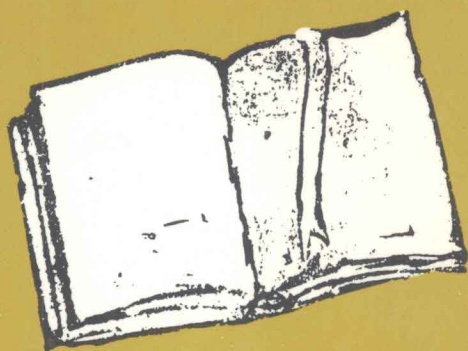


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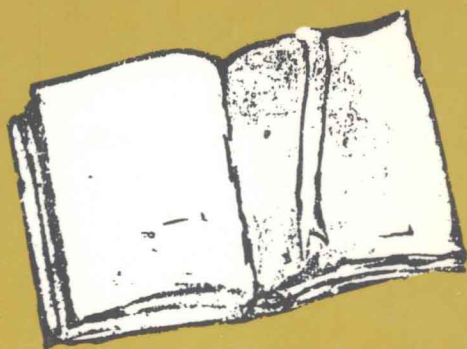


THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE

Problems
and Proposals

Paul J. Achtemeier

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Christians generally agree that the Scriptures are inspired and that this doctrine is of basic importance. But how is the doctrine of inspiration to be understood and what does it mean for our Christian faith?

Paul Achtemeier shows how recent knowledge of the way the Scriptures were formed raises problems in regard to the traditional understanding of inspiration. In response, he presents possibilities for a new approach to inspiration that is compatible with recent critical discoveries and allows the Bible to continue to play a meaningful role. He deals with "liberal" and "conservative" views, specific contradictions in the Bible, and what the Bible says about itself. A perceptive study, **THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE** proposes a view of inspiration that makes sense for today and probes its implications for the believer and the believing community.

PAUL J. ACHEMEIER is the Herbert W. Jackson Professor of Biblical Interpretation at University of Virginia, and previously served as Executive Society of Biblical Literature.

The Inspiration of Scripture

PROBLEMS AND PROPOSALS

PAUL J. ACHTEMEIER



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To the memory of my father

ARTHUR R. ACHTEMEIER

a good man, now departed,
who faithfully proclaimed
the Word of God

CONTENTS

Editor's Foreword	9
Foreword	11
Introduction	13
I. LOCUS AND MODE OF INSPIRATION	21
The Shape of the Problem	22
Inspired Authors	29
Inspired Content	32
Impact on Other Theological Problems	35
II. TWO CONTEMPORARY VIEWS CONSIDERED	41
The Liberal View	41
Its Strengths and Weaknesses	47
The Conservative View	50
Its Strengths and Weaknesses	57
III. HOW THE SCRIPTURES WERE FORMED	76
Bible Books from Earlier Sources	77
Old Material Used in New Ways	82

God Not Bound to the Past	86
Ongoing Interpretation	88
IV. PROBLEMS OLD AND NEW	94
Some Current Evasions	94
Inadequacy of the Prophetic Model	99
V. THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE: A PROPOSAL	105
What the Bible Says About Itself	106
Scripture and the Community of Faith	114
Importance of Canon Formation	118
Three Key Components:	
Tradition	124
Situation	126
Respondent	131
The Locus of Inspiration	134
VI. SOME IMPLICATIONS	137
Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit	137
Proclamation	141
The Believing Community	145
Nature of Biblical Content	147
The Critical Method in Bible Study	149
Further Theological Problems	154
Epilogue: The Bible and the Word of God	162
Notes	167
Index	183

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

The issue of the authority of Scripture is posed for the church in the late twentieth century with an urgency that has not been evident since the fundamentalist controversies following the First World War. The distribution of the Scriptures worldwide in unprecedented numbers and in the popular language of the day has drawn attention to the continuing power of the Bible to speak to us today. But it leaves open the question of how the authority of Scripture is to be understood, to say nothing of the question as to whether one version is more nearly authoritative than another. The conservatism of an earlier day that considered only the King James Version to be inspired as authoritative among English translations has long since dissolved in a flood of new translations—the Good News Bible, The Jerusalem Bible, and The Living Bible. But the issue of Scriptural authority remains.

The issue is not new, however sharply it is posed by recent developments, including the resurgence of evangelical Christianity among Catholics, Protestants, and those outside the organized church. Paul Achtemeier in this book addresses the question against the background of how Jews and early Christians understood the authority of their own Biblical traditions. He shows how one Biblical writer interprets an earlier Scriptural record. The result is to demonstrate that the power of Scripture is dynamic, and that it has been so throughout the history of those who call themselves the peo-

ple of God and who have found in Scripture a word for all seasons. Dr. Achtemeier has addressed himself to a serious issue, and he deals with it in a penetrating way that demands careful thought. But it is an important, nontechnical treatment of this question which has been a traditional bone of contention between those who think of themselves as conservatives and those whom they style as liberals. As Dr. Achtemeier shows, the issue is not, "Is the Bible authoritative?" but, "How has the church in the past, and how should the church in the present, understand Biblical authority?" As an experienced teacher, as a gifted interpreter of Scripture, and as a committed churchman, he offers important and constructive insights on this current issue that has too long divided Christians.

HOWARD CLARK KEE

FOREWORD

The task of writing a book on the inspiration of Scripture is a formidable task indeed, and one not to be undertaken lightly. The history of the church has shown clearly enough that to enter this realm is to enter a place where passions run high and invective is close at hand. Yet perhaps there is a place for a book that seeks to express a conviction about the inspiration of Scripture that is able also to accommodate the discoveries of modern scholars of the Bible. It is that place which this book seeks to fill.

Many people have contributed to its writing, and I must thank some of them: Mrs. Martha Aycock, the reference librarian at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, who is never baffled by a request for information, however vaguely that request may be phrased; Mrs. Ann Charlton, my secretary, who arranged and rearranged notes as necessary, even when she was not entirely clear as to why it was necessary; Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, for a sabbatical leave during which these pages were written; my wife, my true partner in the dialogue of life, who has borne up remarkably well and has offered endless encouragement and sage advice as the ideas for the book developed and were chewed and digested along with the food at many a meal; finally to the one to whom this book is dedicated, from whom I learned, through precept and example, to revere the message of the Bible, and to love its living Lord.

P.J.A.

INTRODUCTION

There should be little question that some form of doctrine concerning the inspiration of the Scripture is a key issue for the Christian faith. What is at stake in that doctrine is nothing less than the question of the importance of the Bible as the source for Christian belief and action. However one may want to conceive of that inspiration, it points to the belief on the part of the church that there is a unique linkage between God's communication with humankind and that specific collection of literature. All that we know of the prophetic protest against a series of rulers content with the normal way of doing things in the ancient Semitic world we know from our Bible. All that we know of the words and deeds of Jesus, who, both by what he said and by what he did, kindled in many of his contemporaries the unshakable conviction that contact with him meant in a unique and unrepeatable way contact with God himself, we know from that same Scripture. All that we know of the many events and reflections which constitute the very foundation and essence of our faith, we know from that one source. Unless that Bible can in some way claim a unique status and authority in its content and intention, the Christian faith becomes what its opponents, past and present, claim it is: a human attempt to solve human problems, suffering from the delusion that it represents something more.

If the Christian faith is to make any kind of claim to be "something more" than just another philosophy or human

system projecting onto the heavens its own desires, it will have to base that claim at some point on its Scriptures. That it is justified in doing so is the burden of the doctrine of inspiration. To some extent, at least, it would be fair to say that the truth claims of the church rest on the reliability of the truth claims of its Scripture. Clearly, without its Scriptures, the Christian faith would not be what it has historically understood itself to be, nor what it continues in our day to claim that it is.

In the light of that importance, it is surprising and puzzling that discussion of the doctrine of inspiration, within the past two or three decades, has been notable more by its absence than its presence. It has been honored by being ignored in many circles. Part of that silence has been due to the embarrassment of people who no longer shared the theological tenets that made a kind of “verbal inerrancy” an adequate formulation for understanding inspiration, but were unwilling or unable to reformulate the doctrine in a way compatible with their different view of the nature of Scripture. Indeed, absence of discussion of the doctrine in any form, I suspect, has been characteristic of courses both in Bible and in doctrine in the majority of the “main line” theological institutions over the past decade or two. Even conservative theological circles, unified largely by their insistence upon defining inspiration in terms of some form of inerrancy, tended to speak mostly to themselves, when they spoke at all on this issue.

All of that has changed radically over the past few years, particularly in the more conservative areas. Indeed, many conservative evangelicals perceive the question of inerrancy, and the view of inspiration that best accommodates such a view, to be the key question faced by themselves and their churches and theological institutions. That the issue still contains the potential of exploding into major importance has been amply demonstrated by events that took place within the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod within the past few years. Bitter confrontation, confusion within the

denomination, and a split in a major theological seminary faculty and within the church itself have resulted from debate on this issue. The emergence of divisions within other confessional bodies and theological persuasions is also a key issue for the people affected. One need only read the evaluation of the "defection" of Fuller Seminary in Harold Lindsell's *The Battle for the Bible*, and the response by those of the Fuller faculty who share a more moderate view, as represented in the essays contained in *Biblical Authority*, edited by Jack Rogers, to be aware of the seriousness with which such divisions are being taken. The discussion has been joined in other ways both from a more conservative point of view (*The Foundation of Biblical Authority*, edited by James M. Boice) and from a more moderate stance (Stephen T. Davis, *The Debate About the Bible*) within the overall group who still hold to some form of inerrancy as the best expression of the nature of the inspiration of the Bible. The emergence of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, which formulated the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, shows that the lines of debate that had already emerged late in the nineteenth century remain central for those who want to maintain the factual inerrancy of Christian Scriptures.

In the face of all of this, it is evident that reflection on the nature of the inspiration of the Bible is imperative on the part of those for whom factual inerrancy is an inadequate explanation of what is taken to be the unique sign of the difference between Christian Scriptures and all other literature. Some discussion has taken place, both from the orientation of the history of this doctrine (Bruce Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration*) and from the perspective of a theologically critical view of the conservative position (James Barr, *Fundamentalism*). The time has arrived, however, for more serious reflection on the way inspiration may be understood in the light of recent discoveries about the nature of the Scripture to which the church looks for guidance, and about which it claims some form of divine inspiration. It is to the task of such

reflection that the following pages seek to make a contribution.

Inevitably, however, reflection on inspiration immediately involves us in reflection on a whole spectrum of related problems. Intimately related to the question of the inspiration of Scripture, for example, is the question of the intention of Scripture. A perennial problem faced by all those who attempt to understand and interpret the Bible, whether professionally or for personal reasons, it centers around the task of letting the Bible speak as it wants to speak. Instead of trying to impose preconceived notions on Scripture, in which case nothing new can be learned from it, the basic problem consists in trying to listen to and understand the text in such a way that we find illumination for our lives.

Underlying that problem is another, a more vexing problem, namely, what kind of book is it to which we listen and from which we attempt to learn? What kind of truth does it intend to convey, and how does it intend to convey it? Light would be thrown on such a question if we could determine how and for what purposes the Scriptures were originally composed and assembled. Light would also be thrown on that question if we could determine what the Bible itself says about its own composition and intention.

At the very foundation of all of this lies the question of the relationship of the Bible to God's will for his people and his world. We need to know with some precision just what kind of literature we are dealing with when we read the Bible, and how that literature was produced and by whom, if we are to gain some leverage on the problem of how we may go about hearing God's voice speaking to us through the pages of Scripture.

These are the kinds of problems which surround and inform any attempt to think through and formulate a doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, and it is to problems like these that this book is also addressed. This book offers no claim to solve the problem in such fashion that all reasonable men and women must be persuaded of the author's view immediately