

## Systematic Theology for the Local Church

### #13—Bibliology—Part IV<sup>1</sup>

#### The Need for an Accurate Revelation

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For the studies in Bibliology: Become familiar with Sections 6-12 in House's *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*. Read all of Packer's *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*. Packer's book was written against the background of the debate over Fundamentalism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, his presentation of the systems of authority (reason, tradition and Scripture) is timeless. Also, read Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, ch. 1, "The Fact of Divine Revelation," ch. 2, "The Inspired Nature of Holy Scripture," ch. 3, "The Attributes of Holy Scripture," and ch. 5, "The Bible as the Που Στῶ for Knowledge and Personal Significance," which deals with the Bible as the basis for life.

Psalm 19 is the psalm of revelation. In the first six verses it describes God's disclosure of Himself in nature. Starting in v. 7 it turns—without any transition!—to the revelation that is Scripture. David says this communication is 'perfect.' Read his words:

#### Psalm 19

For the director of music. A psalm of David.

<sup>1</sup> The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

<sup>2</sup> Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.

<sup>4</sup> Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun,

<sup>5</sup> which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course.

<sup>6</sup> It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.

<sup>7</sup> The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.

<sup>8</sup> The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

<sup>9</sup> The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous.

<sup>10</sup> They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.

<sup>11</sup> By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

<sup>12</sup> Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults.

<sup>13</sup> Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression.

<sup>14</sup> May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

What is it that brings about the attribute of perfection, that brings joy, light and spiritual refreshment? What is it that brings the spiritual conviction that seems to overwhelm him?

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## A unique book

Although we might be inclined to accord the word Bible itself special status, it has quite an ordinary origin. The ancient Greeks called parts of the Papyrus plant *bublos* or *biblos*. By a natural process, this term, and other variations of it, was used for the writing material made from such plants, which grew especially along the Nile, and then for joined pieces of that material. Hence, the word we use to describe the written revelation from God was simply, but perhaps very significantly, the ordinary Greek word for book.

It is important for the student of the Bible to think of the object of his study as a book. It is as genuinely a book in nature as *War and Peace* or the *Iliad*. As such, it contains words in human languages—several languages, as a matter of fact. And it uses figures of speech and other devices that we are familiar with. It speaks of historical events and real places, some that we can visit today. It describes real people and is grounded in authentic history, culture and language.

But as we think further about the Bible, God and humanity, we are led to the conclusion that, although this is a genuine book, it is absolutely unique among all the books of the world. For it claims to be—and we should accept this at face value—a revelation from the God of the universe.

It is worthwhile to ponder the process of communication between God and humanity. To begin with, it is possible that a personal God could exist and yet not communicate at all with humanity. In that case, we would find ourselves forced to agree with the deist, who holds that a personal God is out there somewhere but does not reveal Himself or intervene in human affairs (see 2 Pet. 3:4-7). Secondly, we might conjecture as to other ways in which God could communicate with us. He could write signals in the sky, or speak so that all on earth could hear him physically. Of course, we do find in the Bible itself that He has spoken with an audible voice at times to individuals, as with Moses on Mt. Sinai. But although there are certainly many ways He could communicate to us, when we stop to think about it, a book is a very natural and effective instrument. There are several reasons why this is so.

To begin with, we know books from ordinary life. Granted, they haven't always been around, but written documents have been in existence now for over four millennia, as far as we know. So it is easy for us to accept a book containing something special from God, particularly as compared with smoke signals.

A book is also portable, at least if it is small enough—even ancient scrolls such as the Hebrews used were portable to some degree. That means many people can be exposed to a document. In the case of the Bible, this makes spreading the message relatively easy.

Although God has communicated to many people over the centuries, sometimes face to face, sometimes in dreams and visions, sometimes through overt control of history, we would be at the mercy of oral report for information about such disclosures, if we did not have the advantage of the lasting medium of writing. Thus the Bible makes all other communication from God permanent.

Perhaps most important is the fact that human beings obviously have a facility for communicating with each other by means of that capacity we call language. How natural for God to utilize that same capacity to speak to us! In fact, some writers have asserted that the very reason we have a language capacity is so that God can interact with us.<sup>2</sup> If we stop to think about it, this is quite an amazing thing. The God of the universe uses a channel that seems so terribly ordinary to us—language—to tell us great things we could not otherwise know

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<sup>2</sup> Robert E. Longacre, *The Grammar of Discourse* (New York: Plenum, 1983), 355; Gordon H. Clark, "Special Divine Revelation as Rational," in *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 41.

about Himself and His goodness toward us. (To be sure, some philosophers and theologians have suggested in recent decades that our language is meaningless in talking about the kind of God who must be “out there,” so the Bible is inadequate as a help in understanding God.<sup>3</sup> If we believed this we would be adrift on a sea of uncertainty concerning God and might as well give up the whole matter.) When we have our language in a book from God, we have a very appropriate medium of communication indeed.

And it is this that makes the Bible unique among documents. Although it has some of the same features as other books, it has some that no others possess. It claims to be a revelation from God and backs that up with several qualities. First, it predicts events ahead of time, then records their fulfillment. This is nowhere more prominent than in the book of Daniel, where events concerning the Greek and Roman Empires are unambiguously prophesied in minute detail four hundred years before the fact. No wonder critics of the Bible have worked overtime especially to discredit this particular prophetic book that so clearly supports the supernatural nature of Scripture.

We must also admit—if we are honest about ourselves—that there is no other book that so accurately describes the human condition. Perhaps we could rephrase the familiar adage and say that “Nothing knows me like the Book.” Sometimes we don’t appreciate its piercing insight, but if we are open to the things of God, we come to value it. Incidentally, we should remember that, humanly speaking, one reason the sinner does not come to God is that the Bible exposes his evil deeds (Jn. 3:19-20). David, a child of God, understood how well the book knew him and recorded in Ps. 19 how it brought conviction of sin to his heart.

The Bible has also been corroborated in amazing ways with regard to its historical, geographical, prophetic, cultural, and linguistic features by the findings of archaeology, linguistic studies and other fields. Other books have been so justified, to be sure (except for the prophetic aspect), but none that makes the claims that the Bible does.

The Bible, then, is like no other book, and we must never approach it lightly. We should be thankful that, if we can read and have an appropriate translation, we can scan its pages as easily as those of a newspaper, although we definitely have to expend effort in putting its message together. And we should remember that there is special spiritual quality about it. Certainly we would not worship it, as followers of Muhammad do the Koran. Only Jehovah deserves our worship—even the revelation He has given does not. (That, by the way, is one reason why we do not possess the original manuscripts of any portions of the Old Testament and New Testament). But the Bible certainly merits all our respect.

We must also reckon with the fact that the Bible changes lives—and has changed societies for good on many occasions over the centuries. Every individual, group or nation that obeys it finds itself on the receiving end of blessing from God. The Psalmist rightly understood the relation between the Bible and behavior, as he expressed it in Ps. 119:165: “Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.”

But what quality does the Bible have that enables it to make detailed predictions that come to pass, to diagnose my spiritual needs and yours, to have its historical, cultural and linguistic topics corroborated again and again after being doubted, and, above all, to change human lives for the better?

### **An accurate revelation**

We find that the Bible records different kinds of disclosures from God: dreams, visions, direct writing (the tablets of the Law), messages through prophets, the words of Jesus, the Person of Jesus Himself (Heb. 1:1-2),

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<sup>3</sup> See Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 17-23.

and others. And clearly God led some to record previously unknown data as they wrote. We might well ask if Paul knew all the details about the future as recorded in 1 Cor. 15 before he took pen in hand. Perhaps he did, but then again God may have given him the specifics as he wrote.

What is clear, though, is that the Bible says of itself that it is all from God. We usually think of revelation as only the disclosure of what was previously unknown. But that is only part of what is involved. For example, Luke must have known many historical and geographic details before he wrote the book of Acts. However, their precise combination is a kind of revelation that carries a guarantee of accuracy. God worked in such a way that both the newly given spiritual material and what was known were shaped to form a coherent and precise spiritual message. This is a revelation because God discloses how known and unknown things fit together.

We desperately need this kind of accurate revelatory activity centered on Scripture, because we are incapable of apprehending spiritual realities directly by ourselves. To be sure, we can know certain things about God from the heavens (Ps. 19:1-6; Rom 1:19-20) and from our consciences (Rom. 2:15). But we need to know what our spiritual condition is before God, what God is like and what possibility there is of a remedy for our predicament. The things we can know about God from general revelation are inadequate to help us with our sin problem. We need help that won't mislead us, since so much is at stake. The great theologian B.B. Warfield addresses this point:

Man as finite needs to be told directly by God about the ultimate direction of the course of history. . .

. . . Sinful man wants to suppress the truth of God that comes to him. . . . The natural man is at enmity with God. He always seeks to make himself believe that he has not been confronted with God; his forms of worship are ways by which he makes himself believe that God is finite. . . .

. . . If sinful man is to be saved he must be saved against his will. He hates God. God's work of salvation must be a work into territory that belongs to him by right but that has been usurped by King Diabolus. . . . So an entrance has to be forced . . . . And when God by grace makes friends within the enemy country these friends . . . are as much as was Adam in need of supernatural word revelation. And they are . . . to an extent under the influence of the old man within them and so would even when redeemed never be able to interpret mere revelational facts correctly and fully. Hence the necessity of Scripture.<sup>4</sup>

So God has taken some things we know about already—the Roman Empire, the geography of Judea, the elements of poetry, and many more—and combined them with new information in an overall (though limited in certain respects) special revelation of Himself and His purposes for humanity and the universe. God has communicated in ways that meet our spiritual needs totally, and put that message in a book. Old Testament scholar Gleason Archer puts it this way:

How then can we know God or His will for our lives? Only if He reveals Himself to us! Unless He Himself tells us, we can never know for sure the answers to those questions which matter most to us as human beings. At this point it is important to observe that the Bible presents itself as the written revelation of God. This purports to be a Book in which God gives us the answers to the great questions which concern our soul, and which all the wisdom and science of man are powerless to solve with any degree of certainty.<sup>5</sup>

Not only do we need a message from God about our spiritual needs, but it must be able to tell us exactly what God expects of us. If He spoke to us and yet we became confused in carefully following what He said,

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<sup>4</sup>Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 31, 32, 33.

<sup>5</sup>Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 21.

then He would be leading us into error. Not only would such a revelation be worthless, it would give us the wrong concept of God, and He would be inconsistent with Himself.

The means God used to insure the accuracy of the revelation is presented in many places in the Bible. We read descriptions such as “The Spirit of Lord spoke through me; his word was on my tongue.” (2 Sam. 23:2) and “David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, said” (Mk. 12:36). Clearly God was intimately involved in communication of the message through and to human beings.

Both of the previous examples, and many other portions of Scripture, indicate that in very natural ways human beings were a part of the process. Scripture is thus the product of a significant two-sided activity involving God and individuals. God supervised and saw to it that the message was recorded as He wanted it to be. And human beings, not always knowing that they were part of a momentous spiritual activity, recorded the revelation.

Theologians call God’s work in guaranteeing accuracy *inspiration*. This superintending activity of God yielded an error-free product from the hand of the original writers. And, although the Bible never tells us exactly how inspiration took place, we can understand certain aspects of what God did. We will look at these aspects in great detail in the next few studies.

Here is a definition of *inspiration*:

Inspiration is a term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God’s creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiriation* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*; 1 Cor. 2:13; 2 Pet. 1:19.\*

We will provide detailed biblical support for this definition in our next study.

### **Circular reasoning?**

Sometimes people wonder if the Bible’s statements about itself should be the source for our understanding of its characteristics. Is this arguing in a circle? The Scriptures tell us truths we cannot discover in any other way. If we turn to the Bible for testimony to the otherwise unknown, we certainly can accept its testimony concerning itself. Furthermore, we look to it for information on other doctrines. Why can’t we ask it about itself? It really boils down to whether we trust the Bible as a guide to itself or choose to erect some outside standard. We are in unique territory here, since the Bible is unlike any other book or document. Usually the reluctance to allow the Bible to speak about itself in regard to inspiration is a result of a predisposition to find errors in it. We are in the best position if we give the Bible every benefit of the doubt, allowing time for apparent errors to be resolved while taking the Bible’s claims for itself at face value. To do otherwise is to set ourselves up as judges of the Scriptures. We should always assume that we do not know enough, as opposed to thinking that we have finally proven an error in the Bible. The biblical revelation is so much greater than human beings that we dare not do otherwise.

I conclude with some fine words from Robert Reymond concerning the value of inspired Scripture (‘epistemically’ in the last sentence refers to dealing with knowledge):

Though written entirely by men, [the Bible] is entirely the Word of the living God, because the Spirit of God inspired men to write it in the whole and in the part. The relation between the human authors and the Spirit of God, however, was not one of simple cooperation or coauthorship. Men could not (and would not) have written the Bible apart from the Spirit’s superintending activity. The Holy Spirit, then, is the author of Scripture in a more profound and original sense than the human writers

ever could (or would) have been. God is the primary author of Holy Scripture, with the human writers being the authors of Scripture only insofar as the Spirit mandated, initiated, and provided their impulse to write. Never did the Bible, either in the whole or in the part, exist for a moment apart from its Spirit-mandated and inspired character. Consequently, to regard the Bible as only a generally reliable library of ancient documents composed by human authors, as even some evangelicals are willing for the unbeliever to do (at least at first) as part of their apologetic strategy, is to overlook the most fundamental fact about the Bible and the Bible's major claim about itself. This conviction that the Holy Spirit is the primary author of Scripture entails yet another conviction, namely, that the Spirit's superintending influence upon the minds of the Bible writers insured that they would write precisely what God wanted them to. So, since the God of truth by the Spirit of truth inspired the Bible writers to write what he wanted them to write, the final effect was an *inerrant* autograph or original. And if we fail to recognize within the Scripture our Master's voice speaking his infallible truth to us from his world to our world, we destroy ourselves not only epistemically but only personally, for we abandon the only foundation for the certainty of knowledge and the only "meaning base" by which we may truly know the One infinite, personal God and thereby ourselves as persons of dignity and worth.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Reymond, 3-4.

## Study questions

1. Work on committing to memory the definition of *inspiration* and review the definitions in the running compilation below.
2. In Ps. 19 David meditates on the nature of Scripture and becomes convicted. How does he describe that conviction, and what features of Scripture found in the psalm lead to it?
3. What enables Scripture to bring about the changes in David's life found in Ps. 19?
4. What roles and powers of Scripture are implicit in Warfield's powerful quote? In other words, what can Scripture do and why?

## Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiriation* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.