

3. Scripture

In our lessons we have been thinking about how God reveals himself in special ways to mankind through his living Word (his Son Jesus Christ), through his written Word in Holy Scripture, and through particular revelations made to individuals such as dreams, visions, and so forth. The principal way in which we know God's Word today is through the Holy Scripture. Few of us are beneficiaries of particular revelations, and Jesus Christ is now ascended and seated at the right hand of the Father, so we are reliant upon God's revelation in Holy Scripture as his Word to us.

a. Inspiration

This then brings us to the question of the inspiration of Scripture. The Scriptures are inspired of God. 2 Timothy 3:16 is the *locus classicus* for this teaching: "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." Notice what is said here about the inspiration of Scripture. It is the Scripture itself that is inspired by God. The word here means "God-breathed." Inspiration is not primarily a property of the *authors* of Scripture. It is a property of *the text itself*. Very often people will think the authors of Scripture were inspired by God to write what they did. But that is not, in fact, what 2 Timothy 3:16 says. It is not that the authors of Scripture were inspired; it is rather that the end product is inspired – what they wrote (the text) is God-breathed. So inspiration is first and foremost a property of the text, not of the authors of the text. I think we will see that that is very important.

That doesn't mean, of course, that the authors of Scripture were bereft of the direction of the Holy Spirit in what they said or wrote. Look at 2 Peter 1:19-21:

And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Here, at least with respect to prophecies that are contained in Scripture, he says that the Holy Spirit was involved in carrying along (and the word there for "moved by the Holy Spirit" means literally "borne along" or "carried along"). So these prophets – when they spoke a revelation from God – it was the Holy Spirit which was moving them or bearing them along so that what they spoke was from God.

In the passage in Timothy we see that inspiration is first and foremost a property of the text. It is the text that is God-breathed and is inspired by God and therefore is God's Word to us. But secondly we see from 2 Peter that the authors of Scripture were also moved by the Holy Spirit to say what they did say.

(1) Extent of Inspiration

That is the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. We want to ask then, "What about the extent of inspiration?" Here we want to note three properties of inspiration of Scripture.

(a.) Scriptural inspiration is *plenary*.

That is to say, all of Scripture is inspired by God. That is what 2 Timothy 3:16 says. All Scripture is inspired by God. At that time “Scripture” referred to the OT books recognized by Jews at that time, the same book recognized by Protestants. So it is not just some of it that is inspired by God, but all of it. The Scripture bears the property of plenary inspiration. So you can’t set aside certain books of the Bible as uninspired and regard others as genuinely inspired. All Scripture is inspired by God.

(b) Scriptural inspiration is *verbal*.

That is to say, the very words of Scripture are inspired. The property of plenary inspiration speaks to the breadth of inspiration. Verbal inspiration speaks to the depth of inspiration. It is not just all of the books of the Bible are inspired by God. That is the plenary inspiration. But it is also right down to the individual words that are used. The individual words are inspired by God. That is what is meant by verbal inspiration.

To show that this is the attitude of the authors of Scripture toward Scripture, look, for example, at the way in which the authors of Scripture will sometimes base an argument upon a single word or even a single letter in the text in order to make a theological point. For example, in John 10:34-36, Jesus is disputing with religious leaders of his time about his claim to be the Son of God. In John 10:34-36 we read:

Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, you are gods’? [quoting from the Psalms.] If he called them gods to whom the word of God came (and scripture cannot be broken), do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and

sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?

Never mind the argument here that Jesus gives for why he is not blaspheming. That is not the concern for now. Rather what we want to notice is that when Jesus quotes the Psalms it concerns a single word that is found in Psalm 82:6, namely, the word “gods.” If the psalmist can call these people gods, then Jesus says, *Why am I blaspheming when I say I am the Son of God?* His argument relies on a single word in the Old Testament text – the word “gods.”

Similarly, look at Paul’s argument in Galatians 3:16. Here he is talking about the promises made to Abraham and his seed. Paul says,

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many; but, referring to one, “And to your offspring,” which is Christ.

Again, never mind the argument that Paul is giving here. The point is that the argument he is giving depends upon the single word “offspring” or “seed,” whether it is in the plural or the singular. He says the prophecy doesn’t say plural (to your “seeds” or to your “offsprings”), but to your seed (your offspring) – singular – and that is Jesus Christ. He sees this passage as referring primarily to Christ. Whatever you think of Paul’s argument, the point is that the argument hinges upon the difference between a single word of Scripture, whether it is in the plural or the singular.

So inspiration of Scripture cannot be taken to concern just the general ideas’ being inspired – as if God has inspired merely the

idea expressed in a verse or a passage. Rather it extends to the very words used. We have seen that the author's argument is sometimes dependent upon a single word or form; therefore inspiration cannot be restricted simply to the general idea that the author is sharing and not to the very words that the author has chosen.

Theologians are wont to speak of Scripture as God's *propositional revelation*. When you hear this term you must not take the word "propositional" to mean what philosophers mean by propositions. This can be very confusing. When a philosopher talks about a proposition, he means the information content of a sentence. The same proposition can be expressed by completely different sentences. For example, the sentence "snow is white" is an English sentence. "*Der Schnee ist weiß*" is a completely different sentence. They don't have any words in common. The German has four words in it; the English has three words in it. Yet they both express the same proposition. They have the same propositional content – the same information content – namely that snow is white. So when philosophers talk about propositions, that is what they mean. They mean the information content that is expressed by sentences. But that is not what theologians are talking about when they talk about God's propositional revelation. What theologians mean by propositional, I think, would be better expressed by the word "sentential." That is to say, the sentences of Scripture are inspired by God. God has revealed himself in his Word, Jesus Christ, in a living person, but he has revealed himself in Scripture in sentences. He has inspired certain linguistic utterances. These are, therefore, his Word to us. So don't confuse the notion of propositional revelation with what philosophers mean because otherwise you wouldn't get verbal inspiration. If you say that God has merely

inspired the propositional content of a sentence in the philosopher sense then that won't give you, for example, "snow is white," "*la neige est blanche*," or "*der Schnee ist weiß*." Any of those would be a verbal expression of the same propositional content. So there is a temptation, I think, to say as a philosopher, "What God has inspired are not really the words of Scripture; he has inspired the propositional content of Scripture and this can come to expression in different ways." So a German Bible, for example, is just as much inspired as an English Bible. They both have the same inspired propositional content. But that is, again just to emphasize this, not what theologians mean when they talk about propositional revelation. They really mean sentential revelation – that God has revealed himself in Hebrew and Greek sentences (linguistic utterances). He hasn't revealed himself in German, or English, or Sanskrit. He has revealed himself in Hebrew and Greek sentences. This has the rather odd implication, I think, that only the Greek and Hebrew text is actually the inspired Word of God. If you take verbal revelation seriously then it is these Hebrew and Greek words that are inspired by God. It is not my English Bible. These words were not inspired by God. The words that God inspired, that are God-breathed, are the original Greek and Hebrew words, which is why I think we have such a tremendous incentive to learn the biblical languages so that we can work with Greek and Hebrew dictionaries and other tools to understand the text and the original meaning.

I must say, as I think about this, the notion of verbal inspiration actually comes, I think, very close to the Muslim view of the Qur'an. The Muslim would say that when you read your English

Qur'an that you are not really reading the Qur'an because you are not reading the original Arabic. So if you look at an English Qur'an, it will typically say on the front cover, "The translation of the Qur'an." It is not really a Qur'an. It is a translation of the Qur'an. I reluctantly think that this is pretty much the position that verbal inspiration also commits us to as Christians. The text that is inspired of God is the original Hebrew and Greek sentences. What I have here is an English translation of the Word of God. If it is a good translation, it is going to give me in the philosopher's sense the same propositional content. I will be able to understand the propositional content that the Hebrew and Greek expressed. But in terms of what is inspired – remember we said that it is the text that is inspired of God and that is God-breathed – what text are we talking about? It seems to me the conclusion is inescapable – it is the Hebrew and Greek text. That is what is inspired by God. It underlines the importance of trying to get back to the original text when we are doing exegesis or Bible study to make sure we understand it because sometimes our translations are inadequate or misleading.