

THE INSPIRATION OF THE SCRIPTURES

Arthur G. Willems

I. INTRODUCTION

Each era in the history of the Christian church has been confronted with one outstanding crucial issue. On each particular issue the church stood at the crossroads and her choice was of momentous importance for her future. The basic issue, in the words of Edward J. Young, at the time of each crisis was this, "Shall the Church follow God, or shall it follow man."¹

In past history, through divine leading and intervention the church has generally followed God. In the modern era the church is confronting the important issue of supernaturalism versus naturalism. The war is raging on a number of fronts, but the crucial battle is being fought over the nature of the Bible.

There are those who affirm that the Bible is the Word of God; others maintain that it contains the Word of God; while a third group boldly affirms that the Bible is nothing but man's word about God.

In the past centuries and at the beginning of the present the issue was sharply drawn between the first and third views. In recent years, the second has appeared and has made steady inroads among adherents of both of these views.

The issue becomes that of the recognition of final authority. The particular view of the Scriptures that is held will also determine to what extent the Scriptures will be recognized as a final and supreme authority.

The question of biblical authority includes a number of related subjects. The most important of these are revelation, inspiration, and canonicity. This paper is to deal only with the subject of inspiration of the Scriptures. Nevertheless, it is important to fit inspiration into an overall picture of the attack on the Scriptures.

II. REVELATION, INSPIRATION, AND CANONICITY

Revelation. The term revelation has a rather wide meaning as it pertains to God's revelation of himself to man. It is customary to refer to general and special revelation or natural and supernatural revelation. General revelation refers to God's revealing himself in nature and in the conscience or the constitution of human personality which bears the imprint of the Creator. Although there are numerous references in the Scriptures to general or natural revelation, the subject as such is outside of the scope of the Bible itself.

Special revelation, on the other hand refers to communication of truths of which the unaided mind of man has no knowledge. This is revelation in the biblical sense. It follows that not all Scripture is revelation in this sense. Many of the historical facts recorded were common knowledge and required no special revelation from God to make them known. It is thus correct to speak of the Bible containing a revelation of God.

¹ Edward J. Young, Thy Word Is Truth, p. 14.

Inspiration. The term inspiration has been defined as "a supernatural influence exerted on the sacred writers by the Spirit of God, by virtue of which their writings are given divine trustworthiness."²

Gaussen has defined it in similar terms as "that inexplicable power which the Divine Spirit put forth of old on the authors of holy Scripture, in order to their guidance even in the employment of the words they used, and to preserve them alike from all errors and from all omissions."³

From these definitions it is seen that inspiration is distinguished from revelation in that it is not concerned with communication of information, but with the accurate reception and recording of God's message. Inspiration covers the entire Bible, assuring the infallibility of the recording of the message. However, both revelation and inspiration are concerned with the origin of the Scriptures.

Canonicity. The term canon (from the Greek κανον) according to Thiessen "has at least three meanings: (1) Literally it means a straight rod or bar, as a ruler used by masons and carpenters; then as keeping something straight; then as testing straightness. (2) Metaphorically it means that which serves to measure, a rule, norm, or standard. . . . (3) Passively it means that which has been measured and accepted."⁴

In the early church the term was applied in its passive meaning to the Scriptures. The Scriptures had been measured and accepted.

The term canon thus was used and is still used of the authoritative collection of sacred books which are recognized as such by the church. The same limits of the canon are, however, not universally accepted. To this day the Roman Catholic Church includes in its Old Testament, the Apocrypha. The early church at the beginning accepted the Jewish Old Testament or Torah which included only the thirty-nine books which are found in the Protestant Old Testament.

The history of the New Testament canon indicates that there was a universal acceptance of the majority of the books which comprise the present New Testament. These books were referred to as the homologoumena (ὁμολογούμενα) or the undisputed books. There were, however, some books that were not universally accepted. These were referred to as the antilegomena (ἀντιλεγόμενα) or disputed books. Gradually there was a universal acceptance of some of the disputed books (Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, Jude, Revelation) and a universal rejection of others (Barnabas, Shepherd of Hermos and others). The latter were considered by the church as not measuring up to the standard of the canon or the inspired Word of God.

The problem of canonicity has not been an important issue in the past. The church as such has been more or less content to accept the recognized canon of the Scriptures. Today, however, the question of canonicity is again becoming a live issue. This may be attributed largely to the concept of the Word of God by neo-orthodoxy. Neo-orthodoxy has given a tremendous reemphasis on the Word of God.

² B. B. Warfield, "Inspiration," International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, III, 1473.

³ L. Gaussen, Theopneustia, p. 34.

⁴ Henry Clarence Thiessen, Introduction to the New Testament, p. 3.

However, this they do not equate with the Bible. The printed pages of the Bible are the words of men through which God conveys His message to man. "The words of the Bible . . . are . . . simply a framework or sign by means of which this Word of God is conveyed to the hearer."⁵ This has led them to the conclusion that God could speak to man by other means than the Bible even through other books.

According to this view the question of a closed canon of sacred Scriptures appears presumptuous. Floyd V. Filson builds up a case for the inclusion of the Apocryphal books of the Old Testament on the basis of this reasoning. The inclusion of Revised Version of the Apocrypha in a new edition of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, he feels, will immediately reopen the question, "are they to be included in our Scriptures?"⁶ Filson appears to find no reason why they should not.

The acceptance of the New Testament canon in the early church was not an arbitrary decision of an ecumenical council nor by the decision of a segment of the church. This is at times implied by the Church of Rome or by the attacks of the critics. Thiessen⁷ mentions four criteria which were determining factors and led to a spontaneous process of acceptance. These criteria are: (1) Apostolicity--was the book written by an apostle or one closely associated with one? (2) Content--did the books merit inclusion? (3) Universality--were the books universally received? (4) Inspiration--did the books give evidence of being inspired by the Holy Spirit?

The books of the canon of both Old and New Testaments were thus books that bore the stamp of authenticity in that they contained a revelation of God and indicated that they were the inspired product of the Holy Spirit.

III. INSPIRATION

The biblical usage. The term inspiration occurs two times in the Authorized Version (Job 32:8 and 2 Tim. 3:16). The reference in Job 32:8 appears to be a rather questionable translation of the Hebrew neshamah (נֶשְׁמָה) breath. The later versions translate it breath. This reference can be dismissed without further comment.

The reference to inspiration in 2 Timothy 3:16 has also been translated in various ways which is an indication that the translators have had a problem with it. Besides the difficulty of giving a correct rendering of the Greek word theophneustos (θεοφνεστος) the main difficulty for the translators has been the omission in the Greek of the main verb of the sentence. This has compelled them to supply a form of the verb to be. This has generally been done in one of two possible ways. (1) "All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable . . ." or "all scripture is inspired of God. . ." (2) "Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable . . ."

The second rendering gives a rather objectionable view of the Scriptures in that it implies that not all the Scripture is inspired and profitable.

⁵ Young, op. cit., p. 231.

⁶ Floyd V. Filson, Which Books Belong in the Bible, pp. 12-13.

⁷ Thiessen, op. cit., p. 10.

Unger⁸ lists the objections to the second translation from the standpoint of exegesis, syntax, criticism, and doctrine. From the exegetical standpoint he notes it is not necessary to be told that "every Scripture inspired of God is profitable." That is an obvious case. Syntactically, "the normal easy rendering of the Greek requires the first translation as is proven by the Revised Version's rendering the same construction (a subject and two predicate adjectives joined by a coordinate conjunction) in Hebrews 4:12, 13, I Corinthians 11:30 and II Corinthians 10:10."⁹ From the critical standpoint, he shows that the Greek Fathers who were skilled in the use of the language did not adopt such an interpretation, nor do many modern scholars adopt it. Doctrinally this translation "suggests a subtle and erroneous doctrine that some Scripture may not be inspired, hence, not profitable, thus privileging human judgment and reason to decide what is and what is not Scripture."¹⁰

From every standpoint it is more acceptable to adopt the first translation which definitely teaches that all Scripture is inspired and is profitable.

The term Scripture when taken in its context obviously does not refer to any and all writings. The previous verse refers to "sacred writings" which Timothy had known from the time he was a babe. These were able to make him "wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." This obviously refers to the Old Testament and those portions of the New Testament which had been written at that time. It is also obvious that the term Scripture in verse 16 is synonymous with the sacred writings of verse 15.

That the New Testament books were considered Scriptures is further borne out by 1 Timothy 5:18 and 2 Peter 3:15-16. The reference in 1 Timothy is important from the standpoint that Paul quotes from the Old Testament (Deut. 25:4) and the New Testament (Lk. 10:7) under the title "scripture." The reference in 2 Peter classifies the epistles of Paul as Scriptures. The word "other" in verse 16 is the Greek word loipas () meaning rest rather than other. The statement implies that Peter "puts Paul's Epistles on the same plane with the O. T., which was also misused (Matt. 5:21-44; 15:3; 19:3-10)."¹¹

The phrase "inspired of God" is the translation of the single word theopneustos (ΘΕΟΠΝΕΥΣΤΟΣ) in the Greek. This compound Greek word has an entirely different connotation than the usual meaning of the English word, inspiration. Warfield, definitely holds that theopneustos does not mean "inspired of God." He states, "The Greek term has, however, nothing to say of inspiring, or of inspiration: it speaks only of a 'spring' or 'spiration.' What it says of Scripture is, not that it is 'breathed into by God' or is the product of Divine 'inbreathing' into its human authors, but that it is breathed out by God, 'Godbreathed,' the product of the creative breath of God. In a word, what is declared by this fundamental passage is simply that the Scriptures are a Divine product, without any indication of how God has operated in producing them."¹²

⁸ Merrill F. Unger, Introductory Guide to the Old Testament, pp. 25-26.

⁹ Ibid., p. 26. ¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Archibald Thomas Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, VI, 179.

¹² Warfield, op. cit., III, 1474.

The mode of inspiration. The mode of divine inspiration is not clearly defined in the Bible. Though God in some instances dictated the very message to be recorded, this was the exception rather than the general rule of giving the message. The outstanding passage with reference to the mode of inspiration is found in 2 Peter 1:21, "For no prophecy ever came by the will of man: but men spake from God being moved by the Holy Spirit."

Peter emphasizes the fact that prophecy did not originate with man. It is not of the prophet's private origination, but the prophet spoke as he was moved by the Holy Spirit. In the context it is clear that Peter had in mind not only the utterances of the prophets, but also the recorded message for he states "we have the word of prophecy" (v. 19).

The keyword as to the origination of the prophet's message is the verb moved--pheromonoi (φερόμενοι), a present passive participle of phero (φέρω). The Greek word phero has several meanings. It is necessary to only consider the meaning to carry. Under this meaning of phero, Thayer¹³ lists the passive form to mean to be conveyed or borne. He cites examples in which the passive form is used "of persons borne in a ship over the sea." The use in 2 Peter 1:21, he defines as "to be moved inwardly, prompted."

Walvoord shows that the word does imply certain limits of freedom of the human authors. "A passenger is borne by a ship to his ultimate destination with utmost certainty. The passenger, however, loses none of his human characteristics and can move within the ship with great freedom. Thus holy men spake, whether orally or in writing, within the limits of their own vocabulary and cultural environment, and yet were 'borne' along by God so that what they wrote was the infallible Word of God."¹⁴

Claims of the Bible to inspiration. Besides the references to inspiration already mentioned, there are a number of other passages in the Scriptures that directly or indirectly claim inspiration. In considering the Old Testament it is worthy of note that the writers introduce their message more than 3,800 times with statements that indicate that they are speaking the Word of God.¹⁵ The New Testament writers also consider the Old Testament to be fully inspired. It is necessary to note only one reference to the words of Jesus, "Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law, till all be accomplished" (Matt. 5:18).

As for the claims of the New Testament for itself, 2 Peter 3:15-16 has already been noted. Paul also claims trustworthiness to his own writings (cf. 1 Thess. 4:15; 1 Cor. 14:37; 2 Tim. 1:13). John in the Book of Revelation makes the same claim for his writing (cf. Rev. 21:5; 22:6, 18-19).

¹³ Joseph Henry Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, p. 650.

¹⁴ John F. Walvoord, "Is the Bible the Inspired Word of God?" Bibliotheca Sacra, 116:7, January, 1959.

¹⁵ Thiessen, op. cit., p. 86, citing William Evans, Great Doctrines of the Bible, p. 203.

The inspiration and trustworthiness of the message of the apostles and other New Testament writers was foretold by the Lord as a part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit who was to indwell the believer and make of them competent teachers. Thiessen states that "This He would do by teaching them all things, by bringing to their remembrance all that He had said unto them, by guiding them into all the truth, and by showing them things to come (John 14:26; 16:12, 13). These promises broadly embrace the events of Christ's earthly life, the lessons taught by the experiences of the early disciples, the doctrines of the Epistles, and the predictions of the Apocalypse."¹⁶

We may thus conclude that the biblical usage of the term inspiration implies a supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit upon the writers of the Scriptures, the manner of which is not fully explained except that men were borne along by the Holy Spirit as they spoke and wrote. That the writers considered their writings to be the Word of God is witnessed to in their writings.

IV. THEORIES OF INSPIRATION

Although the mode or manner of inspiration has already been discussed, it is necessary to deal with the various theories which attempt to explain the origin of the Scriptures.

Natural inspiration. Adherents to this theory hold that the Bible is a purely natural book. The writers of the Bible received no supernatural enablement to write and their writings are no different than any other books as to their origin and production. The Bible to them is thus nothing but a human product and has no claim to a special place of authority. This is definitely a non-Christian view.

Mystical inspiration. As related to inspiration, mysticism is but "one step removed from a purely natural origination of the Bible."¹⁷ Walvoord¹⁸ as well as Thiessen¹⁹ identify it with the dynamic theory of inspiration. This theory definitely holds that the writers of the Bible received special enablement to write, but other writers have received the same enablement to produce the great masterpieces of Christian literature. Thiessen notes that some hold that the writers of Scripture are "infallible in matters of faith and practice, but not in things which are not of an immediate religious character."²⁰ Granted that the Bible is not a text book on things which are not of an immediate religious character, but if it is the Word of God, inerrancy must be demanded of every part of it.

Concept theory. Adherents of this view hold that inspiration is to be applied only to the concepts or ideas of the writers. Having received the inspired

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 90.

¹⁷ Walvoord, op. cit., p. 8.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Henry Clarence Thiessen, Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology, p. 106.

²⁰ Ibid.

ideas, the writers were then left on their own to express them in writing. This is an attempt to avoid inspiration of the words of the Scriptures. This theory also has some very obvious weaknesses. Even with inspired concepts, man left to himself is not able to produce an infallible writing. The best writers are not able to always accurately put into writing their own concepts, how much more would this be true if they were to record concepts received from God and which they at times did not fully understand (cf. 1 Pet. 1:10-12). This theory ends with a fallible Scripture.

Dictation theory. This is an extreme view of inspiration which makes of the human authors nothing more than scribes or secretaries who recorded a dictated message from God. It is true that portions of the Bible claim to be dictated by God (cf. Ex. 20:1-17). However, the greater portion of the Bible makes no such claim. The writings themselves often reveal the inner feelings and emotions of the writer as well as his own peculiar style of writing. This is left unaccounted for by this view. Filson holds that only two views of the Bible are possible, it is either "divine dictation or human product."²¹ Filson concludes that the only adequate explanation of the Scriptures is to accept them as a human product and "that any theory of inerrancy is a strained and misleading way of expressing the rich and continued effectiveness of the Bible."²²

Plenary verbal inspiration. This view holds that all the words of the Scriptures are inspired of God. Plenary means full or complete. Verbal refers to the words. As applied to the Bible it means a complete inspiration of the written words of the Bible. This is the view that best fits the claims of the Bible for itself—"All Scripture is inspired of God." Contemporary opponents to verbal inspiration sometimes falsely claim that this view holds that isolated words are inspired. This is not the case. Individual words have meanings, but only as they are used in a proper arrangement with other words are they able to correctly and accurately communicate thought to others. Finlayson makes the following fitting observation on this point: "Only if the thought is verbally correct is the communication what it was intended to be. If the content of revelation is of God, its communication in writing obviously must ensure that it is given as God would have us receive it. In this case, writing communicates the content of revelation, and inspiration guarantees its veracity. But that does not mean that each word is inspired out of relation to all other words in the context."²³

Care must also be taken that claims of verbal plenary inspiration be not applied to copies and translations of the Bible. For practical purposes there is nothing wrong to claim verbal inspiration to the versions in use today, but technically this can only be claimed for the original autographs of the writers. Even though it is possible to see the providential hand of God in preserving the Scriptures and giving them to us in the various versions, it is not correct to claim inspiration for the translators.

²¹ Filson, op. cit., p. 30.

²² Ibid., p. 37.

²³ R. A. Finlayson, "Contemporary Ideas of Inspiration," Revelation and the Bible, ed. Carl F. H. Henry, p. 224.

Contrary to the assumption of the critics, this view does not rule out the human element from the Scriptures. The human authors are often named and their own personalities are seen in their writings. But even though the Bible recognizes the human authors and "their human characteristics, vocabulary, and modes of thought are often traced, the supernatural process of inspiration of the Bible is deemed sufficiently operative so that the human author in every case uses the precise words that God intended him to choose, and the resulting product therefore contains the accuracy and infallibility of Scripture just as if God wrote it Himself."²⁴

V. NEO-ORTHODOXY AND INSPIRATION

Revelation and inspiration. Modern theology is being greatly influenced by neo-orthodoxy. Although there is a great divergence among adherents to this movement they are basically agreed on revelation and inspiration. Kantzer states that on the subject of revelation "contemporary Biblical scholarship, be it modernistic, liberal evangelical, or neo-orthodox, is all but unanimous. Revelation has as its object God, His person; not truth or propositions."²⁵ He lists a threefold objection to revelation of propositional truths: "(1) 'Revealed truth' is an unbiblical concept. (2) All truths are of human origin and therefore tainted by their humanity with error. (3) Mere truth does not bring us into a personal encounter with God."²⁶

It is true that God does not reveal truth to men "to make us wiser but rather to secure in us a commitment, a personal encounter with Him as a person . . ."²⁷ (cf. Phil. 3:10). But it is also quite obvious that such a concept of revelation has no place for the Bible as the inspired Word of God. The orthodox or conservative view of revelation on the other hand holds that God is revealing propositional truths to men. These are truths which they need to know in order to know God and to come into a right relationship with Him. Such a revelation is given in the inspired Word of God.

Concept of the Bible. Karl Barth introduced a new concept of the Bible into the modern theological world with his book, The Word of God and the Word of Man. In this work, Barth directed a blow at the liberal view which had relegated the Bible to a place where it was nothing more than a fallible human book. Barth, as well as Brunner, with the emphasis on the transcendence of God emphasized also the importance of the Word of God and of the Bible. This was, however, not a return to the orthodox doctrine of verbal inspiration. Brunner in The Mediator states, "The orthodox doctrine of Verbal Inspiration has been finally destroyed. It is clear that there is no connection between it and scientific research and honesty: we are forced to make a decision for or against this view."²⁸ In a similar vein, Barth

²⁴ Walvoord, op. cit., p. 11.

²⁵ Kenneth S. Kantzer, "Revelation and Inspiration in Neo-Orthodoxy," Bibliotheca Sacra, 115:123, April, 1958.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 124.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 125.

²⁸ Cited by Kantzer, "Neo-Orthodoxy and the Inspiration of the Scripture," Bibliotheca Sacra, 116:17, January, 1959.

declares of verbal inspiration, "It is a noteworthy contradiction that those who wish to raise the Bible to this height are, in fact, not true to the Bible."²⁹

To both Barth and Brunner, the Bible is not a revelation of God, but a book which tells us about the revelation of God. To them it is a fallible human record which without question contains a number of errors. The Bible may become the Word of God only subjectively as it speaks to men. But they deny that it is the Word of God in an objective sense. In this the Bible is no different from a sermon or a book of sermons. God may speak to the individual through a sermon and as He speaks, that sermon becomes the Word of God to the particular person. Certain passages in the Bible may become the Word of God to an individual again and again. In this subjectivism, neo-orthodoxy has not been able to shake off the influence of Schleiermacher's theology of feeling.

Neo-orthodoxy thus offers the strange paradox of an emphasis on the Word of God and a rejection of the Bible, the written Word of God. In their view, each person is an authority as to what portion is to be accepted as authoritative. Kantzer aptly describes their method when he states, "They do not receive a teaching of the Bible because of the authority of the Bible. Rather they put the Bible through a sieve and receive from it only what comes through the sieve. The sieve any particular neo-orthodox thinker uses may vary greatly from that used by others. One uses a sieve with large holes in it, and he receives much of the Bible. Another uses such a fine sieve that practically nothing of Scripture is able to filter through to him."³⁰ It is thus apparent that to neo-orthodoxy the Bible is not an authoritative and infallible rule of faith and practice. The final seat of authority with it, as with liberalism, is found in man himself.

We close this section with an evaluation by Finlayson: "It has severed the Christian faith from its roots in history; bringing it down to the level of mystical experience, it has emptied Christian faith of its revealed doctrinal content and obliterated the distinction between truth and error, between orthodoxy and heresy, between faith based on knowledge and mere credulity. Most serious of all, it has impugned the trustworthiness of the historical Christ. . . . Under its solvent the person of Christ becomes elusive and illusionary, a mere intruder into history, as someone has put it, who troubled men with his message but left no sure word for posterity. For it must be clearly understood that the battle being waged against the inspiration of the Bible is, in the last resort, an assault upon historic Christianity and its foundation, Jesus Christ. This is an impressive acknowledgment of the fact that Scripture is recognized to be the supreme bulwark of the historic Christian faith."³¹

²⁹ Karl Barth, Das Christliche Verstandnis der Offenbarung, p. 19, cited by ibid., p. 18.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 27.

³¹ Finlayson, op. cit., p. 234.

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"FINDINGS FOR THE PAPER "THE INSPIRATION OF THE SCRIPTURES"

Committee Members: B. J. Braun, Elmer Martens, and Nick Janz

1. Page 1. INTRODUCTION paragraph #3 and #4. Change the paragraph to read:
"There are those who affirm that the Bible is the Word of God; others maintain that it contains the Word of God. A third group boldly affirms that the Bible is nothing but man's word about God; while a fourth group holds that the Bible may become the Word of God.

In past centuries the issue was sharply drawn between the first and third views. With the rise of rationalism, the second appeared. In recent years the neo-orthodox movement has gained adherents from both liberal and evangelical circles."
2. Page 1 II. Revelation, inspiration, Canonicity paragraph #1 Change the last sentence of the paragraph to read:
"Although there are numerous references in the scriptures to general or natural revelation, in essence the Bible moves in the orbit of special revelation."
3. Omit the last sentence on page 1.
4. Page 2 last paragraph. Change the first two sentences as follows:
"When once the canon had been accepted, the problem of canonicity for the church seemed to be settled. The church as such was more or less"
5. Page 6. Insert the following statement between paragraphs #1 and #2. "In the course of history the claims of the Bible have been substantiated in that the Bible has been found to be historically accurate, scientifically correct, and prophetically reliable. The supernatural power of the Bible, and the Bible's unity despite the instrumentality of many writers, all serve to confirm the Scripture's claim to inspiration."
6. Page 5 Last paragraph. Extend the first set of brackets to include the following. "Even I Cor. 7:12 as exegetically viewed does not argue against Paul's claim for inspiration."
7. Page 7 Plenary verbal inspiration. In line 6 underline "isolated".
8. Page 7 Plenary verbal inspiration. Add to that paragraph the sentence: "Furthermore one must not lose sight of the socio-historic meaning of words as used in the particular culture context."
9. Page 9 Paragraph #2 Add this statement: "It is regrettable that considerable numbers of pulpits and theological schools, even of the evangelical wing, have been affected by neo-orthodoxy. It behooves us to pray that neo-orthodoxy may not make inroads into our pulpits and schools."
10. Page 9 Last paragraph. Omit the last half of the paragraph beginning with "Under its solvent..."