony, this also is dictated by the doctrine of inspiration, which tells us that the Scriptures are the products of a single divine mind. There are really three principles involved here. The first is that Scripture should be interpreted by Scripture, just as one part of a human teacher's message may and should be interpreted by appeal to the rest. *Scriptura scripturae interpres*! This does not, of course, imply that the meaning of all texts can be ascertained simply by comparing them with other texts, without regard for their own literary, cultural, and historical background, or for our extra-biblical knowledge bearing on the matters with which they deal. For instance, one cannot get the full point of 'Thou shall not seethe a kid in its mother's milk' (Ex. 23:19; 34:26; Dt. 14:21) till one knows that this was part of a Canaanitish fertility rite and this one learns, not from comparison with other texts, but from archaeology. Similarly, this principle gives no warrant for reading the Bible 'in the flat' without any sense of the historical advance of both revelation and religion, and the difference of background and outlook between one biblical author and another. Such lapses would show failure to grasp what grammatico-historical exegesis really involves. But the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture does require us to treat the Bible organically and to look always for its internal links—which are there in profusion, if only we have eyes to see them.

The second principle is that Scripture should not be set against Scripture. The church, says Article XX of the Church of England, may not 'so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another'—nor should the individual expositor. The basis for this principle is the expectation that the teaching of the God of truth will prove to be consistent with itself.

The third principle is that what appears to be secondary and obscure in the Scripture should be studied in the light of what appears primary and plain. This principle obliges us to echo the main emphases of the New Testament and to develop a christocentric, covenantal, and kerygmatic exegesis of both Testaments; also it obliges us to preserve a studied sense of proportion regarding what are confessedly minutiae, and not to let them overshadow what God has indicated to be the weightier matters.

These three principles together constitute what the Reformers called *analogia Scripturae*, and what we have termed the principle of harmony. It is a principle which makes an integrative aim in interpretation mandatory at every point. To have such an aim is, of course, no guarantee that the interpreter will always succeed in achieving what he aims at, but at least it keeps him facing in the right direction and asking some of the right questions.

Here, then, are two hermeneutical axioms which we may call 'deductive' principles, though, as we have seen, they derive from an exegetical induction in the first instance. They are presuppositions, gained through exegesis of some texts, which demand to control the exegesis of all texts. They are historically, and in my view rightly, basic to evangelical interpretation of Scripture.

Over-simplification

Now it is just here, as it seems to me, that the dangers of over-simplification threaten. I am not now thinking of the popular pietistic over-simplification of supposing that if one approaches Scripture by the light of these evangelical axioms, then interpretations will become magically easy and one's exegesis will be infallibly right. Such ideas do not demand discussion here; we know better than to expect interpretation ever to be easy, and we know there are no infallible interpreters, certainly not ourselves. No; the over-simplifications I have in view are other than this.

The first and basic over-simplification consists simply of forgetting that, as our concept of biblical authority determines our hermeneutic in the manner described, so that concept itself is always, and necessarily, open to challenge from the biblical texts on which we bring our hermeneutics to bear. For our concept of biblical authority is a theological construct, or theory, one of a number which make up our dogmatics; and theological theories, like the theories of natural science, have to be tested by seeing whether they fit all the relevant biblical data (think, for instance, of the doctrine of the Trinity, which is an example of a successful theological theory). If the data seem not to fit the theory, then the relation between them should be thought of as

one of reciprocal interrogation: each calls the other in question. So, if particular texts, despite our exegetical coaxing, still appear to be out of accord with each other in some significant way, or to assert what is untrue, methodologically the first thing we have to do is to re-examine our concepts of biblical authority, and of the hermeneutic which we drew from it. But we must do this by appeal to the proper evidence, that is, the statements of Scripture about itself, not the phenomena which have prompted the check-up. A mistake in method at this point would be disastrous, as the following comments by Dr Roger Nicole on one of the theses of Dr Dewey Beegle's book, *The Inspiration of Scripture*, will show.

> 'Dr Beegle very vigorously contends that a proper approach to the doctrine of inspiration is to start with induction from what he calls "the phenomena of Scripture" rather than with deduction from certain biblical statements about the Scripture. . . . This particular point needs to be controverted. If the Bible does make certain express statements about itself, these manifestly must have a priority in our attempt to formulate a doctrine of Scripture. Quite obviously, induction from Bible phenomena will also have its due place, for it may tend to correct certain inaccuracies which might take place in the deductive process. The statements of Scripture, however, are always primary. To apply the method advocated by Dr Beegle in other areas would quite probably lead to seriously erroneous results. For instance, if we attempted to construct our view of the relation of Christ to sin merely in terms of the concrete data given us in the Gospels about His life, and without regard to certain express statements found in the New Testament about His sinlessness, we might mistakenly conclude that Christ was not sinless. If we sought to develop our doctrines of creation merely by induction from the facts of nature and without regard to the statements of Scripture, we would be left in a quandary. The present remark is not meant to disallow induction as a legitimate factor, but it is meant to deny it the priority in religious matters. First must come the statements of revelation, and then induction may be introduced as a legitimate confirmation, and, in some cases, as a corrective in areas where our interpretation of these statements and their implications may be at fault' (*Gordon Review*, Winter 1964-1965, p. 106).

When we check our concept of the nature and authority of Scripture by the appropriate biblical evidence, in the light of the specific questions raised by the hard texts, we may find that our previous interpretation of the evidence needs to be modified; or we may not. In the latter case, methodologically we are now bound to embrace as our working hypothesis that the inconsistency of the phenomena with the biblical doctrine is apparent, not real. However, the embracing of the hypothesis is not itself a solution of the problem, and a real tension between our deductive principles and the phenomena remains. When, as in most if not all cases, the puzzling phenomena are minutiae, the principle of *analogia Scripturae*, as we saw, would counsel us not to get them out of proportion. But as long as they are there, they continue to present a challenge to us to check and re-check our doctrine of Scripture, and the hermeneutical principles which we derive from it, just as our doctrine of Scripture challenges us to seek harmonistic explanations of puzzling phenomena. It would be a potentially serious over-simplification, as it seems to me, to ignore the fact that we may need to go round the one-way system of the exegetical circle very many times, reviewing our doctrine of Scripture and our hermeneutics again and again in the light of the various queries about both that the different classes of phenomena raise. The point can be illustrated and, perhaps, given some application by citing from two evangelical documents which have had some currency in recent years, and whose overall thrust is in each case admirable. On page 49 of his *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Louis Berkhof states boldly, as Warfield did before him, that part of the interpreter's task is to 'adjust the phenomena of Scripture to the biblical doctrine of inspiration'. A memorandum for theological students produced under the auspices of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students in 1961, closed with a summons to 'development of a truly biblical, i.e. biblically determined, hermeneutic' and 'derivation from this hermeneutic of a proper understanding of the nature of biblical authority'. My present point is simply that to say either of these things without the other would be to over-simplify. The first statement is no more than a half-truth, until it is added that our apprehension of 'the biblical doctrine of inspiration' itself must be constantly checked against the queries concerning it which the phenomena themselves raise. The second statement is no more than a half-truth, until it is added that some pre-understanding of the nature of Scripture and its authority is necessarily involved in any attempt to develop a 'biblically determined hermeneutic'. (After all, even Bultmann would claim, on the basis of his own pre-understanding at this point, that his own hermeneutic

was 'truly biblical, i.e. biblically determined'! It is at the point of this pre-understanding that the ways divide.) The truth is that neither our doctrine of Scripture nor our exegesis can be in a healthy state unless they constantly interact, and each undergoes constant refinement in the light of the other.

If, therefore, we allowed ourselves to treat a pre-packaged, deep-frozen formula labelled 'the evangelical doctrine of Scripture' as a kind of untouchable sacred cow, we should not only be showing ourselves more concerned about our own tradition than about God's truth (and you do not need me to remind you how dangerous that would be); we should also be jeopardising our own prospects in the realm of biblical exposition. If, however, we recognise and accept the principles just stated, it will keep vividly before us the element of *mystery* that confronts us in the Scriptures, the *audacity* of our confession of the doctrine of biblical authority, with so many problems, albeit small ones, yet unsolved, and the need to make this confession in great *humility* and utter dependence upon God; and this will undoubtedly be good both for us and for our handling of the sacred text.

The modern debate

I want now to glance at the modern hermeneutical debate, and to consider how far evangelicals are equipped to enter into it.

The debate has sprung from felt perplexities at three points. First, there are perplexities about the Word of God. Since Barth, the Bible has been re-acknowledged as the medium of God's self-communication to man; but the question presses, how can this be, when (*ex hypothesi*) the Bible, regarded as a human book, is both fallible and fallacious? How does God communicate Himself through the Bible? What is the real nature of the Word of God? What is its relation to the words of the book?

Then, second, there are questions about the New Testament. Modern scholars, preoccupied with the complexities of its contemporary setting, and working in disregard of the notion of revealed truth, feel it to be a most elusive book. What is its real nature? What is its real relation to the Old Testament? What is the significance of its intractable eschatology? What must one do to it to make plain its message for our own time?

Then, third, linked with this are problems about preaching. The New Testament is *kerygmatic:* it consists of proclamation of Christ; but the world to which it proclaims Him is a very different world from ours. What transpositions of the form of the message are needed to enable us to preach it today?

To these questions various answers are given. Let us briefly remind ourselves of three of the main ones.

(i) Karl Barth holds that God communicates with man through the Scriptures by freely choosing to use them to make Jesus Christ, the true Word of God, known. The statement that Scripture is the Word of God means simply that God constantly uses it in this way. Christ is the reality to which all Scripture, when thus used by God, bears witness. Barth's hermeneutical method, therefore, is to apply the 'christological method' of his *Dogmatics*, asking all texts one question only—what have you to say of Jesus Christ? According to Barth's ontology, it is only when one is reading Christ out of texts that they tell us anything about either God or man. This at first sounds promising to evangelical ears; however, what we find is that Barth's ontology, which goes off at a tangent from what the biblical writers were concerned to say about God and His world, imposes on his thought a cramping preoccupation with problems of theoretical knowledge, and the dogmatic arbitrariness of his 'christomonism', as Althaus called it, according to which all truth about creation and the created order is swallowed up into the doctrine of Christ, leads him to conceptions of election, reprobation, and redemption, which systematically distort both his exegesis and any preaching that may be based on it.

(ii) The 'biblical theology' and *heilsgeschichte* movements tell us that God has revealed Himself through a sequence of redemptive events which came to its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To this historical sequence Scripture is man's interpretative witness. Scripture is the product of illumination and insight, but not of inspiration as we earlier defined it, and there is no identity of God's word with man's. The hermeneutical method of these movements, therefore, is to ask the texts what witness they bear to the acts of God, and to integrate their testimony into a complex christocentric whole by means of the organising categories of prospect and fulfilment. ('Prospect' is a better word than 'promise' here; the God of 'biblical theology' does not speak, and so cannot make promises.) One odd result is that theologians of this type seem a good deal more sure that this pattern as a whole corresponds to the acts of God as a whole than they are about the truth of any single part of it! This is particularly noticeable in such a writer as Alan Richardson. The preaching that springs from this movement is a summons to trust in the God, and the Christ, of this whole story, which is good so far, but since

this teaching affords no basis for a direct correlation between faith and Scripture in general, or the biblical promises in particular (since it is not held that God has ever actually used words to talk to man), the preaching is necessarily inadequate.

(iii) Bultmann holds that God acts in man's consciousness through the myths of the New Testament *kerygma* (which myths, he says, we may now ceremonially debunk, and replace, in order to show modern man that they are nothing more than myths!). His action consists of bringing about in experience the dynamic event of the 'word of God'. This 'word of God' is a summons and a decision to live in openness to the future, not bound by the past: which is the whole of Bultmann's understanding of faith. Nothing depends for Bultmann on the fact that the Christ of the myths has no basis in the facts concerning the historical Jesus: 'faith' for him is not correlated to particular historical facts, any more than it is to particular divine words. His hermeneutical method is to ask how the texts disclose the human situation according to Heidegger, and how they summon us to the decision of faith, as described above.

Our enumeration need not go further; these three positions are, between them, the fountain-heads of all the main hermeneutical trends of our time. (The so-called 'new hermeneutic' is only new in the sense of being an extended development of the third approach.) They all appear as products of Christian thought deflected, more or less, from the historical biblical road by the Kantian and post-Kantian heritage in western philosophy. Kant's 'Copernican revolution' in the philosophy of mind and nature, carried through at just the critical moment when Europe was recoiling from Rationalism into Romanticism, diverted interest from the known world to the knowing subject, ruled out the possibility of God addressing man in words, and let loose the bogey of sceptical and nihilistic solipsism to plague his successors. Idealism, positivism, and existentialism, the three main philosophical developments since Kant's time, should be seen as a series of attempts to banish the bogey by new answers to the problem of the knowing subject; and similarly the three types of hermeneutic sketched out above should be seen as so many attempts to banish the same bogey by vindicating the proposition that Christians really know God, even though He does not really talk to us. But this is precisely what the God of the Bible does!—and the first point to be made as we approach the modern hermeneutical debate is that, to the extent to which an expositor denies or discounts the reality of divine talk, to that extent he neither opens the Scriptures nor confesses their God, but wrests the former and denies the latter.

In none of the positions described is the testimony of Scripture to a speaking God, and to itself as His organic revealed Word, taken with full seriousness. Each of them effectively breaks loose from the authority of the Bible by declining fully to accept either its account of its own nature or the hermeneutic that is bound up with that account. Each, in consequence, fails satisfactorily to answer the questions from which it starts. Arbitrariness of this kind brings its own penalty of instability, not to say untruth. In fact, the true key to solving the problems which sparked off the modern hermeneutical debate is to take the Bible's self-testimony perfectly seriously, and to give full weight to the truth that, to put it as vividly as I can, *God has talked*, and Holy Scripture is His own recorded utterance, and what He said in Scripture long ago He says still, in application to ourselves.

It is sometimes said that this view of revelation is itself arbitrary, since the texts on which we rely do not really affirm so much; but Warfield answered that thesis two generations ago, and nothing since his day has in my judgment affected the conclusiveness of his answer. It is also said that this position is rationalistic. That word is, of course, a dreadful missile, but what does it signify in this context? 'Rationalistic' in theology may mean (i) reducing reality, both God and His world, to the limits of an exhaustively intelligible scheme, so ruling out all recognition of the partial character of knowledge of God in this world, as compared with that which is to come (I Cor. 13:13); or (ii) going against Scripture at some particular point at the dictates of reason; or (iii) speculating beyond biblical limits; or (iv) seeking to ground on logical or historical proof truths about God which should be received by faith, simply on the ground that God has told us of them. In which of these senses, now, can the evangelical revelation-claim be called rationalistic? In none! The truth is that it is not rationalistic at all, but simply *rational*. It is a confession of faith in a rational God who has talked rationally to creatures whom He made rational, and whom He declines to treat as anything other than rational.

And the evangelical hermeneutic is a rational hermeneutic, based on the recognition that the affirmations of the biblical writers are the authoritative affirmations of God Himself, and seeking to extract them by exegesis in order that they may be applied afresh to men and their problems in our own day, so that God's message to us may be made plain. Traditionally, when formulating our hermeneutics, we evangelicals have limited the subject

to questions of exegesis and synthesis (see any textbook, Berkhof's *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, or Ramm's *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, for example, for proof of this) and have left questions of the application of truth to be dealt with under the rubrics of homiletics and practical theology; but it is much to be wished that we might re-state our hermeneutics in explicit correlation to the concept of God *communicating*, God speaking in a way that terminates on man. This would involve a final section in the textbooks and lecture courses on the possibility, purpose, and modes of God's address to men through the Bible, and the discussion would cover topics like the *imago Dei* in man as the presupposition of communication; sin, which makes man deaf to God, and grace, which unstops his ears; the whole complex of relations that exists between the revealing Spirit and the revealed Word; preaching as the Word of God; and the Church as the community that listens to God's Word, and lives by it.

The concept of God active in communication is certainly the focus of hermeneutical interest and the field of hermeneutical debate, in modern theology, and when one observes the encroaching shadows of post-Kantian nihilism one sees why this should be so. But this does not mean that there is anything wrong with the concept itself. The truth is rather the reverse. Is not the thought of God active in communication the central, and organising, hermeneutical concept to which the Bible itself would lead us? If so—and I think it is —then our traditional presentation of hermeneutics ought to be re-thought and re-angled so as to express this fact. Until we have shown ourselves to be tackling this task in good earnest, we are hardly ready to take part in current hermeneutical discussions; for not only shall we not be on its 'wavelength', we shall be making it plain to all the world that we have not yet learned, in the theological sense, to take our own hermeneutical principles quite seriously. Books like Gustav Wingren's *The Living Word* and Alan Stibbs' unpretentious and untechnical, yet extraordinary seminal, little paperback *Understanding God's Word* give some of the leads that are in point here.

Inerrancy

It is sometimes supposed that evangelical hermeneutics are necessarily vitiated by evangelical adherence to the concept of biblical inerrancy. For some reason which, to say the least, is not obvious, this adherence is thought to betray an anachronistic resolve to make the Bible teach science, in the modern sense and with modern precision, and thus to mark a departure from the grammatico-historical method which cannot but distort interpretation radically. It is also thought to betray confidence of 'having the answer' to all seeming contradictions and difficulties in the biblical text. In view of these mistaken impressions, it is well to round off this paper by sketching out what inerrancy does and does not mean.

Inerrancy is a word that has only been in common use since the last century, though the idea itself goes back through seventeenth-century orthodoxy, the Reformers, and the Schoolmen, to the Fathers and, behind them, to our Lord's own statements, 'the Scripture cannot be broken', 'thy word is truth' (Jn. 10:35; 17:17). The word has a negative form and a positive function. It is comparable with the four negative adverbs with which the Chalcedonian definition fenced the truth of the Incarnation. Its function, like theirs, was not to explain anything in a positive way, but to safeguard a mystery by excluding current mistakes about it. It, like them, has obvious meaning only in the context of the particular controversy that caused it to be used; apart from that context it, like them, may well seem esoteric and unhelpful. Logically, its function has been to express a double commitment: first, an advance commitment to receive as truth from God all that Scripture is found on inspection actually to teach; second, a methodological commitment to interpret Scripture according to the principle of harmony which we analysed above. It thus represented not so much a lapse into rationalism as a bulwark against rationalism—namely, that kind of rationalism which throws overboard the principle of harmony. It thus expressed also, not an irreligious preoccupation with scientific accuracy, as some have suggested, but an attitude of reverence for the sacred text which some were irreverently expounding as if it were in places self-contradictory and false.

Whether evangelicals continue to speak of biblical inerrancy or not will depend on whether we think that the gain of having a verbal pointer to this double commitment outweighs the disadvantage of being lumbered with a term that is regularly, though mistakenly, taken to imply a blanket claim to know solutions for all apparent biblical discrepancies. The prevalence of this misconception is really rather disastrous, for scholarly advance in biblical study, as in all other realms of science, has the effect, not only of extending broad areas of certainty, but also of increasing the number of questions of detail which at any single moment have to be regarded as open, pending further inquiry or the discovery of more evidence

—some of these, inevitably, being questions to which earlier generations thought they knew the answer; and if we evangelicals are thought to be making a claim which shows, not merely unawareness of this fact, but a dogmatic interest in denying it, we shall have a hard time convincing others that our approach to Scripture is not fundamentally unscientific and unsound. This might be thought a strong argument for eschewing the word wherever possible. But whether or not we use the word is not the most important issue. What matters is that in our exegetical practice we should abide by the principle of harmony; in other words, that we should be agreed at the methodological level. If, on the one hand, we actually agree to receive as truth from God all that Scripture writers are found actually to assert, and, on the other hand, we are agreed in continuing to look for convincing harmonisations of the hard places and declining to cut the knot by saying flatly that the Bible errs, it will not matter whether we talk of inerrancy or not. What matters is never the word, this or any other, but the thing for which it stands.

What I am saying assumes that the scope of each biblical passage, its literary genre, and the range and content of the actual assertions made, must be determined entirely inductively, by grammatico-historical exegesis. It is necessary to insist constantly that the concept of inerrancy gives no direct help in determining such questions as these. It is *not*—repeat, *not*—an exegetical short cut.

No doubt we shall all find that many particular exegetical and harmonistic problems, arising from puzzling biblical phenomena, will have to be left open at every stage in our pilgrimage of biblical study. What significance has this fact? I would suggest that it has no significance that need alarm us. It is stimulating for continued exegetical inquiry; it is unimportant, so far as I can see, for dogmatics, except insofar as it stimulates closer reflection on the doctrine of Scripture; and it is only unmanageable for apologetics if one's apologetic method is rationalistic in type, requiring one to have all the answers to the problems in a particular area before one dare make positive assertions in that area, even when those positive assertions would simply be echoing God's own, set forth in Scripture. But it might be worth asking whether it is not perhaps a blessing to be warned off apologetics of that kind.

Inerrancy and New Testament Exegesis

R. T. France

The decision to reprint Dr Packer's article was taken before the merger of the TSF Bulletin *with* Themelios *was planned, and the following article was commissioned by the then editor of the* TSF Bulletin *to accompany it. The two articles have thus been inherited by the new journal, and the fact that the author of this article is to be editor of the new journal is quite fortuitous*!

My brief is to comment on the doctrinal and hermeneutical position advocated in Dr Packer's excellent article, from the point of view of its application to academic study of the New Testament. I shall focus particularly on his concluding section on *inerrancy*, because it is here that most of the practical problems arise for the conservative student engaging in New Testament exegesis. I shall take Dr Packer's article as read, and not stop to repeat points already made by him.

To turn from Dr Packer's article to the average Gospel commentary is to enter a different world, a world of alleged synoptic contradictions, misunderstandings, myths and legends, a world where 'Jesus said' means 'Here is a helpful thought', a world in which the scholar stands in judgment over the primitive views and historiographical incompetence of the Gospel writers. Coming from the warm security of an all-embracing doctrine of the inspiration and authority of Scripture, the evangelical student finds himself all at sea. Can he survive in these waters? Should he be here at all? And if he should be here, has he any hope of making a positive contribution to biblical studies, or is he *ipso facto* out of the game because he is a conser-

vative, and so will not play according to the accepted rules?

Let us take as our framework Dr Packer's statement of the exegetical demands of an evangelical hermeneutic: 'First, it binds us to continue using the grammatico-historical method; second, it obliges us to observe the principle of harmony.'

1. Grammatico-Historical Exegesis

There can be no problems for the evangelical student in the commitment to rigorous exegesis to discover 'what the author really meant', and this will involve the fullest possible use of linguistic, literary, historical, archaeological and other data bearing on that author's environment. The natural meaning of the biblical writer's words in the light of all this comparative material must be the starting-point of any serious study, whether by a conservative or by a radical. And that is what grammatico-historical exegesis means.

(a) *The Use of External Data*

In the nature of the case a large part of the comparative material adduced will itself be drawn from biblical literature. In study of the New Testament, the influence of the Old Testament is by far the most significant literary factor to be considered. Echoes of Old Testament language should always be taken seriously, and this conservative students have always been glad to do. So far there is no problem in principle.

But some conservative students are unnecessarily timid about admitting the possible influence of non-canonical writings on the New Testament writers. While it is a fact that clear references to non-canonical books are few in the New Testament, they are undoubtedly present. Jude, in his few verses, quotes explicitly from the Book of Enoch and the Assumption of Moses, and makes clear use of the non-biblical tradition of the imprisonment of the fallen angels awaiting their final punishment, which holds a central place in much of the Enoch literature, and recurs frequently in other late Jewish writing. And anyone who has wrestled with the exegesis of 1 Peter 3:19-20 will have discovered (if he has done his job properly) that the same tradition is the basic prerequisite for understanding that passage, indeed that to try to interpret it without reference to the Book of Enoch is a recipe for chaos, making it a happy hunting-ground for extraneous ideas like purgatory and the harrowing of hell, to which it in fact gives no support. The passage is obscure to modern readers because we are not familiar with a body of tradition which was clearly common ground to Peter and his readers. Read it in the light of those traditions, and it yields a clear and very relevant meaning: the risen Christ is supreme even over those malignant spirits who, even in their imprisonment, are the focus of the world's rebellion against God (and who therefore were behind the persecution which threatened Peter's readers, which is the subject of the wider context of these verses).[1]

Why then do some evangelicals find the New Testament writers' use of non-canonical literature embarrassing? There is no suggestion that this confers canonical status on the book concerned, any more than when Paul quotes from the pagan poets Menander, Aratus and Epimenides (1 Cor. 15:33; Acts 17:28; Tit. 1:12), or when we quote anything from Calvin's *Institutes* to *Winnie the Pooh* in the course of a sermon. Grammatico-historical exegesis demands that we allow the biblical writers to speak to us out of their own environment, and that environment includes more than just the Bible itself. It is our business to discover the concepts and traditions which were common ground between the biblical writers and their original readers, but which may be lost or little known to us. Sometimes, as in the case of 'baptism for the dead' in 1 Corinthians 15:29, the clues may have disappeared, and we can only guess. But when the clues are there in Enoch and Jubilees and the Testaments of the Patriarchs, surely there can be no doctrinal problem about using them to the full, thankful that we have these aids to a fuller understanding of what God led Peter to write for our instruction.

But there is also a need for caution here. A New Testament writer's thought is not *confined* to the background from which he wrote. Peter does not simply echo the tradition of the fallen angels, but uses it and transforms it into a vehicle for proclaiming the victory of Christ. It is the context in his own writing which is the key to his meaning, once the concepts he uses have been identified. Here the principle of harmony comes into play: we may not so interpret one passage that it makes the author contradict himself, or breaks the flow of his thought. Our *primary* datum is the New Testament context; the elucidation of the cultural and historical background should illuminate the terms and concepts employed, but can never alone determine the exegesis of the passage.

Take Paul's reference to the 'rock that followed them' (1 Cor. 10:4). A study of this theme in Jewish literature will soon uncover a fascinating body of tradition about this rock, or rather 'rock-

[1] This exegesis is worked out in detail in my contribution to the forthcoming symposium on *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I. Howard Marshall.

shaped well, like a kind of beehive', which rolled along with the Israelites as they wandered through the desert, providing them with water to drink, irrigating the ground, and on one occasion taking the offensive against their enemies by flooding the Arnon canyon to drown them, and coming rolling up out of the valley carrying 'skulls, arms and legs innumerable', until eventually it rolled into the Lake of Galilee, where it may still be seen under the water, 'the size of an oven'.[2] Clearly Paul was familiar at least with the idea of a mobile rock/well, even if not with the bizarre details of the later midrash, and found in this ever-present source of supply and help an apt illustration of Christ. Whether he regarded the tradition as historical fact is debatable, but he cited it not for its historical value, but for its spiritual significance: *pneumatikēs* here probably indicates that he interpreted the tradition typologically. To try to *confine* Paul's thought to the traditional material from which he drew his illustration would be to do violence to his expressed intention in making the allusion. It is referred to not for itself, but for its illustrative value; the focus of his thought is Christ.

Grammatico-historical exegesis demands, then, that we discover all we can of the background to the expressions and concepts used by the New Testament writers, but forbids us to interpret them as merely echoing the ideas of their non-Christian contemporaries. They are using these non-Christian ideas as vehicles to express a radically new message, and it is in the light of this new proclamation that their use of contemporary language must be interpreted. In this process, there is no doctrinal stumbling-block for the evangelical. He, of all people, has the strongest incentive to get his exegesis right.

A question might be raised here about the evangelical insistence, mentioned by Dr Packer, that 'the Scriptures are *clear*, and interpret themselves from within'. Does not all this talk of Enoch and midrash put the true understanding of Scripture beyond the grasp of all but the specialist biblical scholar? Have we not been looking at passages of Scripture which are anything but clear to the ordinary Bible reader? In a sense this is true. It is the business of the biblical scholar to throw light on such difficult passages, and the whole church should be the wiser if he does his job well. Without his help the ordinary Christian, and indeed many a preacher, will continue to make mistakes in exegesis through lack of awareness of the cultural context of the biblical writer. But while a failure to understand 1 Peter 3:19-20, or an instinctive aversion to the non-canonical allusions of Jude, may rob the Christian of some wholesome, even exciting, biblical teaching, it will not block his way to heaven. If the obscure passages of Scripture are viewed with a due sense of proportion, the sort of difficulties we have been considering are seen to be not sufficiently central to the message of Scripture to cause us to question the belief that 'God's people will always know enough to lead them to heaven, starting from where they are'.

(b) *Determining the Writer's Intention*

This is a crucial part of grammatico-historical exegesis. Until we know what was the aim of the biblical writer in compiling a given passage, we are likely to misinterpret his meaning. It is as dangerous to interpret metaphorical language literally as it is to evaporate a historical narrative into symbolism. And the criteria for determining the writer's aim are not necessarily the exegetical conventions of our particular theological group, but a careful study of the writing itself in the light of the literary and historical conventions of the time. Not that the biblical writers need necessarily have been bound by the canons of Graeco-Roman historiography or of inter-testamental Jewish literature; but if we conclude that they have broken with the literary norms of their time, it must be on the evidence of their own writings, not of our twentieth-century conventions.

What was the point, for instance, of Matthew's passage about the coin in the fish's mouth (17:24-27)? To record a miracle of Jesus, most of us would answer. But look at the passage. No miracle is explicitly recorded as having actually happened. The passage is about Jesus' attitude to the payment of the temple tax, with the fish coming in incidentally at the end. An exegesis which regards this passage as primarily a miracle-story is wide of the mark; it is a discussion of a practical question of significance for the church in its relations with Judaism, and embodying principles of lasting importance for the Christian vis-a-vis the society to which he belongs. Whether the coin was found in the fish's mouth at all is debatable, for similar stories of treasure from a fish in both pagan and Jewish literature[3] suggest that this was a popular story motif, to which Jesus may have been playfully alluding, rather than giving a solemn command.

[2] Midrash Rabbah on Numbers 1:2; 19:25-26. The tradition is found earlier in a less elaborate form in the Targums (both Onkelos and the Palestinian Targums), in Pseudo-Philo, and in the Tosefta.

[3] Herodotus III. 41-42 (the ring of Polycrates); Shabbath 119a; Genesis Rabbah 11:4, as cited by Strack-Billerbeck I, 614 (*cf.* Pesikta Rabbati 23:6).

It is not explicitly stated that Peter carried out the proposal. Our decision on this question (which is in any case peripheral to the main point of the passage) will be made not on the basis of a traditional exegesis, but on the estimate of Matthew's (and Jesus') sense of humour or sober literalism to which a study of the Gospel leads us. It is a literary, not a theological question, and our judgment here will not affect our view of the inerrancy of Scripture, as neither interpretation casts any doubt on what the passage actually says.

But the trouble begins when our literary judgments seem to lead us away from the literal meaning of the author's words. Here the question of inerrancy begins to arise. And it arises not primarily from the clashes between New Testament statements and external sources (as in the case of the Lucan census), but from apparent disagreements between the New Testament writers themselves. The student comes up against this difficulty most forcibly in the study of the Gospels, and here most of the problems arise in the area of chronology. Events are recorded in apparently chronological order, with connecting words like 'then' and 'immediately', and yet the order of those same events varies between the Gospels. Most scholars therefore conclude either that one or more of the evangelists has 'got it wrong', or that the order was not meant to be strictly chronological, despite the superficially chronological appearance of the narrative. The former conclusion is clearly incompatible with a belief in inerrancy; but is the latter any less objectionable?

This brings us back to the question of the writer's intention. And the question of what sort of arrangement a Gospel was intended to have is the proper province of grammatico-historical exegesis. It will be decided not by our modern canons of historiography, but by a study of the literary conventions of the time, and most important, by a study of the actual nature of the Gospels themselves and their relation with each other. If such a study leads us to the conclusion that the aim of the writer was to present his material in a logical order, to which strict chronology might on occasion take second place, so that 'then' need not always imply an exact chronological sequence, then there is no obvious ground for postulating 'error' in cases where the order of events differs between the Gospels.

A few examples will clarify the point.

To begin with a relatively simple case, Matthew and Luke record the three temptations of Jesus in a different order. Evangelicals have never had any difficulty in accepting that there is a literary or theological motive behind the variation in order, and few have found the 'chronological discrepancy' here a problem for a belief in inerrancy.

But where the evangelists differ over the order in which separate events occurred, the problem of inerrancy looms larger. Take the order of events after Jesus' entry to Jerusalem. Matthew apparently regards the cleansing of the temple as happening immediately on Jesus' arrival in the city, after which He went out to spend the night at Bethany (21:10-12,17). Mark, however, tells us that the cleansing of the temple was the next day, *after* the night spent at Bethany (11:11-12,15). So far there is no unharmonisable discrepancy: Matthew has omitted to mention a twenty-four hour delay which he did not consider significant; he does not actually *say* that the cleansing happened the same day. It is quite in character for Matthew to omit 'irrelevant' details which occur in Mark. But the situation is complicated by the fig-tree episode. According to Mark, Jesus cursed the tree on His way into the city after the night spent at Bethany and before the cleansing, but it was not discovered to have withered, and the lesson drawn out, until the next morning (11:12-14,20ff.); according to Matthew the cursing, the withering and the lessons drawn from them all occurred together on the morning *after* the cleansing (21:18ff.). A strict chronological harmonisation here seems impossible. Either it happened all at once, as Matthew's repeated *parachrēma* emphasises, or in two stages a day apart, as Mark unambiguously records it. Here it does not look as if Matthew is tidying up the narrative by recording a two-stage incident all in the same paragraph and passing over the day's delay in silence, as he did over the delay between the entry and the cleansing. He explicitly stresses the *immediacy* of the result of Jesus' curse, and the disciples' surprise at it. So here Matthew apparently subordinates strict chronological order to the homiletic aim of stressing the lesson of the fig-tree episode in terms of the dramatic effect of faith (or, of course, depending on your view of Synoptic origins, that Mark has for some unknown reason separated two stages of an event which in fact occurred all at once).

In this incident it is only a difference of twenty-four hours that is involved. Much more striking is the divergence between John and the Synoptic Gospels over the date of the cleansing of the temple. Here the whole length of Jesus' ministry separates the two dates. Again, as in the case above, the evangelical's instinct, rightly, is to try to harmonise the chronology. Did Jesus perhaps cleanse the temple twice? In principle there is no

objection to this suggestion, and many cases of 'duplicate narratives' are in fact best explained as accounts of originally separate but comparable incidents, which have naturally come to be told in increasingly similar words as the stories have been passed down. This is the best explanation, for instance, of the feedings of the 5,000 and the 4,000, or of the various anointing stories, or, probably, of the two miraculous catches of fish in such different historical circumstances. It is a poor historian, whether evangelical or not, who immediately accuses his sources of error and distortion, on the assumption that similar incidents do not happen, rather than weighing up what is the most realistic explanation of the accounts as they stand.

But some events are in the nature of the case not likely to be repeated, and the cleansing of the temple looks like one of these, a public dramatic gesture, a stark demonstration of Jesus' Messianic claim, after which His relations with the Jewish establishment could never be the same again. Nor does any of the evangelists hint that there was a second such incident; it is just that they locate it differently in the development of Jesus' ministry. Which is the more probable stage for it to occur is an open question, though I find it hard to envisage such a public and provocative demonstration right at the beginning of the ministry, when for most of His ministry Jesus was so reluctant to make an open claim to be the Messiah; to my mind it fits naturally with the equally public and irrevocable gesture of Jesus' donkeyride into Jerusalem, in the framework of the final confrontation with the establishment. If so, it is hard to see any way of accounting for its place in John except by saying that he placed it at the beginning as a fitting declaration of who Jesus was (like the immediately preceding incident at Cana, in which Jesus 'manifested His glory'), rather than because it actually happened then; in other words, that in this instance chronological precision took second place to a thematic arrangement designed to effect John's declared purpose in writing, 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ'.

No doubt many refinements ought to be made to these very bald summaries of a few problem areas, but I hope enough has been said to illustrate the point that a study of the Gospel texts themselves indicates that chronology was not always the governing factor in the arrangement of the material. (I am not suggesting, of course, that they *never* arranged their material chronologically, and that all attempts to draw up a chronology of New Testament events are futile. Harmonisation must always be our first aim, in chronology as in other areas of discrepancy, and in very many cases it can be done quite satisfactorily. I am merely pointing out that there are *some* cases where it does not seem to work.) If that is so, then our understanding of inerrancy in this connection must surely be governed by the intention with which the Gospels were written. A non-chronological arrangement is only an 'error' where the aim was to present a strictly chronological account. We should not put to the biblical text questions it was not designed to answer, and then chide it for getting them wrong.

I am not suggesting that this is an 'Open Sesame' to all the problems of the Bible, even in the area of chronology alone. But our commitment to a rigorous application of the grammatico-historical method demands that we determine first what sort of writing we are dealing with, and what its author's aim was in composing it, and it will in fact be found that many of the 'errors' and 'discrepancies' which plague the conservative when he takes up critical study of the Bible are due to our arrogant attempt to impose our modern canons of historiography on the biblical writers, rather than listening to them in the context of their own cultural and literary conventions. In other words, many of the difficulties which make the evangelical student worry about the validity of the claim of inerrancy are in fact created by ourselves, by our failure to practise sufficiently carefully the grammatico-historical exegesis to which our evangelical hermeneutic itself binds us. Of course there will still be problems, to some of which there is no ready answer, but there is no need to multiply them by misdirected exegesis!

2. The Principle of Harmony

The examples already discussed have raised the question of harmonisation in different ways. What I have said about the last two examples might be taken to suggest a hostility to harmonisation as such, so let me repeat that even the secular historian, dealing with ancient (or even modern) sources, has a duty to look first for realistic ways of harmonising apparent discrepancies (including the possibility that his interpretation of the text was mistaken) before he considers the possibility that one or more of his sources may be either mistaken or deliberately misleading. Clearly the biblical scholar, if he regards the biblical texts as God-given, is all the more obliged to look for harmony, and should recoil instinctively from the suggestion that God's word is either mistaken or misleading. There is nothing obscurantist in this attitude; it is the necessary corollary of his dual commitment as a historian and as a Christian.

The proper indulgence of the harmonising instinct, however, must be controlled by at least two cautionary considerations.

(i) Harmony must be sought in terms of the biblical writer's intention, as determined by careful grammatico-historical exegesis. This is the point already sufficiently laboured above. It is perverse to look for a chronological harmony of accounts which were apparently not intended to be chronologically organised, or to look for a literal agreement of figurative language. We should be sure that the discrepancy is real, not the product of shallow exegesis, before we start to harmonise.

(ii) We must beware of such an exclusive concern for harmonisation that we fail to notice the distinctive emphases of the biblical writers.

For example, did the centurion send his Jewish friends to ask Jesus to heal his servant (so Lk. 7: 1-10), or did he come himself (so Mt. 8:5-13)? A classic way of harmonising here is that represented by J. N. Geldenhuys' commentary on Luke[4]: both are true, in that first he sent his friends, then he came himself; Luke has recorded the first scene, and Matthew the second. Presumably if this method is pushed to its logical conclusion the whole dialogue was repeated practically verbatim. But apart from this improbability, the method introduces a new problem, by making a man declare that he is unworthy to approach Jesus in person, only to do just that immediately afterwards. Is this the most *realistic* way to explain the two accounts? Does Luke's narrative really read as if he could envisage the centurion meeting Jesus in person?

A more careful exegesis of the two accounts reveals that each has a rather different purpose in presenting the story.[5] Matthew lays the emphasis heavily on the faith of the centurion, and the significance of such faith in a Gentile. Luke, while also stressing the man's faith, is more interested in his character, particularly his humility, than in his nationality. Here is a more promising explanation of the discrepancy about the friends. To Luke their presence is important in emphasising the centurion's humility and diffidence; to Matthew they are irrelevant, even, by their being Jewish, diverting attention from the main point of the story, the response of the Gentile to Jesus. So Matthew has done what he often does elsewhere (as mentioned above): he has left out a detail irrelevant to his purpose, in order to concentrate on what was for for him the main point of the story. This is no ground for accusing Matthew of falsification or error in suggesting that the two met face to face; his omission of the *means* of the centurion's approach to Jesus is a valid literary device to highlight the message of the incident as he sees it (on the principle, common in biblical and contemporary literature, that a messenger or servant represents the one who sent him to the point of virtual identity).

A too hasty, mechanical harmonisation in this case would run the risk of missing the whole point of the incident, by ignoring the distinctive theological contribution of the two evangelists in their recording of it. Unless we believe that the evangelists were mere mindless collectors of stories and sayings, we must beware lest an exclusive desire for harmonisation robs us of the very messages which they wrote their Gospels to put across. If God has given us a story in two different forms, each with a special theological emphasis, it ill becomes us to try to reduce them to a common denominator. Besides, this example reminds us that a proper attention to the writers' purpose will sometimes direct us to a much more plausible harmonisation than a mechanical fitting together of the component parts is likely to produce.

Similar principles apply to the differing form in which the Gospels record the *sayings* of Jesus. Here, as in the case of 'duplicate narratives' mentioned above, it is often the most realistic explanation that Jesus said similar things on more than one occasion; there is nothing improbable in such a supposition, as anyone who does much public speaking knows from his own experience. I find it very hard, for instance, to believe that the blessings and woes of Luke 6:20-26 and the beatitudes of Matthew 5:3-12 are variants of one original discourse, nor can I see any reason why they should be thought to be so. The desire to make them say the same thing is perhaps one of the reasons why we are not faced as often as we should be by the stark anti-materialism of the Lucan passage; it is spiritualised into poverty 'in spirit', and the whole uncomfortable point is conveniently lost. Jesus said 'you poor', and there is no reason in context to doubt that He meant what He said. To harmonise what was originally distinct is in this case disastrous.

On the other hand, it is clear to anyone who has made even a little use of a Gospel synopsis that the evangelists, for all their undoubted concern to preserve the *content* of Jesus' sayings intact, were quite prepared to vary the wording of a saying they had received in order to emphasise the message which they found in it, and that thus

[4] London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1950.

[5] For a detailed exegesis of this passage see again my contribution to the forthcoming symposium on *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I. Howard Marshall.

varying forms of the same saying do occur.[6] Whether a particular variation is to be explained as reflecting separate original sayings, or adaptation of the wording of one original saying by the evangelists or those from whom they received the tradition, cannot be decided by rule of thumb. Either is entirely possible, and only careful exegesis can decide which is the more probable explanation in any given case.

But even where the latter explanation is adopted, we should not regard the difference in wording as an 'error', nor need the evangelical be embarrassed by it. As Leon Morris has written, 'We must not impose an inerrancy of our own making on the Bible, but rather accept the kind of inerrancy that it teaches. And this is an inerrancy which is compatible with variant reports of the words used on a given occasion.'[7] The evangelical's belief in the inspiration of the writings will assure him that the different wording is not a mistake, but is intended to bring out a different facet of the message of Jesus. The principle of harmony forbids us to interpret one version of a saying as contradicting another, but it in no way inhibits us from exploring the different nuances which the evangelists bring out. Indeed the evangelical, with his doctrine of inspiration, should be in the forefront of those who try by a careful study of the wording of a Gospel to bring out the particular emphases of each inspired writer. In other words, he has every reason to welcome redaction-criticism as an exegetical tool, however much he may deplore the critical assumptions which have motivated some of its best-known practitioners.

So harmonisation must not be sought mechanically, in such a way as to obscure the different emphases of the biblical writers. But this is really no more than to say that harmonisation must be sought under the guidance of grammatico-historical exegesis, and not in defiance of it. The two methodological commitments isolated by Dr Packer as involved in an evangelical hermeneutic are not in conflict with each other, but are complementary. And they are the principles which should guide *any* careful historian in his approach to ancient sources. The difference for the evangelical is that he is committed to the most patient and exacting application of these principles, and will not lightly give up and admit defeat in his search for a real harmony in that which God has caused to be written.

To return, then, to our original question: does the evangelical's commitment to a high view of Scripture, which entails inerrancy, automatically exclude him from the use of the critical methods which are the rules of the game of academic biblical study? In fact just the opposite is the case: he has, if anything, a stronger incentive than anyone else to work hard and critically at his exegesis, for he believes that what he is interpreting is the word of God, and therefore should spare no pains in discovering what it really means. If anyone is obliged to practise the most rigorous grammatico-historical exegesis, without taking short cuts or fudging the issue, it is the evangelical. His doctrinal position obliges him to do the very thing the pundits demand, to study the text of Scripture critically in the light of all available knowledge relevant to it. He can, and should, have a real positive contribution to make to responsible exegesis, which is what academic biblical study is, or should be, all about.

In the process he will find that he will come into confrontation with many fanciful theories and sceptical presuppositions which he is unable to accept. If his study is sufficiently thorough, it will provide him with ample reason to question, on solid academic grounds, the validity of many commonly held positions. He will soon come to suspect that if anyone is not playing according to the rules it is not necessarily he, but those scholars, often widely respected, who covertly import into the study of the Bible modern anti-supernatural presuppositions, and evolve blinkered critical procedures which make New Testament studies the laughing-stock of scholars working in related historical and literary disciplines. If his involvement in academic biblical study enables him to restore some critical sanity to an ingrown discipline, he will deserve the thanks of all serious students of the Bible, evangelical or not.

In biblical studies, as in so many areas of study (and of life), it is the half-hearted who get hurt. The evangelical scholar who is not afraid to get fully involved with critical study of the Bible is soon in a position to see that it is not the rules of the game which discourage an evangelical commitment, but a one-sided interpretation of the rules, which he has every right to challenge, on the basis of the grammatico-historical method itself. The rules need to be properly observed, but it is the players, not the spectators, who are likely to be in a position to enforce them.

[6] This subject is discussed at length in my article on 'The Authenticity of the Sayings of Jesus' in *History, Criticism and Faith*, ed. C. Brown, forthcoming from Inter-Varsity Press.

[7] *The Churchman* 81 (1967), 36. The quotation is from a useful article on 'Biblical Authority and the Concept of Inerrancy' which followed Dr. Packer's article reprinted above.

Preaching from the Patriarchs
Background to the Exposition of Genesis 15

Robert P. Gordon

This article was prepared for a series in the TSF Bulletin *under the title 'Preparation for Exposition', which was planned to give examples of 'the Bible study which must lie behind the exposition of the Word of God', without setting out the exposition itself. Dr Gordon, Lecturer in Hebrew at the University of Glasgow, here shows that academic historical study of the patriarchal period has its contribution to make to the use of Genesis in the pulpit.*

I

The twentieth century has witnessed the rehabilitation of Abraham as a historical person who lived in the first half of the second millennium BC. This is in large measure thanks to archaeological discoveries at such centres as Mari and Nuzi. There is no direct evidence of the existence of Abraham or the other patriarchs, yet customs and practices basic to the Genesis narratives have been amply illustrated from these centres. The significance of these finds for the patriarchal accounts is qualified, certainly not nullified, by the consideration that they are probably to be dated after the time of Abraham.

Abraham is introduced to us as a member of a pagan family living in Ur of the Chaldees. It is still widely held that this is the Ur in southern Iraq which was excavated by Woolley over forty years ago. Such a location would seem to be implied in Stephen's reference to Abraham's time in Mesopotamia 'before he lived in Haran' (Acts 7:2). If the identification is correct it would mean that Terah took his family from one centre of moon worship in southern Mesopotamia to another in the north (the names of both Terah and Laban probably reflect the family's devotion to the moon-god). While precise dates for Abraham and the other patriarchs are not possible (estimates for Abraham vary between 2000 and 1300 BC) the whole of the period within which his story undoubtedly falls was one of considerable population movement. The great events of the international era later in the second millennium were anticipated in the expeditions by emergent powers such as the Hittites and Hurrians (cf. Gn. 14)—still too weak to act other than in co-operation with one another. The bent of the archaeological evidence for this period is of tribal movements *down* the Euphrates valley, notably by the Amorites. In moving from Ur to Haran Terah's family was going against the trend as far as their Semitic (Amorite) brethren were concerned. Equally against the trend was Abraham's abandoning of city life and embracing the fortunes of a semi-nomad (cf. Gn. 11:1-9).

It is the Hurrian tablets from Nuzi which provide the closest parallels to the patriarchal customs. The Hurrians are noted for their assimilability in the alien cultures in which they settled. By the mid-second millennium they were an important element in the population of Haran and many other Mesopotamian cities. Abraham's pretence that Sarah was his sister (which was true in a sense: see Gn. 20:12) may be understood in the light of the Hurrian veneration of sisterhood. The status of a marriage could be enhanced by the husband's adoption of his wife as a sister. The Hurrians also recognised a form of adoption in the case of a childless couple which invites comparison with Eliezer's position in Abraham's house (Gn. 15:2-4). Yet another method of dealing with this problem was for a barren wife to provide her husband with a concubine, that by her he might have an heir. This is just what Sarah did when she gave Hagar to Abraham. And, as happened when Isaac was born, if an heir was born to the man's own wife this child took precedence over any child born in concubinage. As a result, there is no compelling reason for regarding the patriarchal stories as inventions from the period of the Israelite monarchy which reflect the social customs and practices of that age. On the contrary, the affinity of the narratives is with the second rather than with the first millennium. Theology and didactic abound in the Abraham cycle, but they are built on credible historical data.

II

Fundamental to the Abraham story is a tension between promise and fulfilment which is only partly resolved. The theme of faith in God against all the odds is all-pervading and crystallises in the issues of the promised heir (cf. Gn. 15:1-6) and the promised land (cf. Gn. 15:7-21). The call to be God's nomad imposed a great strain on Abraham as a man and as a believer; the generous appraisal in Romans 4:20 does not deny that he made

mistakes, but shows that God chose to overlook them as he reviewed Abraham's life of faith. Abraham does not appear to have been long in Canaan before the inadequacies of the place were impressed upon him. There was a famine in the land and he felt it necessary to go down to Egypt to keep alive (Gn. 12:10-20). The land to which God had called him was no Garden of Eden. Going down to Egypt was a necessary and wise step (cf. Mt. 2:13-23!). Traffic of this sort between Palestine and Egypt was common enough in the Egyptian Middle Kingdom period. It is Abraham's instinct for self-preservation, and the measures to which it drove him, which must be questioned. He evidently failed to derive strength from the consideration that God's promise could not be fulfilled in a dead Abraham.

For Lot the uncertainties of the nomadic way of life became too much. It was time for him to part company with his uncle. Abraham's encouraging Lot to go to whichever part of the land appealed to him is to be seen as being as much an expression of faith in God as a generous offer to his nephew. Lot's subsequent history forms a superbly-handled sub-plot throwing into relief the trials and triumphs of Abraham. Lot's journey east marked the abandonment of the pilgrim vocation and return to urban life—in some of its worst manifestations. Genesis 14:12 speaks of 'Lot who dwelt in Sodom', and it is his presence there at the time of the raid of the confederate kings which forms the background to the episodes described in that chapter. Later he was reckoned an elder in Sodom (Gn. 19:1), but sadly lacking in influence because of compromise. So dependent on city life had he become that when Sodom was destroyed he could not bear to live under any other conditions. The little town of Zoar was a desirable refuge indeed (Gn. 19:18-23). How much higher Abraham rose can be seen from his encounter with two Canaanite kings, as recorded in Genesis 14:17-24.

Genesis 14 bears signs of great antiquity, notably in one or two details of vocabulary and topography. There are several instances of the contemporising of archaic names. The word translated 'trained men' in verse 14 (RSV) does not occur elsewhere in the Old Testament but is paralleled in the early second millennium Egyptian execration texts where it denotes Canaanite retainers. It may be that the chapter had an independent existence before it was incorporated in Genesis; the reference to Abraham as 'the Hebrew' might suggest this. We have in any case a very detailed itinerary of the four kings which embraces much more than is of immediate concern for the history of Abraham, Lot or Sodom. There is a good historical ring about Melchizedek's name. Its original meaning was probably 'Zedek is (my) king', with Zedek a theophoric element. In the time of Joshua, Jerusalem was ruled by a king called Adonizedek ('Zedek is (my) lord'; see Jos. 10:1) and it would seem that the god Zedek was specially worshipped at Jerusalem (Salem in Gn. 14:18 is probably Jerusalem as in Ps. 76:2). Melchizedek is described as 'priest of God Most High'; the divine title 'God Most High' (*'ēl 'elyôn*) is paralleled in Canaanite religious texts. In Abraham's reply to the king of Sodom (14:22) the identification of *'ēl 'elyôn* with Yahweh is made. 'The insertion of YHWH, therefore, can only be meant to emphasise the identity, not the difference, between the God of Melchizedek and the God of Abraham, known to the people of Israel as YHWH. This accords with the biblical idea of individual non-Hebrews who acknowledge the one God.'[1] The point of the intervention by Melchizedek is that he takes from Abraham, whereas the king of Sodom, representative of worldly powers at their worst (cf. 13:13), wishes to confer benefits on him. (Such a didactic element in the story is quite compatible with the desire to preserve a tradition linking Jerusalem with the patriarch.) It was involvement with Sodom which had so quickly put all Lot's attainments at risk, so that Abraham had resolved not to compromise in the slightest degree with the king of Sodom (14:22-23). On the other hand, his willingness to give a tithe to Melchizedek fits well the emerging pattern of Abraham's life, with its subordination of present gain to future prosperity under God.

Through the interview(s) with God in chapter 15 Abraham is made more aware of the way in which the promises will be fulfilled. In particular, he learns that he will have a son who will carry on his name. What had not been specifically stated was whether Sarah would be the mother of that heir. After ten years in Canaan (16:3) Abraham heeded his wife's advice and had a son by Hagar her maid. No matter how socially acceptable this action was, in terms of the grand theme of trust in the God of the promises Abraham was wrong to submit to Sarah's feelings of despair. To judge from the Nuzi contracts it was usually the husband who insisted on the right of concubinage should his wife fail to provide him with an heir. Genesis 17 tells of important new developments in the story. Abraham and Sarah have their names modified, signifying the new phase of life into which they are entering. The first stage in God's covenant-making with Abraham

[1] N. M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York, 1966), p. 117. Quotation from first paperback edition, 1970.

(ch. 15) involved no obligations for the patriarch, but now he was given the responsibility of keeping the covenant of circumcision. Then comes the revelation, so hard to take in, that Sarah will have a son.

In spite of the specific promises made, Abraham lapsed into unbelief and made the same mistake as when he had gone down to Egypt at the beginning. But for the intervention of God the promise would have been nullified. So at last the son was born and Abraham could be forgiven for thinking that he had seen the end of his trials. In fact it is only now, and in connection with the command to go to Moriah and offer Isaac as a burnt offering, that the Biblical writer speaks of God putting Abraham to the test (22:1). It is at Moriah that the patriarch demonstrated not so much his obedience as his faith. The New Testament commentator on this episode observes: 'He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back' (Heb. 11:19).

The second great issue—that of the possession of the land—was not within sight of being fulfilled. This was brought home to Abraham when Sarah died and he had to buy a piece of ground in which to bury her. As a 'stranger and sojourner' (23:4) Abraham was rather dependent on the good-will of the Hittites to whom he put his request. At first they seem to have tried to discourage him from acquiring land among them. Eventually the deal was made, and the report of the conveyancing agrees well with what is known of land transactions, both Hittite and Mesopotamian. Such minor difficulties did not discourage the man who had stood the test at Moriah. One of his last recorded acts was to solemnly commission his servant to go to Padan-Aram to find a wife for Isaac. What concerned him was that the young lady should be brought down to Canaan and that Isaac should not be forced to travel to Padan-Aram. 'See to it that you do not take my son back there!' (24:6). It was nothing if not a magnificent declaration of his conviction that the future of his family lay in Canaan and not back in Mesopotamia.

III

The opening words of Genesis 15, 'after these things', appear to link the chapter with the section immediately preceding, but the legitimacy of this has frequently been disallowed. Bennett's application of the documentary theory led him to suppose that 'these things' refers to Abraham's building of altars and his generosity to Lot, because in the original Yahwistic document chapter 13 was followed by chapter 15, chapter 14 being a separate document of uncertain origin.[2] Such an assumption of mindless editing is quite unnecessary. The promise of protection and reward (15:1) is as well suited to the circumstances described in chapter 14 as to those of chapter 13. (This explanation removes the embarrassment of having, in the same source, two similar messages from God encouraging Abraham after Lot had chosen the most fertile tract of land!) Cassuto thinks that there is a numerical symmetry about the presentation of the Abraham story—a view similar to, but not identical with, the old midrashic expositions of the rabbis. Abraham is put to ten tests and after each 'he receives consolation in the form of a renewed assurance by God, or of a specific act for his benefit'.[3] In one way or another we take Genesis 15:1 to be a fitting sequel to the events of Genesis 14. A man who had just conducted a night raid against enemies much stronger than he would be greatly cheered by talk of a divine shield to protect him. (In more recent times the word translated 'shield' has, on philological grounds, been given the meaning 'benefactor'. The idea of God as a shield for His people, however, has its parallels (e.g., Dt. 33:29) and the more common meaning of *māgēn* is 'shield'. There could be a play on the root since 'delivered' in Genesis 14:20 is *miggēn*.) The significance of the promised reward after the rejection of the offer by the king of Sodom is obvious enough.

Abraham's reply (verse 2) shows what was uppermost in his mind. He had no heir apart from his servant Eliezer who had apparently been adopted to fulfil this rôle. Speiser points out that two types of heir were distinguished in Hurrian family law: the *aplu* ('direct heir') and the *ewuru* ('indirect heir'), the latter being recognised where there were no natural heirs.[4] Eliezer is commonly regarded as being in the nature of an *ewuru* to Abraham and Sarah. In a recent study Thompson has sought to disprove the special relationship between the case of Eliezer and the Nuzi institution of adoption. He makes the point that the adoption of a servant is not attested at Nuzi; the known cases of adoption concern free citizens. In addition, the Hurrian *ewuru* was still given a (secondary) share in the inheritance in the event of a natural heir being born, and this does not appear to have been the case

[2] W. H. Bennett, *Genesis* (Oxford: Century Bible, n.d.), p. 199.

[3] U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part II: From Noah to Abraham* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964), p. 294.

[4] E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (New York: Anchor Bible, 1964), pp. 111-2.

with Eliezer.[5] The first of these objections is the more substantial, but only permits the conclusion that Nuzi does not afford a complete parallel to the case of Eliezer. As to the exclusion of Eliezer from any rights of inheritance—Thompson is reading this into the text. Such is the Hebrew writer's preoccupation with the issue of natural succession that he is little interested, if at all, in how events affected Eliezer.

While the latter part of verse 2 poses difficulties for the translator, its purport is clear from verse 3. Eliezer would in the normal course of events have looked after Abraham and Sarah and would have been responsible for the performance of the proper funerary rites when they died. In return he would have inherited all his master's possessions. This kind of arrangement is known from other places as well as Nuzi. Apart from the natural desire of an ancient Semite to survive through his progeny (to what extent did this take the place of an expectation of an after-life?), Abraham was doubtless thinking of the original terms of his call ('I will make of you a great nation', 12:2). Note that nothing was said on this occasion about the possibility of Sarah having a son. Abraham could well imagine, and probably did imagine, that the son was to be born to Hagar. That he was still far from thinking that the promise could involve Sarah is evident from Genesis 17:16-18.

How do we understand verse 6, and in what way, if any, does Paul's use of it differ from its original significance? The Hebrew word *'ᵉmûnâ* ('faith') may be applied to both God and man. So God is described in Deuteronomy 32:4 as 'a faithful God' (*'ēl 'ᵉmûnâ*), because of the observable justice in all His actions. This is the word used in Habakkuk 2:4, 'the just shall live by his faith (or "faithfulness"?)'. Usually, as here, the OT expresses the idea of faith (as distinct from faithfulness) by verbs (compare the Fourth Gospel in this respect); cf. also 2 Chronicles 20:20, Proverbs 3:5, Isaiah 12:2, etc. Kidner remarks appositely: 'Note that Abram's trust was both personal (*in the Lord*, AV, RV) and propositional (the context is the specific *word of the Lord* in verses 4,5).'[6] In Christian proclamation the appeal for faith in a personal God must always be coupled with a presentation of the evidence for the truth of the Gospel. It is not enough to say that God reveals Himself in acts which man must interpret and from which he must infer the character of God and his own destiny.[7] Biblical faith claims a firmer foundation than the restriction of God's self-disclosure to His actions would allow. If God does not explain His actions man cannot arrive at certain knowledge. And there are many areas where truth cannot be conveyed except in propositional form. Abraham believed God in the absence of any act of God from which he might have drawn inferences about the divine will for himself or his descendants.

The verse was seminal for the NT development of the doctrine of justification. That righteousness was reckoned to Abraham before the covenant of circumcision was initiated (i.e., Gn. 15 comes before Gn 17!) was considered highly significant by Paul (Rom. 4:9-12). This showed that acceptance by God was not dependent on the observance of the rite of circumcision. Indeed, for Paul the proper significance of Genesis 15:6 is that Abraham's acceptance was not dependent on any work or merit he might plead (see Rom. 4:3). Such a message did not only make the Jew aware of his true position before God, it offered great hope to the Gentiles (Rom. 4:16-25). This latter point is taken up in Gal. 3, where our text is linked with the promise of blessing for all nations (Gal. 3:6-9): 'those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith'. James 2:21-24 stresses that the placing of Isaac upon the altar at Moriah was the fulfilment of Genesis 15:6. No opposition between faith and works is implied; real faith issues in works. The necessity of an active principle in faith presumably explains why Genesis 15:6 does not figure in the discussion of faith and the faithful in Hebrews 11. Abraham is commended for *actions* expressive of his trust in God (verses 8-10 and 17-19).

How do we define 'righteousness' in this context? Attempts to find the original significance of the Hebrew root *ṣ-d-q* have not resulted in a unanimous verdict, though there is something to be said for the explanation adopted by, among others, Snaith.[8] In his opinion the root meaning is 'to be straight'. (The root *ṣ-d-q* is commonly rendered in the LXX by *dikē* and its derivatives, particularly *dikaiosunē* —whose importance for Pauline thought scarcely needs mentioning.) But root meanings will help us little in our pursuit of *ṣᵉdāqâ* in Genesis 15:6. Hooke gives the word a fairly full content here: it signifies 'nothing less than the character of God Himself in His dealings with man. The original

[5] T. L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (BZAW 133, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), pp. 203-30 (esp. pp. 225-6).

[6] D. Kidner, *Genesis* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), p. 124.

[7] *pace* G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts* (London: SCM, 1952), pp. 50ff.

[8] N. H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (London: Epworth, 1944), p. 73.

intention in man's creation was that he should be in God's image, after His likeness. By his act of disobedience the image was defaced, the likeness destroyed; now the work of restoration has begun; God has found the response of faith and obedience, He has found a man in whom His own character begins to be formed.'[9] Skinner attaches more of a positional significance to the word: 'a right relation to God conferred by a divine sentence of approval'.[10] The frequent forensic association of the root *ṣ-d-q* may well be discerned in this occurrence of *ṣᵉḏaqâ.* in circumstances where Abraham's weakness was much in evidence his trust in God was acknowledged by the divine Judge as sufficient grounds for acceptance. Right relationship is often implied in the occurrences of *ṣᵉḏaqâ*; the 'righteous' man is one who meets the obligations of the relationship upon which he has entered. God is always 'righteous' in His dealings with man. Abraham met the obligation of his relationship to God by his faith-dependence.

In verses 7ff. the question of Abraham's possession of the land is raised. Assurance is conveyed through a covenant pledge. While the animals used were acceptable as Levitical offerings in later times, and the treatment of the birds conforms to Leviticus 1:17, this was much more than a sacrifice. From verses 1(?) and 5 it appears that the first part of Abraham's interview with God took place at night. The fact that verse 12 refers to sunset has been taken as an indication that the chapter is of composite origin. This may be the case, but need verses 7ff. be treated as if they were intended to refer to the same occasion as the earlier section? Perhaps the vision really was composite! At all events, the scene is set in such a way as to convey a sense of awe in the face of the ceremony about to take place. Abraham's deep sleep is reminiscent of Genesis 2: 21, where the same Hebrew word describes Adam's supernatural trance.

The total of four hundred years for the Egyptian bondage is a round figure (cf. Acts 7:6). According to Exodus 12:40 'the time that the people of Israel dwelt in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years'. That the Israelites would come out with great possessions accords with Exodus 12:35-36. In view of the fact that Abraham's ancestors were buried in Mesopotamia the reference to his going to his fathers in peace (verse 15) cannot mean that he would be buried in a family grave. The 'fourth generation' (verse 16), representing the end of the period of four hundred and thirty years, must be understood in the light of the Canaanite and Mesopotamian use of 'generation' to denote a lengthy life-span.[11] The Amorites were the inhabitants of Canaan. The statement about them in verse 16 is regarded by Kidner as one of the most important OT pronouncements on theodicy. Joshua's invasion was 'an act of justice, not aggression'.[12]

Throughout the section beginning with verse 12 the emphasis is on the initiative taken by God. God undertakes to bestow the covenant blessings and at this stage no obligation is laid upon Abraham. The divine initiative becomes most express in verse 17. As at Sinai (Ex. 19:18) God's presence is represented by smoke and fire. God passes between the pieces of the dismembered victims, in solemn undertaking that He will fulfil the promises made. Illustration of this procedure comes from a passage in Jeremiah and from extra-Biblical sources. In speaking of those who broke a covenant which they had made with God the prophet (Jer. 34:18-20) develops the significance of the divided carcase. As the calf had been divided when the covenant was ratified so the people concerned were liable to as effective a destruction for having broken the terms of the covenant. Of the various Mesopotamian analogues we choose the treaty between Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Mati'ilu of Arpad: 'If Mati'ilu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off . . . the head of Mati'ilu be torn off. . . .'[13] 1 Samuel 11: 7 shares the same outlook. The Hebrew expression for making a covenant translates literally as 'to cut a covenant' and preserves the ritual associations of the covenant ceremony. It was in the reign of David that Abraham's descendants actually came to control the territory detailed in verses 18-21.

For Paul it was a fact of the utmost significance that this unconditional covenant was ratified centuries before the Mosaic covenant at Sinai (see Gal. 3:15-18). The principle of salvation by grace (implicit in the promise to Abraham) preceded, and was never superseded by, the covenant of law. The principle of sovereign grace is never denied, God must fulfil His covenant undertakings; it is men individually who may cut themselves off from the covenant blessings. What God has required in all ages, so that His saving purpose may be fulfilled in men, has already been stated in our chapter (verse 6). Genesis 15 has the gospel in a nutshell.

[9] S. H. Hooke, *Genesis* in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (ed. M. Black and H. H. Rowley, London: Nelson, 1962), p. 191.
[10] J. Skinner, *Genesis*² (ICC, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930), p. 280.

[11] See K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1966), p. 54.
[12] *op. cit.*, p. 125.
[13] See J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*³ (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 532-3.

Preaching from the Patriarchs
Background to the Exposition of Genesis 15

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This article was prepared for a series in the TSF Bulletin *under the title 'Preparation for Exposition', which was planned to give examples of 'the Bible study which must lie behind the exposition of the Word of God', without setting out the exposition itself. Dr Gordon, Lecturer in Hebrew at the University of Glasgow, here shows that academic historical study of the patriarchal period has its contribution to make to the use of Genesis in the pulpit.*

I

The twentieth century has witnessed the rehabilitation of Abraham as a historical person who lived in the first half of the second millennium BC. This is in large measure thanks to archaeological discoveries at such centres as Mari and Nuzi. There is no direct evidence of the existence of Abraham or the other patriarchs, yet customs and practices basic to the Genesis narratives have been amply illustrated from these centres. The significance of these finds for the patriarchal accounts is qualified, certainly not nullified, by the consideration that they are probably to be dated after the time of Abraham.

Abraham is introduced to us as a member of a pagan family living in Ur of the Chaldees. It is still widely held that this is the Ur in southern Iraq which was excavated by Woolley over forty years ago. Such a location would seem to be implied in Stephen's reference to Abraham's time in Mesopotamia 'before he lived in Haran' (Acts 7:2). If the identification is correct it would mean that Terah took his family from one centre of moon worship in southern Mesopotamia to another in the north (the names of both Terah and Laban probably reflect the family's devotion to the moon-god). While precise dates for Abraham and the other patriarchs are not possible (estimates for Abraham vary between 2000 and 1300 BC) the whole of the period within which his story undoubtedly falls was one of considerable population movement. The great events of the international era later in the second millennium were anticipated in the expeditions by emergent powers such as the Hittites and Hurrians (cf. Gn. 14)—still too weak to act other than in co-operation with one another. The bent of the archaeological evidence for this period is of tribal movements *down* the Euphrates valley, notably by the Amorites. In moving from Ur to Haran Terah's family was going against the trend as far as their Semitic (Amorite) brethren were concerned. Equally against the trend was Abraham's abandoning of city life and embracing the fortunes of a semi-nomad (cf. Gn. 11:1-9).

It is the Hurrian tablets from Nuzi which provide the closest parallels to the patriarchal customs. The Hurrians are noted for their assimilability in the alien cultures in which they settled. By the mid-second millennium they were an important element in the population of Haran and many other Mesopotamian cities. Abraham's pretence that Sarah was his sister (which was true in a sense: see Gn. 20:12) may be understood in the light of the Hurrian veneration of sisterhood. The status of a marriage could be enhanced by the husband's adoption of his wife as a sister. The Hurrians also recognised a form of adoption in the case of a childless couple which invites comparison with Eliezer's position in Abraham's house (Gn. 15:2-4). Yet another method of dealing with this problem was for a barren wife to provide her husband with a concubine, that by her he might have an heir. This is just what Sarah did when she gave Hagar to Abraham. And, as happened when Isaac was born, if an heir was born to the man's own wife this child took precedence over any child born in concubinage. As a result, there is no compelling reason for regarding the patriarchal stories as inventions from the period of the Israelite monarchy which reflect the social customs and practices of that age. On the contrary, the affinity of the narratives is with the second rather than with the first millennium. Theology and didactic abound in the Abraham cycle, but they are built on credible historical data.

II

Fundamental to the Abraham story is a tension between promise and fulfilment which is only partly resolved. The theme of faith in God against all the odds is all-pervading and crystallises in the issues of the promised heir (cf. Gn. 15:1-6) and the promised land (cf. Gn. 15:7-21). The call to be God's nomad imposed a great strain on Abraham as a man and as a believer; the generous appraisal in Romans 4:20 does not deny that he made

mistakes, but shows that God chose to overlook them as he reviewed Abraham's life of faith. Abraham does not appear to have been long in Canaan before the inadequacies of the place were impressed upon him. There was a famine in the land and he felt it necessary to go down to Egypt to keep alive (Gn. 12:10-20). The land to which God had called him was no Garden of Eden. Going down to Egypt was a necessary and wise step (cf. Mt. 2:13-23!). Traffic of this sort between Palestine and Egypt was common enough in the Egyptian Middle Kingdom period. It is Abraham's instinct for self-preservation, and the measures to which it drove him, which must be questioned. He evidently failed to derive strength from the consideration that God's promise could not be fulfilled in a dead Abraham.

For Lot the uncertainties of the nomadic way of life became too much. It was time for him to part company with his uncle. Abraham's encouraging Lot to go to whichever part of the land appealed to him is to be seen as being as much an expression of faith in God as a generous offer to his nephew. Lot's subsequent history forms a superbly-handled sub-plot throwing into relief the trials and triumphs of Abraham. Lot's journey east marked the abandonment of the pilgrim vocation and return to urban life—in some of its worst manifestations. Genesis 14:12 speaks of 'Lot who dwelt in Sodom', and it is his presence there at the time of the raid of the confederate kings which forms the background to the episodes described in that chapter. Later he was reckoned an elder in Sodom (Gn. 19:1), but sadly lacking in influence because of compromise. So dependent on city life had he become that when Sodom was destroyed he could not bear to live under any other conditions. The little town of Zoar was a desirable refuge indeed (Gn. 19:18-23). How much higher Abraham rose can be seen from his encounter with two Canaanite kings, as recorded in Genesis 14:17-24.

Genesis 14 bears signs of great antiquity, notably in one or two details of vocabulary and topography. There are several instances of the contemporising of archaic names. The word translated 'trained men' in verse 14 (RSV) does not occur elsewhere in the Old Testament but is paralleled in the early second millennium Egyptian execration texts where it denotes Canaanite retainers. It may be that the chapter had an independent existence before it was incorporated in Genesis; the reference to Abraham as 'the Hebrew' might suggest this. We have in any case a very detailed itinerary of the four kings which embraces much more than is of immediate concern for the history of Abraham, Lot or Sodom. There is a good historical ring about Melchizedek's name. Its original meaning was probably 'Zedek is (my) king', with Zedek a theophoric element. In the time of Joshua, Jerusalem was ruled by a king called Adonizedek ('Zedek is (my) lord'; see Jos. 10:1) and it would seem that the god Zedek was specially worshipped at Jerusalem (Salem in Gn. 14:18 is probably Jerusalem as in Ps. 76:2). Melchizedek is described as 'priest of God Most High'; the divine title 'God Most High' (*'ēl 'elyôn*) is paralleled in Canaanite religious texts. In Abraham's reply to the king of Sodom (14:22) the identification of *'ēl 'elyôn* with Yahweh is made. 'The insertion of YHWH, therefore, can only be meant to emphasise the identity, not the difference, between the God of Melchizedek and the God of Abraham, known to the people of Israel as YHWH. This accords with the biblical idea of individual non-Hebrews who acknowledge the one God.'[1] The point of the intervention by Melchizedek is that he takes from Abraham, whereas the king of Sodom, representative of worldly powers at their worst (cf. 13:13), wishes to confer benefits on him. (Such a didactic element in the story is quite compatible with the desire to preserve a tradition linking Jerusalem with the patriarch.) It was involvement with Sodom which had so quickly put all Lot's attainments at risk, so that Abraham had resolved not to compromise in the slightest degree with the king of Sodom (14:22-23). On the other hand, his willingness to give a tithe to Melchizedek fits well the emerging pattern of Abraham's life, with its subordination of present gain to future prosperity under God.

Through the interview(s) with God in chapter 15 Abraham is made more aware of the way in which the promises will be fulfilled. In particular, he learns that he will have a son who will carry on his name. What had not been specifically stated was whether Sarah would be the mother of that heir. After ten years in Canaan (16:3) Abraham heeded his wife's advice and had a son by Hagar her maid. No matter how socially acceptable this action was, in terms of the grand theme of trust in the God of the promises Abraham was wrong to submit to Sarah's feelings of despair. To judge from the Nuzi contracts it was usually the husband who insisted on the right of concubinage should his wife fail to provide him with an heir. Genesis 17 tells of important new developments in the story. Abraham and Sarah have their names modified, signifying the new phase of life into which they are entering. The first stage in God's covenant-making with Abraham

[1] N. M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York, 1966), p. 117. Quotation from first paperback edition, 1970.

(ch. 15) involved no obligations for the patriarch, but now he was given the responsibility of keeping the covenant of circumcision. Then comes the revelation, so hard to take in, that Sarah will have a son.

In spite of the specific promises made, Abraham lapsed into unbelief and made the same mistake as when he had gone down to Egypt at the beginning. But for the intervention of God the promise would have been nullified. So at last the son was born and Abraham could be forgiven for thinking that he had seen the end of his trials. In fact it is only now, and in connection with the command to go to Moriah and offer Isaac as a burnt offering, that the Biblical writer speaks of God putting Abraham to the test (22:1). It is at Moriah that the patriarch demonstrated not so much his obedience as his faith. The New Testament commentator on this episode observes: 'He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back' (Heb. 11:19).

The second great issue—that of the possession of the land—was not within sight of being fulfilled. This was brought home to Abraham when Sarah died and he had to buy a piece of ground in which to bury her. As a 'stranger and sojourner' (23:4) Abraham was rather dependent on the good-will of the Hittites to whom he put his request. At first they seem to have tried to discourage him from acquiring land among them. Eventually the deal was made, and the report of the conveyancing agrees well with what is known of land transactions, both Hittite and Mesopotamian. Such minor difficulties did not discourage the man who had stood the test at Moriah. One of his last recorded acts was to solemnly commission his servant to go to Padan-Aram to find a wife for Isaac. What concerned him was that the young lady should be brought down to Canaan and that Isaac should not be forced to travel to Padan-Aram. 'See to it that you do not take my son back there!' (24:6). It was nothing if not a magnificent declaration of his conviction that the future of his family lay in Canaan and not back in Mesopotamia.

III

The opening words of Genesis 15, 'after these things', appear to link the chapter with the section immediately preceding, but the legitimacy of this has frequently been disallowed. Bennett's application of the documentary theory led him to suppose that 'these things' refers to Abraham's building of altars and his generosity to Lot, because in the original Yahwistic document chapter 13 was followed by chapter 15, chapter 14 being a separate document of uncertain origin.[2] Such an assumption of mindless editing is quite unnecessary. The promise of protection and reward (15:1) is as well suited to the circumstances described in chapter 14 as to those of chapter 13. (This explanation removes the embarrassment of having, in the same source, two similar messages from God encouraging Abraham after Lot had chosen the most fertile tract of land!) Cassuto thinks that there is a numerical symmetry about the presentation of the Abraham story—a view similar to, but not identical with, the old midrashic expositions of the rabbis. Abraham is put to ten tests and after each 'he receives consolation in the form of a renewed assurance by God, or of a specific act for his benefit'.[3] In one way or another we take Genesis 15:1 to be a fitting sequel to the events of Genesis 14. A man who had just conducted a night raid against enemies much stronger than he would be greatly cheered by talk of a divine shield to protect him. (In more recent times the word translated 'shield' has, on philological grounds, been given the meaning 'benefactor'. The idea of God as a shield for His people, however, has its parallels (e.g., Dt. 33:29) and the more common meaning of *māgēn* is 'shield'. There could be a play on the root since 'delivered' in Genesis 14:20 is *miggēn*.) The significance of the promised reward after the rejection of the offer by the king of Sodom is obvious enough.

Abraham's reply (verse 2) shows what was uppermost in his mind. He had no heir apart from his servant Eliezer who had apparently been adopted to fulfil this rôle. Speiser points out that two types of heir were distinguished in Hurrian family law: the *aplu* ('direct heir') and the *ewuru* ('indirect heir'), the latter being recognised where there were no natural heirs.[4] Eliezer is commonly regarded as being in the nature of an *ewuru* to Abraham and Sarah. In a recent study Thompson has sought to disprove the special relationship between the case of Eliezer and the Nuzi institution of adoption. He makes the point that the adoption of a servant is not attested at Nuzi; the known cases of adoption concern free citizens. In addition, the Hurrian *ewuru* was still given a (secondary) share in the inheritance in the event of a natural heir being born, and this does not appear to have been the case

[2] W. H. Bennett, *Genesis* (Oxford: Century Bible, n.d.), p. 199.

[3] U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part II: From Noah to Abraham* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964), p. 294.

[4] E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (New York: Anchor Bible, 1964), pp. 111-2.

with Eliezer.[5] The first of these objections is the more substantial, but only permits the conclusion that Nuzi does not afford a complete parallel to the case of Eliezer. As to the exclusion of Eliezer from any rights of inheritance—Thompson is reading this into the text. Such is the Hebrew writer's preoccupation with the issue of natural succession that he is little interested, if at all, in how events affected Eliezer.

While the latter part of verse 2 poses difficulties for the translator, its purport is clear from verse 3. Eliezer would in the normal course of events have looked after Abraham and Sarah and would have been responsible for the performance of the proper funerary rites when they died. In return he would have inherited all his master's possessions. This kind of arrangement is known from other places as well as Nuzi. Apart from the natural desire of an ancient Semite to survive through his progeny (to what extent did this take the place of an expectation of an after-life?), Abraham was doubtless thinking of the original terms of his call ('I will make of you a great nation', 12:2). Note that nothing was said on this occasion about the possibility of Sarah having a son. Abraham could well imagine, and probably did imagine, that the son was to be born to Hagar. That he was still far from thinking that the promise could involve Sarah is evident from Genesis 17:16-18.

How do we understand verse 6, and in what way, if any, does Paul's use of it differ from its original significance? The Hebrew word *'ᵉmûnâ* ('faith') may be applied to both God and man. So God is described in Deuteronomy 32:4 as 'a faithful God' (*'ēl 'ᵉmûnâ*), because of the observable justice in all His actions. This is the word used in Habakkuk 2:4, 'the just shall live by his faith (or "faithfulness"?)'. Usually, as here, the OT expresses the idea of faith (as distinct from faithfulness) by verbs (compare the Fourth Gospel in this respect); cf. also 2 Chronicles 20:20, Proverbs 3:5, Isaiah 12:2, etc. Kidner remarks appositely: 'Note that Abram's trust was both personal (*in the Lord*, AV, RV) and propositional (the context is the specific *word of the Lord* in verses 4,5).'[6] In Christian proclamation the appeal for faith in a personal God must always be coupled with a presentation of the evidence for the truth of the Gospel. It is not enough to say that God reveals Himself in acts which man must interpret and from which he must infer the character of God and his own destiny.[7] Biblical faith claims a firmer foundation than the restriction of God's self-disclosure to His actions would allow. If God does not explain His actions man cannot arrive at certain knowledge. And there are many areas where truth cannot be conveyed except in propositional form. Abraham believed God in the absence of any act of God from which he might have drawn inferences about the divine will for himself or his descendants.

The verse was seminal for the NT development of the doctrine of justification. That righteousness was reckoned to Abraham before the covenant of circumcision was initiated (i.e., Gn. 15 comes before Gn 17!) was considered highly significant by Paul (Rom. 4:9-12). This showed that acceptance by God was not dependent on the observance of the rite of circumcision. Indeed, for Paul the proper significance of Genesis 15:6 is that Abraham's acceptance was not dependent on any work or merit he might plead (see Rom. 4:3). Such a message did not only make the Jew aware of his true position before God, it offered great hope to the Gentiles (Rom. 4:16-25). This latter point is taken up in Gal. 3, where our text is linked with the promise of blessing for all nations (Gal. 3:6-9): 'those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith'. James 2:21-24 stresses that the placing of Isaac upon the altar at Moriah was the fulfilment of Genesis 15:6. No opposition between faith and works is implied; real faith issues in works. The necessity of an active principle in faith presumably explains why Genesis 15:6 does not figure in the discussion of faith and the faithful in Hebrews 11. Abraham is commended for *actions* expressive of his trust in God (verses 8-10 and 17-19).

How do we define 'righteousness' in this context? Attempts to find the original significance of the Hebrew root *ṣ-d-q* have not resulted in a unanimous verdict, though there is something to be said for the explanation adopted by, among others, Snaith.[8] In his opinion the root meaning is 'to be straight'. (The root *ṣ-d-q* is commonly rendered in the LXX by *dikē* and its derivatives, particularly *dikaiosunē* —whose importance for Pauline thought scarcely needs mentioning.) But root meanings will help us little in our pursuit of *ṣᵉdāqâ* in Genesis 15:6. Hooke gives the word a fairly full content here: it signifies 'nothing less than the character of God Himself in His dealings with man. The original

[5] T. L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (BZAW 133, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), pp. 203-30 (esp. pp. 225-6).
[6] D. Kidner, *Genesis* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), p. 124.
[7] *pace* G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts* (London: SCM, 1952), pp. 50ff.
[8] N. H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (London: Epworth, 1944), p. 73.

intention in man's creation was that he should be in God's image, after His likeness. By his act of disobedience the image was defaced, the likeness destroyed; now the work of restoration has begun; God has found the response of faith and obedience, He has found a man in whom His own character begins to be formed.'[9] Skinner attaches more of a positional significance to the word: 'a right relation to God conferred by a divine sentence of approval'.[10] The frequent forensic association of the root *ṣ-d-q* may well be discerned in this occurrence of *ṣᵉḏaqâ.* in circumstances where Abraham's weakness was much in evidence his trust in God was acknowledged by the divine Judge as sufficient grounds for acceptance. Right relationship is often implied in the occurrences of *ṣᵉḏaqâ*; the 'righteous' man is one who meets the obligations of the relationship upon which he has entered. God is always 'righteous' in His dealings with man. Abraham met the obligation of his relationship to God by his faith-dependence.

In verses 7ff. the question of Abraham's possession of the land is raised. Assurance is conveyed through a covenant pledge. While the animals used were acceptable as Levitical offerings in later times, and the treatment of the birds conforms to Leviticus 1:17, this was much more than a sacrifice. From verses 1(?) and 5 it appears that the first part of Abraham's interview with God took place at night. The fact that verse 12 refers to sunset has been taken as an indication that the chapter is of composite origin. This may be the case, but need verses 7ff. be treated as if they were intended to refer to the same occasion as the earlier section? Perhaps the vision really was composite! At all events, the scene is set in such a way as to convey a sense of awe in the face of the ceremony about to take place. Abraham's deep sleep is reminiscent of Genesis 2:21, where the same Hebrew word describes Adam's supernatural trance.

The total of four hundred years for the Egyptian bondage is a round figure (cf. Acts 7:6). According to Exodus 12:40 'the time that the people of Israel dwelt in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years'. That the Israelites would come out with great possessions accords with Exodus 12:35-36. In view of the fact that Abraham's ancestors were buried in Mesopotamia the reference to his going to his fathers in peace (verse 15) cannot mean that he would be buried in a family grave. The 'fourth generation' (verse 16), representing the end of the period of four hundred and thirty years, must be understood in the light of the Canaanite and Mesopotamian use of 'generation' to denote a lengthy life-span.[11] The Amorites were the inhabitants of Canaan. The statement about them in verse 16 is regarded by Kidner as one of the most important OT pronouncements on theodicy. Joshua's invasion was 'an act of justice, not aggression'.[12]

Throughout the section beginning with verse 12 the emphasis is on the initiative taken by God. God undertakes to bestow the covenant blessings and at this stage no obligation is laid upon Abraham. The divine initiative becomes most express in verse 17. As at Sinai (Ex. 19:18) God's presence is represented by smoke and fire. God passes between the pieces of the dismembered victims, in solemn undertaking that He will fulfil the promises made. Illustration of this procedure comes from a passage in Jeremiah and from extra-Biblical sources. In speaking of those who broke a covenant which they had made with God the prophet (Jer. 34:18-20) develops the significance of the divided carcase. As the calf had been divided when the covenant was ratified so the people concerned were liable to as effective a destruction for having broken the terms of the covenant. Of the various Mesopotamian analogues we choose the treaty between Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Mati'ilu of Arpad: 'If Mati'ilu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off . . . the head of Mati'ilu be torn off. . . .'[13] 1 Samuel 11:7 shares the same outlook. The Hebrew expression for making a covenant translates literally as 'to cut a covenant' and preserves the ritual associations of the covenant ceremony. It was in the reign of David that Abraham's descendants actually came to control the territory detailed in verses 18-21.

For Paul it was a fact of the utmost significance that this unconditional covenant was ratified centuries before the Mosaic covenant at Sinai (see Gal. 3:15-18). The principle of salvation by grace (implicit in the promise to Abraham) preceded, and was never superseded by, the covenant of law. The principle of sovereign grace is never denied, God must fulfil His covenant undertakings; it is men individually who may cut themselves off from the covenant blessings. What God has required in all ages, so that His saving purpose may be fulfilled in men, has already been stated in our chapter (verse 6). Genesis 15 has the gospel in a nutshell.

[9] S. H. Hooke, *Genesis* in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (ed. M. Black and H. H. Rowley, London: Nelson, 1962), p. 191.

[10] J. Skinner, *Genesis*[2] (ICC, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930), p. 280.

[11] See K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1966), p. 54.

[12] *op. cit.*, p. 125.

[13] See J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*[3] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 532-3.