



THE HOLY BIBLE

There is certainly a great deal that can be said about the Holy Bible. But the most important factors in understanding the Holy Bible are understanding its unity, the tradition that establishes it teaches us how to interpret it, and the proper teaching of what inspiration really is. The loss of these basic foundations of what the Holy Bible is is the major reason that has led to the multitude of Christian denominations. We all read the same book, the Holy Bible. So then why are we so different? Differences in those three basic principles are the reason why.

FIRST: THE UNITY OF THE BIBLE AND THE MULTIPLICITY OF ITS WRITERS

The number of inspired writers who participated in the writing of the books of the Holy Bible reaches more than forty writers from different classes of people. Among them is the shepherd, the fisherman, the tax collector, the tentmaker, the leader, the prophet, the king, etc... All of them are from the Hebrews except for Luke the writer of the gospel named after him and was probably a Gentile physician from Antioch. (There are few who consider him Jewish.)

The writing of the books of the Bible was completed during approximately fifteen centuries and some. It spans from between about the middle of the fifteenth century B.C. to the end of the first century A.D.

In spite of the diversity of subjects which the Bible touches and the variety of its styles from prose and poetry, history and stories, wisdom and ethics, philosophy and proverbs, prophecies and admonitions, teachings and sermons, praises and prayers, and in spite of the great number of the writers and the variety of their styles with the difference of their education and the circumstances of their lives and the difference of time and place, nevertheless we find one design that brings it together and one order that penetrates into it, and witnesses to the exalted hand of the one composer who is the Holy Spirit. For truly, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God. [Literally: "Every (part of) the Scripture is the breath of God] (*2Timothy 3:16*).

SECOND: TRADITION AND THE HOLY BIBLE

First: Tradition is that which witnesses to the Holy Bible:

By way of tradition we knew the canonical books of the Holy Bible and the names of their writers. We were able through the testimony of tradition and the one unanimous voice of all the fathers of the Church in all generations to distinguish between it and the other forged books which the heretics wrote in different generations to insert in them their destructive heresies. In order for them to be able to spread it, they would publish it with dazzling names that they falsely attributed to the apostles. From these forged books, we mention as an example the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*, the *Gospel according to the Egyptians*, the *Gospel of the Ebionites*, the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Barnabas*, the *Gospel of the Infancy*... and the book of the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the book of the *Preaching of Peter*, the book of the *Acts of Peter*, the book of the *Acts of Paul*, etc...

Only by way of tradition are we able to know the true books of the Holy Bible, their number, the names of their writers, the time of its writing, and the details that came in them.

Because the saints of the Church in all times preserved the Holy Books and used it in their prayers and worship and witnessed to it in their sayings and writings, and because they would memorize Bible verses, their writings were stocked with verses of the Holy Bible to the point that the scholars of

Patrology (the study of the sayings of the fathers) determined that if the books of the Holy Bible were not present in our hands, we would be able to gather what was in them word for word by gathering the verses present in the numerous sayings, writings, and expositions of the saintly fathers.

The testimonies of the Church fathers to the books of the Holy Bible are innumerable, and we wouldn't be able to quote all of them here. It suffices that we quote a few of them for lack of space.

Saint Augustine says: "There is a clear boundary found that separates all the books following the apostolic times from the books that have canonical authority in the Old and New Testaments. The authority of these books came down to us from the apostles through the succession of the bishops and the spreading of the Church. And because of the eminent standing of this authority and its prestige, every believer and every godly thought must submit to it. The Holy Bible has a distinct sanctity to it, and because of this distinguishing feature present in all of the Holy Books, we must accept all that is presented to us of the sayings of the canonical books whether by mouth of a prophet or an evangelist" (from his book [*Against Faustum*] 11:5).

He also says: "As for me, I believe only in the Bible as declared by the authority of the Church" (*Contra epist. Manichae quam V Cant Fundamenti* 6).

Saint Serapion, bishop of Antioch, says – refuting the forged book attributed to Peter named the Gospel of Peter – "Because we, O brethren, accept all that is from Peter and the rest of the apostles as apostles of Christ. However, we vehemently reject the writings falsely attributed to them knowing that whatever is like these was not delivered to us" (*History of the Church*, Eusebius, book 6, part 12:3).

Tradition then is that which testifies to the Holy Bible and makes known to us its canonical books. As also it:

Second: is that which explains the Holy Bible to us, and presents a canonical explanation especially of the verses "hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction" (2Peter 3:16). There are very many commentaries of the fathers and their explanations in front of us which they wrote about the Holy Books. Even though they wrote in different ages and countries, they all nevertheless are distinguished by the same one spirit. Because they all [*drank*] their teachings from that one fountain which is none other than the teaching of the apostles and kept their explanations within the tradition delivered to them.

The apostles who wrote the books are themselves the ones who would comment on and explain what appeared difficult to understand for the believers. These oral apostolic explanations spread in the Church generation after generation until the commentator fathers of the Church documented them in their commentaries which they wrote.

Because of this, all the writings of the fathers came to be distinguished by the apostolic mark and the orthodox faith just as it is characterized by the freedom from infringement and deviation and is distinguished by utter purity from every strange teaching.

We write down here an excellent example of this orthodox principle of interpretation which is the attention to recording the sayings of the apostles. It is what **Saint Papias**, one of the fathers who lived in the second century A.D., wrote in the introduction of his book *Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord*: "But I shall not hesitate also to put down for you along with my interpretations whatsoever things I have learned carefully from the elders (those who saw the apostles) and carefully remembered, guaranteeing their truth. For I did not, like the multitude, take pleasure in those that speak much, but in those that teach the truth; not in those that relate strange commandments, but in those that deliver the commandments given by the Lord to faith, and springing from the truth itself. If, then, any one came, who had been a follower of the elders (those who saw the apostles), I questioned him in regard to the words of the elders, -what Andrew or what Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the disciples of the Lord. For I did not think that what was to be gotten from the books would profit me as much as what came from the living and abiding voice" (*History of the Church*, Eusebius, book 3, part 39:3,4).

This is the orthodox principle of interpretation that the interpreter investigate the explanations and teachings of the apostles themselves as shown in the sayings and interpretations of those Church teachers who preceded them. This is what preserves the faith and protects it from heresy. If we search for the causes of heresies in various ages, we would find that their originators, even if they were from the believers, perished due to their lack of understanding of the verses of the Bible and their inventing faulty interpretations polluted with strange philosophies which their personal desires and deviant ideas have dictated to them. This is because since they were filled with the spirit of pride, they did not pay attention to the interpretations of the apostles which the living tradition of the Church preserved.

These types of heretics appear in the Church in every generation from the apostolic age itself until our time [now]. In the book of *Revelation* the Lord addresses the angel of the Church of Pergamos saying: “Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate” (*Revelations* 2:15). From these types of heretics our teacher Peter the apostle warns us saying: “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways” (*2Peter* 2:1,2).

Likewise our teacher Paul the apostle warns us of heretics who ascribe themselves to the Church saying: “For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ” (*2Corinthians* 11:13).

He explains to his disciple Timothy the reason for the appearance of these heresies by that their originators, with the spirit of pride, leave the teaching of the apostles which is the words of the Lord, and adhere to vain philosophies, demonstrating knowledge when in fact they are ignorant saying: “If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing” (*1Timothy* 6:3,4).

He also says to him: “O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge—by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith” (*1Timothy* 6:20,21).

This is just as he instructed the believers that they do not become troubled when these heresies spread in a disturbing fashion: “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires they will heap up for themselves teachers” (*2Timothy* 4:3).

Because of this it was a wise principle of the Church to vehemently renounce every teaching and interpretation that does not agree with the apostolic tradition. By this it was able to sever from its body every originator of heresies in various ages and refute their heresies and maintain the upright apostolic faith. It does this also according to the teaching of the apostles. Our teacher Paul the apostle says to his disciple Titus: “Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned” (*Titus* 3:10-11). Likewise our teacher John the apostle of love says: “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds” (*2John* 10-11).

The principle of commitment to the apostolic tradition and teaching in interpretation is a wise orthodox principle. Because of this the Orthodox Church believes that it is not every person’s right to interpret the verses of the Holy Bible as he wishes and according to his liking. Rather he should in his interpretation be committed to the spirit of the fathers and the teaching of the apostles. And by this the Church was able to maintain its unity, spirituality, and orthodoxy.

It preserved its unity of spirit and sound teaching... Even when those who refuse the apostolic tradition and are not committed to it and call for the right of every person to interpret the Holy Bible as he likes or is inspired (the spirit) – as they say – without being bound by the opinion of those who preceded or the tradition of the disciples, but only what seems appropriate to him and as it guides him (the spirit), we found that these became divided and parted into numerous factions reaching several hundred in number. So did Christ become divided amongst Himself?!. And if truly they were moved by

the Holy Spirit in their interpretations – as they claim – wouldn't they have maintained the unified teaching?! Because the Holy Spirit is One. So is it possible that we could ascribe the opinions of every one of their factions which opposes the rest of the factions in a way that made each of them an independent denomination; is it possible that we could attribute all of this to the one Spirit?! Certainly not... since the Holy Spirit is not divided amongst Himself and does not teach things that appears to be in objection with each other and contradict each other. Therefore, it is impossible to consider these differing factions churches, because the true Church of Christ is distinguished in that it is "one body and one spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (*Ephesians* 4:4-5).

Therefore our Holy Church is proud of the Apostolic tradition because:

Firstly: it gives testimony to the Holy Bible.

Secondly: it explains for us the verses of the Holy Bible.

THIRD: INSPIRATION OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

Inspiration is the supernatural action of the Holy Spirit on the mind of the sacred writers whereby the Scriptures were not merely their own but the Word of God.

The Bible not merely contains but is the Word of God. The written word is at once perfectly Divine and perfectly human; infallibly authoritative because it is the Word of God, intelligible because it is written in the language of men.

Since we receive our Sacred Scriptures from the Church, we should first listen to the Church in what she says about them in her traditional formulae: viz, God is the author of the Scripture, the inspired writer is the organ of the Holy Spirit, Scripture is the Word of God.

History alone allows us to establish the fact that Jews and Christians have always believed in the inspiration of the books of the Bible. These books are held as sacred and canonical, not because having been put together by merely human labor and afterwards approved by the Church's authority, but because, having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and, as such, they have been handed down to the Church itself as an unerring guide to her.

Difference Between Revelation and Inspiration

Revelation has to do with the communication of truth that cannot be otherwise discovered; inspiration has to do with the recording of the revealed truth.

Inspiration has to do with the recording of the truth. The Spirit of God moved upon men to write the books of the Bible (*Acts* 1:16; *Hebrews* 10:15-17; *2Peter* 1:21). All Scripture is fully and verbally inspired. St. Paul (*2Timothy* 3:16) declares that no part of the written word is uninspired, but "All Scripture (lit. "every Scripture", i.e. every portion) is inspired by God (lit. "God-breathed") and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness".

Inadequate Theories of Inspiration

Various theories of inspiration have been suggested down through the ages which often contain some truth, but remain insufficient definitions. They are erroneous and misleading, because they are inadequate.

1. Natural Inspiration or the intuition theory:

This theory holds that inspiration is merely a superior insight on the part of natural man. It is merely the intensifying and elevating of the religious perceptions of the writer; but this religious enthusiasm does not differ essentially from that which animated Homer and Plato. This is the denial of everything supernatural, in the ordinary sense of the word, as well as in religion in general.

This view puts some of the Church's great hymns on a level with the Bible. In reality it confuses the Spirit's work of illumination imparted to all the faithful with his special work of inspiration.

Illumination does not deal with the transmission of the truth, but with the understanding of truth already revealed.

2. The dynamic or partial-inspiration theory:

According to this theory, the writers of Scripture enjoyed the influence of the Holy Spirit to such an extent, that it is the Word, and contains the will, of God. This made them infallible in matters of faith and practice, but not in things which are not of an immediately religious character. Thus the writer could be in error in things which relate to history and science. This theory is prevailing among many protestant groups, and has been held by Luther, Calvin, Baxter, Doddridge and many others. It lays stress upon the sense of Scripture as a revelation of God's will, and leaves room for the full play of human agency in the composition, admitting mistakes (or at least the possibility of mistakes) made by the writers of the Bible in statements related to history and natural sciences. Luther who magnified Paul accused him in one instance of false logic, and spoke disparagingly of Esther [Schaff. P., *A Religious Encyclopaedia...*, vol. II, p. 1105].

This conception of partial inspiration is a modern figment having no support in what the Bible teaches about its own make up.

The Problems with this theory are obvious. How can we accept one sentence of Scripture and not another? Who can tell us which part is right and which part is not? And further, who can tell us how to distinguish between things that are essential to faith and practice and those that are not?

If Scripture were not plenary and verbally inspired by God, its practical utility as a sure guide in all questions directly or indirectly affecting doctrine and practice would be materially impaired. Nowhere does the Bible tell us that inspiration covers only things which relate to faith and practice. It declares in the most absolute comprehensive words that all (lit. every) Scripture is God-breathed (*2Timothy 3:16*).

In fact, a limited inspiration contradicts Christian tradition and theological teaching.

3. The theory that the thoughts, not the words, are inspired:

This theory holds that God suggested the thoughts of the revelation, but left it up to the writer to put the revelation into words.

But the Bible indicates that the words themselves are inspired. St. Paul states that he spoke, "not in words which man's wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches" (*1Corinthians 2:13*). He further declares that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God (*2Timothy 3:16*). This means that the very words are the words of the Spirit.

Our Lord Jesus Christ stresses the importance of single words or even one jot, i.e. the smallest letter in the Greek and Hebrew alphabet, or one tittle, i.e. the smallest stroke in certain Hebrew letters, using a solemn affirmation to underline the authority of His words about the law, saying, "For assuredly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (*Matthew 5:18*; "law" means the whole Old Testament, as John (10:34-35) uses law of the psalms).

Additionally, it is difficult to think of thought apart from words. The thoughts are in the words, and the two are inseparable. It is inconceivable to dissociate them from each other. Therefore, the words themselves must be inspired, and not only the thoughts.

4. The theory that the Bible contains the Word of God [i.e. is not wholly the Word of God]:

According to this theory, the Bible is a book composed from merely human resources which God can make his Word at the moment of personal encounter. The authors of Scripture wrote of their encounters with God in thought patterns of their days, reflecting their specific teachings, actions, temptations and trials. They incorporated into their writings various supernatural myths and miraculous

tales to convey spiritual truths. But their writing still becomes the Word of God to us at that existential moment when God breaks through to us and reveals himself in his Word.

This theory views Biblical inspiration as not differing essentially from the gift of the Holy Spirit imparted to all the faithful. Accordingly, it is, to say the least, an improper use of language to call the sacred text itself inspired. At any rate, this text can, and actually does, err not only in profane matters, but also in those appertaining more or less to religion, since the Prophets and Apostles did not possess absolute infallibility. The Apostles were not perfect in their conduct and judgment as rulers and teachers or the Church (*Acts* 15:39; 23:3; *Galatians* 2:12; *2Corinthians* 13:12; *Philippians* 3:12). The grace of God was in them as earthen vessels.

This conception of Biblical criticism does not rest on an innocent view about the negligibility of the factor of inspiration, but on the outright denial of it. Those critics say Scripture must be demythologized. The interpreter's job is to strip away all the mythical embellishments and seek to arrive at the spiritual truth God has for us.

The extremists among those critics ridicule the doctrines of Incarnation, Virgin-birth of Christ, his Resurrection and Ascension, the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment. They adopt the same attitude of the Sadducees who "say that there is no resurrection - and no angel or spirit" (*Acts* 23:8), disregarding Christ's proof of the Resurrection from the Pentateuch (e.g. *Exodus* 3:6, 15) given in his reply to the Sadducees (*Matthew* 22:23-33; *Mark* 12:18-27; *Luke* 20:27-40). Some Anglican clergy published books entitled "Christianity without Christ?"; "The Myth of God incarnate"; "The foolishness of God"

[See Bowden, J., *Jesus, The Unanswered Questions*. SCM Press, London 1988, pp. xviii, 82. In pp. 87-89 he says "*some theologians now felt the doctrine of Incarnation to be so inadequate that it was time for it to be abandoned... That also explains why in addition to those Christians who were shocked by The Myth of God Incarnate as a threat to their faith there were many others, Christians and those of other religions, particularly Moslems, who welcomed it as a positive contribution to the dialogue between religions...*"].

Over against these perverse views several things can be said. In the first place, it is a very subjective approach to the Bible. Scripture could be made to say one thing to one person and something else to another. It is not the text which is inspired but the reader. This position discards the objective approach to the interpretation of Scripture. It virtually subjects the teaching content of Scripture to a degree of uncertainty rendering the revelation value of the whole doubtful.

5. The dictation theory:

The dictation theory holds that the authors of the Bible were mere machines, instruments, pens, amanuenses, not beings whose individualities were preserved and somehow pressed into service in the act of inspiration.

Closely related to the dictation theory is the theory that inspiration is an ecstasy, or possession which was propounded by Plato (*Timaeus*, 71), from whom it was borrowed by Philo (*de Spec. Leg.* IV:8), Josephus (*Antiquities* iv:vi:5), and some early Christian writers (e.g. Athenagoras, *Apology* ix).

The Scriptures recognize an ecstatic condition, but it is something different from the ecstasy of Plato and Philo, except, perhaps, in the case of Balaam, who prophesied against his will. It is not, as Augustine has rightly said, a suspension of mental faculties, but an "alienation of the mind from physical sense-perception". (Schaff, *A Religious Encyclopedia* vol. II, p. 1102).

This theory that inspiration is an ecstasy, or possession was advocated by the Montanists, whose excesses were castigated by Miltiades in a treatise bearing the title, That the Prophet ought not to speak in Ecstasy, which recalls the words of St. Paul, "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" (*1Corinthians* 14:32). Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* I: 17) regarded such an ecstatic condition as an evidence of false prophets and an evil spirit.

The defenders of the dictation theory claim that there is nothing undignified in dictation, certainly as between God and man. Besides, the statements of the recipients of revelation show that such a process not seldom took place. The offence at "dictation" frequently proceeds from an under-estimate of God and an over-estimate of man. Therefore, it matters not at all that the Holy Spirit took men as instruments for writing - compared to pens or to a flute blown by a flute-player, or a plectrum striking a lyre - or used them as hands which wrote down what Christ dictated.

On this view the style is always that of the Holy Spirit. Some have even argued that the grammar must be everywhere perfect because it is the Holy Spirit's grammar.

But this theory ignores the obvious differences in the style of Moses, David, Isaiah, James, John, Peter and Paul, for example. Some have tried to meet this difficulty by supposing that the Holy Spirit in each case adopted the style of the sacred writer, but there is a better way of accounting for and defending the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration. We must acknowledge that Scripture is at once perfectly Divine and perfectly human. God used living men, not dead tools. He did not set aside human personality, nor did he divest the writers of their several individualities of style, just as the inspired teachers in the early church were not passive machines in prophesying (*1Corinthians* 14:32). "Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty" (*2Corinthians* 3:17). Their will became one with God's will; his Spirit acted on their spirit so that their individuality had free play in the sphere of his inspiration.

References:

The Manuscripts of the Holy Bible by Fr. Shenouda Maher (Arabic)

The Holy Tradition by Fr. Shenouda Maher (Arabic)

Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures by Fr. Shenouda Maher (English)

QUESTIONS:

- 1) There are many people who believe in the Bible and the Bible alone, i.e. *Sola Scriptura*, and deny the importance of the Holy Tradition. How can one reply to this and state the importance of the Holy Tradition and its relationship to the Holy Bible?
- 2) Give three verses in the Holy Bible that explain what inspiration really means. Explain the importance of these verses in understanding the proper doctrine of inspiration.