

The History of the Doctrine of Inspiration From the Ancient Church Through the Reformation

by
M. James Sawyer, Ph.D.
Professor of Theology
Western Seminary
San Jose, CA
mjsawyer@aol.com



Introduction

The Christian church did not arise in an historical vacuum, nor did it arise with a complete systematic theology. Rather it adopted many of its attitudes toward religion from its reluctant mother, Judaism. With this in mind, it is the purpose of this lesson to trace the historic understanding of the Church toward its sacred writings, beginning with its earliest period, up through the present.

Jewish Attitudes Towards Scripture

Revealed Religion

Judaism saw itself as a revealed religion. God had spoken from heaven to the Patriarchs and the prophets and given his divine law. In a very real sense Judaism was *Noministic*, founded upon the supreme authority of that God-given law. The Jews understood that God's Revelation had been accomplished through a multitude of channels: dreams, theophanies, His word spoken from heaven inspiring the prophets in an undefined fashion. With the exception of the direct appearance of God, all these revelations were mediated by the Spirit of Yahweh. The Holy Spirit was regarded as the spirit of prophecy. Thus, any to whom God would reveal Himself was deemed to be a prophet. Thus the title *prophet* came to be applied not only to the major and minor prophets, but also to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, and even Mordacai. In all, Judaism recognized forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses who bore God's message to Israel. (G. F. Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1930), p. 235-237.

In defining a prophet as one to whom God spoke, the concept of an inspired Scripture naturally grew. Everything in Scripture was viewed as inspired, although everything revealed was not inscripturated. While in the first century Philo proposed a mantic theory of revelation which was reminiscent of Plato, the Rabbinical schools knew nothing of such a theory. According to the Rabbis, the Holy Spirit had inspired the prophets and the scriptural authors so that every syllable of Scripture had the verity and the authority of the Word of God. Yet despite this assertion, they did not speculate as to the method of this inspiration. In their eyes it was simply an accomplished fact.

Scripture as the “Exclamation of the Holy Spirit”

Scripture was viewed by the Jews as the “Exclamation of the Holy Spirit” (Jewish Encyclopedia sv. Inspiration, v. 4, p. 607). As such it was believed impossible for contradictions or real differences to appear in the text.

Revelation Complete in Moses

The Jews viewed Revelation as Complete in Moses. The Torah was seen as having emanated in its entirety from God, every verse and letter. This revelation was complete and final; the Rabbis had no conception of progressive revelation. The Prophets and the Hagiographa were seen to add nothing to the Torah. given to Moses. Rather these later writings served to reinforce, repeat, amplify, and explain the Torah. Not only was any contradiction between the Torah and the later writings denied, any real difference was also denied. To illustrate this mentality we may look at how the Rabbis used the Scriptures. Prooftexts for theological points were quoted in triplets; a verse from the Torah, one from the prophets and a verse from the writings. This practice did not demonstrate a confirmation of the Mosaic precept, but that God taught His lessons by reiteration. (Moore, p. 239-40)

Levels of Inspiration

In viewing all Scripture as inspired, the Jews did not see all Scripture on an equal level of inspiration. Moses’ writings were viewed as the *dictation of God*. The prophets and the Hagiographa were seen as inspired but in a lesser degree since these books were not given by actual dictation, but only through inspiration. (J. E. p. 608)

Torah

The Rabbis held that Torah was the product of plenary inspiration extending to the very letters, and even to the vocalization (later when the vowel points were added the concept was extended to the pointing). Thus the normative view of the Torah held that, “he who says the Torah is not from heaven is a heretic, a despiser of the Word of God and one who has no share in the world to come.” (ibid.). If one should exclude even one verse of the Torah claiming that Moses added it on his own authority, this proscription was applied to him.

Prophets and Hagiographa

While most of the Rabbis’ statements have to do with Torah, this is not to imply that they undervalued or derided the authority of the rest of the Scriptures, only that the Torah was the standard by which the other Scripture was judged as to its worth and canonicity. There was never a *formal* distinction drawn between the plenary inspiration of the Torah and the more general inspiration attributed to the other books of Scripture. It was all regarded as having full divine authority extending to its very words.

Inspiration and the LXX

Early, the Jews regarded the LXX as divinely inspired. The apocryphal *letter of Aristes* states that the seventy-two translators of the LXX completed their task of translation on seventy days without error under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. While this view was later abandoned by the Rabbis who retreated to the inspiration of only the original Hebrew manuscripts, the idea of an inspired LXX took root in the Christian Church and can be seen even in the great Augustine, who chided Jerome for his use of the Hebrew text over the “inspired” and authoritative LXX.

Christ and the Apostles

Jesus Christ and the Scriptures

When one examines the life and ministry of our Lord, he is immediately impressed with the fact that he lived and breathed Scripture. For Him Scripture was the final authority in matters of history, doctrine and ethics.

History

Our Lord’s acceptance of the authority of Scripture is seen in the warp and woof of His teachings. He makes references to Adam, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sodom & Gomorrah, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, and David eating the Showbread, to mention a few. Jesus Christ accepted the fabric of Old Testament History without reservation. We should note however, for Him this history was not merely academic, for him it held special relevance for each contemporary situation.

Doctrine

That Christ accepted the Old Testament on doctrinal matters is to speak a truism. In his encounter with Satan after his baptism, He appeals to the authority of Scripture on every occasion with the formula, “it is written.” It is important to note that in his encounters with the religious leaders of the day, He never chide them for too closely observing the Old Testament. Rather the opposite was true. While theologically the Jews held a high view of Scripture, their tradition had so hedged the text that they had in effect nullified its teaching. Jesus condemned them not for their belief but their unbelief.

Ethics

Jesus Christ made it plain that his teachings were not opposed to Scripture, but based upon it. “Don’t think I have come to nullify/ abolish the Law and prophets but to establish them.”(Matt 5:17) In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus did not nullify the OT teachings, rather he rescued them from their then current misapplications. For example, the original injunction, “. . . an eye for an eye . . .” was meant to limit vengeance. The Jews had so twisted the injunction so as to justify it. So when Jesus said “do not resist him who is evil . . . but . . . turn the other cheek, “ (Matt 5:38-42) he was actually reasserting the principle of not taking vengeance.

As Clark Pinnock observes, “We can say that Jesus everywhere and always regards Scripture as an authoritative document whose ultimate author is God Himself.” “The

importance of the phrase "Scripture cannot be broken" does not lie in an isolated proof-text for Jesus' view of inspiration, but in the fact that it is entirely representative of his constant approach to the Bible. This document is for Him God's written Word to man."

In summary: We find that our Lord's attitude toward the authority was that of Judaism generally. He saw it as the totally trustworthy Word of God.

Peter, Paul, Hebrews & Inspiration

Paul

Even liberal scholars of a previous generation admit that at least Paul, among the apostles, held the view of Scripture which was prevalent in Tannitic Judaism. For example Farrar states that Paul "doubtless shared in the views of the later Jewish schools--Tanaitism and Amoritan--on the nature of inspiration. These views made the words of Scripture co-extensive with the words of God. One example will suffice to illustrate Paul's strict view of inspiration, that is the case of Galatians 3:15-16. Paul states, "Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and his *seed*. It does not say and to *seeds* as to many, but 'and to your seed,' who is Christ

Peter

The apostle Peter presents a striking example of one for whom the prophetic scripture was even more solidly established than personal experience. Stating that he had not followed fables of Christ's power and glory but was an eyewitness of his majesty of the Mount of transfiguration he continues in II Pet 1:19 saying, "And we have an even surer prophetic Word." Thus he makes it clear that while he regarded experience as a truthful witness, the divine authority of Holy Scripture coming from men borne along by the Holy Spirit had even greater authority and than experience. Concerning this Buswell has noted, ". . . it is not strange to observe that an individual personal testimony may be subject to hallucination to which the prophetic word is not subject.

Hebrews

Tholuck has noted that the author to the Epistle to the Hebrews use of the OT text "rests on the strictest view of inspiration, since Passages in which God is not the speaker are cited as the words of God.

The Apostolic Fathers

G. T. Ladd, himself an opponent of the doctrine of inerrancy/infallibility has conceded that this was the doctrine of the ancient church.

The Bible is, indeed considered as showing, although its different parts arose in different places and times, a wonderful and convincing and even perfect consent in all matters pertaining to religion and saving truth. This view was not the result of critical study and a detailed reconciliation of the various apparent discrepancies in the Scriptures; it is rather an immediate inference from the assumed nature of that inspiration in which the Bible has

its origin to the nature of the product thus supposed to have been brought about by inspiration. . . The Holy Spirit who is the direct and responsible author of all its parts and details, can make no mistakes; the product of which he is the author is therefore, without mistakes or blemishes,--is, indeed, immaculate and infallible

While Ladd tries to limit biblical infallibility to “religion and saving truth,” the examples he puts forth make it clear that the fathers held to a doctrine of inspiration/inerrancy close to that of contemporary conservative Evangelicalism.

A few Representative examples will suffice to demonstrate the attitude of Scripture held in the ancient Church.

Clement of Rome

Clement exhorts his readers to, “Look carefully into the Scriptures, which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit. Observe that nothing false is written in them.” Elsewhere he refers to Scripture as the “oracles of God.”

Ignatius

Ignatius, bishop of Antioch and an early martyr, gives evidence of the total trustworthiness of Scripture which was common in his day. One notable feature on Ignatius’ writing is that when he wished to settle an issue he would adopt the standard NT formula for citation of the OT, *gegraptai*.

The Apologists and Theologians

Justin Martyr

In Numerous places Justin asserts the full authority of the OT. To him it is a product of the Divine *logos*. He states: But when you hear the utterances of the prophets spoken as it were, personally, you must not assume that they are spoken by the inspired themselves, but by the divine word that moves them.” Thus it is not surprising that Scriptures do not contradict one another.

Irenaeus & Tertullian

This pair give evidence of a more highly developed doctrine of Scripture than has been seen to date, yet without lessening the authority of the Scriptures. Concerning the apostolic authors of Scripture he states, “They are beyond falsehood.” Thus it followed that, “The Scriptures are perfect inasmuch as they were uttered by the word of God or His Spirit.” So fully divine were they considered that there was not one detail which was considered to be insignificant. Having said all this, Irenaeus also speaks of the human authors as genuine authors, not mere scribes.

With Tertullian, the most theologically astute of the apologists, one finds a conscious broadening of authority from just the Old Testament to the written developing canon of the NT. Scripture is to him a “written revelation.” Elsewhere he equates Scripture with true doctrine noting, “. . . it is better to be ignorant when God had not spoken than to

acquire knowledge from men and to be dependent upon his conjectures.”

With Irenaeus and Tertullian one finds a maturing of the concept of inspiration which is extended to the NT as well as the Old. A place is given to the human author as well as the divine, yet in such a way so as not to compromise the absolute veracity and authority of the Scriptures, down to their very letters.

Origen

As with other early fathers, Origen insisted that the Scriptures formed a harmonious unity which was perfect in every particular. Inspiration was seen to extend to the very letters of the text. The problem in Origen comes in his application of his hermeneutics. While he dogmatically asserts the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, he vitiates this principle by his hermeneutic. Specifically, he often denied the historicity of events which offended his platonic framework, interpreting them in an allegorical fashion.

Cyprian and the North African Church

In citing Scripture Cyprian says: “the Holy Spirit says. . .” thus demonstrating their divine origin. HE also stated that the Old and NT were “fountains of divine fullness from which the Christian must draw strength and wisdom.” In the century and one half following Cyprian, the authority of Scripture in North Africa was, if possible, elevated to an even higher position than earlier. “The Bible was the keystone of the Christian community in North Africa.” It was regarded as the greatest sacrilege to alter even one word of Scripture.

Augustine

The Fact of Inspiration

Augustine in numerous places attributes the origin of Scripture to God. He states variously, “Both Testaments have been written by the one God.” “Let them know that everything, both in the Old as well as the New Testament was written by the Holy Spirit.” In *The Trinity* he is emphatic that it was God who *inspired* the Scriptures and that men wrote under the influence of divine inspiration.

He refers to Scripture variously as the word of God, the words of God, the divine word, divine oracles, the book of God, the holy book, divine Scripture, Holy Scripture, divine Scriptures, Scriptures of God, divine letters, prophetic letters, divine authority, divine testimony, and the Testimony of God, to mention but a few. He did not regard his view as being novel, rather he saw himself as holding the ancient doctrine of the Church. For Augustine the fact of inspiration was so obvious that he seldom sought to prove inspiration from the Scripture itself. Rather, he assumed it.

The Nature of Inspiration

Inspiration: the Human side

Augustine’s doctrine of inspiration has been perceived so strictly by some that they have

accused him of holding to a verbal dictation view of the process. Such accusations come because of Augustine's use of the term *dictare*. In truth, he held to the vital involvement of the human authors with their material. He states: "Each of the Evangelists believed it to have been his duty to relate the matters he was engaged in recording, in that order in which pleased God to bring them to his recollection." Elsewhere he states: "Matthew followed the authority of the Holy Ghost, under whose guidance he felt his mind to be directed more than is the case with us." It is under this type of recognition that he is able to deal with stylistic differences between various authors within the text.

So far removed is his theory of inspiration from mechanical dictation, at one point he asserts that revelation is not necessary for inspiration. He notes: "It is permissible for the divine authority to take truthful testimony from whatever source he may wish."

Augustine stressed the human side of inspiration so much, at times the divine seems to have disappeared completely. While at other times the divine is stressed to the apparent exclusion of the human. Polman in trying to resolve this tension has stated: "*The Bible was both the exclusive work of the Holy Spirit alone and at the same time the work of the biblical writers.*"

Inspiration: the Divine side

Augustine attributed inspiration to all three persons of the trinity. This was consistent with his belief that the external works of the trinity could not be divided among its members. Rather all three members worked in concert with one another.

God's part in inspiration begins with an impulse to move the human author who at that point undertakes to compose a sacred composition. He noted: "Indeed it could not be truly said that God is the author of Scripture if the initiative to write came from man himself and not God." The divine impulse was the *sine qua non* in the authorship of Scripture. However once moved by the Holy Spirit, the scriptural authors were not left to their own devices. The Spirit continued to influence and guide. He noted of the process as it related to the composition of the Pentateuch: "The Prophet (Moses) has compiled a narrative of human actions, under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Ghost." He even speaks of the Spirit bringing to mind different details to the various evangelists as they wrote. So strong is the divine imprint in Scripture that it is to be regarded as the voice of God.

It should go without saying that the divine inspiration of the Scriptures was plenary. Augustine sees the entire body of Scripture as immediately inspired, yet in such a way as to maintain the integrity of the human authors.

Inerrancy

Augustine saw inerrancy as the necessary consequence of inspiration. He held both to the formal inerrancy of Scripture (i.e. it could not contradict itself) and to a correspondence theory of truth. He saw Scripture as absolutely trustworthy. Should a book claiming inspiration be found to contain a single error, it must be *ipso facto* be rejected as uninspired.

In affirming the non-contradiction of Scripture he notes:

The authority of these books has come down to us from the apostles through the succession of bishops and the extension of the church, from a position of lofty supremacy, claims the submission of every faithful and pious mind. *If we are perplexed by an apparent contradiction in Scripture it is not allowable to say, "The author of this book is mistaken;"* but either the manuscript is faulty or the translator is wrong, or you have not understood. In the innumerable books that have been written latterly we may sometimes find the same truth as in Scripture, but there is not the same authority. Scripture has a sacredness peculiar to itself. . . *in consequence of the distinctive peculiarity of the sacred writings we are bound to receive as true whatever the canon shows to have been said by even one prophet or apostle or evangelist.* Otherwise no a single page will be left for the guidance of human fallibility, if contempt for the wholesome authority of canonical books either puts an end to that authority or involves it in hopeless confusion.

The true Christian is not free to doubt the veracity of Scripture at any point. In fact *inerrancy* was seen as such a foundational doctrine, one could not be saved without believing it. Augustine even propounds the "domino theory" asserting, "If once you admit into the high sanctuary of authority one false statement. . . There will not be left a single sentence of those books which if appearing difficult or hard to believe, may not by the same fatal rule be explained away, as a statement in which intentionally the author declared what was not true.

The Medieval Church

During the medieval period the problem was not with the inspiration of Scripture, but rather with the subtle elevation of the Church to a position equal in authority with the Scriptures. Scriptures were still seen as divinely inspired and authoritative, but the Church held the interpretive key.

The Reformation

Martin Luther

Luther's devotion to Scripture and its authority is well documented. One is reminded of his defense before the Diet of Worms, "--unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason...I do not accept the authority of popes or councils, for they have contradicted each other...my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen." (Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*)

Inspiration

Karl Barth has noted of the reformer's doctrine of Scripture: "The Reformers took over unquestioningly and unreservedly the statement on the inspiration and indeed the verbal inspiration of the Bible, as it is explicitly and implicitly contained in those Pauline

passages which we have taken as our basis, even including the formula that God is the author of the Bible, and occasionally making use of the idea of the dictation of the Bible through the biblical writers. How could it be otherwise? Not with less, but with more radical seriousness they wanted to proclaim the subjection of the church to the Bible as the Word of God, and its authority as such. Even in his early period, Luther demanded, *ut omne verbum vocale, per quemcunque dictatur, velut Domino ipse dicente suscipiamos credamos, cedimus et humiliter, subicimus nostrum sensum.* . . . At least therefore, Luther is not inconsistent when we hear him thundering at the end of his life `Therefore, we either believe roundly and wholly and utterly, or we believe nothing: The Holy Ghost doth not let Himself be severed or parted, that he should let one part be taught truly and another part falsely. . . . For it is the fashion of all heretics, that they begin first with a single article, like a ring which is of no further value when it has a break or cut . . .”

Luther made no new claims concerning the nature of the Scripture. Even the rationalist, Adolf von Harnack, was forced to admit that Luther “confounded the Word of God and the Sacred Scripture.” In the first five volumes of Luther’s collected works (they total 55 volumes) there are over one thousand explicit references to the verbal inspiration of Scripture!

Luther himself states: “We must make a great difference between God’s Word and the word of man. A man’s word is a little sound, that flies in the air, and soon vanishes; but the Word of God is greater than heaven and earth, yea greater than death and hell, for it forms part of the power of God and endures everlastingly; we should therefore, diligently study God’s Word and assuredly believe that God Himself speaks to us.”

In another place he states: “It is cursed unbelief and odious flesh which will not permit us to see and know that God speaks to us in Scripture and that it is God’s Word, but tells us that it is merely the word of Isaiah, Paul or some other man who has not created heaven and earth.

Luther is emphatic that this inspiration extends to the form as well as the content of the Scripture. In other words he affirms the inspiration of the *words of Scripture*. He states: “But why by the phrase ‘by every word’? Because disbelieving one single word, you no longer live by the Word of God. For the single whole Christ is in every word, and he is wholly in all single words. When, therefore, one denies in one word Him who is in every/all words, one denies Him in His totality.”

Inerrancy

Some have argued that Luther was not concerned with the technical accuracy of the Scripture, rather only its ability to “accomplish righteousness in us.” This contention is not borne out by Luther’s explicit testimony on the subject. Numerous times he goes to great length to defend the technical accuracy of Scripture. He states at various points:

I have learned to ascribe the honor of infallibility only to those books that are accepted as canonical. I am profoundly convinced that none of these writers has ever erred.

St. Augustine in a letter to St. Jerome, has put down a fine axiom--that only the Holy Scripture is considered inerrant.

Scripture has never erred.

I have learned to hold only the Holy Scripture inerrant.

This inerrancy was twofold: formal (i.e. Scripture did not contradict itself) and its statements corresponded with reality. If secular historians contradicted Scripture, it was the secular historians who were to be accounted as wrong. Like modern inerrantists he limited the inerrancy of Scripture to the original autographs.

John Calvin

The Nature of Scripture

When it pleased God to raise up a more visible form of the church, He willed to have his word set down and sealed in writing. . . . He commanded also that the prophesies to be committed to writing and be accounted part of His Word. To these at the same time histories were added, also the labor of the prophets, but composed under the Holy Spirit's dictation. I include the psalms with the prophets, That the whole body [corpus], therefore, made up of law, prophesies, psalms and histories was the Lord's Word for the ancient people. . .

Let this be a firm principle: No other word is to be held as the Word of God, and given place as such in the church, than what is contained in the Law and the prophets, then in the writings of the apostles. . . [The Apostles] were to expound the ancient Scriptures and to show that what is taught there has been fulfilled in Christ. Yet they do not do this except from the Lord, that is, with Christ's Spirit going before them and in a sense dictating their words. . . . [They] were sure and genuine penmen of the holy Spirit, and their writings are therefore to be considered oracles of God: and the sole office of others is to teach what is provided and sealed in the Holy Scripture.[Institutes, IV, viii]

While Calvin nowhere formally delineates his doctrine of Scripture we are able to deduce his doctrine from his use of the text and his comments on particular texts. He variously refers to Scripture as the mouth of God, doctrine, teaching from God's mouth. He at times even speaks of the Scripture as having been dictated by God. A further important concept in Calvin's doctrine of Scripture is that of condescension.

Concerning 2 Tim 3:16 he commented:

He [Paul] commends Scripture, first on account of its authority, second on account of the utility that springs from it. In order to uphold the authority of Scripture, he declares it to be divinely inspired: for if it be so, it is beyond all controversy that men should receive it with reverence. . . . Whoever then wishes to profit in the Scriptures, let him first lay down as a settled point this--that the law and the prophets are not a teaching delivered by the will of men, but dictated by the Holy Ghost. . . . Moses and the prophets did not utter at random what we have from their hand, but since they spoke by divine impulse, they confidently and fearlessly testified, as was actually the case, that it was the mouth of the Lord that spoke. . . . We owe to the Scripture

the same reverence which we owe to God, because it has proceeded from Him alone, and has nothing of man mixed with it.

The full authority which they [the scriptures] obtain with the faithful proceeds from no other consideration than that they are persuaded that they proceeded for heaven, as if God had been heard giving utterance to them.

God's dictating

When Calvin used the term dictate he sounds like he is endorsing what is referred to as verbal dictation, such is not the case however, what he is doing instead is affirming in the most emphatic way that Scripture bears the same relation to the mind of God which was its source as a letter written by a good secretary bears to the mind of the man from which she took it. i.e. a relationship of complete correspondence and thus absolute authenticity.

God's condescension

While modern writers often speak of God condescending to human terms they usually have reference to human fallibility. This was not Calvin's understanding. Rather God simplified his language to conform to our incomplete understanding. "God condescends to our immaturity. . . When God prattles to us in Scripture in a clumsy, homely style, let us know that this is done on account of the love he bears us." T. . L. Parker has noted:

Calvin frequently expresses this [accommodation] under the simile of an adult (usually he means a mother) communicating with a child and confining herself to concepts, syntax, and vocabulary that he can understand With a very small child this becomes baby-talk hardly recognizable as the same language the mother normally speaks. Now Calvin obviously assumes that by means of this to an adult barely comprehensible language the mother genuinely expresses meaning to the child, and the child genuinely comprehends that meaning. So God prattles or babbles with man in Scripture.

Inerrancy

While Calvin does at times speak of mistakes in Scripture, such mistakes are limited to the transmission of the text, not the text as it was originally given.

[Download Word Document](#)



[HOME](#) | [CONTENTS](#) | [NET BIBLE](#) | [SEARCH](#) | [BSF STORE](#)
(C) 1997, Biblical Studies Foundation. All rights reserved.