

THE BIBLE: ITS INSPIRATION 2 Peter 1:20 and 21

Above all you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

One of the finest views in the world is the view from my home city of Plymouth when, along with Francis Drake at the bowling green, you stand on a summer's day and look out across a famous expanse of water, Plymouth Sound. There you have the seaside scene of sailing boats and yachts, listless for a time until the wind blows and animation comes. That is the background to the text. The English translation doesn't really catch the force of this image of the prophets raising their sails, the breath of the Holy Spirit blowing and carrying them along in the direction that he wished.

What is the major debate in the contemporary church? It's not anything that makes the news. It's not the ordination of women; it's not baptism; it's not charismatic gifts; it's not styles of worship; it's not any of the ethical or sexual morality questions - important as all these issues are. The major debate in the life of the local, national and worldwide church is about the nature and authority of the Bible - and our response to this as individuals, as a local church and as a denomination is absolutely critical.

How do we know anything about God? God is beyond the scope of ordinary human experience and what we know about Him is what He chooses to reveal to us by revelation. We know something of God's nature through creation. I have been privileged to visit the Methodist Church at Davos, a lovely ski resort in Switzerland. There, on the mountain top with fine evangelical Christians, you want to express something of the grandeur and majesty of God. When you want to describe a spiritual experience that's been wonderful you think of the mountain top or the oceans, and all those things are helpful to us in understanding the nature and grandeur of God through creation. You can think a little about history: about past events, the Old Testament, and in particular about Israel's history. We also now take this through the Lord Jesus and the history of the church; for us, our roots in Methodism and the story of the Wesleys is very important.

Christian tradition has it that we know most about God in two ways - through his dealing with his people, especially the Old Testament nation of Israel, and through his coming in person in Jesus Christ. When God makes himself known to us we call it revelation - God is revealed to us. Revelation really has two dimensions - event, and comment upon that event. The Bible is a written record of the divine revelation. It is a record of the history of Israel as the people who are the elect of God. It is a record of the coming, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ - God come to us in person. But the Bible itself claims to be rather more than a written record: it claims to be divine revelation itself. As someone has said, there are two sides to the coin - Jesus is the Word in flesh; the Bible is the Word in words.

Until recently there had been no teaching in the whole history of the church that had more greatly united Christians than their gathering around the Bible, the Holy Scriptures, as the Word of God. Biblical preaching has from the outset been the hallmark of the true church, and the

abandonment of this teaching is threatening every major Christian church in the world. Athanasius, an early Christian scholar regarded as a great father of the worldwide church, united Christians around the Bible and around the historic creeds. Wesley said that ‘the Bible distinguished Christians from Jews, Muslims and infidels’.

Christians have always been persecuted from outside of the church - the Roman Emperor Julian said, “Destroy the Christians and their book” - but now the Scriptures and the creeds are under immense attack not from *outside* the church but from *inside*. Inspiration, the doctrine about which I am preaching, is attacked not because it is theoretically impossible but because it is thought by some to be practically unreasonable.

A common reason for doubting the inspiration of the Bible is not liking what the Bible says. I think there are a lot of people suffering from that problem. Professor Howard Marshall, a Methodist minister and Professor at the University of Aberdeen, goes as far as saying this in his book “Biblical Inspiration”:

“The possibility that God uses words to reveal himself is thoroughly reasonable, and if he does not do so, it is very dubious whether he can reveal himself adequately to us.”

The Roman Catholic Council of Trent, responding to the Reformation teaching of Luther, Calvin and others, added the Apocryphal books to the Old Testament. There might be a debate about which books to include. Nevertheless, Professor Hans Küng from the University of Tübingen in Germany says that it now seems that the Church of Rome accepts the complete and absolute inerrancy of Scripture.

Inerrancy and infallibility are very slippery words and I’m not going to get too bogged down with those, but why is it important to defend the Bible? Well in one sense, we are happy that the Bible can defend itself. It’s now been under attack for 2000 years in its various forms, both in the Old Testament and then the Christian Scriptures, but we do not seek primarily to defend the Bible. I’m not here to defend the Bible: the Bible will manage pretty well without John Haley’s endeavours. But I am here to defend people from the false teaching that comes when we abandon our traditional notions of the Bible. In other words, when your ministers or preachers preach to you on the authority of the Bible it is the most pastoral address that they will ever give you. This is not at the level of high theory. This is the most pastoral message that I can bring to you: to tell you that this book is the very Word of God.

Take the Apostle Paul - I’m sure he was capable of making things up on his own. He didn’t! “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, he was buried [that is, his death was historical and real], he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.” There are people among us who while claiming to be pastoral are in effect wolves in sheep’s clothing. They are undermining the Bible in order to do two things: to lead us to a new theology, and to lead us to a new morality (a new immorality I would call it)!

The theological questions these days centre not upon whether Jonah was a figure from history, or whether the book of Jonah is an allegory. They centre not upon an attempt to explain or, more

accurately, explain away the miracles. The questions these days centre on the incarnation and whether it is true, on the resurrection and whether it is historical, on whether we can any longer claim any uniqueness for the person of Jesus. These are questions that cut right to the very heart of our belief.

The moral questions are not about whether it is right to clean your shoes on a Sunday. In the old fashioned way, if you were cleaning your shoes on Saturday night and the clock chimed midnight you went to chapel on Sunday with one clean and one dirty. Neither are the moral questions about whether you ought to peel your carrots and your potatoes on Saturday night or whether you ought to eat salad on Sundays. All those things might have been important in a bygone generation - and I won't tell you which I do and don't do. We are not talking about that kind of moral or ethical question of Christian practice. We are talking about whether, for example, two people of the same sex can publicly live together and on their own admission have a relationship that they describe as similar to marriage and yet still hold office within our church - even that of an ordained circuit minister. *Those* are the issues that we are now discussing, and those issues threaten the very future of the church as we know it. All of this comes back to this the Bible, and to what we are saying about it.

Our text is a powerful statement of what we have traditionally called the inspiration of Scripture.

I. INSPIRATION

(i) The means of Inspiration

It is sometimes thought that the idea of inspiration is centred on a few isolated texts. However, if we had time we could go through our Bibles with a yellow highlighter pen and highlight every page in the Scriptures where it's claiming some kind of inspiration: we would then find that there is a strong and vigorous doctrine of inspiration right through the Bible from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation. A familiar text, but by no means the only one, is this:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

(2 Timothy 3:16)

There are some people who are taking it upon themselves to carve this text up, because they think that if they destroy this one then we will be on even more wobbly ground. However, there is a strong and vigorous doctrine of inspiration right through the whole of the Bible. Every time a prophet says “thus says the Lord” he is claiming divine inspiration. Revelation is all of “thus said the Lord” and vision and so on. Much is also made by some of the difference between the words “all Scripture” and “every Scripture.” I do not see a big difference there. Some people have said, “isn't it disappointing: all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful. We thought they would at least say a little bit more than that it was *useful*.” Which word would you put in its place - “useless”? I think a lot of people are now saying “useless”, but I am not. Equally, I think many evangelical Christians are not doing the case any good at all when they say that God dictated the Bible and the Scriptural authors wrote it down. I think that there are parts that may be a little like - that when God's specific revelation is so clear that the very words themselves are

given – but I do not think that verbal inspiration means dictation. The case for the inspiration of the Bible isn't helped by those people who believe that the Scripture writers were private secretaries to God and that God dictated the word and they wrote it down. John Wesley wrote: "The words given accurately answered the impression on their minds."

Professor William Abraham says:

"The inspirer makes a definite objective difference to the work of the inspired without obliterating or rendering redundant the native activity of the other."

God makes a difference to what the writers of Scripture record, but he doesn't obliterate their activity. The personality and circumstances of the New Testament and Old Testament writers were used by God for the end result.

If you want to get Christians arguing here's a good one: which is more important - divine sovereignty or human free-will? The Scripture writers enshrine the mystery of divine sovereignty and human free-will. We often think of that in the doctrine of salvation, but it's also there in our doctrine of Scripture. The words of human writers were mysteriously and miraculously rendered the Word of God. The relationship between humanity and divinity and the writing of the Scriptural text is a mystery, not unlike incarnation. When we start to explore the mystery between the divine and human nature of Christ, we are as confused as we are when we try to work out the relationship between the divine and the human in the Scriptures. It's not unlike creation, in which we accept a lot of scientific explanation but we still believe that God is Creator. With the Bible, we must attempt an explanation of the human element but still see its origin in God, who was at work in the whole process of composition. We still maintain our belief in the Creator with supporting evidence for the design, pattern and order of creation. So much so, in fact, that it has been said that the order of our present creation just happening by accident is about as likely as the *Oxford English Dictionary* being the result of an explosion in the printing works - it all just landed in the right place!

There are facts which are hard to explain, and Christians do well simply to say "yes, I know that's hard." We believe in a Creator because most of the facts point that way, and the decision to believe in a Creator is one of faith. Our conclusion about the Bible is similar. There are some things in the Bible with which we are very happy and there are other things that are rather more difficult; accepting the Bible as the Word of God is a faith decision. Creation and the incarnation hint at a possible solution to the problem of the point at which the writers and their writings may be called inspired. If you have done any academic Bible study, you will know that many people say that there were written or oral sources behind the verses of Scripture that we have now. So when was the moment of inspiration? The broad answer is when they came in their final form, even if the exact moment isn't known. The Scriptures are a book brought into birth, and matters of conception and birth are a bit like that. The moment of birth is a definite time; if you know the exact moment of your conception, good for you, but most people do not. It's a little bit like that with the Scriptures; however, by faith we believe it to be the Word of God, not by passive reception but by obedient cooperation.

If God wished it to be written, are we seriously saying that he couldn't have arranged that to happen? I'm not saying that - and I hope that you are not saying it either.

(ii) What does the New Testament make of the Old Testament? It is hard to over-emphasise the Apostles' regard for the Old Testament. The New Testament quotes the Old Testament as if it were God speaking. The New Testament often says 'Scripture says', meaning 'God says' and vice versa. The New Testament regards the fulfilment of the Old Testament as vital: Old Testament quotations in the New Testament are not incidental but fundamental. Matthew's Christian writing and Old Testament interpretation are of one weave. You know that the weaver has the warp and the weft, threads that criss-cross in such a way that it is impossible to divide them. Try looking at the Gospel of Matthew and separating that which is Old Testament from that which is original to Matthew - it's a hard job. The New Testament directly quotes the Old Testament over 250 times, and refers to the Old Testament over 350 times. The best thing that you can do with your Bible is to tear a page out. I learnt this from Alec Motyer, who said that the page to tear out of your Bible is the one between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Often in the Bible there are a lot of blank white ones as well - just rip those out for God's Word is one. The Old and the New Testament are of one weave.

What did Jesus think of the Old Testament? There was never one moment of controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees on inspiration: both accepted that the Scriptures were the inspired Word of God. Neither was there any controversy on the authority of Scriptures. Jesus and the Pharisees accepted that the Scriptures had authority. There was never any controversy on the historicity of Old Testament Scripture. Jesus, when tempted, countered Satan with the reply, "it is written", three times. If it was good enough for Jesus to quote Scripture to Satan in order to overcome temptation, when presumably he could have drawn on resources of his own, I think it ought to be good enough for us! Jesus spoke of himself on many, many occasions as fulfilling Scripture. Indeed, he himself said "the word of Scripture could not be broken."

(iii) The Canon

Christians in Greek-speaking cultures took the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint, often abbreviated in our Bibles "LXX", as their Scriptures. They took those Old Testament writings in the Greek translation as the Word of God.

What about the Canon of the Scriptures - that is, which books are in and which books are out? No Council of Jews or of the church brought into being anything which had not previously existed. The New Testament Christians believed that the Old Testament was the Word of God. Jesus confirmed the Jewish Canon that we call the Old Testament in Matthew 23:35 with references to Abel and Zechariah. Abel was mentioned in Genesis 4:8 and Zechariah was mentioned in 2 Chronicles 24:21. Jews at the time of Jesus arranged the Old Testament Scriptures in a slightly different order from Genesis to 2 Chronicles, but all the 39 books were included somewhere in between. The books were scrolls, rather than bound, and were arranged chronologically rather than typologically but it seems to me that the order doesn't matter much.

Some of you may have Bibles containing the Apocrypha. I think it is best not to have the Apocrypha bound with the Scriptures. Jesus didn't recognise it, and the New Testament never

quotes it as Scripture, only referring to it in passing on a couple of occasions. Philo, who lived from 20 B.C. to 40 A.D., quotes the Old Testament prolifically - but never the Apocrypha. Jerome, translator of the Latin Vulgate, did not accept the Apocrypha as the Word of God. Even the Roman Catholic Church did not accept the Apocryphal books until the year 1546. Wesley followed the tradition of the Western Church and Reformers in rejecting the Apocrypha, though he found some pieces of it valuable - just like he found the works of some other writers valuable. The early church did not decide to add to the Old Testament, and would have found it hard to do so. Early Christians had been brought up as devout Jews - they would have found it impossible to have s added to the 39 books they had always believed?" Some books proved themselves to be equal and demanded by their very nature and content to be included. If there were a committee to decide which books to include in the New Testament, it is unlikely to have included the awkward and difficult passages. Some of the difficult passages in our New Testament prove the very authenticity of our Scriptures: if men and women had sat around deciding what to include, we would never have had those hard and awkward bits. Divine appointment, rather than human selection was critical. The New Testament books became authoritative in their own right. The early Christian Fathers - Irenaeus, Ignatius and other Fathers of the church -distinguished their writings from the writings of Peter and Paul. They knew that the work of Peter and Paul was different from their own work, and yet only a matter of 100 years or so separated them.

To say that the church somehow sat down and had a committee meeting and decided which books would be in the New Testament is simply wrong. The church, recognising the books through which the Holy Spirit was speaking in a profound way, acknowledged that those books demanded to be included in the Scriptures. If we seek to change that list of books, though there has not been any significant debate in the church about the list of books for over 1600 years, it is not that the Holy Spirit has stopped speaking through those books; it is that we no longer wish to listen.

The style of the writing is different. It's hard to say that Jeremiah and Exodus are overwhelmingly similar; John is different from Luke who in turn is different from Paul.

Many New Testament books say that they were designed for public reading. That is how Old Testament books were read: the reader stood up, unrolled the scroll, and read it in public. The New Testament Church was saying, "when you gather together in your meetings, after you have read the Scriptures, read also this from Paul. It is hard to say that they did not accept these as sister-texts. The books came to be included because they proved themselves to be authoritative, prophetic, authentic, dynamic, and life-changing, and they have been received, collected, read and used by many congregations of the church, the people of God. In effect we conclude that the Bible is the self-authenticating word of God. I can recommend "The Bible: Fact or Fantasy" by Professor John Drane from Stirling University. The last chapter, where he describes the power of the Bible in the experience of people of whom he has met and known, is a very moving chapter.

The Bible - the self-authenticating Word of God. A Chaplain in a big hospital managed to get all the Gideon Bibles withdrawn, saying, "it is a very dangerous book - the Bible," but the

Methodist Chaplain got them all put back in. Hallelujah! The Bible is the self-authenticating Word of God and when men and women read it lives are changed.

(iv) Textual reliability

“There are thousands of mistakes in the Bible”. Is that true? Our New Testament text is reliable: we need not worry about it. There are five thousand Greek manuscripts of the New Testament compared with as few as one of other ancient writings. The loss of the original text, I suppose, preserves us from Bible worship, but there is no substantial gap between the original and the copies that we have, compared with several hundred or even a thousand years with regard to other ancient works.

Students at secondary, high schools, grammar schools and universities study the works of Homer. One of Homer’s famous writings is a work called “The Iliad”. In this work 5% of the text is debated because the textual manuscripts are corrupt - 5%. In the New Testament only 0.1% of the text is debated because we’re not quite sure what the original manuscript may have said. In its own terms the Bible is unique. There is no rival to it in authenticity. Only 11 verses of the New Testament were not quoted by other Christians writing before the Council of Nicaea, and even the liberal scholars now tell us that their theories of the late composition of many of the New Testament books are probably wrong. In fact John Robinson, one of the more liberal scholars of the 1960s, now says that the long oral tradition that he had assumed had been behind John’s Gospel is not right. Our Old Testament text is reliable. Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, it was popularly thought that the Old Testament contained many copyists’ errors. This is now shown to be totally untrue.

We are thankful for the work of those scholars who struggle with the ancient manuscripts and the texts and give us, to the best of their ability, the correct text, but they are on the 0.1% of the New Testament. Very little basic teaching hangs on that 0.1%.

(v) Internal Harmony of Scripture

Much is made of the apparent contradictions in the Bible. The Bible was written over a period of 1600 years - 60 human generations, 40 or more diverse authors from Moses to Paul, from the wilderness to prison, from Rome to Jerusalem, in three continents (Africa, Asia and Europe), in three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek), covering hundreds of controversial subjects.

The miracle is not how few apparent contradictions there are in the Bible but the extent of its harmony. The harmony of the Bible - with its different authors, its different languages, with its different cultures, written in different ages and generations, with different outlooks and so on - is unique. The major theme of the Bible is salvation in Christ, and that theme is intact. The so called exceptions just prove the rule: they prove the authenticity of the Scripture.

Not all Scripture is equally inspiring. We are unlikely to derive as much inspiration from the genealogies from the beginning of Matthew as we do from the account of the resurrection at the end. But neither is all of a great work, of music or of literature, equally inspiring. Some people have CDs of classical selections and these selected the so-called ‘purple passages’ from the classics as an introduction. You listen to one of Rachmaninoff’s piano concertos and the one you like is No 2 and the part of it you particularly like is the second movement. When you have

an appreciation of the second movement, you decide, “Perhaps I’ll get it all and listen to the first and the third.” As you listen to the first and third movements, you suddenly realise that you didn’t notice some of the things you can hear in the second movement until you’d listened to the first and the third. You think, “well I like this, perhaps I’ll listen to his No 1 Concerto,” and you listen to that - but you still like No 2 and the second movement the best. Scripture is like that. You gain a greater appreciation of the ‘purple passages’ because you know the other passages – and they all stand as one weave. What is recorded in Scripture is there by God’s intention. He has caused the book to be written, collected, preserved, translated and distributed among his people.

“The Divine Revelation,” according to our Methodist Deed of Union, “recorded in Holy Scripture is.....the supreme rule of faith and practice.”

Some people are trying to say now that the “Divine Revelation recorded in Holy Scripture” is different from “Holy Scripture”, which seems rather like saying that the ocean is different from the water contained in it. Generations of Christians have believed that the Bible is the Word of God. The whole purpose of Scripture is to point to Christ. To undermine Scripture is to undermine Christ. For Christ, his cross, his blood, his resurrection, is the only ground of salvation. To deny that there are difficulties and passages which are hard to understand, to say that there are no difficulties in synthesising biblical accounts, is to bury your head in the sand like an ostrich and does the cause of the doctrine of Holy Scripture no good at all. But to imply that the notion of the Bible’s inspiration and authority falls because of these difficulties is grossly unfair.

Even though there are difficulties in believing that God is Creator in a world where two-thirds of the world is starving and where children are born with terminal illness or limbless, with tumours on the brain, blind, or disabled, we are holding on tenaciously to our belief in God as Creator, despite the many real problems that we face. To say that the Bible falls because there are some difficulties in accepting it as the Word of God is just unfair. There are people who are saying that if one half-verse from the Old Testament is wrong then the whole of the Bible will fall. Don’t let them get away with it. We need to return then to being people of the book.

P T Forsyth (who did not share my views of inerrancy) said this:

“The true minister ought to find the words and phrases of the Bible so full of spiritual food...that he has some difficulty in not believing in verbal inspiration.”

Let me conclude then with a challenge - Wesley didn’t believe in daily Bible study for him it was hourly!