Inerrancy and New Testament Exegesis

R. T. France

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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 '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 conservative, 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 traditional tools of exegesis: 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 the message of the Bible. However, the real 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 had 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 I do not think that 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 Apocalypse of Moses, and makes 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 literature. Surely any non-canonical reference to this in the New Testament context; the elucidation of the cultural and historical background should illuminate the text of Scripture and of the New Testament and its relationship to it, is not contrary to the biblical divinity of Peter's readers, which is the subject of the wider context of these verses).

Why then do some evangelicals find the New Testament writers' use of non-canonical literature embarrassing? There is no escape from the fact 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 17:11), or when we recall that it is from Calvin's Institutes to Win 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 texts of the Bible. 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 the cases in 1 Peter 5:12-15:29, 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 biblical 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 clues 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 task is to let the text of the New Testament speak to us in the context of the Jewish Bible, and the Judaism of 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. It is Packer'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-
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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 the text of the Bible. However, while the 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.

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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 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 writings. While it is true that 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 Apocalypse of Moses, and makes use of the same non-canonical tradition of the imprisonment of the fallen angels awaiting their final punishment, which holds a central place in much of the Enoch literature. This, of course, is a heretical text. But the same is also true of the non-canonical writings in the Apocrypha which have wrested with the exegesis of I 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, and 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 threaten the cause of the kingdom of God). This is Peter's readers, which is the subject of the wider context of these verses).

Why then do some evangelical writers use non-canonical literature for embarrassing? There is no doubt 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 17:16), or when rather than Calvin's Institutes to Wintle the Poo 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 Jewish Scriptures. 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 the Book of Enoch, this is a matter of interpretation. When the last days shall be (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 making them as fully as we have their uses 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 on 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 clues 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 concern is with 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-
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 aver- sion to the non-canonical allusions of Jude, may rob the Christian of some wholesome, even exciting, biblical teaching, it does not even 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 insufficiently central to the message of Scripture to cause us to question Cephas's faith in that 'God's people will always know enough to lead them, 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 the 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, much less the detailed language 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 completely separate them even with the literary norms of their time, must be on the evidence of their own writings, not of our twenty-first-century conventions.

So far as the point, for instance, of Matthew's passage about the coin in the fish's mouth (Matt 27:18-27)? 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 in the mouth incidentally. Is this 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 the time, and Jesus' attitude in its relations with Judaism, and embodying his own principle of long-standing importance for the Christian view-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 literature7 suggest that this was a popular story motif, to which Jesus may have been playfully alluding, rather than giving a solemn command.

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 tradi- tion received from a Christian of the name of Jesus (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 other inferences from the text cast any doubt on what the passage actually says.

But the trouble begins when our literary judg- ments seem to lead us away from the literal mean- ing of the author's words. Here the question of interpreting the text literally and historically arises not from the clashes between New Testament state- ments and external sources (as in the case of the Lukan census), but from apparent disagreements between the New Testament writers themselves. Too many people, basing us against this difficulty most forcibly in the study of the Gospels, and here most of the problems are in the area of chronology. Events are recorded in apparently chronologically correct ways, like the 'then' and 'immediately', and yet the order of the 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 decided on until the liturgical composition or superficially chronological appearance of the nar- rative. The former conclusion is clearly incom- patible 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 arrange- ment a Gospel was intended to have is the proper province of grammatico-historical exegesis. It will be decided not by our modern canons of historic- ity, 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 the same facts for the reader's edification, then 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 when 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 literacy 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 their 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 the cleansing of the money changers (Mark 11:15-17, 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 unharmonious discrepancy: Matthew has his events the day before Jesus' entry to Jerusalem, 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 'irrele- vant' 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 day. Matthew has Jesus cursing the tree the day before the cleansing, the withering and the lessons drawn from them all occurred together on the morning after the cleansing (21:18ff.). A strict chronological understanding here seems impossible. Either it happened as Mark's reports, or Matthew's pararheuma emphasises, or in two stages a day apart, as Mark unambiguously records it. Here it does not look as if Matthew is tiding up the threads by being 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 is suggesting that Matthew 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 priority) would place the 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 situation in describing the events of the 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 evangelist's instinct, rightly, is to try to harmonise the chronology. Did Jesus perhaps cleanse the temple twice? In principle there is no
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 sending the Arnon canyon to drown them, and coming rolling up out of the valley carrying 'skulls, arms and legs unmentionable', until eventually it rolled into the Lake of Galilee, where it may still be seen under the water. 'Thus,' Paul must have been 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 the apt illustration of Christ. Whether he regarded the redemption as historical fact is debatable, but he cited it not for its historical value, but for its spiritual significance: *menantikiti* here probably indicates that he interpreted the tradition typologically, to *confine* Paul's thought to the traditional material by 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.

Grammatically-historical exegetics 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 equal, or similar, or similar to its contemporaries. They are using 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's insistence, mentioned by Dr Packard, that the Scriptures are *clear* and interpret themselves from within. Does not this talk of Enoch and midrash put the true understanding of Scripture beyond the grasp of all but the specialist biblical scholar? Has not the scholarly view of 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 passages, and the whole church should be the wiser for his labour. 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 aver- sion to the non-canonical allusions of Jude, may render Christian of some wholesome, even exciting, biblical teaching, it will not every- where. In 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 insufficiently central to the message of Scripture to warrant us to question as if Paul is saying that 'God's people will always know enough to lead them, 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 modern 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, or the norms 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 come to speak then with the literary norms of their time, it must be on the evidence of their own writings, not of our twentieth-century conventions.

The point, for instance, of Matthew's passage about the death of Jesus around 4-27? 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 Jesus' fish coming in in- cidentally 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 the time, which of course interacts in its relations with Judaism, and embodying principles of lasting importance for the Christian voir-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 suggest that this was a popular story motif, to which Jesus may have been playfully alluding, rather than giving a solemn command. 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 tradi- tion handed down, but on the criteria of (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 an argument in the latter instance casts any doubt on what the passage actually says.

But the trouble begins when our literary judg- ments seem to lead us away from the literal mean- ing of the author's words. Here the question of interpreting the writer's intention comes into play. 'from the clashes between New Testament state- ments and external sources (as in the case of the Lukan census), but from apparent disagreements between the New Testament writers themselves. The conversation shows 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 chronologi- cal order, whether the 'One day' and 'three days' and 'immediately', and yet the order of the 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 chronological, but rather superficially chronologically accurate in the nar- rative. The former conclusion is clearly incom- patible with a belief in inerrancy; but is the latter any less objectionable? transparently back to the question of the writer's intention. And the question of what sort of arrange- ment 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 a chronological order of events, then that 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 when 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 the 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 to the temple and cried out (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 unharmonious discrepancy: Matthew has Jesus on the Sunday and Mark on the Monday. 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 'irrele- vant' details which occur in Mark. But the situation is complicated by the fig-tree episode, Acts 3:16, 17. 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 day, so that the study of Matthew to the morning after the cleansing does not indicate that Mark, the cursing, the withering and the lessons drawn from them all occurred together on the morning after the cleansing (21:18ff). A strict chronological ordering here seems impossible. Either it happened at the temple's request on the day paraechema emphasises, or in two stages a day apart, as Mark unambiguously records it. Here it does not look as if Matthew is tidyng up the chronology. He is indicating incidentally in the same paragraph and passing over in the morning'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 is not subordinating 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 priority) and this is another paradigmatic substage in the whole 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, whose vision is not immediately blinded by the absence of the resurrection. I do not deny that the disciples, and others, may have accused 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 scepticism on this point is not likely to be repeated, and the cleansing of the temple which 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; either is possible. But 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 appeal to the authorities; or to make it fit naturally with the equally public and provocative 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 placement if it were placed 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, a historian of the formological 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 indicate the point that a study of the Gospel texts themselves indicates that chronology was not always the governing, or even the most prominent, criterion. 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 intentions 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 if we do, we are immediately accused of 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 scepticism on this point is not likely to be repeated, and the cleansing of the temple which 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; either is possible. But 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 appeal to the authorities; or to make it fit naturally with the equally public and provocative 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 placement if it were placed 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, a historian of the formological 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'.

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 where the aim was 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 diversity that was intended.

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. D. Kelly's commentary on Luke1; 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 diversity of the historical character is washed away; and 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 sort of critical itself for which we attempt to harmonise? 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 incident. Luke has placed it 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 important in bringing 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 him the main point of the story. This is not 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 falsify 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 that we can superimpose their views for harmonisation rob 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 literary data.

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 reading of the individual sayings and the general attitude of Matthew 5-12 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 put under the 'you poor', and the whole passage is placed in context to do what it 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 cursory study of the two 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

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, who, without first immediately accusing 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 instances in 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; but there is a sense in which the 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 make it fits naturally with the equally public and provocative 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 placement here, except to place 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, a historical event, a chronologically precise event 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'.

I 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 indicate the point that a study of the Gospel texts themselves indicates that chronology was not always the governing principle. In other words, the approach is not to be dictated by a priori assumptions of what was meant in a literal sense, but to consider the implications of the text for its own sake. 


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 any given rules of the game of academic biblical study? In fact, if 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 the integrity of which he ardently spares no pains in discovering what it really means. If he is involved in the task of practising the most rigorous grammatico-historical exegesis, without taking short cuts or fudging the issue, it is the evangelical. His doctrinal position obliges him to be at the vanguard of the plethora of 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 an additional reason to question, from 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 well-known, who have consistently进口 into the study of the Bible modern anti-supernatural presuppositions, and evolved blinkered critical procedures which make New Testament studies the laughing-stock of scholars working in related historical and literary disciplines. If he is involved 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 otherwise.

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 not the rules of the game which discourage an evangelical's 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 are not peculiar to the Bible, nor the players, not the spectators, who are likely to be in a position to enforce them.
Fee, Gordon D. New Testament exegesis. *Bibliography: p. Includes index.* Often helpful, information, but not designed to teach the student how to exegesise a piece of text in particular. On the other hand, I saw what was passing for exegesis in many seminaries and graduate schools—basically advanced Greek, in which “exegesis” meant to know the meaning of words and determine “what kind of genitive” and instinct told me that, necessary and useful as such work was, it was not exegesis, but only one part of the whole. So I did what many of my contemporaries had to do, who also were taught “exegesis” as a part of “hermeneutics” or as “advanced Greek”—I learned on my own. Inerrancy and New Testament Exegesis. Author. France, Richard Thomas. Thesaurus BiBIL: Bible (as a whole) → Hermeneutics → Methods: Hermeneutics Thesaurus BiBIL: Bible (as a whole) → History of Interpretation and Reception. Last modification. 2017-10-27. Few areas of New Testament study are as often discussed as the New Testament’s use of the Old. There has long been a need for a careful case-by-case treatment, since the use we see in the New Testament is so varied and diverse. Thoroughly academical, conservative, evangelical and faithful to the inerrancy of scripture, it traces the historical development of each quotation from the Old Testament, through the Jewish writers of the intertestamental period like the Qumram, Midrash, and hundreds of commentaries of the time period. This book was properly NOT entitled “Commentary on the New Testament Exegesis of the Old Testament.” It is a well-studied and scholarly look at how the New Testament writers made USE of the Old Testament Scriptures. The New Testament (NT) is the second division of the Christian biblical canon. It discusses the teachings and person of Jesus, as well as events in first-century Christianity. The New Testament’s background, the first division of the Christian Bible, is called the Old Testament, which is based primarily upon the Hebrew Bible; together they are regarded as sacred scripture by Christians.