

How Do We Read The Bible?

I'm taking this to ask: What does it mean when the Bible is read, what does it mean to say: this is God's Word?

The privileged position enjoyed by the Bible amongst Christians is expressed in different ways. Some say it is "inspired", some say it is "the truth", some say it cannot err.

Some find it very difficult to accept that there could be anything in the Scriptures that is untrue in any sense at all. I guess this is what I would call a hard-line position.

Others have suggested different ways of understanding the Scriptures as God's Word, and see various modifications of the hard-line statements above.

Philosophically, we have a problem with the Bible as revelation. Revelation is something that we could not know unless God acts to make it known to us. But the Scripture is a human product, requiring a human being to put down on parchment or vellum things previously unthought-of and unwritten. How does a human being write down what a human being cannot know?

The answer to that question has been offered in a variety of ways.

- 1 One of the oldest ways is to speak of God's condescension (*synkatabasis*) whereby God takes the step of accommodating himself to our human weaknesses, and allows us to express the inexpressible in human words. It isn't that we get it right in any comprehensive way, but he accepts the limitation of human language and allows us to know him within the terms that are possible to us. The analogy here is with the incarnation: it is as far as we can see formally impossible for God to become man; so much of what makes up the defined reality of human life contradicts that formal qualities of the eternal God; yet Jesus is truly and fully God and man at the same time. You can't grasp it philosophically, but you can understand some of the effects. Condescension includes God's acceptance of the weaknesses of human authors, who will use metaphor or hyperbole in the interest of getting a hearing or making a point to other weak human beings.

- 2 A second way of discussing the way in which revelation takes place is to employ the word “dictation” to describe what God does. This is a surprisingly frequent notion, in which people as wise as Augustine and Jerome will say that “God dictated Paul’s Letter to the Romans”. In the Reformation this formula proved perfectly acceptable to both sides: in 1546 the Council of Trent clearly states that “This truth and rule are contained in the written books and unwritten traditions which have come down to us, having been received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the apostles by the dictation of the Holy Spirit, and have been transmitted as it were from hand to hand.” This passage was quoted verbatim by the First Vatican Council in 1870. Karl Barth refers to the sacred writers of holy Scripture as acting as *amanuenses* (secretaries), *librarii* (bookmakers), or as *actuarii* (proxy representatives). Calvin too thought the Scriptures were dictated, but not that the writers were stenographers: he finds room for their being afflicted with the obscurity of their times, and notices that Paul does not quote the Scriptures without errors.
- 3 God is the Author - this assertion is very frequent in Catholic and Protestant circles alike; but we should note that in Latin the word “auctor” has a far deeper meaning than “author”, and that it does not imply *literary* authorship so much as the kind of authority which is exercised in creation: the Latin root is agricultural, and implies “one who makes things grow”. This is a very wide term indeed.

Plenary Verbal Inspiration

The ultimate fundamentalist position as derived from the perception of the book you hold in your hand as the inspired Word of God. In the Swiss Protestant *Formula Consensus Helvetica* of 1675 it was asserted that not only the words but even the very letters of Scripture are inspired; the sacrosanctity of Scripture is established. This theory, called Plenary Verbal Inspiration, has the following consequences:

- 1 Every Scripture is the Word of God
- 2 Since God is not false, every word of Scripture is true
- 3 The truth of the Bible is ultimately propositional
- 4 There are no contradictions between the Biblical texts
- 5 The Bible does not simply contain revelation, but *is* revelation.

The Effects of Biblical Scholarship

Anyone who has studied the Scriptures knows that the propositions of Plenary Verbal Inspiration fall short of the facts. Did the inspiration, for

instance, of the prophets come to them in verbal form? How about the prophetic deeds, where the prophets transmitted their message non-verbally, by acting out a message? Secondly, what about the *events* that are revelatory, like the Exodus, or the life of Jesus itself - are these not to be thought of as the *primary* revelations of God in the Old and New Testaments respectively? Thirdly, do we not detect very clearly the processes of human authorship at work in the Scriptures as we have them - for instance, when Ezra quotes the Persian archives, or Paul gives out instructions about his clothes or scrolls? Did not Luke survey the available information he had received from written accounts and from eyewitnesses?

Since the 18th century we have become increasingly aware of the question of quality in the very texts of the Scriptures. Any given page of a translated Bible holds some, often many words which have been chosen as valid after a contest between variant readings. We do not have a single autograph copy of any work of the Scriptures. The question arises: do we believe, as many Eastern Christians do today, that the great translation of the OT into Greek (the Septuagint) was itself inspired? It is itself full of mistranslations and variants. In exact terms, we know that we don't possess a virgin copy of the Scriptures.

Historical criticism taught us that not only the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible which are most sacred to the Jews, but also the four Gospels, were not composed in a single campaign, but by the complex use of former documents and sources, and certainly not by any form of dictation. This discovery has led to opposite conclusions, even within the Protestant schools: some have hardened their line on verbal inspiration, whilst liberal others have abandoned the theory of inspiration altogether. Catholics have not done that, but have modified their understanding of what is actually inspired and what this means. As Galileo challenged the "truth" of Genesis, and at length alerted the Church to the boundaries between scientific and religious forms of discourse, Scripture scholars have opened the way to a more sophisticated understanding of revelation .

I would offer the following thoughts as important to our reception of the Scriptures. The first is to remember the Scriptural author, as a praying, thinking person, whose experience of what God is like helps to mould his thinking and whose living prayer may inspire him to produce a book. It has to be that revelation precedes this process - or he would have nothing to write about! His are the decisions about what is to be included, and how the work should be formulated and arranged. But God is active in this inner dialogue.

Secondly, the Biblical author is not alone. We should not think of him as perched on a solitary eminence, receiving transmitted waves from a dark

sky, but alive within a human faith community, rich already with traditions which feed its members, and which affect profoundly his way of perceiving God. Form-criticism acknowledges this dependence between the author and his community; radical form-critics would reduce the author to a mere scribe, taking down the shared expressions of the group. This way of thinking stopped people talking about “inspiration” altogether.

Thirdly, the arrival of redaction-criticism fortunately redressed the balance, identifying the very real way in which the marshalling and presentation of such community material can be genuine authorship, genuine theology. Fourthly and finally the literary and structural approaches open the way to a text-centred thinking about inspiration. In order to be a text, Scripture needs two operations: one is supplied by the writer, the other by the reader, who can be regarded as mentally re-writing. The doctrine of inspiration says that the Holy Spirit is responsible for the biblical text precisely as text, that is, with regard to both of these human dimensions. For writing, the Holy Spirit is active in all the long processes by which a biblical text is produced within a community of faith – the formulation of traditions, partial texts, early drafts of the books, and final rewriting. As for reading, we predicate inspiration of the biblical text precisely because there is a faith community who, under the Spirit, will read and identify with the text. Or as the second letter to Timothy puts it,

“Every Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in goodness, so that the man or woman of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

NB We say that the Bible as a whole is inspired, and that *therefore* its parts are inspired. We do *not* say that every verse of the Bible is inspired, and that therefore the Bible as a whole is inspired. We must read the Bible as a whole, measuring the parts against the whole; concentration on the inspiration of an isolated text can lead us into fundamentalism.

Finally, you can probably sense in everything that I’ve said how much I believe that the Scriptures demand the Church, presuppose the Church, and depend upon the Church for their recognition and for their correct use. That is why Catholics say that the right to interpret the Scripture correctly belongs to the Church. Or as Karl Rahner succinctly puts it,

Since Scripture is something derivative, it must be understood from the essential nature of the Church, which is the eschatological and irreversible permanence of Jesus Christ in history...God is the inspirer and the author of Scripture, although the inspiration of Scripture is only a moment within God’s primordial authorship of the Church.