

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God [*Theopneustos*, God-breathed].” (2 Tim 3:16)

✠ Lecture II: Infallibility of the Holy Bible ✠

History alone allows us to establish the fact that Jews and Christians have always believed in the inspiration of the books of the Bible. These books are held as sacred and canonical, not because having been put together by merely human labor and afterwards approved by the Church’s authority, but because, having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and as such, they have been handed down to the Church itself as an unerring guide to her. Our Lord Jesus Christ used the Scriptures in conformity with the general belief, as the word of God. The most decisive texts in this respect are found in the Holy Gospel of John (5:39; 10:34-36). The words ‘Scripture, Word of God, Spirit of God’ in the saying and writings of the Apostles are used indifferently (Rom 4:3; 9:17; Acts 20:27; 1 Thess 2:3; 2 Cor 2:17; 13:3). St. Paul alone appeals expressly more than eighty times to ‘the Oracles of God’ i.e. divine utterances, of which Israel was made the guardian. St. Paul and St. Peter give the reason why it was accepted: it is that all Scripture is inspired of God (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20-21). Often we have statements like this in the Pentateuch, “Now the Lord spoke to Moses, saying” (Ex 13:1; Lev 4:1; Num 4:1; Deut 32:48). He was commanded to write in a book what God told him (Ex 17:14; 34:27). Likewise the prophets say, “For the Lord speaks” (Is 1:2), “The Lord said to Isaiah” (Is 7:3), “Thus says the Lord” (Is 43:1), “The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying” (Jer 11:1), “The word of the Lord came expressly to Ezekiel” (Ezek 1:3)...etc. Statements like these occur more than 3800 times in the Old Testament. Thus the Old Testament asserts to be a revelation from God. The New Testament writers likewise assert that they declare the message of God. St. Paul asserts that the things which he wrote were the commandments of the Lord (1 Cor 14:37); that what he preached, men were to receive as the very word of God (1 Thess 2:13); and that faith in the doctrines which he taught is indispensable to men’s salvation; therefore he says: “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal 1:8)

I) Terms related to the doctrine of Inspiration:

1. Revelation:

“God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). Because love is of His very nature He has sought to communicate with those of His creatures, which possess a little power to understand, to love, and to share His purpose. It is His communication with human beings that we call revelation. The revelation of God takes two forms:

a) The General Revelation of God:

This is found in nature, history and conscience. It is communicated through the media of natural phenomena occurring in nature or the course of history; it is addressed to all humans and is accessible to all; it has for its object the supplying of the natural need of the man and the persuasion of the soul to seek after true God. “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork” (Ps 19:1)

b) The Special Revelation of God:

It is given to man in various ways: in the form of miracles and prophecy, in the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the Scriptures and in personal experience. We are primarily concerned at this point with the special and direct revelation as distinct from the general and indirect revelation.

→ Therefore, revelation has to do with the **communication** of truth that cannot be otherwise discovered; inspiration has to do with the **recording** of the revealed truth.

✠ **We can have revelation without inspiration**, as has been the case with many of the godly people in the past. This is clear from the fact that St. John heard the seven thunders utter their voices, but was not permitted to write what they have revealed (Rev 10:3-4). St. Paul also tells us how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter (2 Cor 12:4)

✚ **We may also have inspiration without direct revelation**, as when the writers set down what they had seen with their own eyes or discovered by accurate research (**Lk 1:1-4; 1 Jn 1:1-4**). St. Luke, as a historian, examined written records and verified oral tradition in the penning of his gospel, and was an eyewitness to much of the events which he wrote in the Holy Book of Acts. St. John, on the other hand, received much of the Holy Book of Revelation by direct revelation from God. Both of them were inspired in the writing of their material, but the material was received in different manners.

2. Authority:

The Holy Bible carries with it the Divine authority of God. Therefore, it is binding upon man, on his mind, conscience, will and heart. Man, Creed, and Church are all subject to the authority of the Holy Bible. God has spoken, we must submit. The eternal ‘thus saith the Lord’ is our authoritative standard. Usually inspiration and authority are identical, so that what is inspired is also authoritative for teaching and conduct; but occasionally that is not the case. For example, Satan’s statements to Eve are recorded in the Holy Book of Genesis by inspiration, but they are not true. The same can be said about St. Peter’s advice to Christ (**Mt 16:22**). Since none of these represent God’s mind, they are not authoritative. The same thing can be said about texts that are taken out of their context and given a very different meaning. The words still are inspired but the new meaning is not authoritative.

3. Inerrancy:

Not only is Holy Scripture inspired and authoritative, it is also inerrant and infallible. By this we mean that it is without error in the original manuscripts. It is inerrant in all that it affirms, whether in historical, scientific, moral, or doctrinal matters. Inerrancy extends to all of Holy Scripture and is not limited to certain teachings of Holy Scripture.

4. Illumination:

The One who inspired the sacred writers in the writing of the Holy Bible, illuminates the minds of those who read it. Because of sin and the darkened understanding brought about by sin, no one can reach to the proper understanding of Holy Scripture without aid. But the Holy Spirit can enlighten the mind of the believer to understand the scriptures (**1 Cor 2:6-16; Eph 1:18; 1 Jn 2:20-27**)

II) The Biblical Doctrine of Inspiration:

Inspiration is **‘the supernatural action of the Holy Spirit on the mind of the sacred writers whereby the Scriptures were not merely their own but the word of God’**. The Holy Spirit so guided and superintended the sacred writers making use of their unique personalities that they wrote all that He wanted them to write without excess, omission, or error. Therefore, the inspired writings are at the same time perfectly Divine and perfectly human; infallibly authoritative because they are all God-breathed; intelligible because written in the language of men.

The impulsion to write comes from God who moves the will of the writer either directly or decides it by proposing motives of an intellectual order. He can arouse or simply utilize external influences capable of acting on the will of the sacred writer. According to an early tradition, St. Mark and St. John both wrote their Holy Gospels at the request of the faithful.

Some parts of Holy Scripture were immediately communicated by God and are called ‘apocalypse’ or ‘revelation’, as that to John and to St. Paul (**2 Cor 12:1; Rom 16:25**). Others, as the historical parts, are matters of human testimony. But inspiration was as much needed to write known facts authoritatively as to communicate new truths; otherwise why should certain facts be selected and others be passed by. Therefore, inspired prohibition is as miraculous as inspired utterance. Had the writers of the Holy Gospel been left to themselves, they would have given many details of our Lord Jesus Christ’s early life which our curiosity would have desired, but which God’s wisdom withheld, so as to concentrate all our attention on Lord Jesus Christ’s ministry and redemptive death, glorious resurrection, ascension and the hope of His second coming.

III) Guiding Principles of the Doctrine of Inspiration:

1. Inspiration is inexplicable.

It is the operation of the Holy Spirit. In spite of all what we have said about the nature of inspiration, we do not know exactly how that power of the Holy Spirit operates.

2. Inspiration, in the restricted sense, is limited to the authors of the Bible.

Other books are not inspired in the same sense. A book composed from merely human resources alone would not become an inspired text, even if approved of, afterwards, by the Holy Spirit. This subsequent approval might make the truth contained in the book credible as if it were an article of divine faith, but it would not give a divine origin to the book itself.

3. Inspiration is essentially guidance.

That is, the Holy Spirit elevated and directed the faculties of the sacred writers, and thus supervising the selection of the materials to be used and the words to be employed in writing. The mode of God's inspiring the writers is not essential for us to know exactly, but result is what momentarily concerns us, viz. that their writings are our guide, for "no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation [origin], for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved [lit. borne along] by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:20-21)

4. The Holy Spirit preserved the sacred writers from all error and from all omission.

5. Inspiration is affirmed only of the original autographic text of Scripture as it left the pen of the sacred writers.

It is not affirmed of any of the versions, whether ancient or modern, nor of any Hebrew or Greek manuscripts in existence, nor of any ancient text known. All these are not certainly known to be free from all error. Various readings in manuscripts do not invalidate verbal inspiration. While there are no original autographs available, a multitude of old manuscripts, patristic quotations and ancient versions have been preserved which enable us to restore the original text almost perfectly for all practical purposes. The number of the words, which are still in doubt, is very small, and no doctrine is affected by this situation.

6. Inspiration of Scripture is plenary and verbal.

It extends to the words not merely to the thoughts and conceptions. It is plenary because the inspiration is entire and without restrictions; it includes all and every Scripture (2 Tim 3:16); verbal because it includes every word (1 Cor 2:13). Caiaphas is an example showing that the **words** were sanctioned as divinely inspired. He was given through his office, as a high priest of Israel, the authority to speak prophetically. Whilst he himself did not know the deep significance of his own words "he spoke not of himself" (Jn 11:49-52)

✧ Lord Jesus Christ believed in the verbal inspiration of the Old Testament. He indicated His conception of inspiration by saying, "until heaven and earth pass away, not one jot [the smallest letter] or one title [the smallest stroke in a Hebrew letter] shall pass away from the law, until all is accomplished" (Mt 5:18; Lk 16:17). 'Law' in this setting no doubt included the entire Old Testament as (Jn 10:34) used 'law' for the Psalms. The one word 'my' is Christ's proof of His divinity (Mt 22:41-46), "The Lord said unto my Lord (Ps 110:1): If David then calls Him 'Lord', how is he his son?" Our lord makes it a fundamental principle "the Scripture cannot be broken", even to one word (Jn 10:35)

✧ St. Paul shows unhesitating confidence in the divine authority of special words, as "seed" not "seeds" (Gal 3:16), "all" (Heb 2:8), "brethren" (Heb 2:11), "today" and "My rest" (Heb 4:1-11). To crown all, (Rev 22:19) at its close declares, "If any man shall take away from the **words** of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life".

✧ St. Paul in (1 Cor 7:5-6) distinguishes his words “by permission” from those “of commandment”; and in verses 25-38 he gives his “judgment” (opinion) as one faithful, but as having on the point “no commandment of the Lord”. **Here his inspiration appears in his expressly declining to command as divinely authoritative a certain course as an apostle, and merely advising it as a Christian friend.**

✧ In verse 12-15 (contrast 10) he says on a particular case, “**I, not the Lord**”, whereas he had on the main point said “**not I but the Lord**”. The Lord has given commands concerning divorce (Mt 5:31); now Paul speaks with the authority given him saying “**I, not the Lord**”, declaring that he has no express revelation, or tradition delivered from the Lord, commanding it, but he gives his judgment; viz., under the ordinary inspiration which accompanied the apostles in all their canonical writings (1 Cor 7:40; 14:34; 1 Thess 4:15)

✧ St. Paul, therefore, is not drawing a line between the authoritative commands of Christ and his own. Rather, he himself is claiming inspiration and the authority to set forth doctrine and practice (1 Cor 7: 12-25). He has the “Spirit of God” (1 Cor 7:40)

IV) Inadequate Theories of Inspiration:

- Natural Inspiration or the Intuition Theory:

This theory holds that inspiration is merely a superior insight on the part of natural man. It is merely the intensifying and elevating of the religious perception of the writer; but this religious enthusiasm does not differ essentially from that which animated Homer and Plato. This is the denial of everything supernatural, in the ordinary sense of the word, as well as in religion in general.

→ This view puts some of the Church’s great hymns on a level with the Holy Bible. In reality it confuses the Holy Spirit’s work of illumination imparted to all the faithful with His special work of inspiration. Illumination does not deal with the transmission of the truth, but with the understanding of truth already revealed.

- The Dynamic or Partial Inspiration Theory:

According to this theory, the writers of Holy Scripture were infallible in matters of faith and practice, but not in things that are not of an immediately religious character. Thus the writer could be in error in things that relate to history and science. This theory is prevailing among many Protestant groups, and has been held by Luther, Calvin, Baxter, Doddridge and many others. It lays stress upon the sense of Holy Scripture as a revelation of God’s will and leaves room for the full play of human agency in the composition, admitting mistakes (or at least the possibility of them) made by the writers of the Holy Bible in statements related to history and natural science. Luther, who magnified Paul, accused him in one instance of false logic, and spoke disparagingly of the Holy Book of Esther (Schaff. P., A Religious Encyclopedia... vol. II, p.1105)

→ This theory contradicts the Holy Bible that affirms that **all** (every) Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16)

- The Theory that Thoughts, Not Words, are Inspired:

This theory holds that God suggested the thoughts of the revelation, but left it up to the writer to put the revelation into words.

→ But the Holy Bible indicates that the words themselves are inspired. St. Paul states that he spoke, “not in words which man’s wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches” (1 Cor 2:13). Additionally, it is difficult to think of thought apart from words. The thoughts are in the words, and the two are inseparable. It is inconceivable to dissociate them from each other. Therefore, the words themselves must be inspired, and not only the thoughts. (Review verbal inspiration, above)

- The Theory that the Holy Bible contains the Word of God (i.e. is not wholly the word of God):

According to this theory, the Holy Bible is a book composed from merely human resources, which God can make his word at the moment of personal encounter. The Authors of Holy Scripture wrote of their encounters with God in thought patterns of their days, reflecting their specific teachings, actions, temptations and trials. They incorporated into their writings various supernatural myths and miraculous tales to convey spiritual truths. But their writing will become the word of God to us at that existential moment when God breaks through to us and reveals Himself in His word.

→ This conception of Biblical criticism does not rest on an innocent view about the negligibility of the factor of inspiration, but on the outright denial of it. Those critics say that Scripture must be demythologized. The interpreter's job is to strip away all the mythical embellishments and seek to arrive at the spiritual truth God has for us. Thus, it is not the text that is inspired but the reader.

- **The Dictation Theory:**

The defenders of the dictation theory claim that there is nothing undignified in dictation, certainly as between God and man. Besides, the statements of the recipients of revelation show that such process seldom took place. The offence at 'dictation' frequently proceeds from an under-estimation of God and an over-estimation of man. Therefore, it doesn't matter at all that the Holy Spirit took men as instruments of writing – compared to pens or to a flute blown by a flute-player.

→ This theory ignores the obvious differences in the style of Moses, David, Isaiah, James, John, Peter, and Paul. We must acknowledge that Holy Scripture is at the same time perfectly divine and perfectly human. God used living men, not dead tools. He did not set aside human personality, nor did he divest the writers of their several individualities of style, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Cor 3:17). Their will became one with God's will; His Spirit acted on their spirit so that their individuality had free play in the sphere of His inspiration.

* This lecture adapted from 'The Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures' by Fr. Shenouda Maher.