INSPIRATION, INERRANCY
AND THE TRUTH OF SACRED SCRIPTURE
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Exciting news! Dr. Smith’s brand new book is now on Amazon:

The House of the Lord:
A Catholic Biblical Theology of God’s Temple Presence
in the Old and New Testaments

PART I. INSPIRATION & INERRANCY—
WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW.

1) REVIEWING MAGISTERIAL TEACHING
a. Dei Verbum “Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in Sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles, holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted” (DV §11).

b. Catechism of the Catholic Church: “The inspired books teach the truth. Since therefore all that the inspired authors or sacred writers affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confined to the Sacred Scriptures” (CCC 107).

2) A CATHOLIC DEFINITION OF INSPIRATION:
  a. “Biblical inspiration means the divine action stimulating the human authors of the biblical books to produce their work, and the divine charasm bestowed upon the biblical authors, enabling them to produce those literary works which make up part of the Bible.”¹
  b. Scriptural insights from Moses, St. Paul and St. Peter
     • Deut. 18:17—20 (three movements of God)
     • 2 Tim. 3:16 (Gk: theoneustos)
     • 1 Pet. 1:20—21 (Gk: phéro)

¹ Denis Farkasfalvy, O. Cist., Inspiration and Interpretation, 211.
3) **INSPIRATION: HOW IT WORKS**
   a. Having the correct “model” is crucial.
      
      **DICTATION MODEL** **COMMUNAL MODEL** **PLENARY MODEL**
   b. St. Peter’s term, *phasis* is informed by its nautical context.

4) **SOME COMMON QUESTIONS ON INSPIRATION**
   a. *Which biblical books are inspired? At what point did they become “inspired?”*
   b. *I’ve heard some scholars use the word “inspiring” (over “inspired”). Is this incorrect language?*
   c. *Are some texts “more” inspired than others?*
   d. *Which translations are “inspired”?

5) **INERRANCY: THE CORROLARY OF INSPIRATION**
   a. Inspiration and inerrancy: they’re a package deal.
   b. The “shape” of inerrancy—four distinct approaches, only one proper and Catholic option.
      
      • **Secular humanist** approach.
      • **Fundamentalist** approach.
      • **“Restricted”** (or “Limited”) approach.
      • **Unrestricted (or “Robust”)** approach.

6) **INERRANCY: WHAT IT DOES AND DOES NOT MEAN / WHAT IT DOES AND DOES NOT INVOLVE**
   • The biblical “autographs.”
     o *What about subsequent manuscripts?*
   • Inerrancy presupposes the proper interpretation.
   • The difference between “error” and “dark passages”

7) **FORM AND CONTENT: THE KEY TO UNLOCKING INERRANCY**
   a. **Dei Verbum:** “In determining the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be paid, (among other things), to literary genres. This is because truth is presented and expressed differently in historical, prophetic, or poetic texts, or in other styles of speech. The interpreter has to look for that meaning which a biblical writer intended and expressed in his particular circumstances, and in his historical and cultural context, by means of such literary genres as were in use at his time. To understand correctly what a biblical writer intended to assert, due attention is needed both to the customary and characteristic ways of feeling, speaking, and narrating which were current in his time, and to the social conventions of the period” (*DV* §11).

   b. **Dr. Brant Pitre:** “From this important passage, we are able to distill several tools for Catholic exegetes to use in determining the intentions of the human
First, exegesis must pay attention to literary genres. This means asking questions like: What kind of book is this? What is the literary form of the work? Is it poetry, prophecy, history? How one answers this question will have a direct effect on the interpretation of the text. Second, the exegete must also closely examine the language of the sacred text and its “characteristic ways of speaking.” This means asking questions such as: What is the precise meaning of the words used? What is their denotation as well as their connotation? Is the human author using a particular idiom, such as hyperbole or double entendre? Finally, both literary and linguistic analysis must be accompanied by a close study of history and culture: What is the “historical and cultural context” in which the text was composed? What were the “social conventions of the period” that can shed light on the text? In sum, these four tools—literature, language, history, and culture—are Vatican II’s primary means of discovering the intention of the human authors.”

PART II.
THREE WHOPPERS: SO-CALLED “ERRORS” THE FOUR GOSPELS

I. A MOST COMMON ‘ERROR’ IN THE GOSPELS

1) THE MUSTARD SEED: IS JESUS INCORRECT WHEN HE STATES THAT THE IT IS THE ‘SMALLEST’ OF SEEDS?

*Mark 4:30-32*  And he said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

**OBJECTION:** New Testament scholar and critic Bart Ehrman ("Jesus Interrupted") contends that modern botany demonstrates that the Gospel of Mark is incorrect on this point—and that there are numerous spermaton ("seeds") smaller than the mustard seed. As Ehrman holds, the Israeli orchid seeds are among the smallest in the region, and some of the smallest on earth. *Why not choose it for teaching purposes?*

**RESPONSE:**

1) Jesus uses the comparative, not the superlative form of the adjective, *mikros*

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hōs sinapeōs kokkō, hos, hotan sparē epi lēs gēs, mikroteron on pantōn iōn spermatōn iōn epi lēs gēs

The comparative form conveys 1 of 2 ideas, that of (a) contrast, or (b) duality. I suggest a simple “contrast” is involved here. The syntax of the Gospel supports this.

2) The final phrase of Jesus’ expression is key: What is meant by ton epi tes ges (“on the earth”)? Bart Ehrman is far too elastic in ascribing a technical meaning of the entire planet. This parable, like all parables, is drawn from local customs. It is reasonable to suggest that the phrase is not set in “global” terms, but in the regional landscape.

3) But what of the orchid? True, the orchid seed is smaller ... but it also does not grow into a large tree, as the mustard seed does.

   a. [Incidentally, the parable is “incorrect” in a scientific sense on both ends .. it is not the smallest of seeds … nor the largest of trees… ]

   b. Certainly, we would allow some latitude to any speaker: for the “imagery” to work, it has to make sense to the listener. What farmer is going to “climb” an orchid? The mustard seed / tree is aptly chosen – it is familiar, a seed farmers would work with, and that everyone could visualize in the field – the contrast of a tiny seed … and a large tree.

4) A final remark concerning Bart Ehrman …

   a. Ehrman is deficient in his critique, given all of the above. But more than that, one obvious point has not been mentioned. I have provided a technical answer – but a a much simpler explanation is all that is necessary:

   b. The purpose of this parable (all parables) is didactic! Recall that Jesus says elsewhere, “Unless one hates his father and mother, he cannot be my disciple …” (Luke 14:26). Are we to believe there that Jesus has discarded the Decalogue?

   c. Ehrman is holding the saying of Jesus to an unreasonable standard, given the customs of human language, particularly in a context such as this.

   d. There is no “error” in this text.

II. CONTRADICTIONS IN THE PASSION NARRATIVES OF THE GOSPELS

2) THE LAST SUPPER: THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS AND JOHN ARE IN CONFLICT AS TO WHETHER IT WAS A “PASSEOVER” MEAL

   a) On one hand, the Synoptic Gospels appear to portray the Last Supper as a Passover Meal (Mark 14:12 // Matt. 26-17:19 // Luke 22:7-13). This would have taken place on the eve of the first full day of Passover, i.e. Thurs. eve of Holy Week.

   b) On the other hand, John indicates that as the Jewish soldiers led Jesus from the home of Caiaphus to the Roman praetorium, they did not enter it, “so that they might not be defiled, but might eat the Passover” (John 18:28; cf. Num 9:9-11)

   c) OBJECTION: If the Passover meal had already taken place (Synoptics), how could these Jews be “unclean” and thus be disqualified from participating in the meal? Such proponents suggest the Passover meal had not yet taken place.
Modern approaches tend to view one or the other as the “historically accurate” one (R.E. Brown, John Meier)

d) **RESPONSE:** No Discrepancy! Aquinas, Augustine, Jerome, a Lapide.

In his commentary on *John*, St. Thomas resolves the discrepancy as follows:

i) John’s expression, “so that they might not be defiled, but might eat the Passover” (*John* 18:28) is actually easily remedied as a matter of semantics: the term *pascha* (Greek: “Passover”) has a range of meaning, and five similar—yet distinct connotations:

(a) The original event in Exodus;
(b) The Passover meal;
(c) The Passover Lamb itself;
(d) The entire seven day Feast of Unleavened Bread
(e) Ongoing liturgies during the Feast of Passover—*beyond the initial meal.*

e) In this fifth meaning of “Passover,” the discrepancy is resolved: The Thurs meal of the Synoptics holds; John does not offer an alternative, but simply explains that these soldiers did not enter the praetorium, *so that they might continue to participate in the Passover liturgies over the seven day festival.*

f) The tension between the Synoptic Gospels and *John* is reconciled with a proper meaning of the term in question. Moreover, our solution does not set aside the discrepancy, propose a fanciful solution, or prefer one Gospel over another as the “more-historical.”

3) **THE RESURRECTION: CONFLICTS OVER THE “PLAYERS” AT THE TOMB**

A) **DID MARY MAGDALENE GO TO THE TOMB ALONE—OR NOT?**

• **Response:**

a) First, all the Synoptics report that a small group of women went to the tomb. *John* focuses on Mary Magdalene alone. Yet, note her report to the Apostles:

   **John 20:1-2**  Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran, and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and *we* do not know where they have laid him.”

   In v:1, John indicates that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb; yet, in v. 2, John records it in the plural, as “*we.*” It is unlikely that this is a “literary plural,” since later, Mary announces the news in the singular:

   **John 20:18**  Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, “*I have seen the Lord*”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

b) In a similar way, Luke records Peter running to the tomb, i.e., as if alone:
Luke 24:12  But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home wondering at what had happened. Yet, later in the same chapter, Peter indicates “some women of our company” were present as well:

Luke 24:22-24  Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb, and found it just as the women had said; but him they did not see.”

c)  THE POINT: At times, the Gospels hone in on a single witness (Mary, Peter) in order to highlight their personal encounter. Yet, when all of the details reported by the Gospels are accounted for, it is clear that numerous women were with Mary.

B)  WAS THERE AN ANGEL—OR A MAN AT THE TOMB?

Matt. 28:2  Behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone, and sat on it.

Mark 16:5  And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed.

Luke 24:4  While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel …

c)  RESPONSE. In Luke and Mark, the figure(s) is not human but only seemed to be at first glance. This is clear by the description (white robe / amazed / dazzling apparel)

d)  This is corroborated later in Luke 22:22. Peter’s response indicates that the “two men” were really angels: “Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive.” While Mark never clarifies this, it can be easily inferred. The issue of 1 angel (Mark) or 2 (Luke) is less problematic than it appears. As in our above discussion about the women, one figure is highlighted for emphasis.

e)  Finally, concerns about the position of the angels (sitting on the stone, inside the tomb, standing) are incidental; it is implausible that such peripheral details were invented.

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3  Additionally, other OT and NT texts similarly describe angels as “young man / men”: Acts 1:10 “And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes …” See also: Tobit 5:5-10; Acts 10:30.

4  Moreover, in Luke 24:4, the verb “stood by” (εὑρίσκεται) can connote “being present, stationary” and need not necessarily refer to whether one is actually standing or sitting.
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Foreword by Brant Pitre