

Induction and Deduction with Reference to Inspiration

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One feature of the evangelical doctrine of scriptural inspiration (and inerrancy) which is subject to considerable debate is the respective place and scope of induction and deduction in the task of ascertaining a truly biblical view of the subject.

Dewey M. Beegle, for instance, opts for a priority of induction (*Scripture, Tradition and Infallibility*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973, p. 16) and he chides the upholders of inerrancy for having permitted an Aristotelian scholastic method of deductive reasoning to obscure the phenomena of Scripture which, he feels, should have been the foundation on which inductive reasoning could have developed a truly biblical view.

At the Wenham evangelical conference on scriptural authority (1966), there was a good deal of discussion on this topic, and the present essay is intended to offer certain modest suggestions in this area.

For the sake of clarification we would offer the following characterizations:

Deductive reasoning starts with a principle and/or statement, and analyses its implications (in these terms, to ascertain the meaning of a statement involves primarily deductive activity).

Induction starts with a number of concrete facts or data of observation, and seeks to correlate them in terms of a common principle.

We would submit, as Dr. Beegle readily recognizes, that these two forms of reasoning can hardly be exercised in isolation but that they are mutually necessary for any meaningful elaboration in almost any branch of knowledge.

Applying these distinctions to the subject of scriptural inspiration, we could characterize the two extreme positions as follows:

Some believe that we should start from the statements of Scripture and move deductively to a doctrine of inspiration with all it implicates.

Others, on the contrary, would maintain that we should start from the phenomena of Scripture and by induction develop a doctrine concerning the nature of Scripture.

Surely when one reflects on the matter it must be apparent that we cannot accept a challenge to choose between deduction and induction, but that we must insist on an appropriate combination of the two methods. Specifically, we opt for a combination in which the direct statements of Scripture and the deductive analysis of their meaning have a certain priority, but where the inductive process is brought into play as a controlling and corrective factor.

The approach to the doctrine of inspiration is not really different from that to any doctrine. When we attempt to express the biblical doctrine of God we do not start with the scriptural accounts of the acts of God in order to induce from them a view of God which we should think scriptural. Rather, we start from the scriptural statements about God and derive from them a general understanding which we are then careful to match to the characteristics apparent from divine activity. Meanwhile, we do not view the statements concerning God's activities to be irrelevant to our inquiry. On the contrary we view these as providing us with important checking points for the propriety of our understanding of what the Scripture means in its direct statements about God. To give an example, we primarily derive our view of God's love not from the examination of some incidents in which God appeared in a gracious guise, but rather from the express scriptural affirmation, supported by massive evidence, that God is love. Now even a well-intentioned person might go grievously astray in his assessment of what is involved in this statement. For instance, one might deduce from it that God does not impose punishment for sin, that hell cannot be eternal, that the work of Jesus Christ could not be sacrificial, let alone penal, etc. It becomes, therefore, apparent that our understanding of the meaning of certain passages of Scripture may sometimes have to be adjusted in terms of the phenomena, especially indubitable phenomena fully attested in Scripture.

The same method must prevail in establishing a scriptural doctrine of inspiration. At the start must stand an analysis of what the Scripture says about itself. Tied with this analysis are certain implications which appear as inevitable deductions from the original statements. These must then be tested by the phenomena of Scripture to see whether they are consonant with the facts. Our confidence that the truth of God is one would not then let us commit ourselves to any view which would seem to present us with an inevitable conflict with assured data of objective reality.

It is in this way that the doctrine of Scripture has generally been structured by evangelicals and, in our judgment, rightly so. In using these methods of mental activity, we ought to remain sharply aware of the places where the possibility of error may enter into our explications and formulations.

1. With respect to deduction, we can be mistaken in ascertaining the meaning of a premise upon which we believe that we should establish our faith. There can be further error introduced if in our deductions from these statements of Scripture we proceed beyond what is legitimate, particularly beyond the Scripture itself.

2. In the process of induction the possibilities for deviations are even more serious, for we must reckon with: a) possible incomplete enumeration of relevant facts; b) possible inappropriate selection of facts; c) possible inadequate understanding of the nature of the facts selected; d) our limited ability to envision the full range and variety of principles that would account for the facts; e) our possible inadequate grasp of the relationship between the facts and the principles advocated; f) possible improper use of the rational powers at all these steps.

These cautions are not meant to suggest that either induction or deduction is basically invalid, but rather that we need to remain aware of their possible limitations. The scientific method proceeds primarily by induction and the Baconian revolution, which was the start of the development of modern science, consisted precisely in recoiling from a largely deductive method in order to have recourse to a predominantly inductive and empirical approach. The fault of the scholastic approach was not that they used deduction, but rather that they had faulty or inadequately understood premises from which they started their deductions. The situation with the students of Scripture is not analogous. He does have authoritative statements made under divine inspiration, and, provided that he be right in assessing their true meaning and that the deductions which he draws from them be correctly inferred, he need not fear that he will reach erroneous results on account of a faulty methodology.

The approach advocated here is not only that which characterizes theological doctrine in general but which has been specifically applied to the biblical doctrine of Scripture by such theologians as Herman Bavinck (*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, section 112, third edition, vol I, p. 447) or by B. B. Warfield (see particularly the section, "Facts Versus Doctrine," in "The Real Problem of Inspiration," *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, pp. 201-208).

Let us now attempt to apply this methodology specifically to the subject of inerrancy of Scripture. The doctrine of inerrancy appears in the first place as a corollary (or an implicate) of the doctrine of the divine authorship of the Scripture. Furthermore, this implicate has received some direct support from statements of Scripture such as Psalm 119:160, "The sum of thy word is truth" (cf. also 142), and John 10:35, "The scripture cannot be broken."

Now in our assessment of the precise range of this inerrancy we might be inclined to reach erroneous conclusions if we were confined to our speculative reasoning on this point. The actual phenomena of Scripture, however, do permit us to achieve a more accurate grasp of what is involved in the biblical concept and to correct what would have been erroneous deductions on our part. We may proceed in this wise along a kind of spiral which provides an increasing precision of approximation.

1. We might have been inclined to argue that if God deemed it important to produce inerrant autographs He would safeguard in an absolute way the process of transmission. The plain fact is, however, that there are variants in the manuscripts and, therefore, the facts make it mandatory that we should acknowledge the possible difference between the autographs and any particular copy. This point is reflected in the way in which evangelicals are prone to express their precise position on inspiration. In these formulations the mention of the autographs is not intended as a way of escape to avoid the pressure of apparent difficulties, but rather as a realistic recognition of the actual, though minor, diversity of our available manuscripts.

2. We might have been inclined to argue from inerrancy to strict conformity to certain grammatical or orthographical standards. We do find, however, that the text of Scripture frequently does not conform to a rigid pattern in this respect. We are, therefore, led to conclude that while grammar is important for the apprehension of meaning, any particular standard of grammar cannot be thought to have been vital in God's eye for the communication of His truth.

3. We might think it proper to argue that inerrancy demands conformity to modern standards or methods of expression. Here again the facts of Scripture show us that this is not the case and that God was satisfied to convey the truth in terms of the standards and ways of speaking which were current in the days of the composition of Scripture.

4. Specifically, we must note that the Scripture frequently employs approximations which are not to be viewed as imperfections but rather as an expression of that which is most immediately relevant in relation to the message which God inspires. In this sense there are approximations in numbers, in quotations and reports, in the very use of human language, for the words never exhaust the referents. It may be noted, however, that they are divinely appointed means of communication and that they do permit any degree of approximation that may be desired and necessary for the divine purpose. Inerrancy does not imply actuarial accuracy, which was not intended by God.

5. Inerrancy does not imply that Scripture is intended to correct current conceptions at the scientific, psychological, historical, etc., level. Its message is frequently projected against the contemporary world-and-life view without endorsing what may be erroneous in it.

6. In his "Notes on the Inerrancy of Scripture" (*Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* VIII (1965), pp. 127-138) Dr. Preus suggests that "etymologies in Scripture are often according to sound, and not (obviously) according to modern linguistic analysis" (p. 136). Here we would have another delineation of the concept of inerrancy in terms of phenomena. I would recommend the whole article of Dr. Preus and particularly his "Ekthesis F" as a valuable study in this respect.

7. Thus far we have dealt with characteristics of the inerrancy of Scripture that are generally acknowledged among evangelicals and have been recognized over the centuries, specifically in many cases, by the frequently maligned seventeenth-century dogmatists of Protestant orthodoxy. Now we come to the point in the spiral where a cleavage may occur. There are those who judge that certain difficulties in peripheral matters of history, geography, science, etc., are so marked that we are led to the conclusion that the inerrancy of Scripture does not bear on such topics. We cannot concur in this conclusion, and would like to offer to those who might be inclined in this direction the following considerations as a sort of *caveat*.

a. We must realistically assess whether discrepancies or errors of this order can possibly be admitted within the framework of the texts from which our doctrine of Scripture is derived. The question is whether we do not merely adjust our understanding of the doctrine of Scripture but actually advance to the point of correcting the teaching of Scripture in terms of our understanding of the facts. This is the precise point at which Warfield appears to have given a sound note of warning (*op. cit.*, p. 204).

b. This procedure may lead us to serious problems at some of the most vital levels, because such apparent discrepancies are present in Scripture not merely in areas which appear peripheral to us, but some serious problems of this order occur at points which evangelicals would acknowledge immediately as vital. For instance, it is wise to remember that the accounts of the appearances of Christ after His resurrection may well constitute an area where it is somewhat difficult to establish harmony, and this is intimately related to the nerve center of the gospel: the resurrection of Christ.

c. There is a melancholy history of those who, having taken this turn in the spiral, have moved on much further into directions that are wholly opposed to evangelical truth. Surely the past teaches us that this is a danger point, perhaps the crucial danger point, and we dare not take this step without taking cognizance of its probable effects.

The cases of Henry Preserved Smith (1847-1927) and of Charles Augustus Briggs (1841-1913) come to mind. These scholars were tried in separate cases in the 1890's in the courts of the Presbyterian Church in U.S.A., and found out of harmony with the doctrinal standards of the church. The original main contention

of both of these men was precisely that the infallibility of the Bible must not be viewed as extending to peripheral details which have no vital bearing on the theological, ethical, and spiritual revelation given to us by God. In both cases in the course of a fairly lengthy span of life beyond the time of their condemnation, these men did exhibit the eroding effect of this principle in their total attitude to the faith. Both manifested an increasing acceptance, even at times a militant advocacy, of critical methods and conclusions. In the case of Henry P. Smith it would probably not be unfair to say that he became drastically estranged from the evangelical faith. Perhaps if these men had been treated less severely by their church, it may be urged, they would not have been carried away so far into unsound directions. On the other hand, their subsequent development confirmed in a notable way the gravity of the trend which men like B. B. Warfield had been able to discern in seed form in their initial, more cautious statements. (See B. B. Warfield, *Limited Inspiration*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1961, which is a reprint of his article on "Professor Henry Preserved Smith on Inspiration," *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* V [October 1894], 600-653.

An even more drastic case may be seen in the career of Edmond Scherer (1815-1889), who started as a disciple of Gaussen and ended in practical atheism.

4. Some scholars have made much of the remarks of James Orr, who went on record as allowing the possibility of error in the autographs of Scripture. It is true that in his book *Revelation and Inspiration* (London: Duckworth, 1910; xii, 224 pp.) he made certain statements which concede the possibility of error (cf. pp. 179-181, 214f.), and yet the whole orientation of the book is positive, and he does insist that "the Bible, impartially interpreted and judged, is free from demonstrable error in its statements, and harmonious in its teaching, to a degree that of itself creates an irresistible impression of a supernatural factor in its origin" (*op. cit.*, p. 216).

Those who hold to biblical inerrancy may at times be inclined to concentrate upon this topic out of proportion to its proper place in the total structure of the doctrine of Scripture. Microscopic examination is proper and even necessary in science, but it must always be conducted within the framework of a total perspective. We must beware lest in our attempt to present the authority of Scripture we become embroiled in the discussion of a multitude of minute and largely inconsequential problems and lose sight of the main issue under consideration. To fall into this defect, even unconsciously, has at least two disadvantages:

1. It handicaps us with respect to those we wish to win over to our view by broaching the subject with reference to some of its difficulties rather than in terms of its main supportive arguments. Surely there is a time when objections to any position must be met, but this time comes more appropriately after a positive presentation of the case has been made.

2. It exhibits a lack of due sense of proportion in those who permit themselves to fall into this trap. This is not an inevitable concomitant of inerrancy, however. One has only to look at F. Turretini's *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, for instance, to see the wide range of topics which this decided advocate of inerrancy covered under the doctrine of Scripture. Evangelicals must always remain on guard lest they "major on the minors."

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