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Inspiration and Inerrancy in Scripture

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Inspiration and Inerrancy in Scripture

Inspiration in Qur'anic revelation is quite different from the Catholic understanding. The incarnational principle through which the human faculties of the inspired writer are active in the very mode of receptivity seems to be understood differently by Muslims. Differences in understanding how the "God who speaks" is known by his creatures can lead to invaluable dialogue and mutual understanding for both of our Abrahamic traditions.

I. INTRODUCTION.

The inspiration and inerrancy of Sacred Scripture are important doctrines long held by the Catholic Church and a consequence of its understanding of divine revelation. They have also been subject of doctrinal development in the last century and a half. In this essay I will confine my investigation to an examination of those developments in conciliar and papal documents of the Church's magisterium in the modern period. In pursuing this inquiry it will be soon evident that the interpretation of Sacred Scripture is intimately related to the meanings of inspiration and inerrancy.

II. THE COUNCILS OF TRENT AND VATICAN I ON INSPIRATION AND INERRANCY.

In response to the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent, during its fourth session, issued the *Decree on Sacred Books and on the Traditions to be Received* (1546) that stated that God is the author of both the Old and New Testaments, a phrase that recalls a similar wording from the Council of Florence in 1442. In both instances, divine authorship is connected with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In the case of Florence, it is the "saints of both covenants" who speak by this inspiration,¹ whereas in the Tridentine decree, inspiration embraces not only the books of the Bible, but "all the traditions concerning faith and morals."² The language of Trent was repeated by the First Vatican Council in 1870, in *Dei Filius*, its Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, with this explanatory addition:

These [the "books of the Old and New Testaments . . . contained in the ancient Latin edition of the Vulgate"] the Church holds to be sacred and canonical, not because, having been carefully composed by mere human industry, they were afterwards approved by her authority, not merely because they contain revelation with no admixture of error, but because, having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God for their author and have been delivered as such to the Church herself.³

As characteristic of this Council (and most others with the notable exception of the Second Vatican Council), in order to ensure the clarity of doctrine, an *anathema* is pronounced against anyone who denies this truth concerning the divine inspiration of Sacred Scripture.⁴

Despite the authoritative pronouncement, no elaboration was given regarding the nature of inspiration. Clearly, it has been a long held conviction on the part of the Church that both Sacred Scripture and the human authors of scripture are divinely inspired. The biblical witness in the Old Testament reiterates continuously the formulaic "Thus says the Lord" of prophetic speech that accounts for written as well as oral oracular utterances. More dramatically, the tablets of testimony, or the Ten Commandments, were written by

the finger of God on tables of stone (Exodus 31:18), while Moses himself committed to writing "the words of the Lord and all the ordinances" that were revealed to him (Exodus 24:3-4). Apart from historical-critical and redactional analysis of the origins of the Pentateuch, these passages illustrate that the biblically formed communities of Israel and the Church acknowledge the operation of divine and human agency in the writing of the scriptures.

The New Testament, likewise, confirms this same truth. Regarding scripture as a whole, 2 Timothy states:

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 (3:16-17).

Divine inspiration does not exclude active human agency, as witnessed in 2 Peter:

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 (1:20-21).

The two passages taken together establish the theological framework for understanding the inspiration of Scripture in the subsequent theological tradition.

As with other Christian theological traditions, modernity has presented distinct challenges to the understanding of both the modality of inspiration and the authority of truth communicated in the sacred text of Holy Scripture. The former entails the extent to which human agency participates in divine revelation, so that Scripture is recognized as the written word of God. The latter examines the veracity of God's word *vis-à-vis* the notion of whether any error is communicated in the sacred text, thereby undermining its authority.

Even apart from disputes about religious truth that may surface in contested interpretations of Scripture, the peculiarly modern problematic has arisen with regard to reason's assessment of scientific and historical truths relative to the content of the biblical traditions. Only with the intellectual and cultural developments of the

European Enlightenment did this become a major issue for biblical exegetes, theologians, and church authorities. Protestants and Catholics may disagree over the correct doctrine to be derived from their respective interpretations of the Pauline theology of justification for example. However, it is quite another matter when both traditions are challenged about the veracity of the Bible as the written word of God, when error is attributed to its contents. By the nineteenth century, these issues were being explicitly taken up by Christian scholars and churches, and not without significant conflict and disagreements over these matters.

III. CONTINUITY IN THE CATHOLIC UNDERSTANDING OF INSPIRATION AND INNERRANCY.

In the late nineteenth century, the Catholic magisterium began to address the specifics of the traditional teaching on biblical inspiration and inerrancy already affirmed by the First Vatican Council. Pope Leo XIII, in his 1893 Encyclical Letter, *Providentissimus Deus* (*On the Study of Holy Scripture*), responds to the "Higher Criticism" that would become dominant in biblical studies. Later known as the historical-critical method, it was, in the nineteenth century, a source of division between conservative and liberal Protestant scholars and even led to splits within several Protestant ecclesial communions. In *Providentissimus Deus*, Leo XIII exercises caution in regard to "higher criticism," arguing that the "origin, integrity, and authority" of the books of the Bible are undermined by its methodological criteria of "internal indications."⁵

As analyzed later by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in its 1993 document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, historical-critical method entails the diachronic process by which textual units, including their literary genres, their origins in oral and written traditions, and their final redaction, have affected the composition of particular biblical books. To say the least, the Commission's evaluation of the method is more positive, although not uncritically so, than that rendered by Leo XIII in his encyclical. Nevertheless, there are important principles informing the continuity of the Catholic position that shed light on the doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy.

As remarked by Pope John Paul II, in an address introducing *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, the difference between *Providentissimus Deus* and a similar encyclical on biblical themes by Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (*On Promoting Biblical Studies*), published 50 years later in 1942, is the following:

On the one hand, *Providentissimus Deus* wanted especially to protect Catholic interpretation of the Bible from the attacks of rationalistic science; on the other hand, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* was primarily concerned with defending Catholic interpretation from attacks that opposed the use of science by exegetes and that wanted to impose a non-scientific, so-called "spiritual" interpretation of Sacred Scriptures.⁶

The interpretative or hermeneutical focus is clearly a matter of affirming the complementarity between "intellectual work" and "a vigorous spiritual life."⁷ Consistent with the constructive relationship between faith and reason,⁸ and the classic Thomistic axiom that "grace perfects nature," John Paul II reaches even deeper into Catholic dogma with his emphasis on the incarnation as the proper foundational analogy for biblical hermeneutics. Critical exegesis and spiritual meaning are the parameters for Catholic biblical interpretation. This is consistent with the traditional Catholic emphasis on the "two senses of scripture: the literal and spiritual, the latter being subdivided into the allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses."⁹ In this respect, the literal meaning has always been foundational for the other senses of senses of Scripture.¹⁰ Therefore, in reference to the doctrine of inspiration, the pontiff can state:

It is true that putting God's words into writing, through the charism of scriptural inspiration, was the first step toward the incarnation of the Word of God.¹¹

The parallel with critical exegesis is even more explicit:

The Church of Christ takes the realism of the incarnation seriously, and this is why she attaches great importance to the "historico-critical" study of the Bible.¹²

To return to Leo XIII, his understanding of inspiration and inerrancy is more nuanced than his cautionary note regarding "higher

criticism" might suggest. The two doctrines are inextricably linked and establish a pattern that will develop over the course of the next century. In his articulation we cannot separate the two.

For all the books which the Church receives as sacred and canonical are written wholly and entirely, with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Spirit; and so far is it from being possible that any error can coexist with inspiration, that inspiration is not only essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true.¹³

The plenary nature of inspiration thereby requires that "nothing can be proved either by physical science or archeology which can really contradict scripture."¹⁴ The same applies to historical matters, although it is admitted that figurative language is used in the scriptures. Nevertheless, inerrancy cannot be limited to faith and morals alone, nor does that Catholic notion of inspiration entail that God, the primary author of scripture, can be so removed from the sacred writers that the latter are capable of error, whereas God is not. Rather, God assists them, such that they are impelled to write as by a supernatural power.¹⁵

The strict relationship between inspiration and the veracity of certain historical matters was maintained in the early twentieth century in the decisions of the Pontifical Biblical Commission—e.g., the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch—and in the Encyclical Letter, *Spiritus Paraclitus (On the Fifteenth Centenary of the Death of St. Jerome)*, of Pope Benedict XV in 1920. The latter describes the modality of inspiration of the Holy Spirit in terms of inspiration, suggestion, and even dictation. However, Benedict also noted that Saint Jerome acknowledged that "in composition, in language, in style and mode of expression, each of them [each biblical writer] uses his own gifts and powers."¹⁶ This is consistent with the incarnational principle and was further developed by Pope Pius XII and the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and those promulgated since the Council.

The developments in question focus on how the relationship between inspiration and inerrancy are deepened by the incarnational

paradigm and, therefore, become more nuanced in regard to how God engages and utilizes the human element in each. Thus, for example, Pope Pius XII employs the analogy of the incarnation with a particular caveat familiar to Christology:

For as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things, "except sin," so the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect, except error. In this consists that "condescension" of the God of providence, which St. John Chrysostom extolled with the highest praise and repeatedly declared to be found in the Sacred Books.¹⁷

If the notion of condescension is descriptive of the communication of divine words in human words, it can help clarify the old canard that accuses the biblical text of expressing historical inaccuracies without compromising the level of critical scholarship that exegetes must employ. It even accentuates the latter by more accurately representing "the manner of expression or literary mode adopted by the sacred writer."¹⁸ Thus, Pius XII:

Not infrequently—to mention only one instance—when some persons reproachfully charge the Sacred Writers with some historical error or inaccuracy in the recording of facts, on closer examination it turns out to be nothing else than those customary modes of expression and narration peculiar to the ancients, which used to be employed in the mutual dealings of social life and which in fact were sanctioned by common usage.¹⁹

Whereas Leo XIII, in *Providentissimus Deus*, had also said something similar *vis-à-vis* science and history, Pius XII took up his predecessor's exhortation that corrections on such matters "are not contrary to the Scripture rightly explained,"²⁰ as long as the philosophical foundations for sacred truth be not undermined. Therefore, a more "progressive exploration of the antiquities of the East,"²¹ is warranted since these foundations are intact:

For all human knowledge, even the non-sacred, has indeed its own proper dignity and excellence, being a finite participation of the infinite knowledge of God,

but it acquires a new and higher dignity and, as it were, a consecration, when it is employed to cast a brighter light upon the things of God.²²

By the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), and for the present post-conciliar period, the historical-critical method has become the norm for Catholic exegetes and was even the presupposition for the 1964 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission entitled *Concerning the Historical Truth of the Gospels*. This instruction from the Commission affirmed the scholarly consensus concerning the origins of the Gospels in a threefold historical progression: in the preaching of Jesus; in the early apostolic proclamation, including the circulation of oral and written traditions; and in the final writing or redaction of the Gospels. On this basis a generation later (in the already mentioned 1993 document, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*), the Commission critically evaluates a number of contemporary biblical analytical and hermeneutical methods in order to maximize their fruitfulness for Catholic biblical exegesis. It is a sign of maturity in the process of development when the Commission can simultaneously affirm that the “historical-critical method is the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts,”²³ and the traditional Catholic position that acknowledges the literal, spiritual, and fuller senses of the biblical texts.²⁴ The document also strongly critiques fundamentalist interpretation that misunderstands the literal meaning of the text and “does not take into account the development of the gospel tradition, but naively confuses the final stage of this tradition (what the evangelists have written) with the initial (the words and deeds of the historical Jesus).”²⁵

THE CONSTITUTION *DEI VERBUM* OF VATICAN COUNCIL II.

Thus far, I have attempted to demonstrate that developments in the Catholic understanding of biblical interpretation have been important for the correlative understanding of inspiration and inerrancy. Theological dogma, critical inquiry, and spiritual meaning are all necessary and interrelated for a thoroughly Catholic perspective to

emerge. The temptation to concede to a spiritual or mystical approach, in contradistinction to a scholarly one, has been consistently rejected by the Catholic Church. Simultaneously, any approach that precludes the spiritual meaning of the text is reductive and inadequate to the very nature of the biblical texts as the written word of God. There can be no spiritual meaning of the text without a literal meaning that is clearly accessible to the reader or hearer, a tradition with deep roots in Christian antiquity as well as in the Medieval era. With this as background, we now turn to *Dei Verbum*, the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* of the Second Vatican Council, promulgated in 1965. As such, it is the definitive statement by the Church on these matters.

The subject of inspiration and inerrancy is addressed in chapter III of the Constitution. However, the relationship between divine and human agency, so important for an adequate understanding of these doctrines, is implicated at the beginning of the document. Revelation is given so that the world might hear the summons to salvation and respond in faith, hope, and love.²⁶ In chapter I, entitled "Divine Revelation Itself," the Constitution rehearses the history of salvation in which deeds and words "are intrinsically bound up with each other," the works showing forth the reality signified by the words, and the words proclaiming the works and the mystery they contain.²⁷ In the same vein, divine revelation seeks out the "obedience of faith," wherein the human heart assisted by the grace of God and the interior helps of the Holy Spirit, converts to God and accepts and believes the truth.²⁸

Chapter II deals with the transmission of divine revelation and entails a similar relationship between divine and human agency. Revelation is transmitted by the apostles, who "by the spoken word of their preaching," and eventually "under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit, committed the message of salvation to writing."²⁹ As Catholicism affirms the transmission of divine revelation through both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, it is important to note the similarities between them in their respective modes of transmission since they both "make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church."³⁰ *Dei Verbum* characterizes this similarity in pneumatological terms:

Sacred scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. And Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit.³¹

The presence of the Holy Spirit also assists the Church's magisterium in its office of authentically interpreting the Word of God, even as it is subject to the same Word. Therefore, one cannot extract the power and authenticity of the divine word from its actualization, reception, and interpretation within the ecclesial community from which it emerges and which it sustains and calls into existence. In this context the interpretation of Sacred Scripture must respect, as summarized by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "the content and unity of the whole Scripture," "the living Tradition of the whole Church," and analogy of faith, the latter understood as "the coherence of the truths of the faith among themselves and within the whole plan of salvation."³² God's Word in its various forms and modalities elicits human agency in its manifestation, proclamation, transmission, and interpretation.

Consistent with previous views of inspiration, *Dei Verbum* teaches that biblical inspiration is plenary, "whole and entire," throughout the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments.³³ It also specifies in detail the manner of divine engagement with human agency in the writing of Sacred Scripture:

To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their powers and faculties, so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more.³⁴

Interpretation, then, must respect the intention of the biblical writers and consider the full panoply of literary forms and expressions utilized by them. God remains the author of Scripture, wherein according to the incarnational analogy already mentioned, God in his "ineffable loving-kindness . . . [has gone far] . . . in adapting his language with thoughtful concern for our nature."³⁵

With this foundational account of inspiration, *Dei Verbum* further develops the received teaching on inerrancy:

Since, therefore, all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully, and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to confide to the sacred Scriptures.³⁶

The truth invested in scripture is soteriologically determined. This is more specific than previous accounts. However, in light of the awareness gained in the nature and genres of biblical literature with respect to history and science, for example, the telos of salvation best characterizes the truth of scripture and is consistent with divine revelation in history being directed toward the economy of salvation. In sum, the soteriological motif is that which elicits trust based as it is upon the fidelity of the divine promises, whose center is in a person:

The most intimate truth which this revelation gives about God and the salvation of man shines forth in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and sum total of Revelation.³⁷

CONCLUSION.

On matters of the inspiration and inerrancy of divine revelation in Sacred Scripture in the context of interreligious dialogue with Muslims, Catholics would query the modality of inspiration with regard to the former and ask whether historical-critical inquiry would undermine the latter. In *Revelation: Catholic & Muslim Perspectives*, Muslim scholars state the following:

The Prophet, when he receives the revelation, submits his own dynamic personality to such a degree that almost nothing remains in him but the faculty of reception.³⁸

Also,

A Prophet is a human being filled with the consciousness of one's life and the natural impulses for action and self-

assertion; and at the same time, a Prophet has a purely passive receptivity, endowed with nothing but the highest sensitivity and the power of exact replication.³⁹

And,

The primary duty of a Prophet, in contrast with that of any other spiritual leader, is not to produce images and ideas born in his or her own mind. The Prophet's duty consists only in reading out of the unseen book of Divine Truth and reproducing its exact meaning for humanity without additions or subtractions.⁴⁰

I quote extensively from the document to register that inspiration in Qur'anic revelation is quite different from the Catholic understanding articulated in this essay. The incarnational principle through which the human faculties of the inspired writer are active in the very mode of receptivity seems to be understood differently by Muslims. This may also have implications for a discussion of inerrancy if historical-critical analysis is able to give evidence of various traditions that are resident in the text of the Qur'an. At this point, I venture these comments only as an initial observation, not an evaluation of authenticity or truth. Differences in understanding how the "God who speaks" is known by his creatures can lead to invaluable dialogue and mutual understanding for both of our Abrahamic traditions.

1. "(The holy Roman Church) professes that one and the same God is author of the Old and New Testaments, i.e., of the Law, the Prophets and the Gospel, because by inspiration of one and the same Holy Spirit the saints of both covenants (sic) have spoken." Quoted in *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* [CF], Edited by J. Neuner, SJ and J. Dupuis, SJ (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1982, Revised Edition), p. 72, no. 208 (Denzinger-Schönmetzner [hereafter, DS] 1334).

2. "Following, then, the example of the orthodox Fathers it ["The holy ecumenical and general Council of Trent"] receives and venerates with the same sense of loyalty and reverence all the books of the Old and New Testaments—for God alone is the author of both—together with all the traditions concerning faith and morals, as coming from the mouth of Christ or being inspired by the Holy Spirit and preserved in continuous succession in the Catholic Church." CF, p. 73, no. 210 (DS 1501).

3. CF, pp. 75–76, no. 216 (DS 3004).

4. Canon 4 to Chapter II of *Dei Filius* states: "If anyone does not receive as sacred and canonical the book of Holy Scripture, entire and with all their parts, as the sacred Synod of Trent has enumerated them, or denies that they have been divinely inspired, *anathema sit*." *CF*, p.76, no. 218 (*DS* 3029).
5. *Providentissimus Deus* [*PD*] in *Bible Interpretation*, Edited by J. J. Megivern (Wilmington, NC: Consortium Books, 1978), p. 212.
6. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church: Address of His Holiness John Paul II and Document of The Pontifical Biblical Commission* [*IBC*], Pontifical Biblical Commission, (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1993), p. 13.
7. *IBC*, p. 19.
8. Hence, John Paul II opens his Encyclical Letter, *Fides et Ratio* (*On the Relationship between Faith and Reason*) with the following: "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves." John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1998), p. 7.
9. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [*CCC*], nos. 115–117, (New York: Doubleday, 1995), pp. 38–39. The CCC utilizes the medieval couplet to describe these senses: "The Letter speaks of deeds; Allegory to faith; The Moral how to act; Anagogy our destiny." No. 118, p. 39.
10. "The *literal sense* is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation: 'All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal.'" CCC, no. 116, p.39.
11. *IBC*, p. 16.
12. *Ibid*, p. 17.
13. *PD*, *Bible Interpretation*, p. 215.
14. *Ibid*, p. 218.
15. *Ibid*, p. 216.
16. In *Biblical Interpretation*, p. 271.
17. *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, no. 37, in *Bible Interpretation* [*DAS*], p. 333.
18. *DAS*, no. 38, p. 333.
19. *Ibid*.
20. *PD*, *Bible Interpretation*, p. 334.
21. *DAS*, no. 42, *Bible Interpretation*, p. 334.
22. *DAS*, no. 41, p. 334.
23. *IBC*, p. 35.
24. *IBC*, pp. 81–88.
25. *IBC*, p. 74.

26. *Dei Verbum*, no. 1 [DV], in *Bible Interpretation*, p. 403.
27. DV, no. 2, p. 404.
28. DV, no. 5, p. 405.
29. DV, no. 7, p. 406.
30. DV, no. 10, p. 408.
31. DV, no. 9, p. 408.
32. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 112–114, p. 38. These are taken from DV, no. 12.
33. DV, no. 11, p. 409.
34. Ibid.
35. DV, no. 13, p. 410.
36. DV, no. 11, p. 409.
37. DV, no. 2, p. 404.
38. *Revelation: Catholic & Muslim Perspectives*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006), p. 33.
39. Ibid, p. 33.
40. Ibid, p. 34.