

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bq\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php)

## The Inspiration of the Bible\*

ONE of the major problems in the Christian church today is that of assigning a place to the Scriptures. The practice of consistent private Bible reading is not so widespread now as it was thirty years ago, and the Scriptures are not unjustly described as the "neglected weapon" of the Church. There are signs, however, that the younger generation has a different approach and is prepared to take the Bible more seriously, but this implies that the Christian teacher and minister will face more and harder questions than before. The old-fashioned answers will no longer satisfy, as any Sunday School teacher could tell. Therefore we must face frankly certain searching questions about the Bible and endeavour to answer them in modern terms. Is the Bible inspired? Is the Bible any different from other religious books? Can we say that the Bible is the Word of God? Can we feel genuine doubt about one passage without begging the question for the whole of the Bible? And so on.

In a recent book Dr. Horton Davies has some penetrating things to say about the use of the Bible in the Church. He quotes Chillingworth's well-known saying: "The Bible and the Bible only is the religion of the Protestants," and goes on to say that we should probably want to amend the dictum to say the Bible is the basis of the religion of the Protestants. The whole of Dr. Davies' book shows how badly the Bible has fared at the hands of its users, even in our own time.<sup>1</sup> In and to such a world as this, what is the relevance of the Bible? To set the question against its background, we glance briefly at the way the Bible has been handled and interpreted in previous ages.

It may well be that the Jews before our Lord's time had a doctrine of verbal inspiration and complete infallibility for their Scriptures—our Old Testament. Paul himself may have subscribed to this view. Justin Martyr in the second century believed that God had raised up holy and inspired men to produce the works of the New Testament. Origen, in the third century, is noted for his allegorisation of Scripture. His three levels of meaning—Literal, Moral and Mystic—meant that he could read almost anything into a given text. From the fourth century onwards one can see the gradual increase of the power of the Church, which finally became

\* Being the substance of two lectures on the same subject delivered at the first conference of ex-students of the Baptist Student Federation.

<sup>1</sup> See especially the concluding words of the section on biblical exegesis on page 82 of *Christian Deviations*.

the ultimate court of appeal, over both Scripture and tradition. The Reformers changed this emphasis and established Scripture once more as a final authority and as its own interpreter. Luther's main appeal was to Scripture, but he did not teach verbal inspiration. The touchstone by which he judged the books of the canon was "whether they proclaim Christ or not." Calvin accepted this criterion of exposition, but held the theory of an infallible Bible.

Of course, the advent of Biblical criticism has changed the scene considerably and altered the whole approach to any Biblical question. But modern criticism is not so modern as some would have us believe. About 250 A.D. Dionysius of Alexandria urged against the view that the Apostle John wrote *Revelation*, and Origen (born in 186) replied to the plain question "who wrote *Hebrews*?" with the equally plain answer, "God knows." In fact, the allegory by which we remember Origen's view of the Old Testament was a step away from absolute literalism. Professor Dodd says: "When the gospel according to St. Matthew uses the story of Jonah as a symbol of the resurrection from the dead, it is not very far from the original intention of the myth."<sup>2</sup> It was Luther who said: "The Scriptures are the crib wherein Christ is laid," and Emil Brunner added: "Biblical criticism is nothing but the act by which we recognise that the crib is not Christ."

Having made that sketchy reference to the background of our approach to the question of the inspiration of the Bible, we must now address ourselves more properly to the subject. It would seem on consideration of this theme, that it is almost impossible to answer the question, "Is the Bible inspired?" in the way we ought to answer as students. We need the question reframing so that we can make our primary effort on the academic level and then place the result in the setting of the devotional use of the Bible. As the question stands the personal and individual view of the Bible would have to come in at the start, so we may take the liberty to change the question very slightly. We shall assume that the answer to the question, "Is the Bible inspired?" is "Yes," and then try to say how that is so, or why we think it is so. In order to clear the ground before us we must dispose of four unlawful solutions to the question. All four have ardent advocates, but their prevalence retards rather than advances the true understanding of the Bible.

The first is that of *Verbal Infallibility or Plenary Inspiration*, or whatever title its advocates give it to make it a little more intellectually respectable. This is the idea that the Scriptures are perfect in every sense, that they cannot err in what they teach, and that every word recorded as coming from the mouth of our Lord must necessarily have been spoken by Him. Dr. H. Wheeler Robinson, commenting on this view of the Bible, compares it with the view of

<sup>2</sup> *The Bible Today*, p. 17.

the Eucharist known as Transubstantiation, adding that both are not merely untenable—they are irrelevant.<sup>3</sup> Certainly there are contradictions and difficulties enough in Scripture without our adding to them by such theories. The part played by men in the writing of the various books cannot be overlooked. St. Paul certainly did not regard himself as a pen in the hand of the Holy Spirit. In fact, in 1 *Corinthians*, he is at pains to distinguish divine commands from his own views, but attributes the latter to the guidance of the Spirit. As Principal Cunliffe-Jones has said: "The guidance of the Holy Spirit does not come to a passive mind, but is a supernatural enrichment of an active one."<sup>4</sup>

The second unlawful approach is that of *Unbridled Allegory*. This is a delicate subject, because the Bible uses allegory and some passages can best be interpreted by this means. But it must be controlled and the Bible taken at its face value where this is possible. The *Song of Songs* is a collection of love poems, and no amount of special pleading will make it anything else, least of all a foreshadowing of the relation between Christ and His Church. The book of *Revelation* deals a lot in symbolism, but it must be remembered that it is the symbolism of the first and second centuries, not the twentieth. The beast with the number 666 is Nero, not the Pope, not Napoleon, not Hitler, not even one of the modern form-critics. Where the Bible speaks plainly we must take the plain meaning, and where it speaks in metaphors we must remember their limitations.

Thirdly, we reject the *Piecemeal Method*, which snatches a few texts from their contexts and uses them to support wild theories which are clearly contrary to the general teaching of Scripture. In this way one can make even St. Paul subscribe to most of the known heresies. As early as the second century Marcion rejected the Old Testament altogether because he could not make it fit in with his conception of New Testament teaching. But soon he was forced to more stringent measures to smooth out the difficulties, and eventually he retained only an expurgated edition of the Third Gospel and seven epistles. There are many Christians today who are virtual Marcionites. Well may Dr. Rowley write: "To impart a sounder view of the Old Testament has seemed to some a harder task than to banish the Old Testament from the Bible."<sup>5</sup> The practice of using only certain parts of the Bible is more deeply ingrained in our Christian life than we think. The writer has kept a note of the texts used by writers of sermons in the *Expository Times* for the past three years. There are certain passages where the references are thick, while whole books have not received a mention, much less have been used for texts.

<sup>3</sup> *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit*, p. 171.

<sup>4</sup> *The Authority of the Biblical Revelation*, p. 98.

<sup>5</sup> *Relevance of the Bible*, p. 77.

Finally, we reject the view that the Bible is inspired *because it is Inspiring*. Philosophically, this view is untenable. A book is not necessarily inspired if it is inspiring; a book may be inspiring because it is inspired, or for several other reasons. Neither is it adequate to substitute a theory of inspired men for an inspired book. This latter approach has a large element of truth in it, but the answer it provides is too easy, and avoids some of the most difficult problems. As J. K. Mozley has said: "Our concern with the Bible is with its content, not with its authors." And: "The doctrine of inspiration is the assertion of the divine character of the Bible."<sup>6</sup>

Space does not allow us to examine the two comparatively late Biblical references to Scripture in *2 Tim.* iii. 16 and *2 Peter* i. 20 and 21. Both seem to regard Scripture as inspired and binding for Christian life and doctrine.

#### LITERATURE AND HISTORY

As we now seek to say something about how we believe the Bible to be inspired we shall start a long way out from our goal and work slowly back towards it. We take our first stand in the realm of literature and make the assertion that the Bible is part of the *Literature of the Ages*. As an example of literature the Bible stands high. Its pictures are painted on a large canvas; its situations are real and typical; its language is noble and its thought profound. Whether we read the stately prose of the 1611 version or appreciate the Greek of *Luke* or *1 Peter* or whether we read the stories of fierce battles and terrible prophets or read the parables as examples of how to write short stories, makes little difference. As literature the Bible ranks among the best. But this statement leaves the Bible in the realms of Shakespeare, Milton or even some of the modern dramatists, who seem to be increasingly aware of the important part the spiritual plays in the life and well-being of man.

The Bible is concerned with God and man and the relationship between them. It begins with the creation of the world and closes with the end of the world. Its problems are moral and religious; its people are spiritual beings. So we can take our second step with confidence and say that the Bible is *Religious Literature*. In this category new canons of criticism apply; new elements will be looked for in the writing; new attention will be paid to the claims to historicity. Dr. H. Wheeler Robinson wrote: "If we read the Bible only as a human book, we shall lose something that no other book can give; if we read it simply as a divine oracle we shall never understand it aright."<sup>7</sup> But we soon notice that there are differences between the Bible and other religious books. Primarily it is not concerned with man's search for God, or what laws must prevail if

<sup>6</sup> *The Christian Faith*, ed. Matthews, pp. 58 and 61.

<sup>7</sup> *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit*, p. 161.

man will please God, but with God's great love and power shown to men in mighty acts and with the effect of the rule and love of God on the lives of men. The Bible is quiet about its own claims, which is more than can be said for the Koran. In Christianity it is not the book which is sent down, devoid of contradictions, but Jesus Christ, full of grace and truth. Remembrance of this fact will keep our perspective free from the taint of bibliolatry.

Often we hear it said that all religious books are the same, they say the same things and point in the same direction, and so on. It has even been said that Jesus taught nothing new, but that all His teaching is found elsewhere. The answer to that argument may be found in two sentences; one from C. S. Lewis, "Really great teachers never do produce new moralities. It is the quacks and the cranks who do that" (*Christian Behaviour*, p. 16). The other answer is given by Professor A. M. Hunter, "The work of the great artist is not to manufacture new paints, but with old ones to produce great pictures" (*Design for Life*, p. 22).

We go on to assert another major fact about the Bible which helps to distinguish it from other religious writings. It is *historical* in the best sense. It deals with real situations, discusses real events, and often adds penetrating interpretation. Dr. Wheeler Robinson, maligned by some in our denomination today who do not try to understand what he was trying to do, and to whose studies of inspiration and prophetic consciousness modern scholarship owes so much, saw a close link between inspiration and historicity. For him the inspiration of the prophets as men lay behind their oracles. Behind the literature is the history, and within the history are the men who are inspired. (cf. *Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit*, p. 162f.).

The patriarchs of the Old Testament were real men, despite the fact that the writers sometimes exaggerate some of their achievements or overlook their weaknesses. The prophets were historical enough; one does not need to be particularly religious to give credence to the fact that they really lived and spoke. The stern denunciations of Amos; the fine sympathy of Hosea; the transparent humanity of Jeremiah; the priestly inclinations of Ezekiel; the lofty theology of first Isaiah or the penetrating insight of second Isaiah—these mark the men as real as if they were here today and showed those same characteristics.

It is not necessary in these days to argue for the historicity of our Lord as a person. We may still wish that certain types of Christians would do justice to His humanity, but few now doubt that He once lived. The gospels have come out well from the hundred years' searching criticism to which they have been subjected. The reception given to Graves and Podro's *Nazarene Gospel Restored*, by a long series of reviewers, even excluding Dr. Rowley's

scathing attack in the *Manchester Guardian*, shows that the age of fanciful reconstructions of the life and ministry of our Lord has passed, and one may take leave to think that many other reviewers would have said what Dr. Rowley said had they as much courage and as great a reputation.

Professor Alan Richardson has observed that in the fixing of the canon of Scripture the Church acknowledged the historicity of the Gospel. There can be no other gospel than that which has once been lived out by Christ on this earth, so the Scriptures cannot be added too. The Church is not the creator of the Gospel, but the servant of it. Historical events stand behind both. The Church is bound by Scripture to be faithful to the apostolic witness, once delivered.<sup>8</sup>

So we may safely add to our assessment of the Bible the word historical, but it must be clearly understood what we mean by that. We are not making a claim that the Bible is a history book. It is in a sense, but we do not wish to press that point, for it is not a history book in the modern sense of the term. The German word translated "salvation history" (*Heilgeschichte*) is nearest to the sense we want. It is a book written from a certain standpoint, the standpoint of one who sees the world as a huge stage where God performs His great epic of mankind. Men play their parts, and God performs mighty acts, sometimes unmistakably, sometimes by a combination of events which require the eye of faith to perceive the hand of God. The last word in this section may go to Principal Cunliffe-Jones, who says: "The Bible is history preaching. We must take it seriously in both aspects and see how they influence one another."<sup>9</sup>

#### UNIQUENESS

This fact of historicity, linking up with what has been said earlier of the favourable position of the Bible when compared with other religious literature gives us good reason to assert the *Uniqueness* of the Bible. Brunner makes this his starting-point for his section on the Bible in *Our Faith*. He says: "No one will dispute the assertion that the Bible is a unique book" (p. 16). The primary reason for this is that it deals with a unique Person, a unique God and a unique community. It can be left to each of us to fill in the detail at this point—the amazing number of persons who possess a Bible, the huge figures for its yearly sale, the sacrifices men have made to preserve it, the labour devoted to the study of it today, and so on.

The next point also goes to show the uniqueness of the Bible, but can be put in a separate section because of its importance and comprehensive nature. When one is trying to put down in cold academic terms some facts about the inspiration of the Bible one

<sup>8</sup> *Christian Apologetics*, p. 210.

<sup>9</sup> *The Authority of the Biblical Revelation*, p. 108.

cannot leave out the question of *Subject Matter*. How closely the two are related can be seen in the following brief extract from Dr. Bicknell's standard work on the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, "the quality of inspiration corresponds to the nature of the truth revealed" (p. 174). Thus there can be an "inspired" scientific document; there can be an "inspired" poem or piece of descriptive prose or an "inspired" work of art. If one follows Bicknell here one presumably sees inspiration as a sort of element of genius, and this view makes the inspiration of a piece of work dependent on the inspiration of the author and nothing else. In fact Dr. Bicknell does take this view later in his work. But one inference from this concept is plain—that if the nature of revealed truth is divine, then the quality of the inspiration will be at once supremely good and influential on the lives of men. This is no doubt the point where Dr. Bicknell himself would tread most surely, for on the same page as the quotation above he says: "There can be no book to supersede the Bible, because there can be no revelation to supersede Christ."

Now we have used the word, and are committed—*Revelation*—that is one of the briefest ways of saying what the subject matter of the Bible is. We have already seen that primarily the Bible records God's search for man and dealings with him. God takes the initiative, and that accounts for the comparative dearth of material in the Bible to suit the man who undertakes a long and involved search for God. Far more in keeping with the theme of the Bible is the text: "The Lord is nigh to all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth."

But again we must guard ourselves with a distinction: the Bible is a record of God's revelation, but is not the revelation itself. It records God's dealings with men and how God's plan has worked through all the ages. Yet if we use the idea of Professor Dodd, we can say that the Bible is not revelation, neither is it merely a history of revelation, but history *as* revelation. It is history with a new element in it, an element which controls it, an element which is divine.<sup>10</sup>

Involved in this question of revelation is another factor: that of prophetic consciousness. The writers of the various Old Testament and New Testament documents saw God's hand and will in history and the events of their own time. But was that by a stroke of genius, by divine inspiration, or by the action of God in using a consecrated mind? That is the question Dr. Harold Knight has in mind when he prefaces a very profound discussion of prophetic consciousness with the words: "What is the metaphysical character of the prophet's knowledge of God?"<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *The Bible Today*, Chapter V.

<sup>11</sup> *Hebrew Prophetic Consciousness*, Part II, p. 109f.



If we wish to know something about revelation we cannot do better than to glance at the main outline of Dr. Knight's argument. First he comes down boldly on the side of the modern scholars in answer to the question: "What do you mean by saying that God spoke to the prophets?" when he says: "The older view, that revelation consists in the divine impartation of transcendent truth undiscoverable by unaided human reason, can no longer be maintained. It contradicts our general understanding of the nature of God and man, and the relations that obtain between them" (109-110). He argues that this older view of inspiration (he means the idea that the writers were passive instruments of the Holy Spirit) implies a handling of the personality of man quite contrary to what God intends. Dr. Knight puts our statement about God seeking man in more academic terms. Revelation is "the transforming self-disclosing of the ultimate personal Reality to the personal spirit of man" (110). This is one of Dr. Wheeler Robinson's salient points; that revelation is always "Spirit to spirit" with the capital "S" coming first. Dr. Knight goes so far in this direction as to commit himself to the statement that Hebrew theology denies that man has the inherent spiritual capacity to find out God.

But we make a grave error if we suppose that revelation is purely objective, for anything purely objective could not be appreciated by us, as we only notice the things that are relevant to us, i.e. the subjective aspects. This is no doubt what Dr. Knight has in mind when he says: "There is no word of God which is not also a word of man, the achievement of his earnest spiritual wrestlings" (112). The inter-action of the human mind with the self-revealing Other is the hallmark of revelational knowledge. In other words the basis of the prophetic consciousness is not speculative but experiential. Its authority is spiritual and intrinsic, wins its own recognition, cannot be argued or demonstrated, yet must always be open to the judgment of human minds.

Ultimately we come to the point at which we see that Christ Himself is the one perfect revelation of God; He is a "self-disclosure of the ultimate personal reality"; He is a manifestation of a "self-revealing Other"; He is very God made man, come to earth, come to suffer, to serve, to die and to be raised. J. K. Mozley sums it up when he says: "The Bible to Christianity is not the same as the Koran to Islam, or as the book of Joseph Smith is to the church of the Latter Day Saints. Christianity is not the religion of a book in any sense that could imply that the book is itself the revelation."<sup>12</sup>

J. R. C. PERKIN

*(To be concluded)*

<sup>12</sup> *The Christian Faith*, ed. Matthews, p. 51.