

§ 2. Doctrine of Revelation

Lecture 4

Inspiration

In our lessons we have been thinking about how God reveals himself in special ways to mankind through his living Word (his Son Jesus Christ), through his written Word in Holy Scripture, and through particular revelations made to individuals such as dreams, visions, and so forth. The principal way in which we know God's Word today is through the Holy Scripture. Few of us are beneficiaries of particular revelations, and Jesus Christ is now ascended and seated at the right hand of the Father, so we are relying upon God's revelation in Holy Scripture as his Word to us.

This then brings us to the question of the inspiration of Scripture. The Scriptures are inspired of God. 2 Timothy 3:16 is the *locus classicus* for this teaching: "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." Notice what is said here about the inspiration of Scripture. It is the Scripture itself that is inspired by God. The word here means "God-breathed." Inspiration is not primarily a property of the *authors* of Scripture. It is a property of *the text itself*. Very often people will think the authors of Scripture were inspired by God to write what they did. But that is not, in fact, what 2 Timothy 3:16 says. It is not that the authors of Scripture were inspired; it is rather that the end product is inspired – what they wrote (the text) is God-breathed. So inspiration is first and foremost a property of the text, not of the authors of the text. I think we will see that that is very important.

That doesn't mean, of course, that the authors of Scripture were bereft of the direction of the Holy Spirit in what they said or wrote. Look at 2 Peter 1:19-21:

And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Here, at least with respect to prophecies that are contained in Scripture, he says that the Holy Spirit was involved in carrying along (and the word there for "moved by the Holy Spirit" means literally "borne along" or "carried along"). So these prophets – when they spoke a revelation from God – it was the Holy Spirit which was moving them or bearing them along so that what they spoke was from God.

In the passage in Timothy we see that inspiration is first and foremost a property of the text. It is the text that is God-breathed and is inspired by God and therefore is God's Word to us. But secondly we see from 2 Peter that the authors of Scripture were also moved by the Holy Spirit to say what they did say.¹

That is the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. We want to ask then, "What about the extent of inspiration?" Here we want to note three properties of inspiration of Scripture.

1. Scriptural inspiration is *plenary*. That is to say, all of Scripture is inspired by God. That is what 2 Timothy 3:16 says. All Scripture is inspired by God. So it is not just some of it that is inspired by God, but all of it. The Scripture bears the property of plenary inspiration. So you can't set aside certain books of the Bible as uninspired and regard others as genuinely inspired. All Scripture is inspired by God.

2. Scriptural inspiration is *verbal*. That is to say, the very words of Scripture are inspired. The property of plenary inspiration speaks to the breadth of inspiration. Verbal inspiration speaks to the depth of inspiration. It is not just all of the books of the Bible are inspired by God. That is the plenary inspiration. But it is also right down to the individual words that are used. The individual words are inspired by God. That is what is meant by verbal inspiration.

To show that this is the attitude of the authors of Scripture toward Scripture, look, for example, at the way in which the authors of Scripture will sometimes base an argument upon a single word or even a single letter in the text in order to make a theological point. For example, in John 10:34-36, Jesus is disputing with religious leaders of his time about his claim to be the Son of God. In John 10:34-36 we read:

Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'?" [quoting from the Psalms.] If he called them gods to whom the word of God came (and scripture cannot be broken), do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?"

Never mind the argument here that Jesus gives for why he is not blaspheming. That is not the key. What we want to notice is that when Jesus quotes the Psalms it concerns a single word that is found in Psalm 82:6, namely, the word "gods." If the psalmist can call these people gods then Jesus says, *Why am I blaspheming when I say I am the Son of God*. His argument relies on a single word in the Old Testament text – the word "gods."

Similarly, look at Paul's argument in Galatians 3:16. Here he is talking about the promises made to Abraham and his seed. Paul says,

¹ 5:00

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many; but, referring to one, “And to your offspring,” which is Christ.

Again, never mind the argument that Paul is giving here. The point is that the argument he is giving depends upon the single word “offspring” or “seed,” whether it is in the plural or the singular. He says the prophecy doesn’t say plural (to your “seeds” or to your “offsprings”), but to your seed (your offspring) – singular – and that is Jesus Christ. He sees this passage as referring primarily to Christ. Whatever you think of Paul’s argument, the point is that the argument hinges upon the difference between a single word of Scripture, whether it is in the plural or the singular.²

So inspiration of Scripture cannot be taken to be just a sort of general ideas of Scripture being inspired – that what God has inspired is the sort of idea in a verse or a passage – but it doesn’t extend to the very words. I think we have seen that the argument that is often given is sometimes dependent upon a single word or verbal form, therefore it cannot be treated as simply the general idea that the author is sharing as inspired, but the author was able to pick whatever words he wanted to express it.

Theologians are wont to speak of Scripture as God’s propositional revelation. When you hear this term you must not take the word “propositional” to mean what philosophers mean by propositions. This can be very confusing. When a philosopher talks about a proposition, he means the information content of a sentence. The same proposition can be expressed by completely different sentences. For example, the sentence “snow is white” is an English sentence. “Der Schnee ist weiß” is a completely different sentence. They don’t have any words in common. The German has four words in it; the English has three words in it. Yet they both express the same proposition. They have the same propositional content – the same information content – namely that snow is white. So when philosophers talk about propositions, that is what they mean. They mean the information content that is expressed by sentences. But that is not what theologians are talking about when they talk about God’s propositional revelation. What theologians mean by propositional, I think, would be better expressed by the word “sentential.” That is to say, the sentences of Scripture are inspired by God. God has revealed himself in his Word, Jesus Christ, in a living person, but he has revealed himself in Scripture in sentences. He has inspired certain linguistic utterances. These are, therefore, his Word to us. So don’t confuse the notion of propositional revelation with what philosophers mean because otherwise you wouldn’t get verbal inspiration. If you say that God has merely inspired the propositional content of a sentence in the philosopher sense then that won’t give you, for example, “snow is white,” “la neige est blanche,” or “der Schnee ist weiß.” Any of those would be a verbal expression of the same propositional content. So there is

² 10:04

a temptation, I think, to say as a philosopher, “What God has inspired are not really the words of Scripture; he has inspired the propositional content of Scripture and this can come to expression in different ways.” So a German Bible, for example, is just as much inspired as an English Bible. They both have the same inspired propositional content. But that is, again just to emphasize this, not what theologians mean when they talk about propositional revelation. They really mean sentential revelation – that God has revealed himself in Hebrew and Greek sentences (linguistic utterances). He hasn’t revealed himself in German, or English, or Sanskrit. He has revealed himself in Hebrew and Greek sentences.

This has the rather odd implication, I think, that only the Greek and Hebrew text is actually the inspired Word of God. If you take verbal revelation seriously then it is these Hebrew and Greek words that are inspired by God. It is not my English Bible. These words were not inspired by God.³ The words that God inspired that are God-breathed are these original Greek and Hebrew words, which is why I think we have such a tremendous incentive to learn the biblical languages so that we can work with Greek and Hebrew dictionaries and other tools to understand the text and the original meaning.

I must say, as I think about this, the notion of verbal inspiration actually comes, I think, very close to the Muslim idea of the Qur’an. The Muslim would say that when you read your English Qur’an that you are not really reading the Qur’an because you are not reading the original Arabic. So if you look at an English Qur’an, it will typically say on the front cover, “The translation of the Qur’an.” This is not really a Qur’an. It is a translation of the Qur’an. I reluctantly think that this is pretty much the position that verbal inspiration also commits us to as Christians. The text that is inspired of God is the original Hebrew and Greek sentences. What I have here is an English translation of the Word of God. If it is a good translation, it is going to give me in the philosopher’s sense the same propositional content. I will be able to understand the propositional content that the Hebrew and Greek expressed. But in terms of what is inspired – remember we said all Scripture is inspired by God; it is not the authors of Scripture that are inspired, it is the text that is inspired of God and that is God-breathed – what text are we talking about? It seems to me the conclusion is inescapable – it is the Hebrew and Greek text. That is what is inspired by God. It underlines the importance of trying to get back to the original text when we are doing exegesis or Bible study to make sure we understand it because sometimes our translations are inadequate or misleading.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Beyond the languages that we would study, would we also ask the question which version? Let’s say we have multiple transcripts – which one is correct?

³ 14:57

Dr. Craig: Absolutely! I hope you understand his question. His question is about, “What is the original text?” We don’t have the autographs anymore, which are the original manuscript that Paul actually wrote, for example, to the Colossians, or the Gospel of Luke that was actually written by Luke. What we have are copies of copies of copies. We know that in the transcription and handing on of the text, lots of copyist errors get introduced. Hundreds of thousands of copying errors get introduced into the transmission of the text. So biblical scholars are vitally concerned with being able to reconstruct the original text as accurately as possible. Fortunately, in the case of the New Testament, we have been able to do this with an enormous degree of accuracy. Of the 138,000 words contained in the New Testament, I believe it is only around 1,400 words that are still uncertain. We are not exactly sure what the text read in those cases. None of these are significant. No doctrine hangs upon one of these textual variants. For example, one would be in 1 John when he says, “We write this that our joy may be full.” Other manuscripts say, “We write this that your joy may be full.” The difference is the personal pronoun “our” or “your.” We are not sure what the original text said in that case. So if you have a Greek New Testament, at the bottom of the page it will have what is called an apparatus where it will list the various textual variants and the degree of confidence that we have in the text that we have reconstructed.

Unfortunately, some unscrupulous persons, such as Bart Ehrman, have tried to exploit this uncertainty on the popular level by implying that the text of the New Testament is hugely uncertain because all these copyist errors have been introduced.⁴ But what he doesn’t make clear to the layperson is that it is the very task of the critical scholars to compare the wealth of manuscripts that we have so as to be able to determine what is the original reading. I remember hearing an interview with Ehrman on a radio talk show where the radio interviewer at one point said, *Well, what do you think the original text of the New Testament really said?* And Ehrman said, *What do you mean?* And he said, *You explained all these copying errors got introduced. So what do you think the original really said?* And Ehrman said, *It said pretty much what the text we have today says.* And he said, *But I thought you said there were all these uncertainties and errors and so forth in the transcription?* And Ehrman said, *Oh, well, yeah, but we’ve been able to reconstruct the original text. So we now know with like 99% confidence what the original text said.* So you can see that that puts a very different complexion on the matter.

But your question is quite right. If it is the original Greek and Hebrew that is God-breathed then absolutely it is going to be important that we reconstruct the original text to the best of our ability, and that we read Bibles that are based upon translations of the very best and oldest manuscripts. That is why, for all its literary beauty, the King James Bible really shouldn’t be used by Christians in serious Bible study today. It is based upon the

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Byzantine family of texts which is the worst and most corrupted family of New Testament texts. But when you have a modern translation like the Revised Standard Version, or the American Standard Version, or the English Standard Version, or the NIV, you are going to be reading an English translation based upon the very best manuscripts that are available today. So you can have a very high degree of confidence that when you read these words, at least in the original Greek, you are reading the very words that Paul or Luke or John wrote.

Student: I've heard it said that in some of these situations you can debate what the intent of the Scripture was. You go back to how one would interpret a Greek or Hebrew word. For example, the defense of homosexual behavior. I've heard said that in the original text the word used sometimes means "relationships between men and boys" not necessarily just between two men. Was the intent that, instead of homosexual behavior between two men? How does one then sort through this – even though you have the original word, the intent of that use of that word?

Dr. Craig: You are pointing out that this sort of word study is crucial and common in exegeting the New Testament. You are right in your example in Romans 1, some will try to defend homosexual relations by saying what is really being condemned here is pederasty, the use of boys by men for sexual pleasure. But then others will look at the text and defend that that is not at all really what the text is about, particularly when he talks about women having unnatural relations with other women. But this is the way exegesis proceeds. It is just inevitable that people will appeal to the original Greek text in order to justify their interpretation. Here the layperson is frankly at the mercy of these scholars because he doesn't know who is right. So I think that the best thing that the layperson can do (apart from learning Greek himself or learning how to use Logos software⁵, for example) would be to find scholars that you have real confidence in that you can trust and whose judgment then you can put your confidence in as making a reliable verdict.⁶ I just don't see any way to get around that.

Student: What role does a concordance play in moving a layperson closer to, for example, the King James Version is notoriously unreliable but there is a concordance that they have for that. Does that in any way help bring the layperson closer to what either the intent or what the actual words could have been translated?

Dr. Craig: Not as I understand the word concordance. My English Bible has a concordance in the back which is sort of like a verbal index. If I look up the word "rejoice" it gives me all of the biblical references to where "rejoice" is used. Here is "reign" and all the verses where that word appears. Or "remembrance" or "remove." A concordance is just like an index to the translation. It is a subject or name index. But it is

⁵ See <http://www.logos.com> (accessed December 7, 2014)

⁶ 25:05

based upon the English (in this case) and not on the original Greek or Hebrew. So the concordance isn't really what you need. What you need is a Bible dictionary, not a concordance. If you get a Bible dictionary, it will go from A to Z on these different topics, and it will give you the original languages and the nuances and so forth. So, for example, if you were to pick up your Bible dictionary and look up the entry on "Satan" (you want to read about Satan) it will tell you about the different words that are used in Hebrew and Greek for this figure, where he appears in extra-biblical literature of the time, and give you this kind of deeper knowledge of the way the words are used. I think every mature Christian should have a good Bible dictionary on his shelf that he can turn to when he is doing serious Bible study.

Student: There seems to be this assumption that 2 Timothy 3:16 is also applicable to the New Testament – that the New Testament is also inspired. How do we know that all the New Testament qualifies as Scripture?

Dr. Craig: Right. Obviously, 2 Timothy isn't talking about the New Testament. It is talking about the Jewish Scriptures that Timothy had learned since he was a child. Your question will be having to do with why we should regard the New Testament as inspired. We will take up that question a little bit later. But you are quite right in saying 2 Timothy is speaking about the Old Testament Hebrew Bible.

Student: What about a commentary?

Dr. Craig: I think commentaries are also very illuminating on the text. I would encourage you, when you are doing a Bible study or a book study, to get some good commentaries by, again, trusted authors. For example, one of the things that I did in my devotions several years ago was I got the commentary by William Lane (no relation!). He was a fine New Testament scholar on the Gospel of Mark. This is a small, one-volume commentary on Mark written by a fine New Testament scholar. What I would do is read a little passage in the book of Mark for that morning and then I would read Lane's comment on the book of Mark. And, wow, was that illuminating! It just really shed lots of background information on the text and helped me to see applications and meanings that Mark had that I might have missed. So quite definitely, commentaries are also, I think, a great tool for us to use especially when we are doing book studies.

I guess here we are sort of talking about what ought to be in a Christian's library. I think it is sad how the average Christian is just completely unaware of these resources. Yet they are abundant. There are just hundreds of these things that are out there if you just know where to look for them. Every one of us ought to have a Bible dictionary, we ought to have several different translations of the Scriptures so we can compare them with each other, then if we are doing a book study I think we should get some good commentaries

on these. If you don't want to buy them, you can check them out of the library. In fact, here at the church you can get these sorts of things free.⁷

Student: [inaudible]

Dr. Craig: Really? Crosswalk.org? OK.

END DISCUSSION

That brings us to the end of the session. What we will do next time is talk about the property of Scripture being confluent, that is to say, both the product of human authorship and divine authorship, and ask what theory of inspiration can help us to best understand how Scripture can be both the Word of God and the word of man simultaneously.⁸

⁷ 30:05

⁸ Total Running Time: 30:57 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)