

The Main Theories of the Inspiration of Scripture

That the Bible claims to be inspired by God is beyond doubt. The phrases ‘Gods says’ or ‘The Lord spoke’ and their equivalents occur at least 3 800 times in the Old Testament and the fact of inspiration has been sealed by the testimony of Christ and the Apostles. What is less clear is the method by which God inspired the Bible.

The word ‘inspiration’ (Gk. ‘theopneustos’ - lit. ‘God-breathed’) occurs only once in Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16) and the terms used in its context are nowhere defined.(1) Much confusion arises from the secular usage of the word, which is used to describe human genius, such in music or poetry, and even of a ‘hunch’.(2) Clark Pinnock cites B.B. Warfield as arguing that ‘theopneustos’ means ‘breathed out by God’, but the context, he adds, “also suggests a Spiritual power possessed by the text that is what makes it so effective for the purpose specified.”(3) Carl F. Henry states:

The emphasis falls on Divine initiative and inpartation rather than on human creativity; Scripture a~s its origin and nature to what God breathed out.(4)

Muslims believe that their Holy Book is inspired by God. Ghulam Sarwar writes: “The whole of the Qur’an is from Allah. Each word is a revealed word. It was sent down to Muhammad through the angel Jibra’il.”(5) The method that is claimed for the inspiration of the Qur’an is the dictation of every letter and dot. It has frequently been said that ‘Fundamentalists’ hold exactly the same belief about the Bible,(6) that is, that the writers lost all control and became simply God’s penmen, This accusation comes from misunderstanding (and frequently from a deliberate desire to discredit) the theory of ‘verbal’ inspiration.(7) Despite frequent denials by Evangelicals some still accuse them of holding to it.(8)

J.I. Packer rightly points out that: “This ‘dictation theory’ is a man of straw. It is safe to say that no Protestant theologian, from the reformation till now, has held it; and certainly modern Evangelicals do not hold it.”(9) Writing in *The Fundamentals*, (the series of articles that gave modern fundamentalism its name) L.M. Munhall states categorically that ‘such a theory [of mechanical dictation] is nowhere taught in the Scriptures. Indeed, the obvious fact that the individual characteristics of the writers were in no way changed or destroyed disproves such a theory.’(10) Despite these facts, such has been the ferocity of this attack that it has caused the theory of ‘verbal’ inspiration to fall into disfavour throughout the last half of the nineteenth century.(11) It can only be hoped that this ‘straw-man’ will soon be laid to rest.

It was partially as a reaction against the (mythical) dictation theory that the “accommodation” theory was developed. Dictation, it was argued, failed to take into account the human nature of Scripture. Statements like: “...it seemed good to me to write an orderly account for you...” (Luke 1:3), and “When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus in Troas.” (2 Tim. 4:13) it is said are purely human. Further, scholars who hold this position state that the Bible contains ‘crudities, distortions and errors’,(12) because God used sinful men to write it.(13) God, according to writers like C.H. Dodd, communicates truth through the overall message of Scripture,(14) not through the specific wording. Because man is finite God has to communicate to him in terms that he understands. An example of this would be teaching men

a cosmology based on the erroneous ideas of the day, such as the Gilgamesh Epic from Babylonia. Rudolf Bultmann's attempts to 'demythologise' the Gospels to get back to the original accounts based on this theory have been well repudiated.(15)

Because the Lord Jesus Himself accepted the Old Testament as inspired many Liberals have said that in his self-limited state (*Kenosis*) he was simply mistaken because he was a man. Many claim that accepting this theory throws a great flood of light on the real character of Scripture and makes possible a great advance in theological understanding. However, I think that their real motive is to destroy the source of authority in Christianity and open the way to subjectivism. As Packer points out, this theory is a contradiction of the clear statement of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16), that every part of Scripture has a Divine origin.(16)

Geisler & Nix summarise the Evangelical refutation of accommodation as follows:

Just because God condescends to man's level to communicate His Truth to them does not mean that He has to compromise His Truth in doing so. Adaptation to human limits does not necessitate accommodation to human error... God uses anthropomorphisms when speaking to man, but He does not use myths (II Peter 1:16).(17)

Although Jesus' understanding and knowledge was clearly limited while he was on Earth (c.f. Matt. 24:36), just as all human understanding is, it does not follow logically that limited understanding equals wrong understanding.(18) The comparison between Christ's humanity and the nature of the Scriptures also fails when taken to its logical conclusion, when it must be asserted that Christ, as man, sinned in relating falsehood as truth.(19) God in his Sovereign power is not limited by human sinfulness in communicating his Word. He is even able to use men completely opposed to him to speak his words - such as Balaam (Num. 23-24) and Caiaphas (John 11:49-50). The Bible includes the words of Job's friends, the King of Assyria (2 Kings 18:19-25) and of the Devil (Matt. 4:1-8), not because they are true, but because God wanted them recorded.

The method of inspiration that is generally accepted by Evangelicals is that of supervision. It states that God's Sovereign activity is evident in preparing the writers of his Word through their lives and experiences, as well as their vocabulary, to write exactly what he wanted writing. In this was God was able to fully combine the Divine and the human to produce his word to man. B.B. Warfield's classical illustration of this, cited by Milne,(20) is of a stained glass Cathedral window. The window, far from distorting the pure light, rather fulfils the design of the architect in producing exactly the effect that he desired.(21) Instead of detracting from the import and purity of the message, the idiosyncrasies of the writers enhance it.(22)

Bruce Milne concludes: "The Biblical writers were uniquely superintended by the action of Almighty God through His Spirit in all factors influencing their message."(23)

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References

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(3) Pinnock, 63.

(4) Henry, 13.

(5) G. Sarwar, *Islam: Beliefs & Teachings*. (London: The Muslim Educational Trust, 1987), 32-33.

(6) R. Pache, *The Inspiration & Authority of Scripture*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 66.

(7) H.D. McDonald, *Theories of Revelation: An Historical Study 1700-1960*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 258.

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(9) J.I. Packer, '*Fundamentalism' and The Word of God*. (London: London InterVarsity Fellowship, 1958), 79.

(10) L.M. Munhall, "The Inspiration of the Bible," *The Fundamentals*, Vol. 2. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 56.

(11) McDonald, 258.

(12) Packer, 79.

(13) Bruce Milne, *Know The Truth*. (Leicester: IVP, 1982), 37.

(14) C.H. Dodd, *The Authority of The Bible*. (London: Collins, 1960), 42.

(15) Noel Weeks, "The Hermeneutical Problem of Genesis 1-11," *Themelios*. (Sept. 1978): 14.

(16) Packer, 80.

(17) N.L Geisler & W.E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, revised. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 62.

(18) Geisler & Nix, 63.

(19) Packer, 83.

(20) Milne, 38.

(21) Warfield, *Inspiration*, 155-156.

(22) G.W Bromiley cited by Henry, 20.

(23) Milne, 38.

