

THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE AND THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

For the Orthodox Church, the Scriptures are completely authoritative, and none may blatantly contradict them and still claim to stand within the theological mainstream of the Church. All of the Fathers without exception accepted the authority of the Holy Scriptures, and regarded it as axiomatic that the Church must be faithful to their teaching.

Nonetheless, to use the term “the inspiration of Scripture” is already to step away somewhat from the Orthodox approach to Scripture. The term “inspired Scripture” today seems to the Orthodox to presuppose a text which stands (or at least *can* stand) apart from the community of faith in which it was produced and in which it is read. It seems to the Orthodox to answer a question about the authority of *Scripture*, when the Orthodox approach is to deal primarily with the authority of the *Church*.

Thus, the term seems to deal with the question, “Why should I accept that the New Testament is true and reliable in its teaching about Jesus and the Christian Faith?” To this question, the answer is provided, “Because the Scriptures are inspired.”

This is, I submit, a uniquely post-Renaissance, western and Protestant approach, and moreover, one that inevitably leads to certain problems.

This essay will deal with two non-Orthodox approaches to the question of the inspiration and authority of Scripture, and then will offer an Orthodox approach to matter.

TWO NON-ORTHODOX APPROACHES TO THE NEW TESTAMENT¹

1) Scripture as Inspired Text

In this approach, Scripture is viewed as something fundamentally different from all other kinds of literature. All other writings are in the category of “non-inspired”. That is, they may be true, helpful, inspirational in the devotional sense, and many other good things besides, but they are not inspired, because they are merely the products of human wisdom. Human beings created them, and so these writings bear and are limited by the fallibility found in all human beings, however smart and pious they may be. As such, the Church is free to agree with these human writings or to disagree with them, but they can never be placed on par with Scripture, because Scripture is inspired, whereas these writings are not.

What makes the difference between the inspired texts and the merely human uninspired ones? The way in which they were produced. In this view, God is involved in the creation of the texts by working upon the individuals who are writing them (St. Paul, for example), guiding them in what they write so that the result of their writing is The Word of God.

It is not necessary to view this individual guidance of the human writers as a kind of divine “automatic writing”, so that the human personality and mind are completely set aside while God guides their thoughts and hands. This theory (often referred to—or stigmatized—as the theory of “mechanical dictation”) need not be so crude. In this view there is room for the personality, skill, intention and literary habits of the writer. But regardless of the sophistication of the view of how the process of inspiration works, the holders of this view assert that God works uniquely upon the writers *as they write*.

¹ Though the New Testament is of course part of Scripture generally, this essay will focus primarily upon the New Testament, and this for three reasons: 1) The New Testament is the primary and usual source for the Church’s teaching about Jesus and for its presentation of the Christian Faith; 2) In a discussion about the Church, the New Testament has a more organic connection to its life than do the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures; and 3) Though the canonical Scriptures include both the Old and New Testaments, the Old Testament stands somewhat apart from the New. Its authority was of a somewhat different kind—prophetic and not apostolic. That is, the Old Testament writers spoke as prophets (compare the description of David in Acts 2:30), so that their prophetic “Scriptural” utterances were not as connected with their daily authority as was the case with the apostles (not all of David’s daily utterances were prophetic).

Thus, inspiration is viewed somewhat like a light switch: it is either “on” or “off”. If inspiration is functioning (that is, if the switch is “on”), then the written product is Inspired Scripture. If inspiration is not present (that is, if the switch is “off”), then the written product is *not* Inspired Scripture. It can be wonderful and helpful. It can (in the words of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer regarding the “Apocrypha”, be read “for example of life and instruction of manners”. But it may not be called canonical Scripture or placed on the same level as Scripture, because it is not inspired.

It seems (to this present writer, who admittedly has never been a Muslim), that this view has much in common with the Islamic view of the Koran. Islam views the Koran as given to the Prophet Muhammad by a kind of direct dictation, so that the Koranic text is literally the Word of God. Its authority derives entirely from its origin. The Prophet may have done many things and said many things which can serve as examples to pious Muslims. But none of his other utterances are on par with the Koran, because none of them were received by this kind of direct dictation. The inspiration switch was “on” after God said, “Recite!” and dictated the Koran, and then it was turned “off”. To this Orthodox writer, the views of many Protestants seem to have much in common with this Islamic approach. Like many things in Islam, (such as their impressive approach to monotheism), it has the virtue of simplicity. But like these other things, it is perhaps a bit too simple.

One advantage to this Protestant view of the inspiration of Scripture is that it does preserve Scripture’s authority. The Lord Jesus assumed without question the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures (see “the Scripture cannot be broken”; Jn. 10:35; “It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for a stroke of a letter of the Law to fail”; Lk. 16:17). As mentioned above, the Fathers of the Church in the succeeding centuries held the same view. The Protestant view we are considering has the virtue of preserving the authority of Scripture so that the texts are as authoritative for the modern Protestant as they were for the Church Fathers. Nonetheless, there are difficulties with this view—or at least differences from the view held by the Fathers.

The first difficulty (or if one prefers, the first difference) is that this view separates the writing man from the living man. By this I mean that the writer of Scripture, while he is in the act of writing, is separated from the rest of his life. While the inspiration switch is “on”, he is temporarily elevated above his normal manner of living. Thus, St. Paul’s Epistles (written while the switch was “on”) possess an authority which St. Paul does not have when he is not writing New Testament Epistles.

This is somewhat problematic, for St. Paul himself wrote to his churches as if he possessed complete authority even when not writing Epistles (compare 2 Cor. 10:10-11). It seems that he expected to be obeyed simply because he was Christ’s true apostle. His authority derived from this, not because he had been chosen to write what became Scripture. St. Paul the writer possessed (or he thought so anyway) the same authority as St. Paul the speaker. This authority derived from his apostleship—which remained whether or not he was writing.

The second difficulty with this view is that it separates the writer of Scripture from the Church community in which he is rooted. This inevitably follows from what was said above. The apostle wrote with authority, not just because he was endowed with apostolic authority from Christ, but also because, as an apostle, he reproduced the teaching accepted throughout the whole Church. In other words, because he wrote as part of an over-arching Tradition. For apostles did not exist in isolation from the Church, but as part of it—a foundational part of it, to be sure (Eph. 2:20), but a part of it nonetheless. They are but one gift given to it, along with prophets and teachers (Eph. 4:11, 1 Cor. 12:28). This view which makes their writings authoritative because they are inspired threatens this concept of apostleship as set *within* the Church, for it leads one to regard the texts as standing *above* the Church, and not as *a part* of it.

2) Scripture as Literary Text

A second view of Scripture found today is that which views it as primarily a literary text like any other literary text of antiquity. This view does not necessarily absolutely deny Scripture’s authority, but it tends to relativize it. Scripture may still have many great insights, and the Church must listen to it and be guided by its general message. But when all is said and done, according to this view, the writers of

Scripture, being men of their time, could make mistakes. The Bible, according to his view, can be called “the Word of God” because it is said to *contain* the Word of God. Behind this pious-sounding ambiguity though, holders of this view want to reserve the right to say that this or that teaching in the New Testament is *not* the Word of God. (St. Paul especially comes in today for a hard time.) A process of selection comes into play. As an Orthodox, the present writer cannot but recall the words of St. Augustine: “If you believe in the Gospel only those things you agree with, it is not the Gospel you believe in but yourself.”

Though the Fathers made use of the scholarly tools of their day (one thinks of the use of the Hexapla), it can be said that this view cannot be found in the Church earlier than the Enlightenment. Like Enlightenment thinking generally, it exalts the use of reason, and makes reason the tool for interpreting the Scriptures.

This view (prevalent in many western theological colleges) has the advantage of taking seriously the individual styles and purposes of each of the writers of Scripture. It is often very ingenious in analyzing each word and speculating about the genesis of this or that *logion* of Jesus. It takes the humanity of the Scripture with great seriousness.

From the Orthodox perspective, there are several difficulties with this view as well. First and foremost among them, for the Orthodox, is that it is radically inconsistent with the approach of the Fathers. St. Augustine (a western favourite) may be quoted as typical of both western and eastern Fathers: “I have learned to hold those Books alone of the Scriptures that are now called canonical in such reverence and honour that I do most firmly believe that none of their authors has erred in anything that he was written therein.” (*Letter 82*, to Jerome).

Many, however, do not share the Orthodox Church’s reluctance to part company with the Fathers, and so the fact that this view is contrary to the Fathers is not, to their mind, a disadvantage. There is, however, another difficulty, one of a practical nature.

This view of the Scriptures as a literary text not different in kind from other literary texts of antiquity involves a belief in the supremacy of reason—or at least of the adequacy of reason for discovering its meaning. During the Enlightenment, the adequacy of reason to interpret the Scriptures (or anything else, come to that) was unquestioned in the west. Even the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century seem to have taken it for granted that if only the sacred text could become available in the vernacular language of the people then any farmer’s plow-boy could understand it. (It was, if memory serves, William Tyndale who boasted that he would do just that².) In those days, the basic meaning of the Scriptures was thought to be clear, and required no “interpretative lens” through which to view it (such as the consensus of the Fathers, which forms the Orthodox “lens”.) A clear head and a careful reading were all that were necessary.

Since the days of the sixteenth century, it has been proven that the Scripture was perhaps not as clear as was once thought, and that if there was wide-spread agreement between Reformation scholars (for example, about the sinfulness of homosexual acts, or the legitimacy of the ordination of women, to cite two timely modern examples), it was because of what those sixteenth century readers brought *to* the text, not from what they read *out of it*.

The supremacy of reason as the chosen tool for interpreting the Scripture has meant, in practice, the supremacy of men of reason. Or, to put it bluntly, of university professors. If the Scripture is recognized as needing careful interpretation to discover its meaning, then how do we discover its meaning? The Roman Catholic Church relies upon its Magisterium, led by the Bishop of Rome. The Orthodox (as said above) rely upon the consensus of the Fathers. Both the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox rely, in their own ways, upon the infallibility (or reliability, if one prefers) of Church Tradition.

Much of modern academia, embracing the view of Scripture as literary text, does not rely on such Tradition (though of course academic scholars will listen to its insights and strive to learn from antiquity). But Tradition is not an *authoritative lens* for interpreting Scripture—modern academia reserves the

² Tyndale’s memorable quote can be found in A. Lane’s essay, “William Tyndale and the English Bible”, in turn found in the volume “Great Leaders of the Christian Church”, ed. J.D. Woodbridge, Moody Press, 1988.

freedom to disagree with the Tradition just as it reserves the freedom to disagree with this or that teaching of St. Paul.

Since scholars do not speak with an undivided voice, it becomes difficult for the churches at large to determine just what is the authoritative meaning of the New Testament. It would seem that there is no such thing as a scholarly consensus, but rather a series or cluster of different consenses, each depending upon which circles one travels in and what scholars one reads. Thus there is an all but unanimous liberal consensus that St. Paul did not actually write the Pastoral epistles, but not necessarily such a consensus among evangelicals. Scholar differs dramatically from scholar (often making their careers out of such disagreements). Moreover, the proverbial “assured results of modern criticism” are often only assured for a limited time, until someone later successfully challenges those results.

Modern academia is, therefore, not so much an authoritative interpreter of the New Testament as a forum for debate about it. (In fairness to academia, that is all that it claims to be.) And though this is enough for a university, it is not enough for a church, for the humble and faithful laity (called the *plebs sancta Dei* by Gregory Dix in his memorable phrase³) need to know the meaning of the texts that are central to their religious lives. As C.S. Lewis once wrote in a letter, “We laymen are ignorant and timid. Our lives are ever in our hands, the avenger of blood is on our heels, and of each of us his soul may this night be required”.⁴ Though perhaps dramatically stated, the point is well made that the Church at large needs an interpretation of the New Testament upon which it can confidently rely. The view of Scripture as mere literary text does not meet this practical need.

AN ORTHODOX APPROACH TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Orthodox Church has an approach different from those two previously described. (This is not, of course to deny that other churches may share such a view. I am making no claims to exclusivity for the Orthodox Church. One may, if one wishes, view the “O” in “Orthodox” as a small “o”.)

In this view, the New Testament Scripture is accepted as authoritative not because of any special process of inspiration which accompanied the writers while they wrote, but rather because the writings are apostolic. The apostles were the living authority in the first century Church, and their words carried weight because of this personal authority. Thus both what they said while present and what they wrote in epistles while absent were equally to be obeyed (compare 2 Thess. 2:15: “Hold to the traditions you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by our epistle”). After the apostles reposed, their writings continue to carry such weight in the Church.

In this view, the writer is not separated from his writings, for both carry the same authority. Also, the writer is not separated from his community, for the apostolic writings and reminiscences (that is, the Epistles and the Gospels) witness to the one Tradition over-arching the entire Church. The apostolic message in one epistle is part of the fabric of the whole apostolic Tradition found in every church. (That is how, by the way, one can discern the truly apostolic from the merely ancient. The so-called “Gospel of Thomas” is not authentically apostolic because it speaks with a voice that is different from the rest of the Tradition.)

The Orthodox approach to Scripture is also characterized by liturgical experience. The weekly Eucharistic assembly is constitutive of the Church—it is by coming together for the Eucharist, week by week, that the Church renews its fullness and remains what she is. It is in this assembly that the New Testament Scriptures are chanted and find pride of place.

This chanting is not just a reading of an ancient text. It is the living voice of Christ and His apostles, speaking directly to the trembling heart of the believer. This experience of Christ in the proclamation of the New Testament texts is definitive for the Orthodox believer. The Church’s faith, expressed by her liturgical worship, become the context and the lens through which the New Testament is read.

³ The Shape of the Liturgy, Dacre Press, 1978, p. 744.

⁴ Quoted in “God in the Dock”, ed. W. Hooper, Eerdmans, 1970, p. 333.

That does not mean, of course, that the New Testament is read only during liturgical services. Rather, liturgical experience and the insights gathered while there become normative for a private reading of the Scriptures. The Scriptures are read *in church*, as it were, even after the services are over.

This means that the consensus of the Fathers govern the Orthodox interpretation of the New Testament, for the Fathers' approach is found and expressed through the liturgical services. The Orthodox believer reads the New Testament over the shoulders of the Fathers, being guided by the patristic insights and attitudes (though not necessarily by every single conclusion; scholarly discovery still has its humble place).

Foremost in this patristic attitude is humility before the sacred text. As God spoke through the prophet Isaiah, "This is the one to whom I will look—the one that is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at My Word" (Is. 66:2). The Orthodox scholar will approach the texts with reverence and with a trembling heart, knowing that heaven and earth will pass away (and scholars with them), but the words of Christ will never pass away (Mt. 24:35). The Word he reads is more alive than he is.

This approach is not so much one of sentimental piety, as it is one of wholistic earnestness. Though the Orthodox scholar must use his reason in approaching the text, he knows that the text is not addressed to his head alone, but to him in his entirety, to the whole man. The Scripture is not given to the Church simply to be studied, but to be lived.

Thus when St. John of Damascus describes the Church's use of the Scriptures, he writes, "To search the Scriptures is a work most fair and most profitable for souls. For just as the tree planted by the streams of waters, so also the soul watered by the divine Scripture is enriched and gives fruit in its seasons, viz. orthodox belief, and is adorned with evergreen leafage, I mean, actions pleasing to God." (*Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Bk. 4, ch. 17). For the Orthodox Church, the goal is not simply to understand the sacred texts, but to apply them in one's daily life. The texts are given, like every other gift in the Church, to aid the Christian in his ongoing transfiguration.

--Archpriest Lawrence R. Farley