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ABUSING SCRIPTURE

THE CONSEQUENCES OF
MISREADING THE BIBLE



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THE NATURE OF SCRIPTURE

Before we plunge into the task of identifying how Scripture is abused, we must first address a fundamental issue. Namely, what is the nature of Scripture? How do we understand or define its inspiration and authority? Answers to these questions are extremely important, for they provide the assumptions and presuppositions that guide one's approach to Scripture and greatly influence the process of interpretation.

Not all Christians answer these questions in the same way. Even among those who clearly affirm the inspiration of the Bible and hold it to be the authoritative Word of God for Christian faith and life (whether or not they identify themselves as evangelicals), these questions have been answered in a variety of ways.¹ For the purpose of this book, and in fairness to the reader, I will briefly articulate my understanding of the nature of Scripture—seen as the result of divine inspiration and human reception—that is broadly affirmed within the historic orthodox and evangelical Christian traditions.

¹I. Howard Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 31-73, provides a helpful summary and critical discussion of the broad range of views on biblical inspiration and the consequent understandings of the nature of the Bible.

That understanding of the nature of Scripture is grounded in two foundational assumptions. The first—which is at its core an article of faith—is the affirmation that those who wrote the various parts of the Bible over the course of many centuries were inspired by God. They were guided by God’s Spirit in their understanding of God and God’s redemptive work in the world in and through the history of Israel, which culminated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and the witness of his earliest followers. The second assumption—which is grounded in the actual data of Scripture—acknowledges the concrete historical reality of the writers as participants in the process, and it affirms both the recipients’ specific humanity and their cooperation as instruments of divine inspiration as being important dimensions of the nature and character of Scripture.

An early and articulate exponent of this view of biblical inspiration and the nature of the Bible is J. I. Packer, who speaks of the mysterious intersection of the divine and human dimension of Scripture as “concurrent.”² On the human level is the very specific, historical activity of the biblical writers, who used written sources, collected information, interviewed witnesses, recorded prophetic visions and messages, derived moral lessons and wisdom from observation of both human and animal life, composed letters, reflected on the meaning of revelatory events, put in writing the oral traditions passed down for decades or centuries about the history and faith traditions of their faith communities, and bore witness to what they had seen and heard.³ On the level of divine inspiration, “we can assert that the Spirit, who moved on the face of the waters at Creation (Gen 1:2), was active in the whole process so that the Bible can be regarded as both the words of men and the Word of God.”⁴ Connected with this understanding of the process involved in the writing of Scripture is the conviction that, because of the presence and guidance of the Spirit, the result is “infallible.”⁵ This means that the Bible, despite the limitation of the

²James I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1958); and *God Has Spoken* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985).

³See Ecclesiastes 5:18; 6:1-2; 7:15; 9:1; Luke 1:1-4; John 1:1-4; and Acts 15:1 for examples of biblical texts that reflect such activity.

⁴Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration*, p. 42. Acts 15 specifically speaks of this “concurrent action” as a basis for the deliberations and decisions of the so-called “Jerusalem Council,” communicated to the Christian community at Antioch: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28).

⁵See Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration*, p. 53, for a brief discussion of the term *infallible* in connection with the purpose of God in the composition of the Scriptures.

human writers—which includes the possibility of misunderstanding, mishearing, or only partially hearing and understanding the revelatory speaking and acting of God—is trustworthy and perfectly sufficient for the redemptive, life-and-world-transforming purpose for which God inspired it.

I believe that this understanding of inspiration and the nature of Scripture, which affirms the dual reality of both the divine and the human dimensions, is most consistent with the Bible's own explicit affirmations, its diverse content and essential character. As such, it provides a solid foundation for the trustworthy stewardship of the treasure of Scripture.

It is common among Christians who affirm the inspiration of the Bible to file charges against one another. Some call their view of Scripture “high”—meaning that it is true, correct, orthodox—and describe the view of others as being “low”—meaning faulty, inadequate, wrong. An interesting exchange illustrates this. After giving several lectures at an American seminary, the noted Swiss theologian Karl Barth was asked: “How would your theology differ if you had a higher view of the Bible?” Without hesitation Barth replied: “Sir, there is no view of the Bible which is higher than the one which I hold!”

I contend that the *highest view of Scripture* is that which is most faithful to the *intention* of Scripture and takes with utmost seriousness the fact that God's final, ultimate form of revelation is the *incarnation*—Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh (Jn 1:1, 14). Any view of Scripture that seeks to be trustworthy must hold in the highest regard these twin pillars—of *intention* and *incarnation*.

I approach the question of the Bible's essential nature and authority as an *exegete*, concerned specifically with understanding the *phenomenon of Scripture* (what Scripture really is). As an exegete, I am convinced that the text of Scripture should receive priority in any attempt to understand the nature of the Bible and its authority. To state it another way, our understanding of Scripture must be based on its own stated purposes and intentions (*inductively*), rather than on the basis of certain theological assumptions and presuppositions that impose a particular view of Scripture from the outside (*deductively*).

INTENTION AND INCARNATION: KEYS TO THE NATURE OF DIVINE INSPIRATION AND THE NATURE OF THE BIBLE

Clearly, divine inspiration must be assumed as that reality that gives to the Bible its authoritative character. The concept of inspiration is derived primar-

ily from the use of the Greek word *theopneustos* (literally “God-breathed” in 2 Tim 3:15-16 NIV) in connection with the terms *sacred writings* and *Scripture*.⁶ Though the word *theopneustos* is used only here in the New Testament,⁷ the intimate relationship between the speaking and acting of God, on the one hand, and the content of both the Jewish Scriptures and the emerging New Testament documents, on the other hand, is broadly affirmed in the Bible.⁸ In New Testament references to the Old Testament, formulas such as “God says” or “the Holy Spirit says” are common (e.g., Acts 1:16; 2 Cor 6:16). God and Scripture were so intimately linked that “what Scripture says” and “what God says” could at times be equated (Rom 9:17; Gal 3:8). Jesus’ use of the Old Testament and his attitude toward it strongly confirms this sense of Scripture’s divine origin and content (e.g., Mt 5:17-18; Jn 10:35).⁹ It is also clear from the New Testament that the teaching of Jesus and the witness of his followers were understood to be continuous with the inspiration and authority of the Old Testament (e.g., Jn 12:49; 1 Cor 2:13; 1 Thess 2:13; Heb 3:7).

There is no doubt that the biblical writers were aware of, and claimed, divine inspiration. But what is the *intention* of this inspiration? What is the divine purpose for this inspiration? In answering this question, we must resist the temptation to determine in advance what the nature and inspiration of the Bible *must* be. This was the concern of Old Testament scholar and former president of Fuller Theological Seminary, David Hubbard, when he wrote: “How can we let the Bible be what it is?”¹⁰ Noted New Testament scholar Hermann Ridderbos put the matter this way: “Scripture has in many respects a character other than that which a theoretical concept of inspiration or infallibility—*detached from its purpose and empirical reality*—would like to demand. One must be careful when reasoning about what is,

⁶That the text refers to the Old Testament is clear from the Greek word for “sacred writings” (2 Tim 3:15, *hiera grammata*); the term commonly applied to the Jewish Scripture by Greek-speaking Jews.

⁷The use of this term reflects the way first-century Judaism viewed its Scripture. Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 203.

⁸See Wayne Grudem, “Scripture’s Self-Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), pp. 19-59.

⁹See the very clear and balanced discussion in Leon Morris, *I Believe in Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), chap 3.

¹⁰David Hubbard, “The Current Tensions: Is There a Way Out?” in *Biblical Authority*, ed. Jack B. Rogers (Dallas: Word, 1977), p. 151.

and what is not, possible under inspiration by God.”¹¹ Commitment to the Bible’s authority demands that we take its own statements with utmost seriousness. When we do so, we find that the Bible’s authority—its character as the Word of God—is related to its *intention*. The question “inspired for what end?” is extremely important here.

The classical passage about divine inspiration in 2 Timothy 3 defines inspiration in terms of “instruct[ion] . . . for salvation” (2 Tim 3:15). This scope of inspiration is further explicated as “for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16) so that we might be “equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:17). This passage teaches that God’s inspiration in and through Scripture provides for us the knowledge and guidance that is intended to bring about salvation and the renewal of life and the world, through faith in Jesus Christ. The biblical writings are “for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15:4). This redemptive purpose of inspired Scripture is also the point of John 20:31, where the evangelist states that his account of Jesus’ life, of his teachings and of his deeds was “written so that you may come to believe . . . and that through believing you may have life.”

The account of Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian (Acts 8) is also very instructive. The understanding and interpretation of the passage from Isaiah (53:7-8)—which the Ethiopian has been reading—has one purpose: “starting with this scripture, he [Philip] proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35). That is the “what for,” the purpose. Jesus never recommended the Bible as a book of divinely given facts about things in general (such as science, history, psychology, anthropology, cosmology). Rather, he pointed to the Old Testament writings and said: “it is they that testify on my behalf” (Jn 5:39). This is the basis for my insistence throughout this study (but especially in chapters 6-8) on a Christocentric hermeneutic.

The Scriptures exist by divine providence and inspiration so that Jesus and his good news can be proclaimed. And this ought to be our primary concern with the Bible. For if the study of Scripture is isolated from this explicit purpose, the attempts (often very ingenious) to deal with problems and tensions

¹¹Hermann Ridderbos, *Studies in Scripture and Its Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 28, italics mine. Cf. E. Harrison, “The Phenomena of Scripture,” in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), p. 239: “We may have our own ideas about how God should have inspired the Word, but it is more profitable to learn, if we can, how he has actually inspired it.”

in the Bible tend to close it rather than open it; they tend to block the way to meaningful understanding rather than paving the way.

In addition to the critical matter of the Bible's *intention*, we must consider the nature of the biblical documents in light of the paradigm of the *incarnation*, the enfleshment of God's Word through human words, culture and history.

"Divine inspiration," Ridderbos contends, "does not necessarily mean that those who spoke and wrote under inspiration were temporarily stripped of their limitations in knowledge, memory, language and capability of expressing themselves, as specific human beings in a certain period of history."¹² The presence of this "human factor" in Scripture has been acknowledged throughout the church's history.¹³ From the early church fathers, such as Athanasius and Augustine, to the Reformers and beyond, the reality of God's accommodation to human weakness and limitation in the actual writing of the Scriptures has been affirmed. The condescension of a nurse or a schoolmaster to the limitations of children has been used as an analogy. God stoops down to us into the human character of Scripture so that we might hear and understand, and become whole.¹⁴

But what is the nature and extent of this accommodation to limited human reality? In the attempt to answer this question, the analogy to the incarnation has been an important consideration. We must recover the truth contained in this analogy, for it is still the most fruitful path toward understanding the mysterious—and sometimes perplexing and frustrating—dual nature of Scripture: God's Word in human vocabulary, and human vocabulary bathed in the Word of God.¹⁵

As God humbled himself in Christ, and "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (Jn 1:14), so Scripture, as the "word written," participates in this

¹²Ridderbos, *Studies*, p. 25. See also Raymond E. Brown, *101 Questions and Answers on the Bible* (New York: Paulist, 1990), p. 50. "Writing is a human activity; and divine inspiration respects the conventions of that activity."

¹³For a thorough discussion, see Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *Authority and Interpretation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).

¹⁴See Telford Work's discussion of the analogy of the word in the church fathers Athanasius and Augustine in *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 33-66.

¹⁵Cf. James Smart's proposal that the inspiration of Scripture should be understood in analogy to the inspiration of Jesus. His contention is that just as the full reality of the Spirit in Jesus did not dissolve his humanity, so the full inspiration of Scripture does not eliminate its humanity. James Smart, *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), pp. 160-68.

enfleshed nature. Bernard Ramm, one of the most influential evangelical theologians of the last century, put it this way: “Just as the Son of God emptied himself and lowered himself to our estate, so revelation comes to us in a humbled, lower form.”¹⁶ If there is to be integrity in the use of this incarnational model for an adequate understanding of the dual reality of Scripture, the mystery of Jesus’ complete humanity and divinity, in unabridged union, must be consistently applied.

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus is seen as the one who, in his being, is completely one with God. In his person, his words, his deeds and the events of his life, God himself was revealed (e.g., Jn 14:9; 20:28; Col 1:15, 19; Heb 1:1-3). The witness of the New Testament affirms just as strongly that this complete oneness of Jesus with God was realized without the dissolution of his thoroughly human nature. He was born not only through the agency of the Holy Spirit, but also of Mary. He was a helpless infant within the limitations of human life. He grew “in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (Lk 2:52). So complete is his humanity that his relationship with God is maintained, nurtured and empowered in a life of prayer. He was made like us “in every respect”: he was tempted as we are, learned obedience, and was perfected in his humanity through suffering (Heb 2:10, 14, 17-18; 4:15; 5:8). His ability to discern what was in people’s hearts and minds (e.g., Mt 12:25; Mk 2:8) stands side by side with the affirmation of limited knowledge (Mk 13:32).

For the authors of the New Testament, there was no contradiction in asserting both the divinity and humanity of Jesus’ words, deeds and being. The only qualification regarding his complete identity with us in our humanity—namely that he was without sin (Heb 4:15)—does not mitigate his fully human essence. For sin is not an essential, ontological aspect of authentic humanity created in the image of God. It is rather an intrusion (Gen 3) into that which is essentially human. Thus, full accommodation to human limitation in the incarnation does not demand sinfulness. What is an essential part of “creatureliness” is “fleshness,” which in the Hebraic frame of reference denotes weakness and limitation. And it is this fleshness that is affirmed of Jesus.¹⁷

¹⁶Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 33.

¹⁷For a very perceptive and balanced discussion of the presence of both divine knowledge and human limitation in Jesus, see Raymond E. Brown, *Jesus, God and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

This paradigm of the incarnation provides clues to God's way of self-disclosure, to God's way of revelation, which often stands in tension with what we might wish the nature of the biblical revelation to be. That is, we may wish that God's revelation in Christ had come to us without ambiguity, but God's ways are often not our ways, and we dare not dictate our terms to God. The New Testament documents are clear about the fact that the limiting reality of the Word made flesh created numerous problems for Jesus' contemporaries. It led to serious misunderstandings about his person and purpose and caused outright rejection and enmity: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Jn 1:46). "We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man . . ." (Jn 9:29). "We know where this man is from; but when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from" (Jn 7:27).

The eternal, divine *Logos* (Word) was present in the human nature of Jesus, but many who encountered him—including, at times, his disciples—failed to discern the divine reality. Even at the point where the transcendent power of God broke through human limitations, such as in Jesus' demon exorcisms, there were those who did not see divine power at work. Rather, they attributed Jesus' actions to the work of the prince of evil (Lk 11:14-23).

Yet the limiting human reality that created this ambiguity did not invalidate the presence of the divine reality. The earthen vessel of the incarnation did not abrogate the presence of the glory of God (Jn 1:14). The truth of God in the words and deeds of Jesus was not tainted by falsehood or error just because it came to expression through the limitation and weakness of human enfleshment.

God's way of revelation in the incarnation calls for faith: to see in and through and beyond the limiting human expression to the heart of God. "We walk by faith," said Paul, "not by sight" (2 Cor 5:7). Faith accepts the limiting human expression of God's revelation in Jesus *as God's way*, and in that acceptance, it finds the truth. Unbelief sees only the human form and misses the truth of God revealed therein. If, as the orthodox creeds (such as the Nicene Creed from A.D. 325 and the Chalcedonian Creed from A.D. 451) affirm, on the basis of the biblical data, that the completely divine and human dimensions are inextricably and mysteriously present in the incarnation, the presence of this mysterious duality should not be denied to Scripture, which as the written Word of God, derives its final authority from Jesus Christ, the

enfleshed and living Word of God. Since all Scripture points either forward (Old Testament) or backward (New Testament) to the incarnate Logos, it is surely legitimate, if not imperative, that all of Scripture be understood in light of this ultimate divine self-revelation.¹⁸

Thus the human dimension of Scripture would seem to be precisely God's way of "incarnating" the truth expressed in the event of the incarnation. As with the living Word, so also in the written Word the human dimension can be a stumbling block. It can be used, in the context of critical dissection and analysis, as a reason for rejecting "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). But in faith, the human dimension of Scripture can be affirmed as that vehicle whereby God in grace approaches us.

This juxtaposition of the human and the divine in both the incarnation of the living Word and in the written Word is ultimately a paradox and mystery. Yet I believe that the Gospel of Luke provides us with a perspective for cautiously and haltingly entering that mystery. Luke presents Jesus as conceived by the Spirit and endowed with the Spirit at his baptism. He is the one who, "full of the Spirit," is "led by the Spirit" into the wilderness (Lk 4:1). He inaugurates his ministry "in the power of the Spirit" (Lk 4:14) and is anointed by the Spirit to proclaim "good news" (Lk 4:18; cf. also Mt 12:28, where Jesus' demon exorcism activity is attributed to the power of God's Spirit). What this emphasis in Luke seems to indicate is that the presence of the Spirit in Jesus' person and ministry empowers the divine reality, namely the eternal Word within the confines and limitations of Jesus' human reality, so that Jesus' words and deeds can be heard and experienced as expressions of God's word and deed. The Spirit, at work in the Incarnate One, guarantees that the eternal Word speaks through the human words of Jesus. In Jesus' words and deeds, God speaks and acts.

Such an understanding of the *incarnation* has important implications for the nature of the Bible. It is fully human, with all that this implies regarding the presence of limitation, and it is fully divine, with all that this implies about its inspiration and authority. Our hearing and believing of the divine authority, in and through the fully human character of Scripture, is made

¹⁸See the lucid discussion of the grounding of biblical authority ultimately in the incarnation in N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Scripture and the Authority of God—Getting Beyond the Bible Wars* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2005); and Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

possible by the Spirit. Perhaps this is what Luther was pointing to when he stated:

Holy Scripture possesses no external glory, attracts no attention, lacks all beauty and adornment. . . . Yet faith comes from this divine Word, through its inner power without any external loveliness. . . . It is only the internal working of the Holy Spirit that causes us to place our trust in this Word of God, which is without form or comeliness.¹⁹

This understanding of the nature of the Bible and its inspiration provides the framework within which our analysis of Scripture abuse and our discussion of corrective approaches and attitudes takes place. Much of the abuse of Scripture is the result of not taking the *intention* of Scripture—both the intention of God’s inspiring action and the intention of the particular authors of the biblical documents—with full seriousness. A second reason behind the abusive interpretation and application of Scripture is a disregard for, or a diminution of, its *incarnational* character. For when the historical, cultural and situational contexts of particular biblical texts are not given their proper due—or when their redemptive intention is not adequately considered—the trustworthy reading and understanding of the biblical word is seriously compromised.

These two pillars of *intention* and *incarnation* are also the backbone of responsible, trustworthy interpretation of the Bible. The various principles and perspectives for correcting Scripture abuse to be discussed throughout this book reflect these insights about the nature of Scripture and seek to assist students of Scripture in the critical task of avoiding its abuse.

¹⁹Cited by Jack B. Rogers, “The Church Doctrine of Biblical Authority,” *Biblical Authority* (Dallas: Word Publishers, 1977), p. 25.