

INSPIRATION OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

Prefatory Comments

I want to preface this all too brief survey of inspiration by asking you not to become confused and think that every theory of inspiration I will comment on in the following pages is the teaching of the Catholic Church on inspiration. No! The teaching of the Catholic Church on the inspiration of Scripture is in [*Dei Verbum*](#) §11-12 which I will treat on page 6.

How does one define inspiration of the Scriptures? The constant classic formula from the early centuries of the Church is “God is the author of the Scriptures.” How large a role God vs. the human author undertook in the composition of the Scriptures has given rise to various theories of inspiration which will be discussed.

Introduction

Inspiration comes from two Latin words ‘in’ + ‘spirare’ which together mean ‘breathe in’. When we talk of the inspiration of Scripture we mean that God breathed his Holy Spirit into these writings by exerting supernatural, charismatic or divine influence upon man moving his faculties so that he faithfully conveys to others the truths God desires. It means that what the sacred authors wrote can truly be regarded as the Word of God. If their inspiration terminated in speech we call it prophecy and if it terminated in writing we call it biblical inspiration.

Obviously inspiration is a work of the three persons of the Holy Trinity but we ascribe it to the Holy Spirit. It is an extraordinary grace given only to a small number of individuals. It is extraordinary, a supernatural grace, because it enabled them to do what surpasses the natural faculties of man. It was given not for their own personal benefit but for the benefit of the Church.

Was the writer aware when writing that he was inspired by God? Some people believe the writer should have been aware but there is no absolute necessity that he had to have been aware. Some passages of Scripture show that the author was conscious of his divine inspiration (Ex 17:14; Isa 8:1; Hab 2:2-3; Wisdom 7:15; Rev 1:10, 22:18) while other passages show that the author was not aware that he was inspired (2 Macc 2:24; Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30-31; Sir Prologue 16-35 (second half of the prologue)).

Inspiration could be described as a delicate issue since there is not full agreement between the Churches on how much the Bible is inspired, nor even total agreement within any Church. Put simply, the reason for the differences is lack of agreement on how much the human author/editors contributed to a particular book vis-à-vis God’s contribution.

A very sobering thought, as we begin our deliberations, is to acknowledge that none of our English translations of the Bible does justice to the original Hebrew (and very small number of Aramaic passages) of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. Our translations are not inspired; only the original text in the original language is inspired. The Septuagint (LXX – Greek translation of the OT) and Vulgate are no longer considered inspired by the Catholic Church because of so many variants and mistranslations.

WHAT SCRIPTURE SAYS ABOUT INSPIRATION

The Old Testament

The Old Testament does not contain a doctrine of Inspiration but it refers to divine action on the minds of the prophets as they make it clear that what they spoke came from God. Sometimes the OT says God commanded someone to write (Ex 17:14; Isa 30:8; Jer 30:2, 36:2; Hab 2:2). Isaiah referred to his own written prophecy as the “book of the Lord” (34:16). However this shows no awareness of inspiration but of a duty to write. There is no indication in the OT that God is the author of the writings. The divine action upon authors even when stated emphatically e.g. “the Spirit of the Lord came upon me...” does not extend to their writing or even their thinking. The doctrine of inspiration as taught by the Catholic Church is not denied in the OT but it is not affirmed there either.

From 200 B.C. onwards the belief in the divine inspiration of the Hebrew Scriptures emerged among the Jews. 1 Macc 12:9 refers to “the sacred books.” This thinking was inspired by King Josiah adopting the book of the covenant (2 Kings 23:1-2). At the time of Christ Jews venerated the word of the Lord in the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. The rabbis so venerated the sacred text that they saw divine meaning even in the flourishes of the text (see what Jesus says in Matt 5:18).

The New Testament

1. There are countless references in the NT to the sacredness of the OT.
2. There are many NT passages that *implicitly* suggest the origin of the OT texts is divine.
3. The following are NT passages that *explicitly* state the inspiration of Scripture.

2 Tim 3:16

“All Scripture is inspired by God and useful for refuting error, for guiding people’s lives and teaching them to be upright”. The words in question in the Greek are *paşa graph. qeopneustoj* (*pasa graphe theopneustos*). Leaving aside the fact that when 2 Tim was written the Scripture in question was the OT and not the NT, in the commentaries you will see much discussion on how best to translate these three words. The problem is caused because *qeopneustoj theopneustos* occurs nowhere else in the NT. *graph graphe* on its own can refer to an individual part of the Scriptures or to the whole of the Scriptures. Some of the debate about *paşa graph pasa graphe* asks does that phrase refer to the whole of Scripture or to every part of Scripture. However this text does not answer our question about how much the author contributed to the text, nor does it tell us how the Scripture became *qeopneustoj theopneustos*.

What we can say is that it means the Bible is not just another literary classic. It is from the Spirit of God in a special way. God is in some sense the author of Scripture. The scriptures are from God in a special way that the words of St Augustine or St Thomas Aquinas are not. In matters of faith and morals we can give the Scriptures trust. Therefore as 2 Tim 3 says, the inspired Scriptures are to be used in Christian life. They give Christians trustworthy instructions in the truth. Through the Scriptures God continues to nourish us, in public worship and liturgy and privately. When the Word of God is proclaimed we know that God is near, teaching and instructing us, convicting us of sin, consoling us in painful moments. See Rom 15:4.

2 Pet 1:20

2 Pet 1:20-21 says no prophecy in Scripture is a personal interpretation, when men spoke it was not their initiative, it came from God. Men were propelled by the Holy Spirit, *feromenoi* (*pheromenoi*). That is a metaphor taken from sailing. It suggests the sacred writers were like sailing boats carried by the wind. This recognizes the human element in the composition of the Scripture. It also implies that this human element is entirely dependent on God. Although the word 'prophecy' in that text in 2 Pet may appear to refer only to the prophetic writings, "the prophetic word" was an expression used by Philo and the Apostolic Fathers to refer to the entire OT. So the pseudonymous author of 2 Pet (2 Pet is believed to be from the 2nd century) is assuring that God has confirmed the truth of the Bible. He makes this statement because of the false teachers distorting the meaning of the Scriptures (2 Pet 3:3) as well as distorting the meaning of Christian writings (2 Pet 3:16).

Furthermore in 3:15-16 the author refers to the letters of Paul as Sacred Scripture so we can take the reference to prophecy in 1:20-21 to be a reference to the interpretation of the New Testament, remember that 2 Tim 3 was referring to the Old Testament. So even before the Church had decided on the canon of Scripture there was the sense that these writings were inspired and sacred. 2 Pet admitted that Scripture was a combination of the divine and the human. How the divine and the human are related will answer the question, "How authoritative are the Scriptures?"

You may also want to include Rev 1:1-3; 22:6-7, 10, 18-19 in this survey of NT texts.

HISTORY OF THE THEOLOGY OF INSPIRATION

All Christian tradition after the NT was conscious of the divine origin of Scripture. Therefore early Christian writers tried to develop a terminology that would adequately express the role of God in producing the sacred books. So in the Church Fathers Scripture was referred to as the “words of God” or “words of the Holy Spirit.” Sometimes they even wrote of God dictating the books, a concept borrowed from Philo. Early Christian apologists took over the Philonic theory of inspiration. But the majority of early Christian writers rejected that notion. In a few instances the early writers indicated active creativity on the part of the human writers. They looked upon the authors as typically human authors.

God is the author of the Scriptures

The formula that God is the author of the Scriptures originated in the fourth and fifth centuries and has been continuously used since then in discussing the inspiration of Scripture. In fact it became a classic formula. In the fourth and fifth century there was a controversy between the Manichees who denied that God was the “writer” of the OT and the Church in Africa which responded that God was the “unus auctor” one author of the OT and NT. The Latin word auctor has a much wider meaning than author in English. It can mean God as both author of the Scriptures and cause of creation. The term auctor is not explicitly applied to God until the fifth century.

The formula “God the one author of the Scriptures” appeared in various Church documents from the fourth century onwards;

- in a pronouncement of the Iberian bishops against the Priscillianists in Saragossa in 380 AD,
- 1208 AD in the profession of faith prescribed for the Waldensians ([DS 790](#)) by Pope Innocent III
- in the profession of faith of Emperor Michael Palaeologus ([DS 854](#)) and
- in the conciliar texts of the [Council of Florence](#) and its [Decree for the Jacobites](#) (Session 11, Feb 4th, 1442).

“It [the holy Roman Church] professes one and the same God as the **author of the Old and New Testament**, that is, of the Law and the Prophets and the Gospel, since the saints of both Testaments have spoken with the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit, whose books, which are contained under the following titles, it accepts and venerates [list of books follows.]”

The Council of Trent, Vatican I and Vatican II all declared God to be the author of the Scriptures. The Council of Trent during its [fourth session in 1546](#) stated,

“The Council clearly perceived that this truth and rule are contained in the written books and unwritten traditions which have come down to us, having been received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself, or from the apostles by the dictation of the Holy Spirit, and have been transmitted as it were from hand to hand. Following, then, the example of the orthodox Fathers it received and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence all the books of the Old and New Testaments, for **God alone is the author** of both – together with all the traditions

concerning faith and morals, as coming from the mouth of Christ or being inspired by the Holy Spirit and preserved in continuous succession in the Catholic Church.”

Vatican I in 1870 stated,

“The books of the Old and New Testaments are to be received as sacred and canonical in their integrity, with all their parts, as they are enumerated in the decree of the said Council [Trent] and are contained in the ancient Latin edition of the Vulgate. These the Church holds to be sacred and canonical, not because, having been carefully composed by mere human authority, nor merely because they contain revelation with no mixture of error, but because, having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, **they have God for their author** and have been delivered as such to the Church herself.” [Dei Filius](#) Chapter 2 7

Vatican II stated,

“Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in Sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles (see John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-20, 3:15-16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have **God as their author** and have been handed on as such to the Church herself.” [Dei Verbum](#) 11.

See CCC 105-106.

Dictation



Granted that God is the author of the Scriptures how did God author the Scriptures? From the Renaissance and Reformation onwards one principle theory advanced was the dictation theory, that God communicated not only the ideas but also the words and verbal expressions. The verbal dictation theory reached its mature form in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and used concepts from the Scholastics and especially Thomas Aquinas. It means that God communicated the language of Scripture to the human author, giving him supernaturally those words which best suited the writer’s individuality. The author simply had to be as conscious as possible to receive what God was doing. This is depicted in some Renaissance and baroque paintings of the evangelists with a dove representing the Holy Spirit hovering around their head as they wrote. On the left we have the *Inspiration of Matthew* by Caravaggio.

The terms of the Scholastics used to define inspiration were “principal efficient cause” and “instrumental efficient cause.” An instrumental efficient cause is one that truly acts with its own power but only does so when moved by another, the principal efficient cause. When I write I am the principal efficient cause and the pen is the instrumental efficient cause. Since God is the instrumental efficient cause it is applying more weight on the divine component of inspiration rather than the human co-operating in writing the Scriptures. In the Middle Ages this was applied not so much to inspiration but to prophecy. As this theory developed it transformed into the theory of plenary verbal inspiration.

Verbal dictation or plenary verbal inspiration is seen in the Spanish Dominican Melchior Cano (1509-1560). In *De locis theologicis* in 1563 (published posthumously) he stated, “not only the words but even every comma has been supplied by the Divine Spirit...falsity is excluded by the sacred authors...everything great or small has been edited by the sacred authors at the dictation of the Holy Spirit.” (II,17) (As regards comma, he must surely be referring either to the later manuscripts which includes punctuation or to the Vulgate translation)

The Catholic Dominican theologian, Bañez (1528-1604), wrote, “The Holy Spirit not only inspired all that is contained in the Scriptures, he also dictated and suggested every word with which it was written. To dictate means to determine the very words.”

The Council of Trent during its [fourth session](#) in 1546 stated,

“The Council clearly perceived that this truth and rule are contained in the written books and unwritten traditions which have come down to us, having been received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself, of from the apostles by the **dictation** [I take it that it does not mean full plenary verbal inspiration] of the Holy Spirit, and have been transmitted as it were from hand to hand. Following, then, the example of the orthodox Fathers it received and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence all the books of the Old and New Testaments, for God alone is the author of both – together with all the traditions concerning faith and morals, as coming from the mouth of Christ or being inspired by the Holy Spirit and preserved in continuous succession in the Catholic Church” (DS 1501).

This is the first time a magisterial document used the term ‘dictation’ of the composition of the Scriptures. The reason was probably because it wanted to state that both Tradition and the Scriptures were inspired and in an effort to differentiate the two different types of inspiration stated that the Scriptures were dictated. However the Vatican I definition of inspiration omitted the notion of dictation by the Holy Spirit.

Combination of human and divine co-operation

In [Dei Verbum](#) §11-12 of Vatican II the Church teaches that the Scriptures arose from a combination of human and divine co-operation:

11. “Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in Sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles (see John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-20, 3:15-16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred

and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him **they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted.**

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation. Therefore “all Scripture is divinely inspired and has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, for reformation of manners and discipline in right living, so that the man who belongs to God may be efficient and equipped for good work of every kind” (2 Tim. 3:16-17, Greek text).

12. However, **since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion**, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.

Please note that the two paragraphs above are the Catholic Church teaching on inspiration. Do not become confused by this survey of the history of thinking on inspiration. The Catholic Church’s teaching on inspiration is in the two paragraphs above from [*Dei Verbum*](#) §11-12.

Charism of the Community

As Scripture study continued to advance it became clear as early as the nineteenth century that the books of Scripture were authored by not just one person.

1. Many books were authored by many people.
2. In the twentieth century it became clear that not only was more than one person involved in authoring many books of Scripture but also that what was written had been passed down orally previously.
3. And finally it was noticed that editors had edited the final text of some books.

This meant that many minds went into the composition of a single book and not just one mind. What are the consequences of this for inspiration? One could argue that only the final person who put the book together was inspired. But some scholars began to argue that this is not really satisfactory because in many cases the work of the final redactor/editor was minute in comparison to all the work which he inherited. For example the final redaction Ecclesiastes may have involved adding just 5 verses to the end. Another approach is to say that anyone involved in any stage of the composition of a book was inspired. But most of those people are anonymous. For example it is possible to imagine that many bards played a role in determining the final form of the folk songs in Exodus and Judges.

In response to this, US exegetes RAF Mackenzie and JL McKenzie put forward a theory that inspiration has a corporate or social dimension as well as an individual dimension. RAF

Mackenzie, a Canadian Jesuit later appointed Rector of the Pontifical Biblical Institute, in his presidential address to the CBA in 1957 stated,

“We know that the OT, in particular, is not like, say, an average shelf of books in the fiction section of a modern library, a collection of works each written completely by a single author, published at a definite time, and existing unchanged since then. On the contrary: this literature is the accumulation of a people, the archives of a family, a deposit which was not (until the very end of the OT period) a dead letter but was constantly used, reinterpreted, brought up to date, commented on, expanded...it is the work of an inspired tradition, which produced a growth in revelation by directing the work of successive redactors.”

John L McKenzie, a Jesuit at Notre Dame, took up this,

I depart from accepted terminology not only apologies, but also with fears, and only from the conviction that a better understanding of both [revelation and inspiration] is impossible without such a departure...Inspiration has been too closely identified with the individual author and with the written word; revelation has been too simply understood as a revealed proposition, and not as the word of God and the knowledge of God in the biblical sense...The vehicle of inspiration, I have insisted, is the community of the people of God, Israel and the Church: once again, I believe, the difficulty arises from isolating inspiration as the charisma of the individual author.”¹

They were building upon Karl Rahner’s *Inspiration in the Bible*. According to this theory, inspiration is a unique charism of the early Church (see *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* 65:60-61 for details and references). This understanding of inspiration means that it was the believing community which really authored a particular book, although written on manuscript by an individual or editor. This means that Israel was inspired for the composition of the Old Testament and the Church was inspired for the composition of the New Testament. So it is the community that is inspired.

Although being the most recent theory on inspiration, it is not acceptable to everybody. For example, an article by D J McCarthy in *TS* 24 (1963) 554-556 criticizes JL McKenzie for not distinguishing sufficiently the writer of the biblical text from its social aspect and the ongoing traditions of his people.

In recent years there has been a big decline in writing on the topic of inspiration. RF Collins says there is a virtual silence on the topic. He writes in *Introduction to the New Testament* “In fact, one can state with Archbishop Martini that we still lack a complete treatment of inspiration. A complete doctrine is still a desideratum. Given the results of a historical-critical approach to the Scriptures, this desire may never be realized. In retrospect it may someday appear that the specific treatment of inspiration as a topic unto itself was but a momentary phenomenon in the history of Christianity. Indeed the relative silence of contemporary literature on the topic of inspiration might eventually prove to be the beginning of

¹ JL McKenzie “The Social Character of Inspiration” *CBQ* 24 (1962) 115-125

the end of the systematic exposition of the doctrine of inspiration; perhaps even now we have entered into that period which allows for a retrospective view on the “traditional doctrine.”²

THEORIES OF INSPIRATION

Perhaps for simplicity, we could summarize the theories of Inspiration under the following four headings:

1. The Hypnotic Theory (writer completely taken over by God). We see this in Philo and a small number of Church Fathers.
2. Verbal Dictation Theory (writer listens to God’s dictation and puts it in writing). We see this in Cano and Bañez. It developed out of the Scholastic theory of “principal efficient cause” and “instrumental efficient cause.”
3. Combination of divine and human (the inspired writer in co-operation with God put his own stamp on his book). This is the teaching of [Dei Verbum](#) §11-12. This is different to the scholastic theory of “principal efficient cause” and “instrumental efficient cause.” The Vatican II formula ascribes a greater role to the sacred writer than do the Scholastic theory.
4. Charism of the Community (the whole community which produced the book was inspired). Although this theory surfaced before Vatican II it is not to be found in *Dei Verbum*.

The Church’s teaching on Inspiration is that in [Dei Verbum](#) §11-12. The definition of inspiration is *God is the author of the Scriptures*.

² RF Collins *Introduction to the New Testament* 327