

Understandings of 'Inspiration'

A. Opening comments

1. It should be understood that not all readers of the Bible have subscribed to the understanding of Scripture's origin that we have outlined.
 - a) Many differences of belief exist, even among those who profess to be Christians, and much of this confusion exists as a result of differing attitudes towards the Bible and its origin.
 - b) That being said, it is likely that many would actually find it difficult to articulate their particular understanding of 'inspiration' and even more so to find support for it within the Scriptures themselves (if, indeed, they saw that to be appropriate).
2. In light of this, it is important that we have a good grasp of our understanding of the origin of Scripture, and that it should be consistent with our understanding of Scripture itself.
3. It would also be useful to recognise alternative theories as we attempt to reach out to others who appear to see things in a quite different light. As disagreements are often more to do with views of Scripture as a whole than they are to do with views of a particular passage, it is a good idea to first seek common ground on the subject of authority.
4. Outline
 - a) A very little history
 - b) A variety of views
 - c) A simple caution

B. A very little history

1. Things used to be much simpler. Eckhard Schnabel sums up a definition of Scripture by stating that "The conviction that Scripture is the word of God was the undisputed tradition of the church until the 17th Century."¹ Numerous writers could be cited to support this position, including many of the so-called 'Church Fathers' of the centuries following the completion of the New Testament Scriptures.
2. From the 17th century things began to change. Driven by the philosophy of the Enlightenment and fuelled by the Protestant Reformations, challenges to the authority of Scripture began to emerge within the ranks of those driven more by the supremacy of human reason than by divine faith. So much more could be said of this conflict, and of its historical development within 18th and 19th century Europe, but students of the Bible should at least be aware of it and of its

¹ Schnabel, "Scripture" in Alexander and Rosner, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 2000: 34

implications in the development of an understanding of the authority of not only Scripture, but of God himself.

3. Towards the end of the 19th century, following the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and the development of negative higher critical theories, these challenges to the authority of Scripture began to take a hold of much mainstream thought. What was considered to be the orthodox view – that what the Scripture says, God says – was being increasingly side-lined by popular writers and theologians to the extent that, at times, it is almost impossible to avoid their influences in our reading today. So be very aware!

4. Critical thinking

- a) In all of this we must be careful not to throw out the proverbial baby with the dirty bath water. There is little doubt that much has been gained through a critical analysis of the Biblical texts.
 - (1) We will, for example, be particularly interested in lessons learned through what is generally known as lower, or textual, criticism when we come to consider the history and development of the Biblical texts in another place.
 - (2) But the less-than-constructive theories of higher critical thinking, such as many of those presented by the likes of Eichhorn and Wellhausen, are an altogether different matter. These are those which, more often than not, generally seek to explain away all that is divine through mere human endeavour and experience.
- b) The mention of textual criticism raises another matter that ought to be at least a part of our considerations at this time. When examining the origin of Scripture, as we have been doing, we are considering Scripture in its original form – as written by the 'holy apostles and prophets.' Whatever imperfections may or may not have subsequently appeared, through either transmission or translation of the text, they do not affect the claims and primary implications of divine origin.

C. A variety of views

1. It will suffice, at this stage, to simply and briefly describe what are three main, contemporary views of the origin of Scripture. The first is essentially that which we have outlined at some short length in class. The other two, plus additional views and variations of the same, might be pursued further elsewhere. The three main views may be described as:
 - a) The orthodox view
 - b) The neo-orthodox view
 - c) The liberal view
2. The orthodox view – (verbal plenary inspiration)

a) The view of 'inspiration' which we have outlined is often referred to as 'verbal plenary inspiration.' It is 'verbal' – it is by means of words; and it is 'plenary' – it is full or complete in every part.

- (1) The phrase 'verbal plenary inspiration' means that the writers were somehow directed, even to their choice of words. All the words that were first written were God-breathed; God gave full expression to his thoughts in the words of his servants through the Biblical record. Within the personalities and cultural backgrounds of the writers, God guided the choice of their words so that the end result was completely the word of God, whilst also being the words of the human writers. Donald Macleod² uses the word 'organic' to express this idea of Scripture having been given through the human personality.
- (2) "There is nothing in the Bible that is not 'breathed out' by God Himself. In that sense He is the author of the entire Bible. Yet we are told equally clearly that it was men who spoke. ... They were God's spokesmen, but they spoke very much as men. ... Their whole personalities were involved in the work God gave them to do. Their hearts, their minds, their memories, their emotions, their whole experience and all their gifts went into creating the Bible for us. Far from suppressing their personalities, God used them."³

b) The evangelical view

- (1) This is the view generally held within the modern evangelical world⁴ and would be considered consistent with the teachings of Scripture itself. It should be said, however, that among those who hold to this view, there are still many different approaches to interpreting Scripture – but such matters belongs in another place.

c) The neo-evangelical view

- (1) It should also be noted that within the modern evangelical world there will be varying degrees of acceptance and understanding of this view. Some speak of a 'neo-evangelical view' in which, though a high regard might be held for Scripture as a whole, it is not considered to be inerrant as a whole. This view holds that only parts of it are to be considered as 'inspired' – though there is no consensus as to which parts these might be.
- (2) The neo-evangelical position regards the Bible as a book of redemption. In that it is infallible, but it is not considered to be inerrant in all its statements – particularly of an historic or scientific nature.

d) It might be useful to summarily define some key words here:

² Macleod, Donald, *A Faith to Live By: Understanding Christian Doctrine*, 2002: 17 and see 23-36

³ *Ibid.* 23

⁴ For example, the Evangelical Alliance believes in: "The divine inspiration and supreme authority of the Old and New Testament Scriptures, which are the written Word of God—fully trustworthy for faith and conduct."

- (1) infallible – it is without fault, incapable of making mistakes or being wrong. This does not imply divine origin – a railway timetable might be spoken of as being infallible if it contained no mistakes!
- (2) verbal – every word is from God. This might be better understood as every word as it belongs within the whole, and as it was originally written.
- (3) plenary – the entire body of Scripture is in view as being from God.
- (4) organic – within the process of revelation, God uses human character and personality. Special revelation to mankind is always given in the context of relationships.
- (5) inerrant – a consequence of being of divine origin is that Scripture is free from all falsehood, fraud or deceit.

3. The neo-orthodox view

- a) This view essentially denies that the Bible is God's Word, but rather believes that it somehow becomes God's Word. The Bible is seen as a fallible book, written by humans, recording God's revelation of himself in Christ. It is not seen as being a revelation, but rather Christ himself as the Word of God is the revelation. The Bible is therefore seen as the instrument through which that revelation is made known to us.
- b) It is through the Bible, along with all of its perceived errors and contradictions, that an encounter of the personal revelation of God in Christ is seen to take place. The Bible therefore becomes the Word of God to the individual when Christ is encountered in it. Without this personal, experiential encounter the reader would therefore know nothing of God's revelation – not "unless through His revelation of Himself to them [prophets and apostles] He were now revealing Himself to me." (Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation*)
- c) When Karl Barth speaks of the apostles and prophets as being "real, historical men as we are, and therefore sinful in their action, and capable and actually guilty of error in their spoken and written word,"⁵ he was disregarding a fundamental aspect of the Biblical claim, that all Scripture is breathed out by God. The human form or character of Scripture does not imply a human source or origin, neither does it prevent the words written being the very words of God himself.

4. The liberal view

- a) Sometimes spoken of as the 'modernist view,' this position relies heavily upon the results of the higher critical thinking of the 18th century and beyond. The modernist obsession with the supremacy of human reason and so-called scientific rationality, at the expense of divinely revealed truth and reasonable faith, caused many to view the Bible as being little, if anything, more than a human endeavour. It is not surprising that a number of its exponents have either derided the possibility of any form of divine communication or else denied the existence of God altogether.

⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1956: 1.2:529

- b) Though many liberal theologians are willing to acknowledge that the Bible contains the Word of God, they do so with an understanding that it also contains much which is erroneous and therefore unreliable. Human reason is needed to determine which bits are true and which are not, so there can be no meaningful consensus on the matter – it all becomes a matter of personal choice.
- c) The ultimate results of such a view are evident and would suggest that the Bible could really not be seen to be the 'Word of God' in any significant capacity. Historical records within it are seen as being no more reliable than the authors who wrote them and no less biased than the minds of those who compiled or edited the documents. Prophecy that appears to predict future events must have been written after the events actually occurred; and events that are recorded as having taken place likely did not actually happen at all.

D. A simple caution

1. It seems appropriate to add some words of caution at this point. What has been presented here is the shortest of introductions to what can be a most complex and confusing subject. To read the words of some writers of theology, one might come away with the idea that only the most learned are able to make real sense of the Scriptures – and that at the end of the day there really is no absolute sense to be found anyway. Well, that is nonsense.
 - a) Any view of Scripture's origin that does lead to an understanding that it is the Word of God for us today is not only inconsistent with the clear message of Scripture itself, but actually shows that message to be fraudulent and wholly unreliable.
 - b) The vagueness of neo-orthodoxy and the inability of liberalism to provide a consensus of 'reliable' truth presents the reader with serious difficulties. Nothing is certain and everything is simply 'up for grabs.'
 - c) Such thinking may well present the theologians with much to discuss and debate, but it does nothing to assist the wayward traveller who is left with no particular place to go. Something suggests that many scholars have simply been too clever for their own good – and for the good of those they have blindly led into the ditch.
2. The religious Jews of the time of Jesus had studied the Scriptures, but they had failed to recognise the one of whom they spoke (John 5:39-40). Many today have devoted their lives to countless hours of study, only to have driven themselves from faith through a relentless dependence upon human reason and understanding. It seems likely that the apparent need of public recognition, a desire to see one's name in print, and the lure of prestigious academic position have all played their part in the progression (or digression) of human knowledge and achievement. The devil is, indeed, a most cunning beast and has long taken advantage of the pride and love of prestige found within many of us, mere mortals.
3. If God lovingly desires us to know him as a child might know its father – even as a bride might know her husband – then he is not likely to place his revealed truths beyond the reach of all who truly seek him and long to walk in his ways.

We will have more to say of this at another time when we consider how we might understand the Scriptures, but for now let us be confident that God is not likely to have made his word obscure or to have hidden it away from clear view. What Scripture says, God says, and in his wisdom he has made his word accessible to all.

4. In conclusion to this section, read the following passages and think about their implications with regard to these things:
 - a) “The wise shall be put to shame, they shall be dismayed and taken; since they have rejected the word of the LORD, what wisdom is in them?” (Jeremiah 8:9)
 - b) “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” (Mark 10:15)
 - c) “At that time Jesus said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.’” (Matthew 11:25-26)
 - d) “For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.” (1 Corinthians 1:19-21)
 - e) “Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, ‘He catches the wise in their craftiness,’ and again, ‘The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.’” (1 Corinthians 3:18-20)