

Inspiration¹
by
Lorin L. Cranford

The modern discussion of inspiration creates many barriers for understanding the idea in the ancient world. Contemporary concern with precise measurement generates the mistaken notion that the ancient world was similarly concerned. Thus ideas of inerrancy etc. never occurred to the ancient mind simply because these ideas depend on post-enlightenment notions. The modern struggle to balance psychologically the divine and the human aspects in the act of inspiration was of no interest to the ancient world. No discussion of any 'theory of inspiration' ever took place in that earlier period. Therefore the modern reader -- to understand the ancient texts accurately -- must lay aside most every modern framing of the topic and seek to hear the ancient authors on their own terms. Only then can linkages to modern ideas be set up. Unfortunately all too many contemporary descriptions of ancient texts on this subject seem to presuppose naively the modern framing of the issue.

One important perspective is to note the idea of inspiration of persons as they spoke and the inspiration of persons as they wrote. During the biblical period, especially the Hebrew Bible, the former was the dominant emphasis (i.e., Jer. 1:1-9). The Hebrew prophets spoke the words of God as they proclaimed "Thus says the Lord . . ." (400 plus occurrences). The basis for this prophetic speaking was primarily the calling by God to such ministry. Out of their developing relationship with deity came the insight and wisdom to speak in behalf of God. Closely connected was the presence of the Spirit of God (1 Sam. 10:6; Joel 2:28). But the Spirit's presence not only enabled prophetic utterance, all kinds of skills were possible, even to construct buildings (Exod. 31:3; 35:31). The possession of wisdom and understanding came about through God pouring his Spirit into an individual's life. Does this then imply inspiration when the prophet spoke? Seldom, if ever, does the Hebrew Bible directly assert this, even though such evidently was assumed. An important distinction here is the Hebrew concept from the Greek view. Plato typified the Hellenistic mantic view of inspiration "which perceived that the prophet was seized by a *daimon* or the deity and forced to utter words in a frenzied state that came directly from the divine source" (Gnuse, 17; cf. Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration*, 8-10, 13-17). Philo became the source of introducing this alien concept into Jewish thinking later. Hebrew tradition focused on the individual relationship with God and cooperation with His Spirit as the basis of being able to speak in God's behalf (Schmaus, *Handbuch*, 3-4); personality and individuality were never absorbed nor overwhelmed by the divine.

Regarding written materials, the 'Book' in most OT references is the "book of the law (of Moses)" that Moses was commanded to write (Exod. 17:14). No mention of its inspiration is found in any of the references. God's word to the Jewish nation is contained in this book (Deut. 30:10); it formed the written record of the covenant of the people with God (Exod. 24:7; Deut. 29:21; 2 Kings 23:2, 21; 2 Chron. 34:30-31). The closest to a concept of inspiration regarding writing is in Jer. 30:2 where God said to Jeremiah, "Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you." Yet, nothing is directly expressed about inspiration or the involvement of the divine Spirit in the writing of this material. A similar injunction to write came to the prophet in 36:2. The writing was therefore to be the **record** of God's words.

The literary transmission of the message of the prophets generated the notion of inspiration (Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration*, 13-15). Gradually the written record and the oral message of the prophets became one and the same. Other writings in the Hebrew Bible became construed as were the prophets. Yet, in Palestinian Judaism the Torah held a higher place of importance than the other two groups of materials, because of the central role of Moses as God's spokesman and prophet. With the gradual adoption of the Hellenistic view of *enthousiasmos* (ἐνθουσιασμός) Hellenistic Judaism spoke of the entire Bible

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as an emanation of the prophetic spirit (e.g., Philo, *Vita Mosis*, 2.188-191). Inspiration could be conceived of quite apart from the OT inspiration of the prophet, more in the Greek view of ecstasy (Jubilees 2).

The New Testament inherited both the Jewish and the Greek perspectives, although the Jewish view was the controlling perspective (cf. Heb. 1:1-2a; 2 Pet. 1:20-21). In both Hebrews and 2 Peter the OT prophetic model is clearly in view with emphasis on the oral delivery of the prophet's message being the words of God via the guidance of the Spirit of God. In a secondary sense then the written record of those prophetic messages could lay claim to being the words of God also. With Hebrews 1:2 similarly could the claim be made regarding the message of Jesus. The inspiration of written materials is treated more directly in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Several key expressions provide insight into the assertion of this text. "**All Scripture**" (πᾶσα γραφή) refers most naturally to the texts of the Hebrew Bible; only by inference can they be applied to the texts of the NT. The Greek text more accurately reads "every writing" alluding to individual texts, rather than a collection of texts viewed as a unit. Nothing can be gleaned about canon issues here. "**inspired by God**" (θεόπνευστος). Contra the Vulgate's *divinitus inspirata* as though the Scripture was **in**-spired, the Greek term underscores the out-breathing. God did not breathe his word into the minds of the human authors. Rather, that which they wrote was the **ex**-pression of God (Warfield, 132-33). Although the Greek term comes out of the Hellenistic ecstatic tradition, the context of its single NT use here clearly suggests that it should rather be interpreted within the Hebrew prophetic tradition (Vawter, 15-19). "In a word, what is declared by this fundamental passage is simply that the Scriptures are a Divine product, without any indication of how God has operated in producing them" (Warfield, 133). "**useful for**" (ὠφέλιμος πρὸς...). The value of these writings is defined functionally, rather than theoretically; they can shape the behavior and thinking of the Christian for enhanced service. That no legalistic slavery to the written letter prevailed in the NT era is quite clear from the sometimes 'creative' ways in which Paul used the texts of the OT (Schrenk, 758).

The church fathers reflect a convergence of both the Jewish and Greek traditions in the way the texts of the Bible were viewed. While echoing the biblical formulas about the written documents (οἱ ἄγιοι γραφαί, Theophilus of Antioch; ἱερὰ γράμματα, Clement of Alexandria; ἱερὸς βίβλους, Origen et al.; cf. Vawter, 20), the meaning attached to these formulas increasingly depended far more on the Hellenistic mantic tradition than the Hebrew heritage, thus profoundly redefining the ideas away from apostolic thinking. Philo's view ultimately had much greater impact on Christian thinking than on Jewish tradition. The earliest group of fathers, the apostolic fathers, made only incidental allusion to inspiration since their concern was "practical rather than doctrinal" (Westcott, 3). Very little distinction was made by the apostolic fathers and the apologists between the inspiration of the prophetic speakers and the writings bearing their names (Schmaus, 12). The apologist, Athenagoras, reflects clearly the induction of the Hellenistic mantic view of inspiration in his assertion that "while entranced and deprived of their natural powers of reason (κατ' ἔκστασιν τῶν ἐν αὐτοῖς λογισμῶν) by the influence of the divine Spirit, they uttered that which was wrought in them (ᾧ ἐνηργοῦντο), the Spirit using them as its instruments, as a flute-player might blow a flute" (Westcott, 10-11).

Vawter, 20-42, has well summarized the developing view by emphasizing the following aspects: (1) God was asserted to be the *author* of the scriptures by the fathers. (2) The Hellenistic view of inspiration served as an important basis for their allegorizing approach to the sacred texts. (3) Allegorical preoccupation with the words of the text led to Augustine's dictum: *Scriptura Sancta in nulla parte discordat* (*Serm.* 82.9, *PL* 38:510). (4) They struggled continuously with the human elements undeniably present in the written texts. These emerging perspectives developed as Christians fought to defend the faith to external opponents and against the perceived corruption internally, thus utilizing ideas current and understandable in their day.

The use of the word for author in reference to God is late and of Latin origin. *Auctor* became an important concept of the African Church in its battles with Manicheism as a counter-formula to the denial of God as the *scriptor* of the OT. The term *auctor* was capable of a wide diversity of meaning. Some scholars are convinced that it was employed in this battle with the sense of literary author, although Karl Rahner and others have challenged this rigid understanding. Augustine, however, clearly understood it in this sense, but Ambrose viewed it somewhat differently. God was the author of scripture not in the sense of literary author, but as the αἴτιος (cause) of scripture being written: "God's work in the Scripture had been to flood the minds of its writers with the dew of his wisdom (*operatur, irrigat mentes rore sapientiae*), and he invoked the idea of cause expressly to affirm, based on texts like Mt 10.20, that the words of Scripture were those of God and not of men (see *Ep.* 8.10, PL 16:912-916)" (Vawter, 23). Justin reflects a similar rigid Hellenized view: "prophetic speech is not the words of the inspired men, the ἐμπνευσμένων, but of him who moved them" (Vawter, 25). Origen, in spite of inconsistencies and contradictions rampant in his works, stands generally as one of the few voices raised opposing this mechanical view of inspiration. The prophets "voluntarily and consciously collaborated with the word that came to them" (*Hom. in Ezek. frag.* 6.1, PG 13:709). The apostles could express their own opinions, their ἐπίνοια, which he used in his commentary on the fourth gospel to resolve contradictions between the gospels. This did not rule out the view of the divine authorship; rather, it stood alongside in his attempt to grapple with the human and the divine aspects in the written texts.

Allegorical exegesis depended upon the Hellenized view of inspiration since every word was 'God-breathed' and thus capable of hidden meaning that only the orthodox could rightly discern. This provided a helpful way of overcoming serious historical problems at the surface level especially of the OT text in opposing heresy. Such a mechanical view of inspiration facilitated the move away from historical interests since God had completely sublimated the human element in the act of inspiration. Interestingly this interpretive method reflected a paradoxical view toward the words of the text. Disdainful of words in their natural, surface-level meaning as vehicles of communication, divinely inspired words become *the* word from Heaven. Thus, as Augustine contended, "no discordancy of any kind could be admitted to exist in the Scripture" (Vawter, 33). Associated with the antihistorical interests of allegorizing, Augustine could naively accept the legend of the seventy translators of the LXX as proof of its divine inspiration and truth (*Civ.* 18.43, PL 41:603-604). Also concluded from this rigid view of inspiration was the assertion that nothing trivial could exist in scripture, every letter had to have a significant *raison d'être* of its own. Thus, as Vawter, 35, contends, Clement of Alexandria's 'five senses' of scripture resulted, as well as Origen's three, etc. The fathers found themselves resorting to Stoic Platonism for their etymologizing of word for secret meanings, to Pythagoreanism for their numerology.

The connection between the divine and the human in scripture puzzled many fathers. Origen attempted to find a healthy balance while resisting the prevailing mechanical view of inspiration. The Holy Spirit illuminated (φωτίζοντι) the inspired writer (*De princ.* 4.14, PG 11:372), thus leaving the human author with his own mind and thought processes rather than turning him into an automaton (*Contra Celsum* 7.3-4, PG: 1424-5). John Chrysostom followed a similar line of thinking. Augustine's struggle took a different turn. Not ignoring the signs of human frailty evident in the scripture and often embarrassed by them, "he could only conclude that the Holy Spirit had 'permitted' one or the other writer to compose what he did in apparent variance with other Scripture (*Cons. evang.* 2.21.52, PL 34:1102)" (Vawter, 38).

Jerome, more than any other, was sensitive to the human dimensions in scripture in his translation efforts, but made little effort to link these insights to the contention of the scriptures as divine. The conviction that proved more helpful in resolving this tension between the divine and the human was John Chrysostom's συγκατάβασις (condescension) perspective. Origen's accommodation view, συμπεριφορά, was similar though he used it to account for the anthropomorphism's of scripture, but without

detracting from the divine authorship view. Chrysostom often extended his notion to human authorship itself of the sacred writings thus accounting for metaphors, deliberate overstatements or *captatio benevolentiae*. The incarnation of Christ increasingly came to be seen as analogous to the divine/human aspects of scripture.

FOR FURTHER READING:

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