

Some Thoughts on Biblical Inspiration

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The aim of this short reflection is to answer some questions regarding the inspiration of the Bible. In order to understand the Bible correctly, one has to have a clear, basic understanding of the inspiration.

The Bible is a book containing the Word of God written by human beings. It is God's Word addressed to human beings, written in human language. It was not dropped down from heaven by God in the finished form (as some believe), but it was written throughout many centuries. Thus, the Bible is both divine and human work. How do we explain that?

Every word of the Bible was written by human beings inspired by the Spirit of God. Biblical authors were the secondary authors (*causa instrumentalis*) and depended on God (*causa principalis*). Therefore God is the principal author of Sacred Scripture. God has used the human authors, their literary talents and gifts in order to deliver his salvific message.

Dei Verbum on Inspiration

Let us look at the teaching of the last Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation and what it says about the relationship between God and human authors of the Bible:

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. (Dei Verbum, no. 11)

Couple things stand out in this text:

1. The belief in divine inspiration of the Bible is the truth of the faith, based on the apostles.
2. From the apostolic times up to today the Church has always believed in the divine inspiration of Sacred Scripture.
3. The books of the Bible are inspired by God and thus God is their author. Through his Spirit God has influenced the human authors in a direct, positive and supernatural way, so that they written all that God wanted them to write.
4. The entire Bible is inspired: both Old and the New Testaments in their entirety (one cannot say that some books are more inspired than others).

What kind of criteria has the Church used to determine canonicity of the books of the Bible? *Dei verbum* states that the criterion is the apostolic tradition. This is a very important point. The council rejected so

called *internal criteria* that are based on the content of the Bible itself. For example, Martin Luther, the father of the reformation, in speaking about the inspiration of the Bible did not invoke the apostolic tradition. He based his teaching on the content of the Bible: the holiness of its teachings, miracles and prophecies, the literary style and beauty. Thus Luther rejected some of the books of the Bible, claiming that they were not inspired by God.

Dei Verbum on the Nature of Inspiration

The last two sentences of the text that I quoted above speak briefly about the nature of inspiration. It states that God has chosen men and he made use of their power and abilities in writing – thus human writers are called true authors. God inspired them to write all that he wanted them to write. How do we explain the relationship between God who is the main, principal author of the Bible, and human authors who are also called true authors?

St. Thomas Aquinas developed an interesting theory that the council fathers has used. In order to explain the nature of biblical inspiration, St. Thomas Aquinas spoke of God as principal author (*causa principalis*) and human authors (*causa instrumentalis*). God, as the main author of the Bible, has inspired human authors, but doing so he respected their freedom and talents. Therefore in each of the books of the Bible we can detect the characteristics of the human author – for example his style of writing, the use of language, his culture or social status. God has used the human authors as real, living people with all their limitations as well as gifts. This means that there are parts of the Bible that are written in a beautiful and stylish language, but at the same time there are some books or fragments of books, whose language is quite plain and ordinary.

I have looked at some of the characteristics of human authors of the Bible. What about characteristics of the divine author of the Bible?

One thing that we must keep in mind is this: as God has inspired the human authors to write (some of which had limited abilities), he made sure that what they write presents the absolute truth and holiness of God. Because God is an absolute holiness and truth – so is his word directed to us.

Divine and Human Character of the Bible

In the history of theology there were two beautiful attempts to explain the two-fold character of Sacred Scripture – human and divine. The first one was developed by St. John Chrysostom. His is a theory that speaks of God lowering himself to the human level. It comes with the word *syncatabasis* that means “going down together with,” from Latin, *condesensio*. It basically means that God in speaking to us had to lower himself down, so that we might be able to understand his word. This is what the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation says about this:

In Sacred Scripture, therefore, while the truth and holiness of God always remains intact, the marvelous "condescension" of eternal wisdom is clearly shown, "that we may learn the gentle kindness of God, which words cannot express, and how far He has gone in adapting His language with thoughtful

concern for our weak human nature." For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the word of the eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men. (Dei verbum, no. 13)

I really like that comparison and would like to reflect on that some more. God, like wise and clever teacher, comes down and lowers himself, so that we might be able to understand of what he says to us and become partners in dialogue. God must speak to us in human language; otherwise, how we would be able to understand? We deal here with a divine pedagogy – God revealing himself to us in human language.

The second comparison is even more interesting. It compares the inspiration of the Bible to the mystery of the incarnation of the Word in human history. In this way, the mystery of the incarnation (which is one of the fundamental truths of our faith), sheds light on the mystery of the inspiration. This comparison has its roots in the Bible itself, specifically in the Letter to the Hebrews 1:1,

In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a Son.

Some of the Fathers of the Church wrote that even in the Old Testament Jesus was already speaking through the prophets, foretelling his own coming in the flesh. The author of the Bible is one God. St. Cyril of Jerusalem, emphasizing the unity of both testaments, pointed out that the one Spirit of God is the author of the entire Bible. There is only one God, author of the Old and the New Testament; there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, whose coming was foretold in the Old Testament and whose life is described in the New; there is one Holy Spirit, who through the prophets was foretelling the coming of Christ and after his coming came upon him and revealed him.

It is clear that the truth about the divine inspiration of the Bible (as we have seen in St. Cyril and Dei Verbum), is intrinsically connected with the mystery of the incarnation of the Son of God. The belief in the divine inspiration, as well as the belief in the incarnation, belongs to fundamental dogmas of our Christian faith. As in the incarnation the second person of the most holy trinity took on human flesh and became man, so the words of God in the Bible were *incarnated* in human language.