# Inspiration

Various models or metaphors have been used to describe the status or significance of the Bible as a whole. These include revelation (the Bible as the unveiling of otherwise hidden truths), authority (the Bible as the declaring of information or command which demands assent), canon (the Bible as a measure of belief and behavior), and inspiration (the Bible as having its origin in God himself).

Talk in terms of the inspiration of scripture was common in the biblical and patristic periods, though the actual terms inspiration/inspired occur on only a few occasions in English versions. The classic passage is II Tim. 3.16-17, which declares that 'all scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness ...' (rsv). The reference is presumably to the Jewish scriptures in whatever form they were known to the author and his church. neb translates 'every inspired scrip­ture has its use ...', but this hardly implies the view that there is such a thing as an uninspired scripture. Contemporary Jewish thinking may have regarded some material as scriptural and normative without being inspired (so S. Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture,* 1976), but it would not have seen any of scripture as uninspired and useless.

II Tim. 3.16 is exceptional not only for its use of the Greek word *theopneustos,* 'God-breathed' (niv), but also for its attribution of inspiration to the text rather than to its author (both the Greek word itself and its application to the text itself recur in the patristic period with reference to writings even­tually included in the nt, beginning with Cle­ment of Alexandria, *Stromata* vii 16 [vii 101, 103]). It thus contrasts with the further classic passage II Peter 1.20-21, '...no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God'. With this expression one may compare the references in more mainstream nt documents to the Holy Spirit's being involved in the uttering of words preserved in the scriptures. Thus in Mark 12.36 Jesus refers to David declaring 'in the Holy Spirit' (rsv 'inspired by the Holy Spirit'); cf. Acts 1.16; 4.25.

It is characteristic of such passages that inspiration is a hermeneutical category. The Spirit's involvement is alluded to because it underlies the text's meaning and demand for a later audience. Behind the human author is a divine initiative and activity which give his words a reference beyond that known to him. Further, this inspiring Spirit is the Spirit of Christ (cf. passages such as I Cor. 12.3 which link the Spirit and testimony to Christ); thus belief in the inspiration of scripture justifies the conviction that passages which make no overt reference to Christ refer to him covertly. In the present century, too, K. Barth *(Church Dogmatics* i, 2; et 1956) emphasizes the christocentric aspect to inspiration.

In the context of contemporary emphasis on a historical approach to exegesis, it is unlikely that a stress on the inspiration of a work will offer a convincing rationale for these approaches to interpretation which allow for the discovery in the text of meanings that the author would not recognize. We may, how­ever, see it as drawing attention to the depth dimension to the text which underlies the con­temporary interpreter's expectation of dis­covering something there that 'speaks' beyond its original context. It may also point to the assumption that the Spirit who is involved in the origin of scripture is also involved in relat­ing the text to our present. Even if it is inap­propriate to see the inspiration of scripture as signifying that it is inspiring and life-giving, it is important to note that it is the Spirit who makes a proper understanding of scripture possible.

During the patristic and mediaeval periods belief in the inspiration of scripture was an uncontroversial part of the church’s formal beliefs. Whatever its genre (narrative, psalm­ody, letter, etc.) or background and origin, it constituted a static source-book for Christ­ian doctrine. Theologians such as Origen and Chrysostom were aware that often scrip­ture does not seem to be conveying informa­tion with exactitude, and to explain this fact they formulated an understanding of the Holy Spirit's 'condescension' or 'accommodation' to the scripture's human authors. This motif was taken up in the Reformation period by John Calvin, who also developed the notion of the Spirit's involvement with the hearers, as well as with the authors of scripture, in the doctrine of the Spirit's illumination, or of the Spirit's inner witness regarding scripture's being the word of God (e.g. *Institutes* i, 7). This development took place in the context of debate between Protestant and Roman churches and between mainstream Protest­antism and more radical groups (e.g. *Institutes* i, 9; iv, 8); against both of these, Calvin made the inspiration of scripture the basis for its unique status over against post-scriptural tradi­tion and the teaching authority of the church, and against latter-day Montanism.

It is doubtful whether the Bible itself, how­ever, sees the Spirit's involvement with its writers as phenomenologically distinctive; the distinction between the Bible and other sources of truth is better made on the basis of other models referred to at the outset. It is in any case doubtful whether it is wise to attempt in this way to relate the models to each other, e.g. by understanding God as inspiring people so that they can receive his 'revelation' which then has 'authority' and can function as 'canon'. As models they are independent of each other and each potentially offers a total account of the phenomena of scripture from a different perspective.

In the wake of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the Bible came to be studied 'like any other book', and this raised a number of questions regarding its inspiration. First, inspiration came to be a way of speaking of the origin of secular works of art, whose crea­tors may well feel that something was 'given' to them. Writers such as J. G. Herder *(The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry,* 1782-3) applied the artistic notion of inspiration to scriptural works: their inspiration is that of great re­ligious teachers and poets through whom God speaks as he speaks through other works of art. Secondly, the nineteenth century saw the development of critical approaches to the ori­gins and nature of the books, which exposed the utter humanness of the process whereby they came into being and made it more diffi­cult to affirm that they manifested the inerrant truth which the doctrine of inspiration implicitly or explicitly claimed for them. At­tempts to restate the doctrine of inspiration by writers who accept the approaches of biblical criticism, such as W. Sanday *(Inspira­tion,* 1893) and Charles Gore (in *Lux Mundi),* and by writers who reject them, such as B. B. Warfield (e.g. *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture,* reprinted 1951), need to be seen as responses to this situation. It is henceforth a commonplace of conservative works that acknowledging scripture's inspiration logically entails acknowledging its absolute historical truth or inerrancy, an inference not drawn in the early or Reformation periods when the concern with inspiration had other interests. A third result of the impact of biblical criti­cism was the awareness that many biblical books did not come into existence as the work of inspired individuals but as the result of a process involving a variety of traditionists, sources, and redactors. This suggested that inspiration needed to be seen as more of a community than an individual matter, in keep­ing with the biblical stress on the work of the Spirit in the corporate life of the people of God.

But a further result of the impact of biblical criticism has been that in the present century, mainstream theological attempts to consider the significance of scripture have paid more attention to the other models noted above than to inspiration. Conservative works such as those of J. I. Packer *('Fundamentalism' and the Word of God,* 1958) rightly see themselves as restating Warfield's position in the context of the questions which came into prominence in the nineteenth century, especially concern­ing the relationship of the inspiration of scrip­ture to its human origin.

Over the centuries writers have hinted at a number of ways of understanding the nature of the inspiration of the scriptures and the re­lationship of this inspiration to human author­ship, but these questions have been the sub­ject of little sustained attention, except in Aqui­nas. Often writers have confined themselves to denying what they saw as potentially mis­leading inferences regarding the matter. The biblical language of speaking 'in the Spirit' (Mark 12.36) or being 'moved by the Holy Spirit' so that one 'spoke from God' (II Peter 1.21) suggests an inspiration which took the form of possession by the Spirit, God using human beings as instruments in a way which did not involve their minds even as receptors of a divine message (cf. Acts 1.16; 4.25; and some OT descriptions of prophetic experience, such as Ezekiel's). But it is compatible with inspiration taking the form of the dictation of messages by God, which may be the understanding suggested by the familiar 'thus says Yahweh' of the prophets and by some of their own accounts of their experience (e.g. Isa. 6); here the human mind is engaged (cf. I Peter 1.10-12) and the message apparently emerges when the person involved is in a psychologically normal - if heightened - state. Most modern writers are inclined to reject these first two understandings and to stress the way the prophets' own personalities are reflected in their words, which might seem to be excluded by these understandings; they stress how God works through his providen­tial shaping of the human personalities, who then write what they want to write but which happens to be what God wants written. W. J. Abraham *(The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scrip­ture,* 1981) begins by considering the way in which one human being may inspire another to do something; he thus sees inspiration as a matter of God influencing human beings by who he is and what he has done, their writing then being entirely their own work.

One difficulty which underlies this discus­sion is that the inspiration model best fits the prophetic material in scripture, since the prophets refer explicitly to divine involvement in making them speak and giving them their material. The meaning of inspiration must change when extended to narrative, prayers, dialogue involving human speakers as well as divine, God sometimes contradicting the human speaker (Jer. 15) and human authors contradicting themselves (I Cor. 1.14—16); fur­ther, our understanding of inspiration needs to be able to embrace the fact that different levels of insight are expressed in different parts of scripture. It seems best to allow for the possibility that each of the different under­standings of inspiration may apply to some of the material in scripture; which of them is appropriate will vary from work to work and from text to text.

In addition to works cited, see P. J. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture,* 1980; L. Alonso Schokel, *The Inspired Word,* 1967; G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture,* 1975; K. R. Trembath, *Evangelical Theories of Biblical In­spiration,* 1988; B. Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration,* 1972.