

*Chapter 1*



*Locus and Mode  
of Inspiration*

Part of the common heritage in which all Christians share is the conviction that the Bible occupies a special place in the life and worship of the church and its members. To say that the Bible is “inspired” means at least that in some special way the literature in that book owes its origin to God himself and to the events behind which he has stood, which are reported in its pages, and that therefore the Bible occupies a central and irreplaceable position within the Christian faith. In a unique way our contact with the God of whom the Bible speaks is linked to the records of what that God has said and done in the past, which are contained in the Bible. The confession of faith that that is so does not limit itself to the past, however. Part of the confession that God has spoken in the past, and that we have an authoritative account of those words, also refers to the present. To say that Scripture is “inspired” means that God continues to address his people through its pages in the present. For the Christian, the “inspired” Bible means that God spoke not only to our forebears in the history of Israel, and to the apostles in the founding generation of the Christian church, but that he also continues to address his people through its pages, as they are read in public worship and private devotions. The lives of countless Christians, public and private, in secular and worship contexts, bear witness to the continuing power of the Scriptures to mediate the will of God for contemporary life.

## THE SHAPE OF THE PROBLEM

If Christians share the common belief that the Bible occupies a unique place in their faith, they do not share a common understanding of the way that unique place is to be perceived. If Christians agree that in some sense God speaks to us through the accounts contained in the Scriptures, and hence that those Scriptures are inspired, all Christians do not agree as to the way that inspiration is to be described and understood.

The attempt to find an appropriate way to express their deeply held convictions about the nature of the Bible and its witness has occupied Christian thinkers almost from the beginning of the church, and with the Reformation it came to be a central issue in theological understanding and formulation. It has become clear enough in the course of those debates, and in the debates about the Bible that have continued to the present time, that the way in which inspiration is understood has wide-ranging implications for the way many other concepts in the Christian faith are to be understood. It is our task in these pages to investigate some of the ways inspiration has been understood to occur, and some of the doctrines of the Christian faith that are affected by that understanding.

Perhaps the most natural approach to our problem would be to turn to the Bible itself and see what it has to say about its own inspiration. Although some passages refer to this phenomenon, the most notable being 2 Timothy 3:16, it quickly becomes apparent that the Bible itself contains no full-blown or systematically formulated doctrine of its own significance. While the claim is made in 2 Timothy 3:16 that “all Scripture” is “God inspired” or “God inbreathed” and hence is useful for religious purposes, how that inspiration occurred is not made clear. Yet it is precisely the solution to the problem of the how of inspiration that will affect in so great a measure the way other aspects of the Christian faith are understood.

A major problem associated with the *how* of inspiration, for example, concerns the locus of that inspiration. Is it the authors of Scripture that we are to speak of as inspired, or is it the words that those authors wrote down that we are to see as bearing the major share of inspiration?<sup>1</sup> Both instances have been argued. How, the defenders of

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<sup>1</sup>There is a good discussion of these alternative ways of understanding inspiration in J. K. S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), ch. 5, 156ff.

the former position argue, can one seriously suppose that inspiration can adhere to the paper, ink, or type of these writings? Is it not much more reasonable to suppose that what we have to do with in Scripture are certain persons who have been inspired by God, persons upon whose heart or mind the Spirit first worked its influence, and who under that inspired power wrote down the words we have in our Bible? Surely the Spirit is given to the person, and from that inspiration the words then derive their authority.<sup>2</sup> Defenders of the latter position will counter with the question: How can we be sure that what the inspired author wrote was a true reflection of that inspiration if we cannot also say that the very words he or she put down were also inspired, shared also in the inbreathing of the divine Spirit? Is it not more realistic to believe that the influence of the Holy Spirit was at work in the very writing of the biblical authors, so that what they wrote was an authoritative account—because inspired—of what God had done for them and their times?<sup>3</sup> If that is not the case, then how can we realistically speak of the Scriptures as inspired?

Since too great an emphasis on the person as bearer of inspiration, on the one hand, and on the words themselves as bearer of inspiration, on the other, has led to such problems, a third possibility has also been proposed. That position would want to affirm that what is inspired is to be understood not exclusively of the person, though he or she of course shared in the inspiration, nor solely of the words written down, though they too were not unaffected by the power of God's Spirit. Rather, the content of Scripture, the thoughts that the authors sought to convey in the words they chose, is the locus of inspiration. Thus, if some of the words of a certain passage are uncertain because of damage to ancient manuscripts, all is not lost, since what is important is the sense the words sought to convey rather than the very words themselves. Again, if our contact with the inspired person is impossible because of the passage of time—we cannot have direct personal access to the Apostle Paul, for example, simply because he died centuries ago—we can nev-

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<sup>2</sup> An example is James Orr, who argues for this position in *Revelation and Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952 reprint), 162–63.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen T. Davis argues for this, although not entirely in the form I have cast the discussion; see his *The Debate About the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 54, 114–15.

ertheless have access to the author's message, to the content of what the writer sought to convey through the written word.<sup>4</sup>

While each of these solutions that we have sketched out—inspiration located in the person, the words, or a combination of the two—has its own problems and its own strengths, all three of them share one common assumption. That assumption is that each book of Scripture was produced by an individual author, who thought about the content, organized it, and then either wrote it down or dictated it to another who wrote it down. That author is therefore the key to what has been written. The more important question, then, when dealing with the *how* of inspiration is not so much the *locus* of the inspiration—whether in person, words, or a combination—but the *mode* of inspiration. That is, how can it happen that the inspiration is mediated to the author in the first place? If inspiration means that Scripture in some way has its origin in God himself, how are we to understand that phrase *in some way*? How did God use the authors of Scripture so that what they thought and wrote bore the imprint of the divine origin and hence the divine intention? How, in sum, are we to understand the process by which God used the authors to set down in Scripture what God himself wanted set down?

There has been a great deal of discussion of this problem in the course of the life of the church, and we shall have occasion to refer to some of it in a moment. Yet there was one solution proposed, and then further refined, which has played a major role in setting the stage for modern discussions of inspiration. That classic solution was formulated during the period of the history of the church when Christian scholars found in the philosophy of Aristotle the most useful instrument for articulating Christian doctrine. That period is known as the Scholastic period, or more broadly the Middle Ages. Aristotle's thinking covered a vast range of subjects and offered a set of categories by which, so it was believed, the totality of reality could be subsumed and understood. Among those categories upon which Aristotle reflected were a number dealing with causation, and he differentiated between

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<sup>4</sup> This position was espoused both by Heinrich Hepppe, a Reformed scholar (cited in Reid, *The Authority of Scripture*, 43), and by Cardinal J. B. Franzelin and Christian Pesch, both nineteenth-century Jesuits, although again not exactly in the form which I have given to it. I owe the material on the Jesuits to Bruce Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 71–72.

a variety of kinds of causation to account for the various cause-and-effect relationships he observed in the world.

Of the various categories of causality that Aristotle recognized, the Scholastics found the categories of *instrumental efficient* cause and *principal efficient* cause most useful. A familiar example of these types of causation is a person writing with a piece of chalk. The chalk is the instrumental efficient cause, since the writing depends on its potentialities to make a mark on a blackboard. Yet of itself the chalk is powerless to write. It needs the person to use it, who then functions as principal efficient cause, making use of the potential of the chalk and allowing it to perform its functions.<sup>5</sup>

That kind of thinking was then applied to understanding the way the Bible came into existence. God, the principal efficient cause, so motivated and inspired the biblical author, the instrumental efficient cause, that the author's potential for writing intelligible language was used for purposes, and to write materials, which the author alone could not have done. In that way, one could account for writings that had obviously been written by human beings, yet that would say more than human beings by themselves could have conceived or composed. The analogy had the additional advantage that it would enable one to account for Scripture coming ultimately from God yet being written in thoroughly human thought categories. God moves as principal efficient cause in such a way that the human potential and faculties of the author are in no way subverted or destroyed.<sup>6</sup> Such "inspiration," so it was argued, does not cancel human potentiality so much as it raises it. In that way human potentiality becomes capable of more than it could realize if left to its own devices.

This way of understanding the inspiration of Scripture can also account for the variety of literary styles and the multitude of literary forms found within the pages of inspired Scripture. If God's efficient causation enhances rather than suppresses the human potential, then

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<sup>5</sup> I have drawn this information, along with much else, from the excellent book by Bruce Vawter.

<sup>6</sup> This method is a favorite of more conservative theologians, as for example B. B. Warfield, who argued God shaped the personality of the writer to produce precisely the divine message (*The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*), quoted in Richard D. Land, "A Conservative Response" (Charles R. Blaisdell, ed., *Conservative, Moderate, Liberal* [St. Louis, Mo.: CBP Press, 1990]), 74.

all the natural idiosyncrasies of language and style of a given author, and all the literary conventions of a given time, would naturally appear in Scripture. It simply indicates that God, when he inspires, does not destroy the human element in his instrumental efficient cause.

Implicit in the idea of God as the principal efficient cause of Scripture, and in the attempts to account for the differing quality of portions of the Bible, is the conviction that the divine inspiration of the biblical authors occurs through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Here a distinction has been drawn between the *external* inspiration of the Spirit, and the *internal testimony* of that same Spirit. The latter term, to which we will need to return at a later point, refers to the gift of the Holy Spirit to the reader of Scripture. It is by that gift that the reader is enabled to believe that what is written in Scripture does in fact come from God and is therefore indispensable for salvation. Contrasted to that is the external inspiration of Scripture, by which is meant the fact that the authors wrote the words in the Bible under the power and authority of God working through his Spirit upon those authors. This activity of the Spirit became an issue at the time of the Reformation, and both the Reformers and the Roman Catholic Church affirmed that the Bible had been written by the agency of God's Spirit. Luther held that the authors had been the "channel" or the "tongue" of the Spirit, and Calvin liked to quote Isaiah 59:21, with its reference to "My spirit which rests on you and my words which I have put in your mouth" (NEB), when he spoke of the inspiration of Scripture.<sup>7</sup> The First Vatican Council declared that the biblical books have God as their author because they were written "under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,"<sup>8</sup> and that view was confirmed in the Second Vatican Council, which also declared that all parts of the Bible, Old and New Testaments, were "committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit."<sup>9</sup>

All of that makes it obvious why this way of understanding the inspiration of the Bible was used so frequently in the church from the Middle Ages right down to the present time. It allows one to affirm the human aspects of Scripture, which are evident to anyone who reads it, while at the same time allowing one to affirm that the

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<sup>7</sup> This is discussed in Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration*, 65 (Luther) and 42 (Calvin).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>9</sup> *Constitution on Divine Revelation*, ch. 3, "The Divine Inspiration and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture," par. 11; cf. also pars. 7 and 9.

ultimate impulse for its composition lay not in the mind or intention of the author, but in God, who employed the various authors to accomplish his purpose of causing a Holy Scripture to be written.<sup>10</sup>

All of this is not to say that such a solution resolves every problem associated with trying to understand the way our Scriptures have been inspired. One example of such an unresolved problem lies in the obviously differing quality of the content of the various books of the Bible. Even a rapid reading of, say, Romans and the Song of Songs will show immediately that the former is far more useful for the Christian faith, or even for religious life in general, than the latter. The same would hold true for, say, the Gospel of Matthew or the Gospel of John, and portions of the book of Numbers or the epistle of Jude. How is one to account for such obvious variations in the quality of material inspired by God and contained in Scripture? One can, of course, solve the problem by denying that it exists, i.e., by insisting that the person who notes differing qualities simply shows in that way that he or she is incapable of finding the true message in those portions of Scripture identified as being of lesser quality. For those for whom such a solution is not acceptable, the only other alternative lies in accounting for those differences. One way is to speak of varying levels of inspiration. Thus James Orr, for example, can argue that while in some places the level of inspiration is at a “maximum,” in other places it is operating on a “lower plane” with “feebler energy.”<sup>11</sup> Such a notion is as old as the third century and the church father Origen, who, in an effort to resolve the tensions between the Gospels, thought that in the Gospels the authors wrote inspired material but also expressed their own opinions. Origen thought himself capable of differentiating between the divine and the human elements in both epistles and Gospels, and could even point to places where he felt the biblical authors,

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<sup>10</sup>This analogy was by no means limited to the Scholastics of the medieval period. It also became the favorite analogy, although not so identified, of conservative Protestants in the English-speaking world; see A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, “Inspiration,” *The Presbyterian Review* 2 (1881): 225–60; Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration*, 169–70, as examples.

<sup>11</sup>Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration*, 177–78. William J. Abraham (*The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981], 63) makes the same point, although his method of first defining what inspiration means on a human level, and then applying it to God’s activity with Scripture, is questionable at best. It assumes possible human meanings describe divine reality.

writing their own opinions, could have made mistakes.<sup>12</sup> The same view also surfaced at the time of the Reformation, when Erasmus sought to limit inspiration to those passages of Scripture which dealt with faith or morals. Some Roman Catholic scholars, writing in opposition to the Reformers and their followers, argued for differing kinds of inspiration in matters of prophecy on the one hand and history on the other. In the former instance the content itself was revealed, while in the matter of history, inspiration simply provided the impulse to record the events, perhaps also protecting the author from any errors.<sup>13</sup> Reformed orthodoxy formulated a similar view in its doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture, by which the adherents meant that what is essential to salvation is clear in the Bible, even though other passages may remain puzzling or obscure. Thus, all things necessary for salvation in Scripture may be said to be of divine origin in a way that other, more obscure materials in Scripture were not.<sup>14</sup>

While this problem and others like it continue to evade a solution satisfactory to all those who want to understand Scripture as inspired, the difficulties have not had sufficient force to call into question the broad solution that God is the author of Scripture as principal efficient cause, inspiring by the Holy Spirit the authors of the various biblical books to write down what God wanted to have written down. This solution, though not always expressed in terms of “principal efficient cause,” has maintained itself long after the influence of Aristotle waned, and, indeed, is widely accepted among people who are not even aware that such a way of understanding has anything to do with that Greek philosopher in the first place. The reason for the longevity of that solution lies in the fact that there is a close analogy to such an understanding of inspiration in the biblical figure of the prophet. That is, the Aristotelian idea of principal efficient cause found its best analogy and chief model in the biblical concept of “prophet,” and it is in that form that this way of understanding inspiration has dominated theological reflections on the nature of inspiration to the virtual exclusion of all other forms.

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<sup>12</sup> Cited and discussed in Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration*, 26.

<sup>13</sup> A good survey of this material can be found in *ibid.*, 65–68, 134–36.

<sup>14</sup> See Heinrich Heppe, *Die Theologie der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche* (Neukirchen: Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1958), 12–13.

## INSPIRED AUTHORS

Because this has been such a key concept in Christian reflections on the way the Bible has been inspired, we must look carefully at the way the prophet functioned in the ancient world, both Jewish and Greek, and at the way those ancient cultural concepts functioned in the biblical idea of prophet and prophecy. Such an inquiry will give us a clearer idea of how the prophet was understood to function in his own context by his own contemporaries and how this analogy has been able to function for us as a model of the way in which Scriptures are inspired by God.

While the Old Testament idea of God inspiring his prophets is familiar enough to Christian readers, the fact that the ancient Greeks also had a concept of divinely inspired men and women may not be so familiar. We must have some grasp of it, however, not only to see how it differed from, but also to see in what ways it was similar to, early Hebraic thinking about the way God inspires human beings.

The ancient Greeks were conscious of the fact that poets and philosophers possessed gifts denied to ordinary men and women, and they accounted for these gifts by claiming that such people were inspired by the nine Muses, who gave songs to poets and divine thoughts to philosophers. In the process of such “inspiration” the normal rational powers of a human being were superseded, and the person was no longer in control of himself. Hence, the one into whom the divine Spirit was infused spoke or acted as a “divine man” and from a consciousness or volition other than his normal state of being.<sup>15</sup> It was from this vocabulary that the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, took the word *prophets* to translate the Hebrew word *nabi* to designate those whom God inspired or even possessed.

It is clear, however, that in the classical period of Hebrew prophecy the prophet was understood as a spokesman for God, but not in such a state that he was devoid of his own powers of reason and emotion. If the prophet spoke for God, and was granted visions and

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<sup>15</sup>Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration*, 8–15 has a brief discussion and further references. See also Dewey M. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 127, and Robert Gnuse, *The Authority of the Bible: Theories of Inspiration, Revelation and the Canon of Scripture* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 17.

heard words of commission and of proclamation, he also entered into dialogue with God, thus clearly showing that even under inspiration the prophet remained conscious and in full possession of his or her own powers (see Exod. 3:1 to 4:17; Jer. 20:7–18).

It is precisely because the prophet is the one into whose mouth God has placed his own words, without thereby destroying the prophet as a human being, that the prophet became the model for an understanding of the inspiration of Scripture. Of all the prophets, Jeremiah is perhaps the clearest example of the usefulness of the prophetic model for inspiration. The words that Jeremiah has to speak to Israel were put into his mouth by God himself (Jer. 1:9; 2:1), but even more, Jeremiah at one point is commanded to write down the words that God had dictated to him (36:1–4, 32). Here, clearly, is a model that meets the test of inspiration: words written by human hands whose ultimate source is God. This way of understanding the inspiration of Scripture was then applied to the other books of the Bible and to other literary forms: poems, songs, histories, wisdom sayings, and all the rest. Behind the books of the Bible stand the inspired authors, each of whom wrote down what God wanted to be written down.<sup>16</sup> Such an understanding gives further impetus to the concept that it is the author, not the words he or she writes, that is inspired. Whether spoken or written, the language derives its inspiration from the prophetic person who speaks under divine inspiration, or who writes under the same impulse.

There is another element in Hebrew prophecy, however, which indicates that the prophet was not always in command of himself at the point of prophecy. The opening chapters of Ezekiel, for example (Ezek. 1:1 to 3:15), bear evidence of the reception of visions not understood and of receiving a message that is not communicated through hearing and understanding (2:9 to 3:3; Ezekiel “eats” the scroll with the message he is to speak). This idea of prophecy, familiar on the basis of our discussion of the Greek idea of “possession” by a divine Spirit, also has its roots deep in Israelite history. Driven by forces beyond their control, those early prophets were able to foretell the future, perform acts of clairvoyance, and carry out acts of physical endurance beyond

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<sup>16</sup>So for example Jack W. Cottrell, “The Nature of Biblical Authority: A Conservative Perspective” (Charles R. Blaisdell, ed., *Conservative, Moderate, Liberal* [St. Louis, Mo.: CBP Press, 1990]), 28, 29.

the capacity of normal human beings (e.g., 1 Sam. 10:5–6, 10–13; 19:23–24; 1 Kgs. 18:12, 46; 2 Kgs. 2:16).<sup>17</sup>

It was this model of prophecy, in which the prophetic individual was totally possessed by an alien, albeit divine, force, that was taken over by both Jewish and early Christian scholars as the best way to understand the inspiration of sacred Scripture. Philo attributed prophecy to divine possession and compared inspiration to the surrender of a citadel that was then occupied by another power.<sup>18</sup> The early Christian writer Justin Martyr similarly seems to have understood inspiration in terms of a kind of mechanical dictation, on the analogy to his view of prophecy as a total possession by an outside force, in this case the Spirit of God.<sup>19</sup> Athenagoras, another early Christian author, similarly understood prophecy as an “ecstasy above the natural operations,”<sup>20</sup> and other early fathers, on the analogy of similar views of prophecy, understood the authors of Scripture to be “divine tools” in whom prophecy functioned to make the prophetic individual little more than a musical pick manipulated by the Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

Such an understanding of prophecy, and of the prophet as the model for understanding the inspiration of Scripture, continued its influence in the church through the Middle Ages and into the period of the Reformation. The view hardened in the subsequent period of Protestant orthodoxy: those books written by a prophet or an apostle were canonical, while all others were not.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>For further discussion, see C. H. Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1948), 48–53, and see Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration*, 8–15 for a brief discussion and further references.

<sup>18</sup>So Reid, *The Authority of Scripture*, 168; see also Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration*, 14.

<sup>19</sup>So Markus Barth, *Conversation with the Bible* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), 108; Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration*, 14, 25. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, 132, argues against such a view on the part of Justin, but I think unsuccessfully.

<sup>20</sup>See Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, 133; Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration*, 14, notes Athenagoras also compared the action of the Holy Spirit on the prophet to a piper blowing a flute.

<sup>21</sup>See Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration*, 25: Ignatius, the early Christian bishop of Antioch, attributed his own arguments for monarchical episcopal authority to a similar ecstatic possession by the Spirit, in his letter to the *Philadelphians* 7:1–2. I owe this reference to Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible*, 62.

<sup>22</sup>For a discussion of the scholastic period, see Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration*, 54–58; for Reformed orthodoxy, see Heppe, *Die Theologie der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche*, 10.

This view of inspiration continues to dominate the thinking of the conservative Christian scholars of our time, and is probably also the model assumed by most people who are untrained in theology. It is, to be sure, a simple and useful way to conceive of inspiration: God inspired the author of a given book in the Bible to write down what God wanted written.<sup>23</sup> Modern analyses of the nature of Scripture do make this view difficult to hold with respect to the way those books came into existence, and we must return to that problem in due course. Nevertheless, the prophetic model continues to hold sway in the thinking of many people about inspiration, even when they are not conscious that such thinking has been modeled on the picture of the Old Testament prophet.

The understanding of inspiration on the analogy of prophecy has had a further implication which has played a dramatic part in the discussions about the nature of the Bible in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That implication concerns the kind of literature the inspired biblical authors produced. In its final form, as we shall see, that implication brought about the shift in the locus of inspiration from the person to the written words. That form of understanding inspiration has been designated by the term *plenary* or *plenary verbal* inspiration.

## INSPIRED CONTENT

In its simplest form, such a view of inspiration asserts that God so guided the writers of Scripture by his Holy Spirit that they were incapable of writing anything contrary to his will, or even of writing anything that in any way could be considered untrue.<sup>24</sup> In sum, the words in Scripture are the words that God, not a human being, has

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<sup>23</sup>So, for example, W. A. Criswell: "Everywhere in the Bible we find God speaking. It is God's voice, not man's" (quoted in Donald Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration, and Interpretation* in series *Christian Foundations* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994], 95). A more sophisticated approach to inspiration which nevertheless retains the basic image of the prophet, i.e. the inspired individual, is that of Abraham, *Divine Inspiration*; see esp. 63–65.

<sup>24</sup>See Harold Lindell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 33, for a current use of such a definition; see Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, 145–46, for a quotation from and discussion of B. B. Warfield's classic definition.

chosen. This view of inspiration is by no means a modern invention. Philo, a Jewish scholar whose birth predated the Christian era, retold a story that a similar kind of inspiration had attended the translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek (the Septuagint). The inspiration of the translation was proved by the discovery that, although the translators worked independently of one another, their work was found to agree word for word, as though, Philo said, “dictated to each by an invisible prompter.”<sup>25</sup> In a similar vein, the *Book of Jubilees* tells how Moses wrote the material in Genesis 1 to Exodus 12 at the dictation of the “angel of the presence,” all in accordance with the direct command of God.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the very words themselves come from God.

Such language about the way Scripture was inspired is also found in the early period of the church. The idea, for example, that prophets under divine inspiration could utter things they themselves did not fully comprehend, would lend itself to the understanding that they were simply recording the words God dictated directly to them.<sup>27</sup> Although this language was present in that period, however, it did not represent the dominant view. Nor did the idea of inspiration as the transcription of God’s own dictated words occupy a central position during the Scholastic period, although, again, there are allusions to it. It was not until the period of Protestant orthodoxy that the concept of divine, verbal dictation came to be the dominant way scriptural inspiration was understood. During that period, beginning in the late seventeenth century, a kind of consensus did emerge that inspiration meant that the Holy Spirit had verbally dictated Scripture to its respective authors.<sup>28</sup> One theologian of that period went so far as to conclude that since the Bible had enjoyed such an origin, it would not rightly be considered a creature.<sup>29</sup> The confession that was formulated by the Swiss Reformed Church (*Formula Consensus Helvetica*) affirmed that not only the words but the very letters were inspired.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Life of Moses*, 2.31–37; the quotation is from par. 37.

<sup>26</sup> The *Book of Jubilees*, chs. 1, 2. The tradition here may be drawing on the imagery of Exod. 24:12. For similar language about the Torah in the Talmud, see the discussion in Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, 130–31.

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of the use of such language by the later Scholastics, see Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration*, 60–62; on Aquinas, 55.

<sup>28</sup> See Reid, *Authority of Scripture*, 84–86.

<sup>29</sup> Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration*, 81.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

That kind of view of the inspiration of the Bible tends, however, to raise again questions having to do with the literary style of the Bible. If the Holy Spirit dictated every word, how can one account for differences in style and vocabulary? Above all, how can one account for infelicities of style and grammar? Can God be the source of anything imperfect? That problem also occurred to some early Christian thinkers in their reflections about the Holy Scripture, and they concluded that such diversities were part of the deliberate strategy of God in producing Scripture. They termed this strategy *condescension* or *accommodation*. Dating as early as the time of John Chrysostom, the concept of accommodation simply asserts that since Scriptures were intended to be understood at a particular place and time, with specific intellectual potential and accomplishments, God accommodated his message to the language, thought forms, and modes of expression that would be readily comprehensible. Thus, Scriptures written in different times will be cast in different forms, in each instance, however, in forms understandable to the time when they were produced. In that way, scholars sought, and in some cases still seek, to account for the time-conditioned nature in which those truths were cloaked.<sup>31</sup> If, as such an understanding of Scripture tends to assume, the Bible contains timeless truths, this is one way to account for the time-conditioned form in which those truths were cloaked.<sup>32</sup>

A further implication of the idea that God dictated Scripture through the inspiration of his Holy Spirit appears in the assertion that since God is not false, every word in Scripture must be true. This idea that Scripture is free from all error, whether concerning history, biology, geology, or doctrine, is usually termed *inerrancy* and seeks to defend the Bible against any charge that it contains error of any kind. How could it, if God in fact has, at least figuratively, dictated every word through his Holy Spirit? There are a number of problems with such a defense of the content of the Bible, and it has not, contrary to the assertions of some of its defenders, been the dominant view in the

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<sup>31</sup>For a good discussion of *accommodation*, see *ibid.*, the section beginning on p. 40; see also pp. 60–61.

<sup>32</sup>Some critics have compared such a view of the Bible to the heresy that Christ's human nature was merely appearance, not reality, a view called *docetism*; cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture: Studies in Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 18.

history of the church.<sup>33</sup> There is also the problem of defining *error*. Does it mean a willful untruth on the part of the author? Does it mean a mistake in biology or geology? How can it be squared with the idea of accommodation, in which God spoke in a time-conditioned way, a way our age no longer believes represents scientific truth? For that reason there has arisen a conflict among conservative Christians as to whether the term *inerrancy* is the most useful way to describe what they want to affirm.<sup>34</sup> However such questions be resolved—and again we will want to return to a discussion of them in another context—for many people, inspiration has come to be equated with inerrancy in the most wooden understanding of that term: no mistakes of any sort in any part of the Bible, based on what we as twentieth-century people of Western culture now think to be true.<sup>35</sup> We shall return in the next chapter to a more complete discussion of this way of understanding the inspiration of Scripture.

## IMPACT ON OTHER THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, not only has the understanding of inspiration taken on a wide variety of forms, as theologians sought to find a way to express convictions about the mode of inspiration and the nature of Scripture, but the way in which inspiration is understood has clear implications for the way further theological problems are resolved. We will illustrate such implications by means of four examples: the effect of inspiration on the certainty of faith, on the way the authority of Scripture is understood, on the way

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<sup>33</sup> Again, see the discussion in Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration*, the section beginning on p. 132. This view tends to crop up when the authority of the Bible is perceived to be under attack, as in the period of Protestant orthodoxy, on which see Heppe, *Die Theologie der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche*, 11–12.

<sup>34</sup> For an example, see *Biblical Authority*, ed. by Jack Rogers (Waco: Word Books, 1977), 178–79; Davis, *Debate About the Bible*, ch. 6, beginning on p. 114.

<sup>35</sup> One difficulty with inerrancy of the Bible in scientific matters is that scientific truth, i.e., statements about *the way things are objectively*, tends to change from time to time. Can the Bible be *inerrant* for its contemporary readers in the time of *both* pre-Galilean *and* post-Galilean astronomy? Or was the Bible written to be inerrant only for late twentieth-century Western civilization? We will return to this question below.

the unity of the Bible is expressed, and on the relationship between the Bible and revelation.

The question of the certainty of faith makes it clear that more than theoretical reflections are involved in the way one understands the inspiration of Scripture. One of the questions that defenders of the view of inerrancy like to ask their opponents is: "If the Bible is not true in all its parts, how can you be sure it is true in any of its parts?" That is, if some parts are open to doubt, how can one have any certainty about the credibility of any part? Perhaps the part most needed for our faith is also in error. What then becomes of the certainty of faith?<sup>36</sup> If the Bible is wrong on historical or botanical matters, how can one be sure it is not also wrong in matters necessary to faith, such as the fact that Jesus was God incarnate or that he rose from the dead? With questions such as these, defenders of the view of the inerrancy of Scripture seek to establish the certainty of faith and to call into question the possibility of similar certainty for those who do not share that view of the mode of inspiration.

People who do not regard inerrancy as a valid mode of understanding inspiration, however, will point out that the reasoning which equated certainty with the view of inerrancy is beset with serious problems, principally because the kind of certainty that it desires in religious and historical matters is simply not available outside the realm of logic and mathematics.<sup>37</sup> A further problem consists in the fact that such *knowledge* in matters of our sin and our divine forgiveness through Christ is simply not available, if knowledge be defined as something that we know from publicly verifiable evidence and that is thus immune from doubt. Critics of such a view point out that *knowledge* is here being confused with *faith*, since faith alone is the appropriate stance in the face of our sin and God's merciful forgiveness of it. Such faith cannot be based on a theoretical reflection (inerrancy) that seeks to impose a prior category on revelation and its biblical witness if it is to be accepted as trustworthy.<sup>38</sup> Such critics also point out that people

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<sup>36</sup>This point was made recently in a statement from the 1978 meeting of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, held in Chicago.

<sup>37</sup>A good discussion of this whole problem can be found in Davis, *Debate About the Bible*, 68–77. He points to the origin of such a view of knowledge in the thinking of Descartes, the French philosopher.

<sup>38</sup>See Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, 30–33, on this point.

do not operate in other areas of life on the principle that one mistake or error renders all other statements or acts coming from that source totally untrustworthy. One's trust in a friend is not irrevocably shattered if one finds that in some matter of historical information that friend should prove to be in error. Life has a way of continuing to function even in the absence of absolute certainty, and whatever else the Bible may concern, it is surely about life. Since life is what Scripture is all about, it would be foolish to expect from Scripture a kind of lifeless certainty in matters of sin and salvation. Those who hold that inspiration of Scripture does not imply its inerrancy thus point to the content of Scripture which inspires trust in a living God as the basis for certainty in faith. The view one takes of inspiration will thus have a strong influence on how one defines certainty of faith, and where one looks in Scripture to find it.

If the certainty of faith is bound up, for good or ill, with the view one takes about the nature of inspiration, a second aspect of faith also connected to it is the matter of the authority of Scripture. Obviously, if the Bible does not have its origins in some unique way in the will of God, if it is a book like any other book, then no more authority can be claimed for it than for any other book. The nature and locus of inspiration, in short, will determine the authority that we may claim for Scripture. Whatever authority Scripture will have, therefore, will depend on its relationship to God. Some have sought to define that relationship in terms of the use God makes of Scripture to awaken faith and obedience in those who hear its message. The Bible's authority will then lie not so much in the accuracy of its historical reporting or on its ability to anticipate discoveries of modern sciences. Rather, its authority will lie in the way in which it brings to bear in the contemporary world the significance of the events and people about which it speaks. It will be authoritative as an instrument in accomplishing God's plan of salvation, bearing witness to God's will and to the way he has accomplished his purposes in the past.<sup>39</sup> Others will want to affirm, however, that unless the authority of the Scripture can

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<sup>39</sup>Good discussions of this view can be found in James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1973), beginning on p. 23, and in Barth, *Conversation with the Bible*, in the chapter entitled "The Authority of a Charter of Liberty." Barth remarks that in viewing the Bible as God's instrument to make known his will one must not confuse the tool with the one who uses it, p. 187.

be based on the objectifiable truth contained in Scripture, that authority will be far too subjective in nature to be significant. Unless the authority of Scripture can be an external, objective authority, it will rest too much in the consciousness of the one who reads it, and thus must ultimately be considered too subjective.<sup>40</sup> How we understand inspiration, therefore, will be closely related to the way in which we understand the mode and function of the authority of Scripture.<sup>41</sup>

A further issue, intimately related to the question of the inspiration of Scripture, is the question of the unity of the Bible. Some have sought to solve this question again on the basis of a prior assumption, namely, that if God is the author through inspiration of all Scripture, then Scripture will be a unity because it has but one author. This will be reinforced if one holds that all parts of Scripture are equally inspired, in which case that unitary inspiration will be applicable to all parts of the Bible, and hence, on this prior assumption, all parts will bear the marks of one unified whole.<sup>42</sup> It then becomes the task of the interpreter to find this unity and to explain—or explain away—any parts of Scripture that do not seem to share that unity. It is just at the point of needing to demonstrate from Scripture itself the validity of the prior assumption about its unity that difficulties arise, however. Just as the more conservative view of inspiration faces a major problem in demonstrating its contention that there are no errors of fact in Scripture, so it faces a major problem in attempting to eliminate discrepancies, not to say contradictions, that appear within the pages of the Bible. The classical way of finding unity has been the allegorical method, by which a text may be found to say something other than its more obvious meaning. In any case, a view of inspiration that must posit a consistency of viewpoint throughout Scripture will be severely challenged by any difficulty in demonstrating that consistency passage-by-passage. Any view of inspiration must be able either to explain or to explain away

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<sup>40</sup>This position developed significantly in the period of Protestant orthodoxy, which sought an objective ground of faith beyond that which either Luther or Calvin had found necessary; see Reid, *Authority of Scripture*, esp. 92, 100.

<sup>41</sup>We will return to the understanding of the authority of the Bible in our final chapter.

<sup>42</sup>See James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 65; Hodge and Warfield, "Inspiration," 226.

evidences that would argue against a single, unified theological viewpoint in Scripture. The definition of *unity* will also be significant here, namely, whether unity in doctrine or theology be conceived in a broader or narrower sense. If a narrower sense faces the problem of apparent disunity in Scripture, a broader sense faces the problem of being so broad that any real meaning to unity is lost. However one may define unity, though, one's view of the nature of inspiration will affect what one is able to affirm about the coherence of viewpoint represented in the Bible.

Still another theological issue closely tied up with the way in which inspiration of Scripture is understood concerns the relationship between the Bible and revelation. Those who understand the nature of revelation to be of such kind that it is found in those acts of God by which he sets forth his plan of salvation for humankind, i.e., in the exodus of Israel from Egypt or the career, death, and resurrection of Jesus, will also find the locus of inspiration in those events and will then understand the Bible as the record of such events, and hence as the record of revelation. If God reveals himself in history, indeed in particular events within human history, then the Bible, in identifying those revelatory events, will be a record of those events. In that case, the Bible is the *witness* to God's revelation of himself as righteous savior.<sup>43</sup> Yet, as the Bible itself indicates, those events are capable of being misunderstood and misinterpreted (e.g., false prophets, Pharisaic rejection of Jesus). Can we, some ask, rely on revelation if its understanding is so fragile that it is open to many differing interpretations? If God wanted to reveal himself, would he not do it in a less ambiguous way, especially if our salvation is in some way intimately related to that revelation? In that case, the revelation must be sought not in the events but in the correct interpretation of those events, i.e., in the Bible itself. If one believes that the inspiration of the Bible is directly from God, and includes the words of Scripture themselves, then the locus of revelation will obviously be those words. In that case, the Bible is not the record of or witness to revelation, it is itself revelation. God reveals himself to us in the theological truths re-

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<sup>43</sup> Good discussions of this kind of view can be found in Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration*, 156–59; Barth, *Conversation with the Bible*, esp. 138–39; Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, 165–69. This view was characteristic of the theological movement known as “Neo-orthodoxy.”

corded by the divinely inspired authors.<sup>44</sup> How one understands inspiration, therefore, and how one understands revelation, will closely affect each other, and changes in the one will inevitably bring about changes in the other.

We have now concluded our rapid survey of some of the problems associated with an attempt to formulate an understanding of the inspiration of Scripture, and we have seen how that formulation affects, and is affected by, some other theological problems. Such a survey has indicated the areas within which we move when we approach the problem of the inspiration of the Bible, and it will equip us to understand some of the problems and the issues which are debated among those who hold differing opinions on the nature of that inspiration. We want, therefore, as our next step, to survey two such attempts to formulate an understanding of the nature of scriptural inspiration, attempts which we will call, for lack of better terminology, liberal and conservative.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>This view is frequently characterized with the catchword *propositional revelation*. It is characteristic of the movement known as Fundamentalism.

<sup>45</sup>These are notoriously slippery and indefinite terms. Their meaning is virtually always determined by the theological stance of the one who uses them, and hence they are quite relative. *Liberal* in this context will be applied to those who use it as a self-designation, and *conservative* will be applied to those who use such self-designations as *evangelicals* or *Bible-believing Christians*.