

# ***THE INSPIRATION OF THE BIBLE***

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## **CHAPTER TWO**

### Overview

- The various theories about Biblical inspiration
- How the theory of Biblical inspiration affects the translation process
- The superiority of the Plenary Inspiration Theory.

#### **Objectives**

1. To investigate the theology of Biblical inspiration from an historical viewpoint.
2. To analyse the historical data and determine whether the Church's understanding of Biblical inspiration has developed through out the ages.
3. To survey the Church's response to Liberalism in the era of "enlightenment" with the formulation of the *Mechanical Dictation* or *Verbal Inspiration* theory.
4. To discover from the Scriptures themselves the correct view of Biblical inspiration.

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## **THE VARIOUS THEORIES ABOUT BIBLICAL INSPIRATION**

The English word 'Bible' comes from the Greek word *biblion*. This word meant "roll" or "book". It was usually a roll of papyrus or reed-like plant that was dried and fashioned into a writing material. This word occurs in the LXX copy of Daniel 9:2, and in Revelation 10:2. But today the word "Bible" means much more than just a book. It carries a sense of majesty as being the ultimate book par excellence.

The Bible was penned by men. Although written by men, the Bible claims that the Holy Spirit was its author (2Timothy 3:16). In a way that can only be described as mysterious, He was able to take the personalities, experiences, emotions and poetic talents of various men and use them to precisely express God's revelation to man. Theologians, however, debate the process of this inspiration. Some refer to it as *Plenary Inspiration*. It stands in contrast to another view called *Natural Inspiration* (the product of highly intelligent men), *Partial*

*Inspiration* (only some parts of the Bible are inspired), and *Mechanical Dictation/Verbal Inspiration* (God commanded men to write verbatim the very words He uttered).

The theology of Biblical inspiration was not formerly developed until about 1580.<sup>1</sup> Prior to this, inspiration of the books within the Canon were taken for granted. There are some elementary thoughts about inspiration in early Christian theology that reflect a general understanding of what is commonly accepted today.

The theory of *Plenary Inspiration* considers that God inspired the writings of various authors (as distinct from the authors themselves). Within the inspiration process of their writings God was able to take the creative abilities of these authors and inspire them to produce the *perfect* Word of God (Psalm 19:7). The result of this process was that we now have a Bible that often exposes the heart, emotions, and trials of its authors. We find this throughout the Psalms of David and the epistles of Paul. Within this theory, the inspiration of God's Word is more concerned about conveying the mind of God through the literary expression of its authors, than it is about the mechanical dictating of precise words.



An artist's impression of Mark writing his gospel (1430 AD)

The Mechanical Dictation theory of inspiration says that God gave precise words to His Biblical authors to record in Scripture. It is also referred to as 'Verbal Inspiration'.<sup>2</sup> This theory paints a picture of God being like a manager dictating to his secretary. The 'secretary' is required to copy down exactly the very words used by the one dictating the message. Passages such as- "*Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.*" (Proverbs 30:5-6) seem to support this theory. This view regards the

Biblical authors as having no input into the text at all. This seems to run contrary to the Biblical text itself where the emotions, personalities and events of the Biblical authors are noted. This view was largely articulated by the Reformers and is held in modern times most predominantly by Plymouth Brethren.<sup>3</sup> For example, the Reformed minister, the Reverend E. S. Turnbull angrily attempts to rebuff Dr. J.I. Packer's

<sup>1</sup> EDT: 1138

<sup>2</sup> EDT: 1139

<sup>3</sup> EDT: 1140

teaching against the Mechanical Dictation theory when he says-

*“In point of fact this objection is a bogie, a red-herring, a myth. Packer takes great pains to try to show that Fundamentalists just do not believe and never have believed that God dictated his Word. He is very critical on p. 178 of a certain Dr. Richardson for daring to define Fundamentalism as a theory of the mode of Biblical inspiration which regards the written Word of the Bible as divinely dictated. Packer writes ‘The fact that Protestant defenders of the divine origin of the Bible during the past century have uniformly been at pains to disclaim any mechanical doctrine of the mode of inspiration...’ And on p. 179 comments, ‘The dictation theory is a mare’s-nest; it never existed at any time during the past century, save in certain people’s imagination.’ That of course is an unguarded, far too sweeping statement. Well might we enquire also, What about all the centuries, especially those in which God so greatly prospered and blessed His people? Packer goes on to call the dictation theory ‘hoary error’.”<sup>4</sup>*

Turnbull cites Psalm 119:89 (the Word of God was settled in heaven from all eternity) as proof that inspiration must have been of a mechanical nature. He claims that King David endorsed Mechanical dictation when he said “*The Spirit of the Lord spake by me and his Word was in my tongue.*” (2Sam. 23:2). Likewise he claims that Paul the apostle taught Mechanical Dictation when he said “*Which things we also speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth;...*” (1Cor. 2:13). And Peter, when he wrote that the Bible penmen were “*moved by the Holy Ghost*” (2Peter 1:21), also endorsed the Mechanical Dictation theory.<sup>5</sup>

Taking the above thought to the opposite extreme results in another theory called the ‘Natural Inspiration’ theory. This regards the Bible as the product of extremely gifted or intelligent men. The Biblical authors merely attained a standard of excellence in spiritual literature to the point where their work even appears to be ‘inspired’. The problem with this theory is that the Bible itself claims that man is spiritually bankrupt, not able to attain the dizzy heights of spiritual literature claimed by this theory. The Bible also asserts that it is God speaking through it, and not the high ideals of intelligent men. The Bible does not pander to the classic wisdom of men. It states that its wisdom is opposite to the wisdom of intelligent men (1Cor. 1:20-21). The Natural Inspiration theory therefore does not make sense Biblically.

The ‘Partial Inspiration’ theory suggests that only parts of the Bible are inspired. Some portions of it are of little or no

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<sup>4</sup> Turnbull: 29

<sup>5</sup> Turnbull: 29

value to the modern reader because these passages (such as the genealogies of First Chronicles) are not inspired by God, according to this view. Prior to the discovery of many Biblically confirming archaeological finds in recent times, liberal scholars generally denied the inspiration of the Bible's geographical details and ancient history (including its characters). This denial supported their assertions that the Bible was only partially inspired. But the discovery of an overwhelming number of significant archaeological finds erodes this theory.

The Partial Inspiration theory is also fraught with subjectiveness. Who determines what parts of the Bible are inspired? Again this theory is clearly not what the Bible claims about itself (2Tim. 3:16).

## **HOW THE THEORY OF BIBLICAL INSPIRATION AFFECTS THE TRANSLATION PROCESS**

When a translator is confronted with translating the original text, his view of Biblical inspiration will have a major bearing on his translating philosophy. If he regards the text as being mechanically dictated, he will pay careful attention to words, rather than meanings. He will leave the search for meaning within the precise words up to the reader. He will consider that his job to provide the reader with the right "words". Thus he will strive to get the precise word in the English language. Technically we call this *Literal (or Formal) Equivalence*.

If the translator, on the other hand, believes that the Bible was only the product of highly intelligent men, he will pay less attention to exact words and strive more for poetic justice. If he believes that the Bible is only partially inspired, he will also not be as careful in his translation of the Bible as he should be because his subjective judgment will cause inconsistencies. He may even deliberately alter the textual translation to fit his own preconceived ideas (eg. Isaiah 7:14, the virgin birth prediction of Christ could be translated as if it was not an inspired prediction. This was an accusation made about the Revised Version's translators).

If the translator believes that the Bible is the result of plenary inspiration, the translator will strive for *meaning*, rather than precise words. He will aim to convey the message of the text rather than the wording of the original text. This is the translation philosophy behind paraphrase editions of the Bible and most the recent translations of the English Bible

(such as the Living Bible, and, the Contemporary English Version).

## **THE SUPERIORITY OF THE PLENARY INSPIRATION THEORY**

Serious examination of the inspiration of the Bible didn't occur until the Reformation Period.<sup>6</sup> Partial and Mechanical Dictation (Verbal) theories were growing in popularity. The Partial theory of inspiration gained a strong foothold during this period as the Renaissance culture questioned anything that didn't seem to fit natural reason. It therefore considered the Biblical accounts of miracles and godly phenomena as unreasonable and consequently not inspired. The reaction to this was the rise of the Mechanical Dictation (Verbal) Inspiration theory.

Theological inquiry delved into this issue, firstly among the Jesuits.<sup>7</sup> They concluded that inspiration was a matter of God using men to communicate His Word (plenary). This accepted the basic elements of Verbal Inspiration that God was clearly the Author of the Bible, and that the Bible was infallible and inerrant. Where it differed significantly from the Verbal Inspiration theory is in its view that God and man produced the Bible. In the Verbal Inspiration theory, man is merely the mechanism for writing down God's dictated Word.

The Plenary Inspiration theory accepts that the Bible is totally the work of God. But it accepts the clear statements within the text that God used men: their thoughts, their emotions, and sometimes their limited understandings, to communicate His Holy Word. Thus, the written Word of God was of God and man. To parallel this, the Living Word was also both God and man (Jn. 1:14). This parallel is not altogether appreciated by such men as E. S. Turnbull. He strongly denounces any suggestion of Plenary Inspiration, preferring to accept the early Reformation view that the Bible was the result of Mechanical or Verbal Inspiration.

*The penmen wrote as they were directed, were dictated to, and inspired by the Spirit of God...Their human temperaments, characteristics and abilities were overruled, guided, directed by the mighty power of God...they wrote exactly, word perfectly, what he would have them write...No, there is nothing human in the Bible! To Packer and others like him, the Scriptures are both human and divine. We believe God's book is altogether divine.<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> EDT: 860

<sup>7</sup> EDT: 860

<sup>8</sup> Turnbull: 30

Despite Mr. Turnbull's claims, the Scriptures do reflect human input. The fact that God can fully use a person's emotions, and at times their understanding, to perfectly articulate His Word makes the Scriptures that much more glorious. It actually reflects the stamp of God, rather than detracting from it. The Plenary theory of inspiration is therefore closest to the Biblical revelation of inspiration. It accommodates Second Timothy 3:16, which says every word of God is inspired, and yet the thoughts and prayers of men which are expressed within its pages. It explains the inclusion of statements like "*the LORD speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets*" (Psalm 50:1). These statements reflect *man's* understanding of his world (the sun does not "rise" and "set") and were included within the pages of inspired Scripture as such. We conclude by noting that the Plenary Inspiration theory is the superior inspiration theory. Put simply, the Scriptures are entirely the Word and message of God, yet have been penned by men whom God was able to use. He used not only their hands to write the Scripture, but also their emotions, experiences, and understandings.