

“Derived” Inspiration

by

Parker Reardon

No other doctrine of Scripture is of such vital foundational importance as the inspiration of Holy Scripture. It is the teaching that the Bible has God as its source that sets it apart from any other book and gives it ultimate authority in the life of the believer. With any book on a reader’s shelf there is no responsibility placed on him to live differently in light of what he reads. He can either choose to believe what the books say, or reject them and he is no better or worse based on that decision.

However, the Bible claims to be the very words from God. The reader of this particular book cannot remain neutral. He must accept what it says, knowing Who is saying it, and manifest its requirements in his life. He must obey what that Word exhorts in light of Who is exhorting him. He must serve Him whom that Word makes him accountable to. And he must worship Him whom that Word introduces to him in all his splendor and glorious majesty.

This doctrine of the original autographs (the originals that the prophets and apostles wrote) being inspired or given directly by God is not only spelled out clearly in Scripture, but it is a doctrine that has been easily held by Christians down through the centuries. However, the question that arises for many is “How does that doctrine apply to the Scriptures that I hold in my hands in my own language?” Does inspiration apply equally to the hundreds of copies that have been made down through the years? Is my Bible still a truthful, accurate word from the Living God? How confident can expositional preachers be in their verse-by-verse teaching if they are unsure that God has

preserved His inspired Word? How can believers build solid convictions from a Bible that they are not convinced is absolutely the truth and nothing but the truth? Is the Bible still verbally (each word) inspired by God or did He just preserve the basic thoughts He wanted to convey?

This study seeks to show in an introductory way that God has been faithful to preserve His inspired Word. There are many different aspects to understanding how inspiration applies to the Scriptures. An introduction of these aspects will help bridge an understanding between the original autographs and what is held in hands today as the Scriptures.

Inspiration of the Text

A cursory look at inspiration is necessary in order to build a foundation. Without an understanding of what it means, and a conviction of the originals being inspired, it is useless to go any further. There are those who, in fact, believe that inspiration refers to how Scripture “received its color from the ages in which they were produced, and from sincere yet fallible opinions of holy men.”¹ Curtis even suggests the Apostles fell into individual errors, were corrected by the Holy Spirit, and thus, “inspiration resides not in each passage alone, but in the spirit of the whole book and with principles of universal religion.”² Some would think inspiration refers to intuition, where the writer is a religious genius with talent for spiritual insight. Others may believe it is the illumination of a person who has a deep experience with God. Yet others might think it speaks of God mechanically dictating the precise words for His message to mankind.

¹ Curtis, The Human Element in the Inspiration of the Sacred Scriptures (New York: Appleton & Co., 1867), p. 37.

²Ibid.

Contrarywise, the predominant historic view has been one of dynamic inspiration. This speaks of extraordinary help of the Holy Spirit that does not violate the writer's individuality or personality. In the strictest sense of the definition, inspiration is how "God superintended the human authors of the Bible so that they composed and recorded without error His message to mankind in the words of their original writings."³ The classic verse on this issue is 2 Timothy 3:16 where Paul teaches the written Scriptures have been breathed out by God. God "moved" the prophets and apostles to pen exactly what He wanted written down, as they spoke for God (2 Pet. 1:19-21). In the Old Testament, God spoke and wrote through the prophets (2 Ki. 9:36; 14:25; Jer. 37:2; Zech. 7:7,12). There are also numerous references to "thus says the Lord" (Jer. 31:2, 7). Direct speech from God is also recorded (Ex. 20:1; Gen. 12:1-3). So, what the prophet said and wrote, God essentially said and wrote. The New Testament attests to itself as being inspired as well. For instance, Peter places Paul's writings in the category of inspired Scripture (2 Pet. 3:16). In the same way, Paul writes to Timothy affirming Jesus' words in Luke 10:7 as Scripture (1 Tim. 5:18). The New Testament also records direct communication from God. For instance, God speaks at the baptism of Christ, the transfiguration of Christ, the conversion of Saul, and Peter's vision. Scripture even records God's speech through Christ and the apostles (2 Cor. 13:3; Jn. 3:34; 6:63, 68; and Luke 5:1 "the multitude pressed about Him to hear the word of God"). Furthermore, Jesus witnessed to the fact that the unfinished revelation that would be penned was inspired Scripture (Jn. 16:12-13; 14:26). According to John Gill in his book *BODY OF DIVINITY*, "Inspiration is to be understood of the Scriptures, as in the original languages

³Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Scripture Press Publications Inc., 1986), p. 38.

in which they were written, and not of translations; unless it could be thought, that the translators of the Bible into the several languages of the nations into which it has been translated, were under the divine inspiration also in translating, and were directed of God to the use of words they have rendered the original by; but this is not reasonable to suppose...only the original exemplar is authentic; and not translations, is every translation to be brought, and by it to be examined, tried, and judged, and to be corrected and amended: and if this was not the case, we should have no certain and infallible rule to go by.”⁴

Transmission of the Text

As important as it is that the autographs be inspired, that does not settle the issue of all the copies that have been made of Scripture. All that people have had throughout history have been copies. Yet, New Testament writers considered errant manuscripts of the first century to be inspired, thus trustworthy and authoritative. Paul ascribed inspiration to the Scriptures that Timothy was raised on. Paul never thought in terms of the technical distinction between the autographs and copies of Scripture. More important however, is the fact that he never makes any claims nor proposes any definitions that would set the original writings apart as a special group to be clearly distinguished from copies of Scripture.”⁵ Nowhere does the Bible teach that copies are not inspired. “In brief, even though our Bibles are an approximation of the original manuscripts, their value and authority are ensured, so it is claimed, by the assumption of inerrant

⁴John Gill, Body of Divinity (1756), p. 13-14.

⁵Dewey Beegle, The Inspiration of Scripture (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), p. 20.

autographs.”⁶ In John 10:34-36 the Scriptures that Jesus is speaking of are the Old Testament writings that were common to He and His Jewish adversaries. He is stressing in this context that Psalm 82:6 of the extant (no longer existing) scrolls is authoritative. How could He claim their authority if not inspired? Even Peter indicates that he never made any distinction between the originals and copies. He speaks of the more sure prophetic word, which probably is a reference to Messianic passages in the Old Testament that were confirmed by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ (2 Pet. 1:19-21). In essence, he is saying that extant Old Testament copies are trustworthy and authoritative because the original prophecies were God-given. The way that Jesus, Paul, and Peter handle passages from Old Testament copies implies these copies preserved both the results of inspiration and the authority that characterized the original autographs. It can be observed that 99% of the saints’ knowledge of God has come through copies, none of which are inerrant. Yet, errant copies have not hindered the Holy Spirit in His ministry of conviction and illumination. However, “only insofar as the accidents of transmission are removed can one be sure what was originally written.”⁷

Criticism of the Text

It is only in the past few hundred years that believers have had complete copies of the Scriptures. Though there have been portions of the Gospel of John and the Psalter, they have all been copies. These copies were handwritten well into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The original autographs were a compilation of scrolls. These scrolls were a book or codex style of manuscript written on papyrus and then bound

⁶Ibid., p. 23.

⁷Ibid., p. 24.

together. Later on, these scrolls were made of vellum, which lasted longer than papyri. As the laborious hand copying ensued, various errors entered into the transmission. It is the job of the textual critic to determine what errors have crept into the God-breathed text due to human error. There are a plethora of reasons for copyist errors, otherwise known as textual variants. They are recognizable and of various sources. A copyist could misspell a word, skip a phrase or line, hear verbal dictation wrongly, or harmonize with a text that he had written earlier. One particular thing that scholars have to be careful of is that they discern marginal notes (commentaries), prayers, and songbooks from the actual text. Another, as Harvey Minkoff suggests in the Bible Review is that “at some point, scribes began to insert certain consonants to take the place of missing vowels, but this technique was not instantly accepted in the ancient world, leading to small but significant textual differences.”⁸ The divine Word is only subject to human criticism in one of the four steps it took to reach the hands of the present-day Christian. The first step of the divine process is the eternal Word’s existence in the mind of God. The second divine step is its revelation from the mind of God to the mind of the writer of Scripture. The third divine step is its mysterious transmission by the Holy Spirit through the writer’s thoughts to types and symbols of language of Hebrew and Greek, as He moved them to write His words. Fourth and finally, however, is the human reproduction from one language to another as it is translated into the language of the people. This is the only step in the process that is fallible and open to man’s mistakes. As Gausson says, “the divine thought being already incarnated, as it were, in the language of sacred text, what remains to be done in translation is no longer the giving of it a body, but only the

⁸Harvey Minkoff, “Searching for the Better Text” (Bible Review, August 1999), pp. 24-29.

changing of its dress, making it say in French what it had already said in Greek.”⁹

Through textual criticism, the translator must correctly conceive the inspired thoughts both in the words of the text and the words of his version. It is the faithful translation that expresses the thoughts of the original in the words of his version. Many think that textual critics take upon themselves a liberty that is not theirs; one of choosing which parts of Scripture are deleted and which parts remain. Yet, textual critics are simply seeking to determine what scribal errors crept into Scripture. As has been said, sacred criticism is a historian not a soothsayer.

One example showing the practical application of appealing to the copies for faithfulness to the originals is Mark 16:18 which people use as a proof-text giving authority for snake handling. It is important to note that the last twelve verses are not in the original conclusion to Mark. It is also a faithful translation of Scripture from the original languages into another language that may, to the reader who correctly understands that language, have the same authority as the original autographs had to those whom that was the vernacular.

Preservation of the Text

Man constantly wants to be dazzled with the supernatural. Thus, since God supernaturally penned the Scriptures, many think He is obligated to preserve His Word in much the same miraculous manner. On the contrary, there is no scriptural basis for claiming God’s supernatural intervention. Preservation of the Scriptures through its copying is the one step in the process that God commits to man as his responsibility to be

⁹Louis Gaussen, The Plenary Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures (Chicago: Bible Institute Association, 1867), p. 156.

diligent with the task at hand. God's sovereign plan intended to utilize "human minds devoted to Him, which would be sufficient to maintain the level of truth necessary for achieving His purposes."¹⁰ One such example of non-miraculous preservation is in Jeremiah 36:28 where Jeremiah had to write a new copy of what had been burned by King Jehoiakim. Another passage showing how God expects man to be zealous in preserving His Word is 2 Kings 22:8-13. The Scriptures had been lost for approximately fifty years when the temple and law were neglected. Josiah found a copy of the law for which loss the nation was punished. In commenting on this passage John Calvin shared his confidence that "the Law was wonderfully preserved by heavenly providence rather than by human effort."¹¹ It is no stretch to say that God bore along the scribes. It is only lacking scriptural backing to say that He bore copyists along to the extent that He moved the prophets and apostles (miraculously).

God's providential preservation began with His watchcare of the prophets and apostles He intended to call into His service. This care extended to His provision of their material needs, protecting them from disqualifying evil, and even restraining those who would destroy them. His preservation of His eternal Word also extends to the inscripturating of it on paper as the Holy Spirit moved and carried them along to write exactly what He desired (1 Pet. 1:21). According to 1 Corinthians 2:13, the Holy Spirit aided in forming God's thoughts into His written words.

In the small percentage of cases where there is uncertainty about the original text's rendering, the context in the verse makes the rendering clear. Thus, 99% of the present manuscripts are inerrant (without error), representing 99% replication of the

¹⁰Beegle, *The Inspiration of Scripture*, p. 26.

¹¹John McNeill. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 88.

originals. Two bright Greek scholars, Westcott and Hort, indicated that only about one-eighth of the existing variants are weighty, which would leave the text 98.33% pure. Historian Philip Schaff estimated there are only 400 variants that affect the sense of the passage and only fifty are actually important. The great American Greek scholar A.T. Robertson said that the areas of real concern amount to one-one thousandth part of the entire text.¹² In summary, “the providence of God superintends matters so that copies of Scripture do not become so corrupt as to become unintelligible for God’s original purposes in giving it or so corrupt as to create a major falsification of His message’s text.”¹³ Since God has faithfully preserved adequate copies, one can wholeheartedly ascribe to the Westminster Confession: “The Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek, being immediately inspired by God and, by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic; so in all controversies of religion, the church is to finally appeal to them.”

Truthfulness of the Text

The bottom line of this whole subject is truthfulness. God’s Word cannot remain true, as the very words from God, if in fact it ever ceases to be inspired. God’s speech, reflective of His character, are truthful, since they represent the God who cannot lie (Titus 1:2). The writer to the Hebrews also attests to the fact that it is impossible for God to lie (Heb. 6:18). David also mentions that God’s words are true (2 Sam. 7:28). His words are pure (Ps. 12:6), they prove true (Prov. 30:5), and are fixed in Heaven for

¹²James White, The King James Only Controversy, (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Pub., 1995), p. 39.

¹³Larry Pettigrew, Theology I class lecture, The Master’s Seminary, October 2002.

eternity (Ps. 119:89). Furthermore, Jesus states that God's Word is truth (Jn. 17:17). If it is Truth, and God's truth, nonetheless, it must be inerrant and inspired.

Conclusion

How could man be thoroughly equipped for every good word and work, had God not preserved His inerrant, inspired Word for man today? Ultimately it is a matter of faith that gives assurance that God's inspired, inerrant Word has been preserved for modern man. It takes the Spirit of God, using the Word of God to convince one that he is holding the Scriptures in his hands. Wayne Grudem sums this up by pointing out that "our ultimate conviction that the words of the Bible are God's words comes only when the Holy Spirit speaks in and through the words of the Bible to our hearts and gives us an inner assurance that these are the words of our Creator speaking to us."¹⁴

¹⁴Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), p.77.

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