

BIBLE INSPIRATION IN WOLFHART PANNENBERG' THEOLOGY: AN EXAMINATION

Glenny. W. Legi

South Sulawesi Conference of SDA, Indonesia
glenlegi@gmail.com

Suryanica Aristas Pasuhuk

Faculty of Philosophy, Klabat University, Indonesia
apasuhuk@unklab.ac.id

Abstract

Wolfgang Pannenberg was a theologian from German. He was a Lutheran theologian. His concept of revelation and inspiration was widely debated among Protestant and Catholic theologians. This article attempts to examine Wolfgang Pannenberg's theology of Biblical Inspiration. A biblical examination of the inspirations in Pannenberg's theology shows contrasting things. His idea of revelation is not direct communication between the Divine and man but rather as history, contrary to the biblical notion. Pannenberg rejected Divine intervention in biblical inspiration. This led him to focus on the role of man in Inspiration. For him, the authors played an active role, in cognitive processes. According to the Bible, writers have a passive role, because they are led and directed by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Pannenberg's idea of the Bible as a human document is not in harmony with the teachings of the Bible

Keywords: *biblical, inspiration, revelation.*

Introduction

Biblical Inspiration is one of the most crucial issues in Christian Theology. Frank Hasel in his dissertation has categorized two main views held by Christian Church today with regard to Biblical inspiration, namely: The Bible comes from above (divine revelation and inspiration) and comes from below (the product of human cognition).¹ Different views on inspiration have an impact on the interpretation of the Bible itself.² In other words, a person's

¹ Frank M. Hasel, "The Scripture in the Theologies of W. Pannenberg and D. G. Bloesch: An Investigation and Assessment of Its Origin, Nature and Use" (Ph.D Dissertation, Andrews University, 1994), 13-86.

² Donald A. Hagner stated that methodology for interpreting the Bible is determined by one's understanding of the Bible itself. The methodology of grammatical-historical sees the Bible as derived from Divine Inspiration, while the methodology of historical criticism focuses on man's cognitive role in the origin of the Bible. In any case, he agrees that these two methodologies have a significant contribution to understanding the true intention of the biblical author towards the recipient, in the situation and conditions in which they live. See,

understanding of inspiration determines the doctrines that he believed and how he understands and treats the Bible. Wolfhart Pannenberg one of the foremost theologians of the 21st century, believes that the inspiration of the Bible is a human cognitive process. In his book *Systematic Theology*, he emphasizes that inspiration is pure without divine intervention.³ Pannenberg uses *Historical-Critical Method* to understand the Bible. The question that needs to be answered is, is the understanding of inspiration in Pannenberg's theology compatible with the inspiration according to the Bible itself? This article aims to examine Pannenberg's theology of inspiration through the lens of the Bible, with the basic understanding that the Bible is the only absolute source of truth.

Pannenberg's on the Relationship between Inspiration and Revelation

To properly understand Pannenberg's understanding of inspiration, it is necessary to understand his understanding of revelation. For Pannenberg, "revelation as history."⁴ He believed that the contact between God and man takes place in history.⁵ For him, revelation is history and rejects revelation as direct communication between the divine and humans. Thus, the Bible is not direct communication between God and men.⁶ His idea of revelation leads to questions regarding divine reality in his theology.

For Pannenberg God specifically is not a person but an infinite reality, which is beyond human reality.⁷ He believed that by nature, God has infinite power.⁸ But in revelation when it says God as a related being, He is described as a person.⁹ Pannenberg's idea of God seems to support the concept of God outside of time (timelessness of God) originating from the Greek philosophers. By emphasizing history as revelation, itself, he places God outside of

The New Testament: Historical and Theological Introduction (Grand Rapids, MD: Baker Academic, 2013), 8-11.

³ In his book *Systematic Theology*, Pannenberg emphasized that inspiration is the pure cognitive proses of the writers. Pannenberg's view is a continuation of theologians in the enlightenment era. See more on Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols., trans., by, Geoffrey Bromiley (London: T & T Clark International, 2004). Lihat juga Hasel, 115.

⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg elaborated his idea on revelation as history in his book, *Revelation as History* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), 10. See also, Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology I*, 189,194.

⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 63

⁶ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology II*, 43.

⁷ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology I*, 382,383.

⁸ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology III*, 546.

⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 8.

time.¹⁰ In other words, the reality of God who is beyond time is the basis of his understanding of “revelation as history” which is related to inspiration. He further explains that the biblical writer’s interpretation of history can be understood as inspiration.¹¹ Thus according to Pannenberg, the relationship between inspiration and revelation lies in the interpretation of history itself. With this background, Pannenberg’s theology of inspiration could be understood.

Inspiration in Pannenberg’s Theology

Since revelation is not direct communication between God and man, Pannenberg also rejects the idea of the divine inspiration of the Bible. He said, the Bible is basically the word of man.¹² On the other hand, Pannenberg stated that the words in the Bible are a divine inspiration.¹³ His idea of inspiration seems contradictory. However, this contradiction raises questions about the divine role in biblical inspiration.

Divine Role in Inspiration. Pannenberg believed that there was a medium through which the contact between the divine and the human in history took place, which could be interpreted as divine inspiration.¹⁴ He stated that the medium in which this contact occurs is the mystical or ecstatic nature of the man himself.¹⁵ Furthermore, the mystical nature of man is the best supernatural and mental state of the individual.¹⁶ There seems to be no role for the divine in biblical inspiration in Pannenberg’s theology. So, what does he mean when he says the Bible is divinely inspired? It seems that according to his theology, there was no divine role in biblical inspiration.

For Pannenberg, the words written by the biblical writers can be understood as divine inspiration if they correctly write down historical events, and other things correctly to show their truth. If the words are correct and true then those words are the words of God because the truth is a divine attribute.¹⁷ From this observation, it is clear that there is no divine role in

¹⁰ David McKenzie, *Wolfhart Pannenberg and Religious Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: University of America, 1980), 133,137.

¹¹ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology I*, 195.

¹² Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology III*, 167,168.

¹³ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology II*, 511.

¹⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *What is Man?: Contemporary Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 86.

¹⁵ Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, 63.

¹⁶ This spiritual and mental state includes happiness, joy and emotions that are in line with logic. *Ibid*, 65.

¹⁷ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology I*, 254.

the inspiration of the Bible because he understands that God's word only attributes to the truths of the biblical writers. He also stated that the idea that the Bible was written under divine inspiration was untenable.¹⁸ Thus in Pannenberg's theology, the Bible is not a product of divine inspiration because there is no divine role in biblical inspiration. That is why inspiration is a human cognitive process. This conclusion leads to the question of the role of man in biblical inspiration.

Human Role in Inspiration. Pannenberg understood that there is no divine role in biblical inspiration. This idea is clear when he says that the Bible is "human document."¹⁹ Since the Bible is only a cognitive product of man, divine inspiration is completely excluded in Pannenberg's theology. For him, there are cognitive elements that underlie the inspiration of the Bible, which can be understood as the role of the human in inspiration.

Pannenberg mentioned two elements of inspiration. According to him, elements of inspiration are human reason and human tradition.²⁰ He believed that Christianity and the bibles were historical science and religion.²¹ He accepted the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation as the most appropriate way to interpret the Bible.²² From this perspective, Pannenberg emphasized history in his theology of inspiration. This is also confirmed by his statement that the Bible is a historical document.²³ Therefore, Pannenberg equates the Bible with other historical documents.

Pannenberg's theology of inspiration can be summed up as follows: Pannenberg rejected divine intervention in biblical inspiration. Furthermore, for his understanding of revelation as history, for him, there was no direct communication between God and man. Therefore, the Bible is not inspired by God but is a product of human cognition through reason dan tradition. The bible is a human document like any historical document. The best method to interpret the Bible must be the historical-critical method.

Biblical Understanding of Inspiration and Revelation

From the biblical point of view, revelation is given directly and indirectly by God Himself. The idea of God declaring/revealing directly can be seen in the story of the dream experienced by Nebuchadnezzar. The prophet Daniel confirmed this when he said, "He reveals deep and secret things" (Dan. 2:22). "Deep and secret things" can be understood when God reveals Himself. Based on this understanding, revelation can be understood as a direct

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 120.

¹⁹ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology III*, 169.

²⁰ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology I*, 171.

²¹ Pannenberg called this concept as *historic science and religion*. See, *Ibid*, 170.

²² Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology III*, 167.

²³ *Ibid*, 160. Compare with Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, 150.

statement from God who entered in time and came to the author of the Bible. In other words, the understanding of timeless God is seemingly inconsistent with this biblical idea. Jesus also agreed that God revealed himself directly to a certain person, he said: "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes" (Matt. 11:25). Thus, revelation is God manifesting Himself directly.

God also reveals Himself by nature. According to David "The heavens declare the glory of God, And the firmament shows His handiwork" (Psalm 19:1). Ellen White added, "God is love is written upon every opening bud, upon every spire of springing grass. The lovely birds making the air vocal with happy songs, the delicately tinted flowers in their perfection perfuming the air, the lofty trees of the forest with their rich foliage of living green – all testify to the tender, fatherly care of our God and His desire to make His children happy."²⁴ God reveals Himself through nature in order to show the beauty of God as the creator.

The idea that God came in person and met the author of the Bible as stated in direct revelation, indicates a direct communication between God and man. This was confirmed by the prophets when they claimed what they said was, "The Word of the Lord came to" the prophet (Jer. 1:11-13; Hos. 1:1; Joel 1:1; Yun. 1:1; Mic. 1:1), "thus says the Lord" (Am. 1:3; Obd. 1:1; Hag. 1:7; Zak. 12:1; Yes. 7:7) and "Hear this word that the LORD has spoken" (Am. 3:1; Yer. 2:4; Yeh. 6:3; Hos. 4:1). From this point of view, Wayne Grudem states, that the words of the prophet are the words of God.²⁵ Therefore, not believing and rejecting what the prophet said, as is the case with not believing and rejecting God (Deuteronomy 18:19; 1 Sam. 10:8; 13:13–14; 15:3, 19, 23; 1 King. 20:35,36).

When God came to communicate His Word to the prophets, He did not dictate it to them. This is obvious because the biblical writers have unequal knowledge, vocabulary that corresponds to the culture, the situation in which they wrote, and their literary abilities. Peter confirmed this by advising believers to clearly understand the writings of his companion Paul. He stated,

“as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has writted to you as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scripture” (2 Pet. 3:15,16).

This idea suggests that before prophets and apostles convey or write a message that God has revealed directly, there is a process of revelation before it is delivered or written by them. This process is called inspiration. That is why revelation and inspiration are inseparable.

Theologians call this proses of inspiration “Biblical Incarnation.”²⁶ The term is used to describe two qualities of the Bible: the combination of God and man. Just as God was

²⁴ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1915), 10.

²⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: Introduction to Biblical Doctrines* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 65.

²⁶ Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), 87. See also Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology I: Prolegomena* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2003), 225.

incarnate as flesh and so Jesus was God-Man, so too did the Bible as the voice of God-Man. This concept leads to the question of the role of God and man in biblical inspiration.

Divine Role in Biblical Inspiration

The key verse for the inspiration of the Bible is found in Paul's writings. He writes, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim. 3:16). The word inspiration appears first in the Vulgate version of the Bible (Latin Bible) translated by Jerome in the 4th century. Apparently, the term inspiration is Jerome's interpretation of the original word. The Greek word for inspiration is "θεόπνευστος", literally meaning "god-breathed". Another Bible verse gives an idea with respect to "god's breathing". David said, "by the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth" (Ps. 33:6). This is understandable when God breathes, referring to His activity in creation. The story of the creation of man also gives light that is in line with this idea. Moses wrote, "And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7). This verse suggests that man is not a living being (exists) before being breathed by God. Based on this understanding, inspiration is the Word or the infinite power of God (the same power as God created the universe) that is breathed upon the prophets/apostles and transmitted as they deliver the message directly or in writing.

God's role in inspiration suggests that the Bible has authority as truth because it comes from Himself and His own breathed. Paul says "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). Thus, the Word of God cannot be wrong for the benefit of faith and spiritual or religious practices.²⁷ This concept leads to the question of man's role in Biblical inspiration.

Man's Role in Biblical Inspiration

Biblical writers do not elaborate on their role in writing the Bible. The key verse about man's role in biblical inspiration is found in Peter's writings. He stated, "what you must know above all, is that the prophecies of scripture should not be interpreted according to your own will, for never prophecies were produced by the will of man, but by the promptings of the Holy Spirit the people spoke in the name of God" (2 Pet. 1:20-21). The original language used for the word "encouragement" was, "φερόμενοι" which can also mean "moved". So, it was God's initiative through the Holy Spirit that moved them to write the Bible. This verse also suggests that man does not play an active role, but rather is passive because of the "encouragement of the Holy Spirit". Commenting on this, Fernando Canale said, the passive role of biblical writers in the inspiration process shows their dependence on the Holy Spirit in the writing of the Bible.²⁸ What does the passive role of the biblical writer mean?

²⁷ Raoul Dederen, "Revelation-Inspiration Phenomenon According to the Bible Writers," in, *Adventist Theological Society Occasional Papers*, ed., by Frank Holbrook dan Leo Van Dolson (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1992), 25. See also Ministerial Association of General Conference of SDA, *Seventh-day Adventist Believe: A Biblical Exposition of 28 Fundamental Doctrines* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 5.

²⁸ Fernando L. Canale, "Revelation and Inspiration: The Classical Model," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 32 (1994): 22, 23.

Luke provides an overview that can help to understand the passive role of writers in the process of inspiration. In the preamble to the Gospels he wrote, he says,

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed. (Luk. 1:1-4).

Luke gives information when he writes the Gospel, it is not just receiving through the light of the Holy Spirit and directly writing it. However, there is a process that the Authors go through. This is their role in the writing of the Bible.

Luke explained that in the process of writing the Gospels that he did there were several stages. First, he carefully examined all the events concerning Jesus that had occurred. So, the role of humans in inspiration involves careful research. Research must of course be based on reliable sources in this regard "eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word" (v. 2). Luke himself was Paul's ministry partner in spreading the gospel (Col.4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Fil. 1:24). Thus, the sources he uses are reliable.

Second, "the word delivered them to us" (v. 3). This means it involves the writing process. The authors of the New Testament often used editors in writing books or letters. This of course does not bother the inspired person because they give directions and evaluate and confirm the writings of the editor, so that the book or letter does not belong to the scribe or the editor.²⁹ Therefore, the vocabulary of other books varies according to their background and culture. Similarly, the literary form and model of each book are different because of the different abilities of the authors.

Third, so that the reader "that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed" (v.4). This process aims to confirm the truth of the Bible. After all, the Bible is the truth because it was written based on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This suggests that the Holy Spirit leads writers to truth in their writing process (including research and vocabulary selection).³⁰ In relation to this, Fernando Canale states, that the Holy Spirit does not improve the minds of the writers but ensures that the authors do not change God's truth with their own interpretations.³¹ Therefore, the Holy Spirit guaranteed that what the prophets and apostles wrote is the Word of God.

²⁹ D. A. Carson and Douglass J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 105.

³⁰ One of the works of the Holy Spirit is to lead into all the truth (Yohanes 16:3).

³¹ Fernando L. Canale, "Revelation and Inspiration," *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed., by George W. Reid (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2005), 65.

An example of this understanding can be found in the writings of the prophet Jeremiah. On receiving the message, he declared, "After which the word of the Lord came to me, it read: Moreover, the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Jeremiah, what do you see?" And I said, "I see a branch of an almond tree." Then the LORD said to me, "You have seen well, for I am ready to perform My word." (Jer. 1:11, 12). When God came to reveal something in the form of a vision, He asked what Jeremiah saw. Jeremiah's answer was then followed by an evaluation by God by stating, "you have seen well". This also means that God agrees with the language used by Jeremiah in explaining the vision he received. That is why Jeremiah's words in describing the vision he received were the Word of God because it was confirmed and endorsed by God Himself.

This concept also suggests that the books of the Bible are interconnected and not contradictory because they are led directly by the Holy Spirit. This idea also suggests that in studying the Bible, the principle of the Bible explaining itself should not be ignored. Therefore, seeking the truth must be understood from the source of the truth itself that is, the Bible.

Summary

A biblical examination of the inspirations in Pannenberg's theology shows contrasting things. His idea of revelation is not direct communication between the Divine and man but rather as history, contrary to the biblical notion. Revelation occurs in history because God entered history and communicated His truth directly to the biblical writers (prophets and apostles). His understanding of revelation and inspiration overrides God's role in the origin of the Bible. On the other hand, the Bible states that God is directly involved and plays an active role in biblical revelation and inspiration. Thus, Pannenberg rejected Divine intervention in biblical inspiration. This led him to focus on the role of man in Inspiration. For him, the authors played an active role, in cognitive processes. According to the Bible, writers have a passive role, because they are led and directed by the Holy Spirit. That is why Pannenberg's idea of the Bible as a human document is not in harmony with the teachings of the Bible.

Conclusion

Pannenberg's theology of inspiration led him to the conclusion that the Bible is a historical document of human origin. On the other hand, biblical theology of inspiration states that the Bible is the Word of God in the language of man. The examination carried out shows that his theology of inspiration is not in line with the teachings of the Bible. From a Biblical perspective, the process of inspiration states that the Bible is the word of God: A statement of His character and will. That is why it aims to educate us in truth and to be lamps/pillars of fire on the way to heavenly Canaan (2 Tim. 3:16; Ps. 119:105).

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