

## Preliminary Observations on an Incarnational Model of Scripture: *Its Viability and Usefulness*<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Christianity is an historical faith and its Scripture begs to be understood in its historical contexts, which means asking “what it meant” before asking “what it means.” This is a basic commitment of evangelicalism,<sup>2</sup> and is demonstrated in many ways on popular levels, such as trips to Israel to “make the Bible come alive,” study Bibles packed with all sorts of background information, etc. Many evangelical Christians have demonstrated this commitment on a professional level as well; either as students or professors of Scripture engaged in a lifelong commitment to studying “what it meant.” This involves becoming more hermeneutically self-conscious, i.e., putting aside modern assumptions, as much as possible, and learning ancient ways. Such a commitment has born considerable fruit in the broader evangelical tradition.

Having said this, however, the historical study of Scripture has a checkered relationship with evangelicalism. To be sure, much of what has been done in our field, by believing and unbelieving scholarship alike has helped confirm our confidence in Scripture. Yet, as we all know, that very work has also challenged our convictions, and at times even reoriented our thinking. This is not necessarily destructive, if such a process brings us closer to biblical teaching, but it can also cause some tensions along the way. To be direct, not a few evangelical biblicists live with a tension between the methods and data our discipline takes for granted and how we otherwise as evangelicals talk about our Bibles. And despite evangelicalism’s commitment to “what it meant,” when biblicists go into challenge mode, frictions sometimes arise between, say, biblicists, theologians, and lay readers. Although all parties would agree, certainly, that Scripture is foundational to all Christian theology, we do not always share the same methods and expectations about what constitutes a proper engagement of Scripture. And it has not helped that the various disciplines have become highly specialized and fragmented.

For me, as a biblical scholar, all this translates to a very practical question: What role can and should the historical study of Scripture play—in both challenge mode and confirm mode—in contributing to such things as how everyday Christians read their Bibles, or how we do dogmatics? Or to put it more programmatically: how can practitioners, theologians, and biblicists contribute together to an overall approach to Scripture that is constructive while also being open to critique by the various disciplines?<sup>3</sup>

I raise these questions not to answer them directly, but to form a backdrop for a more basic consideration. As I engage these questions, I seek theological models of Scripture that are intellectually stimulating, pedagogically useful, and theologically orthodox (in the broadest, most generous sense); and that will provide some common ground as well as enough flexibility for incorporating the important challenges posed by an historical study of Scripture. That may be asking a lot, but, in my opinion, a model that meets these criteria, and presents a simple and elegant point of departure for such discussions, is the ancient and honored analogy of Christ’s incarnation.

To be sure, all analogies, all models, have strengths and weaknesses, and this is no exception. But, if we have learned anything from over 2000 years of Christian interpretation—and 2500 years of Jewish interpretation along side it—it is that our Bible is an elusive book to explain. At times it seems so grand and reaches so deeply into the human heart we are awed, and at other times seems so very mundane, even frustrating in acting so “out of character.” *Any* model of explaining *such* a Scripture *will* fail at some point.

My sense, however, is that an incarnational model not only provides a persuasive theological accounting of why Scripture looks the way it does, but it is also a model with serious precedent in evangelicalism. Hence, it potentially holds much promise as a common point for evangelical conversation, particularly in the context of modern biblical studies, where the “humanity” of Scripture has been so relentlessly and unavoidably laid before us. In other words, employing this model is an attempt to begin and orient a discussion rather than posing a final solution to the problems that confront contemporary interpreters of Scripture.

Toward that end, in what follows, I would like to illustrate the validity—even vitality—of an incarnational model in evangelical thought. Of course, this requires me to limit my scope somewhat, so I have chosen to highlight some comments of just five well-known Christian thinkers (all but one explicitly Reformed), interspersed with some brief commentary of my own. I do not mean to suggest what these men say is the final word on the matter. Far from it. In fact, I have some criticisms, only some of which I will address. My main focus here is twofold: (1) to illustrate how an incarnational model has been articulated in at least one sampling of our evangelical heritage, and (2) to raise some questions concerning the application of that model today as we address subsequent and important changes in biblical studies.

### The Incarnational Model in Evangelical Thought

I would like to begin by reflecting on two Old Princeton theologians, B. B. Warfield and A. A. Hodge.<sup>4</sup> The first example is from a popular essay of Warfield’s. He writes:

[The] whole of Scripture is the product of the *divine activities which enter it*, not by superseding the activities of the human authors, but by working *confluently with them*, so that the Scriptures are the *joint product* of divine and human activities, *both* of which penetrate them *at every point*, working harmoniously together to the production of a writing which is not divine here and human there, but *at once divine and human in every part, every word and every particular*.<sup>5</sup>

Warfield’s unmentioned sparring partners here are those in his day who had bifurcated Scripture: the religious/ethical teachings of Scripture were considered inspired, but matters touching on history, science, etc., were not. Such a move seems to have been driven by a desire to uphold Scripture’s authoritative role in the church’s faith and practice while also acknowledging the significant historical problems raised by the study of Scripture at the time. But Warfield, although recognizing the challenges (at least to a certain extent), is not willing to divide the two. *All* of Scripture is inspired and of divine origin. But that does not mean that the product of the Spirit’s work is free of the human touch. In fact, it is more than a touch: Scripture is a “joint product,” a divine/human book, the character of which permeates throughout, “in every part, every word and every particular” as Warfield puts it.

Such a theological principle is suggestive, but it does not settle *how* the specifics are to be handled. This is a recurring complaint of mine in reading the Old Princeton theologians on this topic: the principle posed is potentially powerful in its application, but such application does not seem to have been the focus of their attention (a point we will return to below). And in my opinion Warfield elsewhere leaves some important issues hanging.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, he articulates an incarnational model of Scripture where the human and divine elements are inextricably bound to one another. When it comes to Scripture, there is no divine without the human, and there is no human without the divine. You cannot speak of one without the

other—at least not for long, and then only for heuristic purposes. Deliberations on the nature of Scripture in contemporary evangelical thought would be well served not only by continuing to embrace this insight, but to work out its implications in our study of Scripture in its historical contexts.

Next is a citation from A. A. Hodge from his well-known booklet *Inspiration*, co-authored with B. B. Warfield. There is a little bit in this booklet for everyone, but Hodge’s comments on the human agency of Scripture are quite revealing—even a bit striking.

It is not merely in the matter of verbal expressions or literary composition that the personal idiosyncrasies of each author are freely manifested by the untrammelled play of all his faculties, but *the very substance of what they write is evidently for the most part the product of their own mental and spiritual activities*. ... As the general characteristic of all their work, each writer was put to that special part of the general work for which he alone was adopted by his original endowments, education, special information and providential position. Each drew from the stores of his *own original information, from the contributions of other men and from all other natural sources*. Each sought knowledge, *like all other authors*, from the use of his own natural faculties of thought and feeling, intuition and of logical inference, of memory and imagination, and of religious experience. Each gave evidence of his own *special limitations* of knowledge and mental power, and of his own *personal defects* as well as of his powers. Each wrote upon a definite occasion, under special historically grouped circumstances, from his own standpoint in the progressively unfolded plan of redemption, and each made his own special contribution to the fabric of God’s word.<sup>7</sup>

For Hodge, the incarnation of the word touches on matters of “the very substance of what they write.” And that substance is, among other things, subject to the “special limitations” and “personal defects” of the biblical writers. Hodge does not mince words, and he explicates this several pages later, in even more provocative terms.

It must be remembered that it is not claimed that the Scriptures, any more than their authors, are omniscient. The information they convey is in the forms of human thought, and *limited on all sides*. They were not designed to teach philosophy, science or human history as such. They were not designed to furnish an infallible system of speculative theology. They were written in human languages, whose *words, inflections, constructions and idioms bear everywhere indelible traces of human error*. The record itself furnishes evidence that the writers were in large measure *dependent for their knowledge upon sources and methods in themselves fallible*, and that their *personal knowledge and judgments were in many matters hesitating and defective, even wrong*.<sup>8</sup>

Here Hodge tells us that the biblical authors were limited, dependent on sometimes-fallible sources for their knowledge, and produced writings that “bear everywhere indelible traces of human error” and “in many matters” were “hesitating and defective, even wrong.” One might wonder just what this pillar of 19<sup>th</sup> century Reformed orthodoxy is getting at.

What is remarkable is that these words are part of Hodge’s *defense* of biblical inspiration in the face of higher critical attacks, where the human element of Scripture was exploited as evidence *against* inspiration. In fact, on the very previous page, Hodge affirms that Scripture is “without error” in all its “real

affirmations.”<sup>9</sup> That qualification he makes is very important: the Bible is inerrant in its “real affirmations,” i.e., in what it teaches (a point we will return to briefly below). Still, one might think he could have exercised some caution, been a bit more tempered in his remarks. He seems to be giving away an awful lot: the Bible is limited on *all* sides, it reflects traces of human error, is *in large measure* dependent on *fallible* sources. One might begin to wonder whose side he is on.

But this is precisely the point worth emphasizing. This was a moment in history when it might have been easier, politically, ecclesiastically, professionally, to downplay the very thing modern scholarship was accenting—Scripture’s human face: “Yes, some of what they say is true, but don’t worry, the Bible is still divine, and that’s what’s *really* important.” But Hodge does nothing of the kind. He will not concede one inch that Scripture’s raw humanity poses a problem for an orthodox doctrine of Scripture. In fact, as this quote indicates, it is something worth drawing out. I would have liked Hodge to follow this by indicating, for example, how the Mesopotamian background relates to Genesis, or the Jewish background to the Gospels, but he does not. Still, the idea is the right one, and as striking as his words may be, they should be allowed to stand today as they did then, as an unflinching, sobering, and orthodox, assertion of an incarnational model, where the human element of Scripture touches not only on matters of language or style, but substance.

One other Old Princetonian deserves to be mentioned, Charles Hodge.

The sacred writers impressed their peculiarities on their several productions as plainly as though they were the subjects of *no extraordinary influence*. This is one of the phenomena of the Bible patent to the most cursory reader. It rests in the *very nature of inspiration that God spake in the language of men*; that He uses men as organs, each according to his particular gifts and endowments. When He ordains praise out of the mouths of babes, they must speak as babes, or the whole power and beauty of the tribute will be lost... [The] inspired penmen wrote out of the fullness of their own thoughts and feelings, and employed the language and modes of expression which to them were the most natural and appropriate.<sup>10</sup>

What stands out here is Hodge’s insistence that Scripture seems quite ordinary, in that such an obvious human dimension is precisely what is entailed in the “very nature of inspiration.” Of course, this is hardly a novel point among contemporary evangelicals, but nevertheless, it is worth drawing out a bit. There is not the slightest tension between the Spirit’s work of inspiration and that such a Scripture will appear “to the most cursory reader” that its authors were under “no extraordinary influence.” The Spirit’s wisdom is such that the product of his inspiration yields a written document that does not strike the reader as particularly inspired. Of course, Scripture *is* unique in that it, unlike any other writing, is the product of special divine inspiration, but Hodge’s point is that this fact is not one that strikes the “cursory reader,” nor is its ordinary quality something to be de-emphasized.

I do not think I am exaggerating this one statement by abstracting it from its context;<sup>11</sup> Hodge is consistent in his exposition of the nature of Scripture as a work that everywhere bears the marks of its humanity. A proper recognition of that humanity is, therefore, for Hodge vital for an accurate understanding of what Scripture is. Moreover, the proper purview of such recognition is the whole of Scripture. Indeed, Hodge begins his discussion of inspiration in the following manner: “The nature of inspiration is to be learnt from the Scriptures; from their didactic statements, *and from their phenomena*.”<sup>12</sup> What we are to learn from Scripture’s attestation, in both its didactic statements and



phenomena, is that Scripture, being of divine origin, is nevertheless a product that is also thoroughly human and contextualized, and that when we read Scripture, *both factors* must come to bear on our interpretation.

Hodge does not go into any detail about how specifically how such a posture can bear interpretive fruit, although he is very conscious of some pressing matters of the day, as can be gleaned from the following. On explicating the extent of inspiration, Hodge writes:

This means, first, that the books of Scripture are equally inspired. All alike are *infallible* in what they teach. And secondly, that *inspiration* extends to all the contents of these several books. It is not confined to moral and religious truths, but *extends to the statements of facts, whether scientific, historical, or geographical*. It is not confined to those facts that importance of which is obvious, or which are involved in doctrine. It extends to everything that any sacred writer asserts to be true.<sup>13</sup>

There is much here to unpack, but allow me to remain focused on one point: inspiration is a quality that extends to *all* of Scripture, including scientific, historical, and geographical facts. This does not mean, however, that these “facts” are to be understood apart from the specific historical contexts in which they were uttered by the human authors of Scripture. This is plain from Hodge’s discussion of plenary inspiration that appears two pages later.

[Plenary inspiration] denies that the sacred writers were merely partially inspired; it asserts that they were fully inspired as to all that they teach, whether of doctrine or fact. *This of course does not imply that the sacred writers were infallible except for the special purpose for which they were employed. They were not imbued with plenary knowledge. As to matters of science, philosophy and history, they stood on the same level with their contemporaries. They were infallible only as teachers, and when acting as spokesmen of God.*<sup>14</sup>

There are ambiguities in this quote, especially in view of what is cited in the immediately preceding one. What does it mean for inspiration to extend to “facts” as well as doctrine, but only doctrine (which seems to be equated with “acting as spokesmen of God” at the end of this quote) being infallible? Also, how would such a view help us in addressing major points of conflict in Hodge’s time as well as our own? Surely, his reference to scientific, historical, philosophical, and geographical matters suggests Hodge’s wish that his insights are applicable to the phenomena of Scripture, but a fuller discussion is wanting.<sup>15</sup> At any rate, my only wish here is to point out the subtlety of Hodge’s observation. Although he does not refer explicitly to an incarnational model in his discussions of inspiration, it is certainly expressed indirectly when he says, “It lies in the *very nature of inspiration that God spake in the language of men.*”

This reflection on the Old Princetonians is, quite obviously, not intended to be an exhaustive representation of their view of the nature of Scripture. It is, as stated at the outset, an attempt to illustrate a dimension of that tradition that is not always given the visibility it deserves, but one that would serve us well in contemporary discussions. Whatever else can be said about their view of Scripture, the Old Princetonians had a robust commitment to a clear articulation of the vitality, the goodness, of its human element. Their doctrine of Scripture was nuanced and sophisticated enough to allow that *all* of Scripture is inspired by the Spirit, not by showing that the human element is tame and restricted, but by showing that it

is, as A. A. Hodge put it, untrammled and pervasive. Again, application of the principle is wanting, but the principle itself is liberating.

We move now to the Dutch Reformed tradition, where even more articulate expressions of an incarnational model may be seen. I would like to give just two examples here: Hermann Bavinck and Herman Ridderbos.<sup>16</sup> In volume one of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck writes that a doctrine of Scripture,

is the working out and application of the central fact of revelation: the incarnation of the Word. The Word (Logos) has become flesh (sarx), and the word has become Scripture; *these two facts do not only run parallel but are most intimately connected*. Christ became flesh, a servant, without form or comeliness, the most despised of human beings; he descended to the nethermost parts of the earth and became obedient even to death on the cross. So also the word, the revelation of God, entered the world of creatureliness, the life and history of humanity, in all the human forms of dream and vision, of investigation and reflection, *right down into that which is humanly weak and despised and ignoble....* All this took place in order that the excellency of the power...of Scripture, may be God's and not ours.<sup>17</sup>

What I find so refreshing in Bavinck, here and elsewhere,<sup>18</sup> is his enthusiasm for an incarnational model, and how that model has positive theological value. There is a reason why Scripture looks the way it does, with all its bumps and bruises, peaks and valleys, gaps and gashes—it is to exalt *God's* power, not ours. This accent on the Bible's humanity should not be misunderstood as a failure to give the divine authorship of Scripture its due place. Rather, to accent the notion that Scripture reflects the ancient contexts in which it was written is to proclaim as good and powerful what that divine author has actually, by his wisdom, produced. The Spirit's primary authorship is not questioned, nor does Scripture's humiliation imply error.<sup>19</sup> Bavinck's point is simply that the "creatureliness" of Scripture is not an obstacle to be overcome, but the very means by which Scripture's divinity can be seen. In fact, Scripture's divinity can *only* be seen *because* of its humanity—God's chosen means—not by looking past it. And it is not just humanity as a safe theoretical construct. It is a humanity that is "weak and despised and ignoble." *That* is what points us to the divine, just as Christ does in his state of humiliation. To marginalize, or minimize, or somehow get behind the Bible's "creatureliness" to the "real" word of God is, for Bavinck, to strip God of his glory.

Jumping almost a century ahead is a 1978 essay on inspiration by Herman Ridderbos.<sup>20</sup> In my opinion, this essay is full of seasoned and frank insights, by a giant of 20<sup>th</sup> century Reformed NT scholarship nearing the end of his academic career. He writes,

[It] is not up to us, it is up to the *free pleasure of God* to decide what kind of effect divine inspiration should have in the *mind, knowledge, memory, accuracy* of those whom he has used in his service, in order that their word really can be accepted and trusted as the inspired word of God. If we deny or ignore this, we dispose of the very nature of the Scriptures as the Word of God, and also of the nature of his authority and infallibility.<sup>21</sup>

Ridderbos is making a very important point here. A belief *that* God inspired Scripture does not commit us to any particular understanding of *how* he did. Or to put it more positively, we must always be willing to examine our understanding of inspiration against Scripture itself—if there is a more basic Reformational

principle concerning Scripture, I would like to hear it. It is wrong to declare *a priori* how God inspired Scripture. Rather, we come to *understand* how God inspired Scripture only by observing and learning how Scripture, at God's free pleasure, behaves. A healthy doctrine of Scripture must account for its shape, in its details. Any other approach, according to Ridderbos, is to deny Scripture and God's authority.

Ridderbos, being a biblical scholar, applies this notion to specific issues of biblical studies, namely the synoptic problem of the Gospels and the Jewish background of the NT. The synoptic problem is for Ridderbos an "empirical reality," meaning the accounts actually differ on matters of fact. He insists that this empirical biblical phenomenon not be nudged to the side in favor of what he calls a "theoretical concept" of inspiration.

The fact is that the infallibility of Scripture has in many respects a character other than that which a theoretical concept of inspiration or infallibility, *detached from its purpose and empirical reality*, would like to demand. One must be careful when reasoning about what is and is not possible under inspiration by God. Here too the *freedom of the Spirit must be honored*; and we shall first have to trace the courses of the Spirit in reverence, rather than come at once to overconfident pronouncements, however proper our intentions.<sup>22</sup>

Although stated in his own individual way, Ridderbos's view is fully consistent, in my opinion, with what we have seen above with Bavinck and the Old Princetonians. He differs only in his concrete application of that principle.

With respect to the Jewish background of the NT, Ridderbos addresses several examples including the reference to Jannes and Jambres in 2 Tim. 3:8 and the angels mediating the law in Gal. 3:19.<sup>23</sup> Ridderbos considers both of these NT phenomena as showing clear dependence on Second Temple Jewish tradition. It may be that some, by virtue of statements such as this, consider this "later Ridderbos" to have moved away from the high view of Scripture he championed in his earlier works. I disagree. I think he is being consistent with a high view, meaning an incarnational view, of Scripture. And this leads him to account for this Jewish element as part of the Spirit's wise design rather than set it aside.

Finally, the following is from C. S. Lewis, in his preface to J. B. Phillips's translation of the NT letters into contemporary English. Although the topic here is translation, Lewis's defense of Phillips is easily applicable to our topic today (and I will admit far too much for a C. S. Lewis fan such as myself to pass over).<sup>24</sup> Lewis observes that the Greek style of the NT betrays writers for whom Greek was not a language at their full command. He writes:

Does this shock us? It ought not to, except as the Incarnation itself ought to shock us. The same divine humility which decreed that God should become a baby in a peasant-woman's breast, and later an arrested field-preacher in the hands of the Roman police, decreed also that He should be preached in a vulgar, prosaic and unliterary language. If you can stomach the one, you can stomach the other. The Incarnation is in that sense an irreverent doctrine: Christianity, in that sense, an incurably irreverent religion. When we expect that it should have come before the World in all the beauty that we now feel in the Authorized Version we are as wide of the mark as the Jews were in expecting that the Messiah would come as an earthly King. The real sanctity, the real beauty and sublimity of the New Testament (as of Christ's life) are of a different sort: miles deeper and *further in*.<sup>25</sup>

Lewis's observation is marked with a rhetorical flourish many admire, and he echoes what we saw especially in Bavinck earlier. Neither Jesus nor Scripture are quite what we might have expected. And it is precisely that fact that drives us to see a more real sanctity, a more real beauty, and a more real sublimity in *both*. Or as Bavinck put it, it is through Scripture's, and Christ's, ignobility that the *power* of God is exalted.

Of course, there is much more that can be said, and a fuller treatment would require various nuances to be addressed and examples gleaned from a broader sampling. But the thoughts outlined above are nevertheless illustrative of a generally flexible and well thought out doctrine of Scripture in evangelicalism, that accents, even revels in, the role of the human element of Scripture as a divine/human book. These men have learned to embrace that human element, not as an unfortunate necessity, or as something that needs to be coaxed to comply with a so-called "high view" of Scripture. And recall again how some of these men described Scripture: weak, despised, ignoble, creaturely, bearing traces of human error; and its authors as limited, defective, hesitating, dependent on fallible sources, etc. They present *such* a Scripture boldly, without reservation, as God's chosen means by which the *divine is made known*, and call upon the analogy of Christ's incarnation to drive that point home.

### Some Thoughts toward an Application of an Incarnational Model Today

As we think through the possibilities of an incarnational model in contemporary evangelical discussions, it may be helpful to focus on some shortcomings in what we have seen above. I only wish to point out two as possible topics of further reflection.

First, the incarnational model outlined above certainly encourages an atmosphere of enthusiastic expectation in biblical scholarship to both challenge and confirm. But, as I indicated at several points, simply laying out the principle of an incarnational model is not enough. As Bavinck puts it, "The incarnation of Christ *demand*s that we trace [Scripture] down into the depths of its humiliation, in all its weakness and contempt."<sup>26</sup> But, of those cited above, an incarnational model is not applied with any specific determination, Ridderbos being the exception of those cited. On one level this is somewhat surprising, since Warfield, Hodge, and Bavinck all wrote at a time when the challenges of biblical scholarship were the topic of the day. True, the incarnational model they so forcefully and cogently articulated was in some measure a response to those very challenges, but they do not go into specifics.

One might think this was to be left to the biblical scholars. For example, William Henry Green (Professor Biblical and Oriental Literature at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1851 until his death in 1900) expresses a rich appreciation for the human element of Scripture, born out of a lifetime of attention to the biblical text in context.

No objection can be made to the demand that the sacred writings should be subject to the same critical tests as other literary products of antiquity. When were they written, and by whom? For who were they intended, and with what end in view? These are questions that may fairly be asked respecting the several books of the Bible, as respecting other books, and the same criteria that are applicable likewise in the other. *Every production of any age bears the stamp of that age*. It takes its shape from influences then at work. It is part of the life of the period, and can only be properly estimated and understood from being viewed in its original connections. Its language will be the



language of the time when it was produced. The subject, the style of thought, the local and personal allusions, will have relation to the circumstances of the period, to which in fact the whole and every part of it must have its adaptation, and which must have their rightful place in determining its true explanation. *Inspiration has no tendency to obliterate those distinctive qualities and characteristics which link men to their own age.*<sup>27</sup>

But, despite such a bold, even blunt, affirmation of the human dimension of Scripture, one is still struck by the relative silence, especially at Old Princeton, concerning the practical application of this insight for pressing issues of the time.<sup>28</sup> Green, for example, was quite open to an historical investigation of Scripture with respect to matters of date and authorship, as can be seen in his conclusion, on the basis of linguistic data, that Ecclesiastes is a post-Solomonic composition.<sup>29</sup>

But what is remarkable from a contemporary point of view is how restricted Green's focus was on such prolegomenal issues. This can be seen most clearly in how Green's career was dominated by a rebuttal of Julius Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis, i.e., the date and authorship of the Pentateuch. If Wellhausen was correct in his famous reconstruction of the *text* of the Pentateuch, then he is also correct in his reconstruction of the *history* behind the Pentateuch. According to Wellhausen's scheme, the law was the product of a "priestly source" and was not written until after the Babylonian exile (a theory that has been thoroughly revised in subsequent generations). Hence, the law was transposed from Israel's premonarchic foundation to a postexilic fabrication.<sup>30</sup> This posed a serious problem at the time and one can well understand why Green and others focused most of their scholarly energies here. Traditional notions of Scripture were coming under fire and, to mix metaphors, the dominoes were unraveling down the slippery slope. But what was lost in the shuffle were other very pressing matters of the day, ones still very much with us today, and where the incarnational model could have been applied with great profit, such as Genesis in light of *Enuma Elish*, *Atrahasis*, *Gilgamesh*, and Darwin. These issues were, unfortunately, addressed less systematically, if at all. So, although there were legitimate reasons, the fact remains that the principle was not put into practice as much as it could have.

A second shortcoming concerns the ambiguities or tensions within the model itself, as it was articulated by some of the figures mentioned above. I would like to give just one example, and this concerns the extent of inspiration. The Bible, we have been told, is inspired throughout, even where biblical writers show their human limitations. In other words, although Scripture is *infallible* only in what it teaches, all of it is *inspired* through and through.<sup>31</sup> Few evangelicals would dispute this, but it raises two important questions.

First is the old chestnut of how, perchance, we are to discern what Scripture is actually teaching. I do not mean to be nettlesome, but there is an ambiguity, even circularity, in saying "the Bible is infallible in what it teaches." We need only think of the diverse and conflicting ways in which Genesis 1 is handled among evangelicals, all parties claiming that Scripture is actually teaching/affirming this rather than that, and all positions enjoying a certain inner logic. For some, discerning what Genesis 1 teaches would necessarily entail a clear grasp of the ANE context. For others the opposite is the case: the only necessary frame of reference is Scripture itself.<sup>32</sup> For still others, it is important that Genesis 1 be in at least general agreement with a scientific model. The label "what Scripture teaches" can be made to reflect the methods, presuppositions, and even theological preferences of the interpreter. To confess that Scripture is infallible in what it teaches, without being able to come to any real agreement on what that teaching is—even among otherwise theologically compatible people—is a matter that could be addressed, or perhaps even articulated in fresh ways.

Second, the assertion that the Bible is “infallible in what it teaches” is not only ambiguous but can run the risk of minimizing any positive theological value of those inspired but non-teaching texts, i.e., those portions of Scripture that A. A. Hodge referred to cryptically as “error” or “personal defects.” They are inspired, we all agree; they are there because God wants them there. So, *why* did God put them there? What are they there *for*? They are under God’s providence, to be sure, but that doesn’t answer the question. Are they part of Scripture simply so we can claim for them God’s providence?

One perennial example is the synoptic problem in the OT. Scripture contains, by most anyone’s reckoning, two different accounts of Israel’s history: that of the Chronicler and that of the Deuteronomistic Historian. I realize that this biblical phenomenon does not cause undue stress for most evangelicals—we can *handle* it. But do these two accounts exist in Scripture in order to be “handled?” For example, did the Spirit give us two accounts to see if we can make them less like two and more than one? Even if it were possible to solve the synoptic problem this way to our satisfaction, are we not getting off on the wrong foot by thinking of it as a problem to be solved, in this or any other way? Is it a problem, or does our Bible look like this for some other reason? Might this sort of thing be the very stuff that, somehow, shows us God’s glory, to tell us something important about, say, the nature of Scripture, what we are to expect from it, what it means to read it, and who this God is who inspired it *this* way rather than some other. These are questions that put us quickly in that conversation where biblical studies, theological studies, and practice intersect. At any rate, the principle that the Bible is infallible in what it teaches is sound but needs more careful explication in interaction with the details of the biblical and, in my opinion, extrabiblical data.

These and other problems in earlier articulations of an incarnational model should not in any way be misunderstood as weaknesses in the model itself, nor calling into question the brilliance of those men who, for their time and place, attempted to articulate it. Still, we all realize that things have changed since these earlier articulations. Not only have many more things ancient come to light, but the comparative study of Scripture has become the unquestioned norm in academia. And it is of more than just passing interest that many evangelical professors have been educated in these very settings and are also keen to send their best students there as well. Generations now of evangelical biblicists have been trained in comparative studies, and that training has bred familiarity, and hence a greater degree of comfort with things that not only would have been held in suspicion in previous generations, but are sometimes still looked at askance by some today.

To get a quick feel for this, one can compare monographs on, for example, Genesis by W. H. Green<sup>33</sup> and E. J. Young,<sup>34</sup> with evangelical works written in recent years, e.g., Bruce Waltke,<sup>35</sup> John Walton,<sup>36</sup> and Tremper Longman III.<sup>37</sup> And, one can further compare these recent evangelical works with other recent treatments on Genesis not written by biblicists.<sup>38</sup> The contrasts are striking, but the more progressive works of Waltke, Walton, and Longman reflect their first-hand familiarity with the data as well as their theological commitment to reflect on Scripture in context. Few would lament this shift in evangelical biblical scholarship, but it does indicate the need for more discussions among the various disciplines. Such discussions would present challenges, to be sure, but it is worth the effort. I would like to conclude briefly with two reasons why.

### **Some Thoughts on the Practical Importance of an Incarnational Model Today**

First, an incarnational model provides a type of apologetic that in my view is needed. A defense of Scripture that engages and accounts for its historical shape, in its details—the very details God put there, the details through which we see God’s power—is a defense that I feel would have considerable impact on

knowledgeable and honestly skeptical readers, of which there are many. For such readers, an incarnational model can help remove the offense of the Bible’s humanity by turning the tables on the assumption that lies behind so many skeptical arguments, namely “something claiming to be *God’s* word would never look like *this*.”<sup>39</sup> An incarnational model exposes such foolishness for what it is, and encourages us not to defend the Bible’s humanity—which still assumes its problematic nature—but rather to declare it, in an echo of 1 Corinthians 1, as *God’s* way of using what appears to be foolish and unwise to bring glory to himself.

Such an apologetic has value not only for those who may be outside of the faith, or on the periphery. It applies to Christians, those for whom a commitment to Scripture as God’s Word is deep and non-negotiable, but for whom the historical context of Scripture creates tensions between what they had been taught and what they are learning now. And these are tensions that students of Scripture have felt with an increased force in recent generations. We probably all know evangelicals over the years who have left the faith because they have been persuaded by critical advances, and not just in seminary or graduate schools, but in high school and college “Bible as literature” classes, by watching PBS or the History Channel, by flipping through Time or Newsweek, or by reading popular novels. I would suggest that at least one reason for this is that these individuals have not had at their disposal a workable, alternate theological model for incorporating what they were learning.<sup>40</sup>

Our response to this should not be an even greater degree of defensiveness by building higher walls of seclusion. The issue is not “they lacked faith and so denied the Bible.” The issue, rather, is a model of Scripture where too much humanity posed a problem. This model, the extent to which it exists, must be laid to rest. The path from conservatism to liberalism is well-worn, but far, far less frequently has the journey been taken in reverse—and this should tell us something about the kind of apologetic that is needed. We do not harm their faith by speaking of the humanity of Scripture, but by failing to. We do not push them toward liberalism by accenting the human element, but by downplaying it. We do not confuse them by exposing them to the Bible’s creatureliness, but by shielding them from it.

Finally, and much more importantly, this historical study of Scripture reminds us of how very near God is to us, how down and dirty he gets. We are all prone in an academic setting at least to speak of God in “distant” language, to hold him at bay as a concept, an idea, a principle, a subject of study. This is an occupational hazard. But we all need to be reminded what is so foundational to the gospel, which is the lengths to which God went to bridge that distance. As distant as God may seem, and as distant as we sometimes try to keep him, Scripture itself reminds us, gently but clearly, from beginning to end, that such a posture cannot last for long. For, on every page is a reminder of how determined God is to be right there in the ups and downs of the drama of redemptive history. And if we see that, perhaps we will be reminded of how determined he is to be right there in the ups and downs of our histories. And so, perhaps the pleasant irony presents itself: the more we study Scripture as an ancient historical phenomenon, the more we see how it transcends that ancient historical setting.

Many of us have given our lives to the study of ancient Scripture, and it is worth pausing to ask ourselves why we do what we do. I think it is this. By “tracing the courses of the Spirit” (as Ridderbos put it), we are declaring the glory of God. By accenting the human element, we are celebrating the wisdom of God. By looking unflinchingly into the humiliation of Scripture, we are confessing the love of God. Truly, there is no higher view of Scripture than one that brings us to those ends.



## Notes

1. The article is a slightly revised version of a paper read at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Washington, D.C., November 16, 2006.
2. The term “evangelical” is not used here as any technical designation, but, as it is commonly used, as a broad description of those holding to the basic articles of orthodox Christian faith, such as a high view of biblical inspiration, Trinity, Christ’s deity, his atoning death, resurrection, etc. It is not meant to be exclusionary of particular traditions who likewise hold to these articles of faith but who would not see themselves as “evangelical” in the more technical sense, e.g., Reformed, Lutheran, etc. It will become quickly apparent below that, at least for the purposes of this paper, I consider the Old Princeton and Dutch Reformed traditions, as well as C. S. Lewis, to fit under this general description.
3. I recognize that there are certainly similarities between what I am espousing here and recent overtures to theological exegesis, rooted in the work of such scholars as Brevard Childs and George Lindbeck, and articulated recently by a number of important Christian thinkers, e.g., Christopher Seitz and Kevin Vanhoozer. Moreover, theological commentary series are beginning to emerge among evangelical publishers, for example, Brazos Press (*Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*) and another by Eerdmans (*The Two Horizons New Testament/Old Testament Commentary*).
4. Readers here might be interested in engaging a similar and lengthier treatment of this very topic by Moises Silva (“Old Princeton, Westminster, and Inerrancy,” in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, A Challenge, A Debate* [ed. H. Conn; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988], 67-80.) There is certain overlap between Silva’s work and my own, including some of the passages cited (!), even though I am happy to say my own choices were wholly the product of my own reading of the Old Princeton theologians. Having said this, our emphases are not identical as the goals of the two essays differ. Silva’s point is that the Old Princeton theologians’ doctrine of Scripture had a certain flexibility to recognize “hermeneutical uncertainty” (80), which accounts for the influence of their formulation of inerrancy as opposed to more rigid models. I agree, but my goal is to draw out the incarnational model of the Old Princeton theologians that gave their notion of inerrancy that needed flexibility. Moreover, as some of my subsequent comments will suggest, I am not as certain as Silva that “careful exegesis” will “remove that uncertainty” (80), nor that this is the role of exegesis. To be sure, however, Silva’s posture is one that would engender very productive theological conversation.
5. B. B. Warfield, “The Divine and Human in the Bible,” in *Evolution, Scripture, and Science: Selected Writings* (ed. M. A. Noll and D. N. Livingstone; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 57; my emphasis. Originally published in the *Presbyterian Journal*, May 3, 1894.
6. One specific issue concerns Warfield’s handling of the NT’s use of the OT (see *Inspiration*, 62-71), which is part of a larger issue, namely, the role that the biblical phenomena play in shaping our doctrine of Scripture. At various junctures, Warfield seems eager to allow the biblical data to shape his doctrine of Scripture, but at other times seems to argue the opposite, i.e., that the phenomena must be controlled by a doctrine of Scripture. Space does not allow even a cursory discussion of this issue here but compare, for example, Warfield on the need to “adjust” phenomena to the “traditional doctrine of Scripture” (*The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* [ed. S. G. Craig; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948], 174-75) to his more flexible (suggestive) acknowledgment that “full justice” needs to be done to the human element as well as the divine (“The Divine and Human in the bible,” 57-58). What does “full justice” mean if, *a priori*, the human element must be adjusted to traditional doctrine? I am not suggesting Warfield is hopelessly muddled on this issue, only that the tensions within Warfield would need to be addressed (sympathetically), and that within the larger tradition he represented.
7. A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, *Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 12-13; my emphasis.
8. Hodge, *Inspiration*, 27-28; my emphasis.
9. Hodge, *Inspiration*, 27. See also Hodge’s comment immediately following the quote above: “Nevertheless, the historical faith of the Church has always been that all the affirmations of Scripture of all kinds, whether of spiritual doctrine of duty, or of physical or historical fact, or of psychological or philosophical principle, are without error when the *ipsissima verba* of the original autographs are ascertained and interpreted in their natural and intended sense” (*Inspiration*, 28). Clearly, Hodge’s use of “error” must be understood within the inerrantist framework that he himself provides on these pages. Precisely what the relationship is between these statements, particularly as it would be worked out by way of concrete example, is a matter not addressed by Hodge. His point here is more programmatic, and my purpose for citing this passage is to illustrate the breadth and subtlety of Hodge’s thinking on the matter.
10. *Systematic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1872), 157; my emphasis.
11. Hodge’s discussion of biblical inspiration is found on pp. 153-72, which comprise the lion’s share of his treatment of “The Protestant Rule of Faith,” the sixth and final chapter of his introduction to his *Systematic Theology*.
12. *Systematic Theology*, 153; my emphasis.



13. *Systematic Theology*, 163; my emphasis.
14. *Systematic Theology*, 165; my emphasis.
15. Immediately following this quote, Hodge devotes several sentences to such things as astronomy, agriculture, Isaiah's understanding of the "mechanism of the universe," Paul's recollection of how many were baptized in Corinth, etc. These and other matters are certainly important, but Hodge does little more than mention these matters; they are not subject to rigorous analysis. At best Hodge suggests a general direction for addressing some of the more pressing issues of the day, a point to which we will return below.
16. Space does not allow a consideration of Abraham Kuyper's contribution to this topic, although Kuyper's position certainly is in harmony with Bavinck's. A detailed discussion of the doctrine of Scripture of Bavinck and Kuyper can be found in Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Old Amsterdam and Inerrancy?" *WTJ* 44 (1982) 250–89 and 45 (1983) 219–72. A fair amount of Gaffin's discussion concerns the relationship between incarnation and inscripturation in Bavinck and Kuyper. Gaffin summarizes approvingly Bavinck's incarnational model as follows: "Inscripturation arises necessarily from the incarnation and would not exist apart from it. This reality determines the origin and composition of Scripture from beginning to end. It specifies more concretely the organic nature of inspiration as a whole. It gives Scripture a unique theanthropic character ('everything divine and everything human'), without, however, involving some sort of hypostatic union between divine and human elements. Scripture has its distinctive servant-form, not because of its 'humanity,' generally considered, but because Christ was incarnated, not in a state of glory but of humiliation. The correlate to the sinlessness of Christ is that Scripture is without error" (Gaffin, "Old Amsterdam," *WTJ* 45 [1983] 268; my emphasis).
17. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volume 1: Prolegomena* (trans. J. Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 434–35; my emphasis.
18. "[T]he organic nature of Scripture...implies the idea that the Holy Spirit, in the inscripturation of the word of God, did not spurn anything human to serve as an organ of the divine. The revelation of God is not abstractly supernatural but has entered into the human fabric, into persons and states of beings, into forms and usages, into history and life. It does not fly high above us but descends into our situation; it has become flesh and blood, like us in all things except sin. Divine revelation is now an ineradicable constituent of this cosmos in which we live and, effecting renewal and restoration, continues its operation. *The human has become an instrument of the divine*; the natural has become a revelation of the supernatural; the visible has become a sign and seal of the invisible. In the process of inspiration, use has been made of all the gifts and forces resident in human nature" (*Reformed Dogmatics* 1.442–43; my emphasis).
19. As eloquent as Bavinck is on the incarnational model, he is also careful to guard against misuses of that model as justification for unorthodox views. See, for example, his discussion in *Reformed Dogmatics*, beginning at 1.435.
20. *Studies in Scripture and Its Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).
21. *Studies in Scripture*, 26; my emphasis.
22. Ridderbos, *Studies in Scripture*, 28; my emphasis.
23. Ridderbos, *Studies in Scripture*, 31–32.
24. I should add that Lewis's views on Scripture, namely his views on inerrancy and infallibility, are difficult to discern, as he did not treat these topics systematically. He certainly was quite in touch with the many difficulties inherent in a literalistic view of inerrancy (the kind that Old Princeton and the Dutch Reformed tradition likewise rejected), but "The issue simply did not assume for him the monumental importance it currently receives in religious circles" (Michael J. Christensen, *C. S. Lewis on Scripture: His Thoughts on the Nature of Biblical Inspiration, the Role of Revelation and the Question of Inerrancy* [Waco: Word, 1979], 23).
25. C. S. Lewis, "Introduction" to J. B. Phillips, *Letters to Young Churches: A Translation of the New Testament Epistles* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), vii–viii.
26. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1.435; my emphasis.
27. *Moses and the Prophets*, (New York: Robert Carter, 1883), 17–18.
28. This matter is taken up in more detail, although still somewhat briefly, in Peter Enns, "Bible in Context: The Continuing Vitality of Reformed Biblical Scholarship," *WTJ* 68 (2006): 203–18.
29. Green came to this conclusion reluctantly toward the end of his career underscores his commitment to allow the data to determine the conclusion: "After all that has been said, however, we do not see how the argument from the language can be met. We conclude, therefore, that it is decisive.... It is alleged, and the fact seems to be, that the Hebrew of this book is so Aramean [Aramaic] that it must belong to a period later than Solomon" (*Old Testament Literature: Lectures on the Poetical Books of the Old Testament* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton College, 1884], 56).
30. Hence the title to Wellhausen's magnum opus, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*. Wellhausen's textual rearrangement of the Pentateuch was *prolegomena*, merely the first step to a complete rethinking of Israel's *history*. Wellhausen published his

famous *Geschichte Israels* in 1878. A second addition was published in 1883 with the better-known title *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, which was translated into English two years later as *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (with an introduction by W. Robertson Smith). The English translation was reprinted in 1957 as *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (trans. A. Menzies and J. S. Black; New York: Meridian, 1957).

31. On this, see the succinct statement by Charles Hodge: “[All] the books of Scripture are *equally inspired*. All alike are *infallible in what they teach*.... [I]nspiration extends to all the contents of these several books” (*Systematic Theology*, 1.163; my emphasis).
32. This posture would include a canonical reading as well as a literary approach (e.g., Framework Hypothesis).
33. *The Unity of the Book of Genesis*, (New York : Charles Scribner's sons, 1895).
34. *Studies in Genesis One*, (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964).
35. *Genesis: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 2001).
36. *Genesis* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).
37. *How to Read Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2005)
38. Douglas F. Kelly, *Creation and Change: Genesis 1.1 – 2.4 in the Light of Changing Scientific Paradigms*, (Fearn, Ross-shire : Mentor, 1997); *The Genesis Debate: Persistent Questions about Creation and the Flood*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990). I am thinking particularly of the chapter co-authored by J. Ligon Duncan and David Hall.
39. ,One cannot help but think here of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003). When the Harvard “symbolologist” Robert Langdon calls upon Teabing, expert on the Holy Grail, to explain to skeptical Sophie the true meaning of the Grail, he begins with a declaration of the nature of Scripture itself. With a smile he turns to Sophie, “The Bible is a product of *man*, my dear. Not God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times...” (231; emphasis original). Although no one would hold such a position literally, the notion, that for the Bible to be the Word of God it must have fallen “magically from the clouds” (i.e., an “other worldly” book), is, I would submit, a commonly held popular position. Such a misunderstanding is not only evident on the popular level but seems to underpin the positions of such capable and influential scholars as Bart Ehrman. A recent online review by Dan Wallace of Ehrman’s *Misquoting Jesus* advocates a response to Ehrman’s challenges for lay readers that I very much resonate with. He argues that we need to address *directly* the issues raised by Ehrman and *acknowledge* where he is correct in an effort to, as Wallace puts it, “insulate” evangelicals rather than “isolate” them ([http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page\\_id=4000#P95\\_33064](http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=4000#P95_33064)).
40. I discuss at more length the issue of understanding modern biblical criticism as a theological model for providing coherence and relevance for Scripture in the modern world in Peter Enns, “Some Thoughts on Theological Exegesis of the Old Testament: Toward a Viable Model of Biblical Coherence and Relevance,” *Reformation and Revival Journal* 14/4 (2005): 81-104.