



Divine Inspiration and the Word of God

Is the nature of the Bible that of propositional or personal revelation? Do you believe in the verbal/plenary theory of inspiration or the dynamic theory? Read and discover!

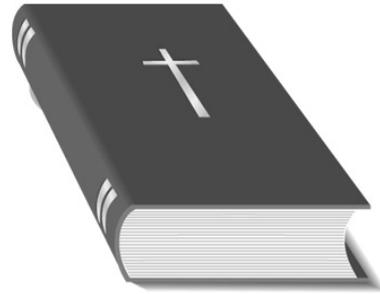
Introduction

Inspiration. The word is used in various ways today. “Patrick is such an inspiration to us all.” “The artist searched in vain for inspiration in order to paint again.” “You will find that book in our ‘Inspirational’ section on the left.” “Notre Dame is playing some inspired football in the second half.” “Hamlet’s soliloquy on death is truly an inspired work of art and human psychology.” But none of these uses of the word matches the meaning of inspiration as a doctrine about Scripture in Christian theology. There is a huge difference between declaring that we are inspired by Psalm 23 and declaring that Psalm 23 is the inspired word of God. The former depends upon our understanding; the latter lies in the nature of Scripture itself. It is this latter claim that constitutes the subject of this study.

The Bible and Revelation

There are two basic interpretations of what it means to say that the Bible is the inspired word of God, and these two interpretations seem to be connected with the two major understandings of the meaning of the term *revelation*. So, perhaps the best place to start a study of the inspiration of the Bible is to investigate the concept of the Bible as revelation.

One of the ways of looking at the Bible is to see it as a book that reveals the important facts about God and the principles by which God wants us to live. This understanding of the nature of the Bible is called *propositional revelation*. The Bible is the only source of the true teachings about God, God’s will, and the way of life for the



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community of faith. Every part of the Bible—its stories, its laws, its songs, its proverbs, its sayings, and its instructions—can be reduced to a set of propositions, or doctrines (teachings) about God and God’s will for the community of faith.

The other view of the Bible begins with a definition of revelation that is somewhat complex. It says the Bible does not reveal a body of propositions about God but rather reveals the very person of God. The Christian faith is not based on propositional revelation but rather is based on *personal revelation*: God’s self-revelation through the incarnation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus Christ is the complete revelation of God: “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:19). If Jesus is the one, unique full revelation of God, then the Bible may be defined as the *written record* of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, God’s previous acts of self-disclosure, and human responses to these mighty acts of God, as written by those intimately involved with those events.

Much of the Bible fits the understanding of propositional revelation. The laws of the Old Testament, the

exhortations of Paul, Peter, or the prophets, many of the teachings of Jesus, and explicit statements about God such as “God is love” (1 John 4:8) or “God is light” (1 John 1:5) seem to support the conclusion that the Bible is a book of the propositional revelation of God. Nevertheless, the Bible itself offers other clues that biblical revelation is best understood as personal revelation.

An Old Testament example is found in the book of Ezekiel. Fifty-four times in Ezekiel the statement “Then you/they shall know that I am Yahweh” appears in its pure form. If we allow for some variation of that phrase, it appears some eighty times! For a book that has only forty-eight chapters, that is a significant statistic. The phrase is significant because it declares the purpose of the various acts of God. Whether it be the ministry of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. 24:27), a particular act of judgment (Ezek. 25:7), or the repopulation of Judah (Ezek. 36:38), God is at work making himself known. Of course, the verb *to know* carries particular significance as well. More than intellectual recognition is involved in the use of the word. *To know* in Hebrew denotes an intimate, personal experience (see Gen. 4:1!). Therefore the purpose of the prophetic speech and divine activity is not to reveal some facts about God but to bring about a personal encounter with God.

The New Testament certainly is to be read as the story of God’s self-revelation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. John 14:9 records Jesus’ response to Philip’s request to be shown the Father: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” In what may have once been intended as a conclusion to John’s Gospel, the writer explicitly declares, “These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). The other Gospels seem to share the same purpose; they present the person of Jesus Christ as the Son of God to the reader. Paul’s writings, while filled with instructions for Christian living, are more concerned with presenting the need of faith (trust) in Jesus as Lord. Even the book of Revelation uses its symbolic power to present an adequate picture of Jesus. In all of these writings, the authors bear witness to their conviction that God is revealed once and for all in the person of Jesus Christ (see Heb. 7:27; 9:12, 26).

Some of the later writings of the New Testament demonstrate more of a propositional view of revelation, and

it has an effect on their view of Scripture. The Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), 2 Peter, and Jude are concerned about false teachers, and in these books the definition of faith seems to shift from entrusting one’s life to God to believing the right things about God. It is not accidental that two pseudonymous works from this group (2 Timothy and 2 Peter) contain the most explicit references in the Bible about inspiration. If God’s revelation is propositional, then the claim of inspiration is a way of guaranteeing the truth of the propositions found in Scripture.

The Claim of Inspiration

The doctrine of biblical inspiration finds expression in 2 Timothy 3:16–17: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” The claim is clearly stated, but it is not defined. The other New Testament passage often cited as a claim of inspiration, 2 Peter 1:20–21, states, “No prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

Both of these unknown Christian leaders, claiming the authority of Paul and Peter, are writing in an effort to dispute the teachings of a growing threat to Christianity: Gnosticism. They are concerned to show that Scripture cannot be manipulated by people to fit some “individual interpretation” in the form of strange doctrines, but that Scripture has its origin in God and therefore must be respected. Nevertheless, they do not define inspiration but simply claim it.

The claim of inspiration must not be limited to these two books, however. Throughout the Bible there are references to the fact that God spoke or made things known to different people. Hosea 1:1–2 is a remarkable example because three such statements pile up on one another: “The word of the LORD that came to Hosea son of Beeri . . . When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea.” In the first phrase, the “word of the LORD” is an active agent that “comes” to the prophet. Literally, the Hebrew verb (*hayah*) is the verb “to be” and can be understood as something that “happened” to Hosea. This divine activity in the life of Hosea can be described as a “communication to”

Hosea (“the LORD said to Hosea”) because Hosea learns something important, and it results in a “communication through” Hosea in the form of a prophetic ministry, which through a rather complex historical process resulted in the production of the book of Hosea.

The term *inspiration* (*theópneustos*) means literally “God breathed” and is used only once in the Bible. Nevertheless, whether implied or explicit, the entire Bible is consistent with the claim that the Scripture is inspired. It must be remembered, however, that the claim is never defined, and the biblical writers seem to be content with this simple declaration that the Scripture originates with God without describing how inspiration occurs.

Theories of Inspiration

There are two basic ways of understanding the process of inspiration: the verbal/plenary theory and the dynamic theory. The *verbal/plenary theory of inspiration* claims that inspiration guarantees God’s full and complete control of the origin of Scripture (*plenary* means “full”). God was so completely in control of the writing process that the biblical authors were prevented from making any type of error whatsoever as they wrote the Bible. Those who hold that the Bible is *verbally* inspired extend the process of inspiration to include the very words of Scripture; God, not the human author, is responsible for the choice of each word of the Bible. Those who hold a *plenary* view hesitate to say that the human author was not influenced by his culture, personal knowledge, or social background. They believe that God used the writer’s personality in the creation of the biblical work. The two do agree, however, that the process of inspiration means that the Bible is free from any error in terms of fact, event, or spiritual teaching. According to this view, whenever the Bible speaks to science, history, biography, doctrine, or any other aspect of reality, it is without error.

On the other hand, the *dynamic theory of inspiration* is more concerned with the spiritual message of the Bible than it is with the details of specific facts and data. According to this view, Scripture has its origin in God because as God was at work in history, the Holy Spirit moved people of faith who witnessed those events to shape, write, and preserve a written record of God’s mighty acts. These people were free agents who were products of their time and culture. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit empowered them to perceive and express the message of God’s dealing with humanity in such a



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way that the Bible is sufficient and reliable to bring a person into a saving relationship with God and provide a complete and authoritative guide to life within the community of faith.

There is a general correlation between one’s view of revelation and one’s understanding of inspiration. Those who see revelation as propositional, more a matter of facts and doctrine, tend to hold to the verbal or plenary view of inspiration. For them, it is vital to guarantee the inerrancy of these teachings by making God the responsible Author. Those who believe that revelation is the personal self-revelation of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth tend to hold to the dynamic view of inspiration. For them, the importance of the Bible as the written record of God’s self-revelation and prior self-manifestations in history lies in the totality and integrity of its message more than in specific words and data.

Drawbacks to Each Theory

Each theory has followers who are sincere people of faith, whether Christian or Jew. As with all human explanations of spiritual realities, however, each view of inspiration presents some problems that must be considered. The verbal/plenary theory is most often applied to the original copy of the biblical book in its original language (the autograph). The greatest problem lies in the fact that we do not possess a single original copy of any of the sixty-six books of the Bible. We do not even have the original copy of the original book. How is one to deal with history of the text as it is copied and translated across the centuries? Is inspiration lost? If every word was chosen directly by God and each passage can claim God directly as Author, then it seems as if every word of Scripture should have equal weight and value. But how many of us are willing to say that the command

to “not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk” (NIV) which is found three times in the Old Testament (Exod. 23:19; 34:26; Deut. 14:21) should be given equal weight to a verse like Acts 4:12? Furthermore, a close reading of biblical texts will lead the reader to encounter some passages that clearly seem to be in contradiction with one another or contain some type of error. How are they to be explained? Even more problematic are those passages that seem to express the opposite of what God would say (see Ps. 137:8–9)! At least the verbal theory of inspiration calls human freedom into question, but both seem to lose some of their strength when the student begins to see that the process of biblical formation was quite complex and included periods of oral tradition and various redactions before some texts arrived at their final forms.

The dynamic theory of inspiration is not without its problems as well. Without question the dynamic view is somewhat vague and unarticulated in comparison to the precision with which other theories are presented. It seems open to the charge that it minimizes the supernatural aspect of the Bible while it overemphasizes the human. There is a danger of making the Bible a completely human work of literature. Sometimes the proponents of this view tend to ignore the elements of the Bible that declare that the Bible is inspired by God.

Formulating an Adequate Theory of Biblical Inspiration

Each individual is responsible for arriving at a personal concept of the inspiration of Scripture that is satisfying but encourages one to continue to learn and mature. One never comes to the “final word” on a subject in biblical studies. A first step may well be determining how much the concept of freedom of the human will means to you.

Along the same lines, you should determine whether your idea of revelation is propositional or personal. Then you should consider how much ambiguity you are able to live with in matters of faith. Is the only truth of a historical, factual nature, or is there a deeper level of truth that may be expressed through symbol, figure, and perhaps even fiction? Your answer to these questions may well suggest where you find yourself along a continuum of theories of revelation ranging from verbal to plenary to dynamic.

Regardless of where you find yourself along that continuum, your theory of inspiration should begin with respect for those who may hold to a different theory. Your theory should be able to include the process of literary formation, translation, and the various types of literature found in the Bible. Your concept of biblical inspiration should allow for different passages in the Bible to legitimately receive different levels of importance in the shaping of your personal theology. And your theory of inspiration should be open to revision as your own understanding of the Bible grows and changes.

While the details of how one explains the process of inspiration may vary, one thing remains constant: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). However we may explain it, the Bible is inspired. Its usefulness within the community of faith proves it.

About the Writer

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