


Theories of Inspiration

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Introduction

While all agree that the Bible is inspired in some way since the Reformation there have arisen numerous theories as to the exact nature of biblical inspiration. These range from the nearly secular assessment that the Bible is inspired in the sense that Shakespeare or Milton is inspired to the view that the Scriptures were verbally dictated by God.

Inspiration As Natural Intuition

This position is held by liberals on the far left of the theological spectrum, i.e.. those who are classified as rationalists. Its proponents hold that what marks the Bible off from other works of literature is the high degree of religious insight, something akin to artistic ability, of the authors of Scripture. This insight was not a supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit, but rather a natural permanent possession of the various individuals. The net effect of this position is to make the scriptural authors as qualitative no different than Plato, Buddha, Mohammed etc. The Bible thus becomes the spiritual experiences of the Jewish people.

Proponents: James Martineau, Theodore Parker, F. W. Newman.

Inspiration As Illumination

This understanding maintains that there was an influence of the Holy Spirit upon the authors of Scripture, but this influence involved only a heightening of their normal powers. This view, traceable to Schleiermacher holds that "the natural, or at most the gracious, agency of God illuminating the rational or the spiritual consciousness of a man, so that out of the fullness of his own Christian understanding and feelings he may speak or write the product of his own religious life." (Bannerman. *The Inspiration Of The Scriptures*, cited by Berkhof, Introduction p. 146.) This view understands inspiration to be of the same nature as divine illumination. The Spirit's work in the process is not seen to be different in kind, only in degree from that the illumination of other believers.

Concept Inspiration

This view of inspiration posits an essential disjuncture between the form and the substance of the Scriptures. Proponents contend that God has inspired the concepts which the authors of Scripture were to write, but left it to the human author to choose the

words. This view is today a more popular than scholarly view. However a century ago there were numerous scholars who adopted this position. The position came in several varieties. All would allow for some form of error in the final inspired product. But some would restrict the truth guaranteed by inspiration to the spiritual substance of Scripture alone, while others would see it as more full, with errors being inconsequential. The process of concept inspiration has been described thus:

The Holy Spirit was ". . . `pointing to them' or `showing them' certain things, as `testifying beforehand' as `revealing to them,'. . . Stimulating them to know things by intellectual processes. . . [the prophets] used their intellectual powers in quest for truth and fact; therefore we may know the teaching of these prophets was a joint product of the subjective investigation made by the prophets themselves and the objective revelation made by the divine spirit. All of this is strictly in accord with the laws and operations of the human mind. The divine spirit enters into the human mind and takes possession of it for the time and for the purpose of religious guidance. He occupies the throne room of the reason, in the innermost seat and the fountain-source of authority in man. He touches the most sensitive point of the religious feeling, and quickens it so as to make the man conscious of the union with God and his call to be a prophet. . . . He fills the chamber of metaphysical reason and guides the intellect in its working in all the categories. So the biblical prophets dig deep into the recesses of the human soul; they soar to the heights of God. . . . The biblical prophets are distinguished by their grasp--they were men of their times, but they were men beyond their times. (Charles A. Briggs, "Inspiration of the Bible," Cornerstones)

The Dynamic Theory Of Inspiration

This view of inspiration holds: That inspiration is not simply a natural but a supernatural fact, and it is the immediate work of a personal God in the soul of man. It holds . . . that inspiration belongs, not only to the men who wrote the Scriptures, but to the Scriptures they wrote, so that these Scriptures, when taken together, constitute a sufficient record of divine revelation.. It holds

. . . That the Scriptures contain a human as well as a divine element, so that while they present a body of divinely revealed truth, this truth is shaped into human molds and adapted to human intelligence. In short it is neither natural, partial, nor mechanical, but supernatural, plenary and dynamical. (A. H. Strong, Systematic Theology, p. 211.)

The Neo-Orthodox Theory Of Inspiration

As we have noted in past lectures, Neo-orthodoxy views the Scriptures as a time-bound culturally condition to the fact that revelation has occurred. Barth considered the position of historic Protestantism which insisted that the words of Scripture were the ipsissima verba of God as the setting up of a paper pope. He viewed the precise nature of the inscription process as mystery. He noted: "it is impossible that there should be a direct identity between the human word of Scripture and the word of God." Such a view he

labeled as docetic. Rather, "the prophets and apostles . . . Were 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." In spite of this fact God condescends to speak through the text of the human fallible Scripture. The Bible becomes the word of God to the individual reading it in a moment of "crisis," i.e. An existential encounter when he meets God in the pages of Scripture.

Partial Inspiration

The partial inspiration viewpoint comes in several varieties and is generally by those of an evangelical perspective who for one reason or another do not accept the concept of inerrancy. Those who adopt this concept generally restrict the Bible's authority to its salvific teaching.

C. S. Lewis

Thus something originally merely natural--the kind of myth that is found among most nations--will have been raised by God above itself, qualified by him and compelled by him to serve purposes which of itself it would not have served.

Generalizing this, I take it that the whole Old Testament consists of the same sort of material as any other literature--chronicle (some of it obviously pretty accurate), poems, moral and political diatribes, romances, and what not; but all taken into the service of God's word. Not all, I suppose, in the same way. There are prophets who write with the clearest awareness that divine compulsion is upon them. There are chroniclers whose intention may have been merely to record. There are poets like those in the Song of Songs who probably never dreamed of any but a secular and natural purpose in what they composed. There is (and it is no less important) the work first of the Jewish and then of the Christian church in preserving and canonizing just these books. There is the work of redactors and editors in modifying them. On all of these I suppose a divine pressure; of which not by any means all need have been conscious.

The human qualities of the raw materials show through. Naiveté, error, contradiction, even (as in the cursing psalms) wickedness are not removed. The total result is not "the word of God" in the sense that every passage, in itself, gives impeccable science or history. It carries the word of God; and we (under grace, with attention to tradition and to interpreters wiser than ourselves, and with the use of such intelligence and learning as we may have) receive that word from it not by using it as an encyclopedia or an encyclical but by steeping ourselves in its tone or temper and so learning its overall message. (Reflections On The Psalms p.111-112)

Dewey Beegle

A contemporary evangelical on the "left wing" of evangelicalism has posited different types of inspiration for the various authors of Scripture. The great ones of Scripture were endowed with a special charismata from God which insured the infallibility of their teaching (Moses, Paul, Jesus). Lesser individuals used their own natural abilities and their status within the community of believers.

The whole history of God's redemptive activity is one in which the Holy Spirit has worked through imperfect means, both men and Scripture, without the means being a handicap. Fallible ministers with many imperfect notions have been God's messengers throughout the history of the church, in spite of this fact the "hungry and thirsty" have heard them gladly as being inspired by God and setting forth a trustworthy message. If the Holy Spirit is willing to authenticate the message of very fallible servants, how much more will he authenticate the extant manuscripts and translations!

In all essential matters of faith and practice, therefore, Scripture is authentic, accurate, and trustworthy. It is the indispensable record of revelation, product of inspiration, and source of authority. And yet the work of the Holy Spirit did not cease with the close of the canon. Although Jesus and his apostolic interpreters represent the ultimate in redemptive revelation (thereby justifying a closed canon), it has been necessary to interpret that truth for each period of the church's history. The clarification and application of biblical revelation continues today, and it will as long as God's creatures exist. In a secondary, derivative fashion, therefore, the revelation and inspiration of God's spirit continues. Accordingly, from the standpoint of the theological interpretation the canon has never been closed. For this reason there is no basis in considering all of the biblical writers and editors as qualitatively different from post-canonical interpreters. Some of the psalms are simply an exhortation to praise God because of his dealings with Israel. The psalmist repeats well-known facts and out of the fullness of his experience with God exhorts his fellows to greater lives of devotion to Israel's loving God. Some of the great hymns evidence the same kind of inspiration. Had Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, Augustus Toplady, and Reginald Heber lived in the pre-exilic centuries of David and his successors and been no more inspired than they were in their own day, there is little doubt of Jesus was still in the future) would have found their way into the Hebrew canon.

If the church had a more dynamic sense of God's inspiration in the twentieth century, it distinctiveness of the Bible, but to think only in terms of its inspiration as absolutely different in kind from inspiration in our time is too high a price to pay. Christians today writers and interpreters. In a genuine sense, the difficulty of interpreting God's record of revelation to this complex age requires as much of God's inbreathing and wisdom as did the process of interpretation in the biblical periods.

Daniel Fuller

Professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, about 30 years ago in an article in BETS "the problem of the mustard seed" proposed a bifurcation between revelatory and non-revelatory Scripture. Revelatory Scripture was seen to be inerrant, non-revelatory Scripture was seen as containing historical, geographical, and scientific errors.

Jack Rogers

Former Professor of theology at Fuller Seminary, has led the fight against the traditional

evangelical concept of inspiration and has proposed instead, following G.C. Berkouwer, that the Bible must be viewed in light of its purpose which is salvific. His "organic" concept of inspiration. Infallibility is redefined by Rogers and limited to the Scripture's salvific purpose. Error, according to Rogers, is that which willfully deceives rather than that which does not correspond to the real world. (he bases this concept on a coherence rather than a correspondence theory of truth.)

Stephen T. Davis

Another Fuller grad, Davis draws the same distinction between revelatory and non-revelatory Scripture that Rogers & Fuller do. What is significant about Davis is practical application in distinguishing the two: I speak for no one except myself, but I believe that killing innocent people is morally wrong. And killing Canaanite civilians is to be sharply distinguished from killing Canaanite soldiers in the battles that were necessary for the Israelites to conquer the land that God had promised them. I frankly find it difficult to believe that it was God's will that every Canaanite--man, woman, and child--be slaughtered. Since the Bible clearly says that this was God's will, I must conclude that the biblical writers in this case were mistaken. The error of confusing patriotic sentiment with

Verbal Dictation

This view holds that God actually dictated the content of the Scriptures to the human to take dictation from a man. Why would a prophet be ashamed to take dictation from God?" Some of those who hold this view hold that God prepared the human authors

What this view seeks to safeguard is the absolute divinity of the Scriptures. Proponents deny that the biblical authors engaged in historical research, utilized documents or oral tradition. All Scripture is seen as having come directly from God to the human writers. It

God, not the word of men, except in some incidental and controlled and limited sense."

This view is held by some Protestant fundamentalists (John R. Rice)

This is not true.

F.E. Gaebelien puts the matter like this:

position of those who accept the Bible as a fully inspired book. . . . almost always there is the insistence upon equating plenary inspiration with the

. . . "the authors of the Bible were little better than human dictaphones, recording mechanically the words of the divine writer. The individuality of

for the Bible which we now have, it is entirely free from error, even the

punctuation having been translated unchanged." Such a view is then said to be intellectually impossible and fit to be held by only the most ignorant.

James I. Packer

Because Evangelicals hold that the biblical writers were completely controlled by the Holy Spirit, it is often supposed. . . That they maintain what is called the "dictation" or "typewriter" theory of inspiration. . . . But it is not so. This "dictation theory" is a man of straw. It is safe to say that no Protestant theologian, from the reformation till now, has ever held it; and certainly modern evangelicals do not hold it. . . .it is true that many sixteenth and seventeenth-century theologians spoke of Scripture as "dictated by the holy ghost." But all they meant was that the authors wrote word for word what God intended. . . . The use of the term "dictation" was always figurative. . . .the proof of this lies in the fact that, when these theologians addressed themselves to the question, what was the spirit's mode of operating in the writers' minds? They all gave their answer in terms not of dictation, but of accommodation, and rightly maintained that God completely adapted his inspiring activity to the cast of mind, outlook, temperament, interests, literary habits, and stylistic idiosyncrasies of each writer.

Verbal Plenary Inspiration

This view holds that the influence of the Holy Spirit over the writers of Scripture extended beyond the thoughts to the selection of the very words which the authors chose. Yet this influence of the Holy Spirit did not amount to a verbal dictation. The term often adopted is that of "concursum," or confluent authorship, i.e. That every word is both fully divine and fully human.

Proponents: conservative Evangelicalism

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