

## Systematic Theology for the Local Church

### #15—Bibliology—Part VI<sup>1</sup>

#### The Process of Inspiration

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July 1, 2007

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 Ποῦ Στῶ for Knowledge and Personal Significance," which deals with the Bible as the basis for life.

In the June 20, 2007, posting on his blog, Albert Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, KY, writes about the Rev. Ann Holmes Redding of Seattle.

Sunday's edition of The Seattle Times featured a major article on Rev. Redding and her claim to be both an Episcopal priest and a practicing Muslim.

Redding, who until recently was director of faith formation at St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral, has been a priest for more than 20 years. Now she's ready to tell people that, for the last 15 months, she's also been a Muslim—drawn to the faith after an introduction to Islamic prayers left her profoundly moved.

Her announcement has provoked surprise and bewilderment in many, raising an obvious question: How can someone be both a Christian and a Muslim?

Well, at least the question is right—How can someone be both a Christian and a Muslim. The simple and profoundly obvious answer is that one cannot be both a Christian and a Muslim, at least not until you completely redefine what it means to be both Christian and Muslim.

Mohler gives her beliefs as reported by the paper:

She believes the Trinity is an idea about God and cannot be taken literally. She does not believe Jesus and God are the same, but rather that God is more than Jesus.

She believes Jesus is the son of God insofar as all humans are the children of God, and that Jesus is divine, just as all humans are divine—because God dwells in all humans.

What makes Jesus unique, she believes, is that out of all humans, he most embodied being filled with God and identifying completely with God's will.

She does believe that Jesus died on the cross and was resurrected, and acknowledges those beliefs conflict with the teachings of the Quran. "That's something I'll find a challenge the rest of my life," she said.

She considers Jesus her savior. At times of despair, because she knows Jesus suffered and overcame suffering, "he has connected me with God," she said.

Mohler concludes:

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So Rev. Redding denies the historic doctrines of the church and then declares herself a Muslim. In March 2006 she said her “shahada” or profession of faith, declaring that there is only one God and that Mohammed is his messenger.

Rev. Redding denies the central teachings of Christianity and explicitly denies what the Bible undeniably teaches.

This is yet another reminder of the basic principle that religious liberals can negotiate themselves to any position they desire. Once you commit yourself to a methodology of denying Scripture and orthodox Christian doctrine, you can declare yourself to be a Christian and a Muslim, a Christian and a Druid, or a Christian and an Atheist for that matter.

This is our third study on the inspiration of Scripture. In the first study we stressed the need for an accurate revelation from God. In the second study we looked in detail at 2 Tim. 3:16-17 in context. We dealt with the meaning of ‘Scripture,’ the inclusiveness of inspiration (it applies to all that is Scripture), the meaning of θεόπνευστος (‘breathed out from God’) and the resultant spiritual power of Scripture. We also reviewed the definition of ‘Scripture’ that I have provided. I recommend learning the underlined part.

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, *expiration* 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.

Although 2 Tim. 3:16-17 does not take us very far into the interaction between God and the writers of Scripture, 2 Pet. 1:19-21 does provide some insight into that cooperative activity. Here are these key verses in their context. Notice that in this passage Peter is talking about things that are ‘true’ (v. 12). These things are the propositional statements of Scripture that we have talked about in past lessons.

<sup>12</sup> So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. <sup>13</sup> I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, <sup>14</sup> because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. <sup>15</sup> And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.

<sup>16</sup> We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. <sup>17</sup> For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” <sup>18</sup> We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

<sup>19</sup> And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. <sup>20</sup> Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. <sup>21</sup> For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Here is the Greek text of vv. 20 and 21:

<sup>20</sup>τοῦτο πρῶτον γινώσκοντες ὅτι πᾶσα προφητεία γραφῆς ἰδίας ἐπιλύσεως οὐ γίνεται. <sup>21</sup>οὐ γὰρ θελήματι ἀνθρώπου ἠνέχθη προφητεία ποτέ, ἀλλὰ ὑπὸ πνεύματος ἁγίου φερόμενοι ἐλάλησαν ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἄνθρωποι.

## The meaning of v. 20b

The word ἐπιλύσεως (*epiluseōs*; ‘interpretation’) in v. 20 has been interpreted in different ways with regard to this text. This is the key factor in the proliferation of translations, which center on two ideas:

- 1) the origin of prophecy itself or
- 2) the interpretation of prophecy by someone after it has been written.

While these sound like very different ideas, and they are, they have their origin for the most part in the possible meaning of the one word.

In ancient Greek *epiluseōs* was equivalent to English ‘explanation’ or ‘interpretation.’ *Epiluseōs* does not occur in the N.T., but the related verb does in Mk. 4:34 (“He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.”) and Acts 19:39 (“If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly.”). The contexts show that in both places the word refers to unraveling a problem. This is really a type of explaining. When we unravel a problem we provide an explanation for it.

The first approach takes *epiluseōs* to mean something like ‘the unraveling of unknown truth,’ and connects the unraveling with prophetic Scripture itself and the role of the prophet, who does not open up or unravel prophetic information by himself as he writes Scripture.

The second approach to translation of *epiluseōs* in 20b takes it to mean ‘interpretation,’ connecting the act of interpreting with someone who is examining the prophetic Scriptures.

The word γίνεταί (*ginetai*) occurs frequently in the N.T. and is usually translated ‘become’ or ‘come into being,’ although it can also be rendered ‘be.’ The first, more frequent, meaning is combined with the ‘unraveling’ idea to yield this kind of translation:

- 1) No prophecy of Scripture comes into being by its own untying.

The meaning of this sentence is that prophetic Scripture didn’t arise by the prophets’ own actions. They didn’t utter words that were their interpretation of what the future might be. Verse 21 would then be giving the real source of the prophetic word—it came as men were moved by the Spirit. John Piper describes this interpretation this way: “No prophecy is the result of a prophet’s private interpretation of history.”<sup>2</sup>

The Weymouth and NIV translations are similar:

Weymouth: But, above all, remember that no prophecy in Scripture will be found to have come from the prophet’s own prompting.

NIV: Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation.

The less usual meaning of *ginetai* (‘is’) is combined with the ‘interpretation’ idea to yield this kind of translation:

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<sup>2</sup> On-line transcription of a sermon by John Piper entitled “Men Moved by the Holy Spirit Spoke from God,” delivered May 16, 1982 at Bethlehem Baptist Church.

2a) No prophecy of Scripture is of its own interpretation, i.e. it should be interpreted by some appropriate context.

This translation reflects the idea that no prophecy is to be disconnected from other Scripture during the process of interpretation.

A similar translation is this:

2b) No prophecy of Scripture is to be understood by one's own interpretation.

This reflects what is probably the most accepted view today. The Bible in Basic English puts it this way:

No man by himself may give a special sense to the words of the prophets.<sup>3</sup>

The idea here is that the interpretation of prophecy is not to be controlled by the *interpreter's* own ideas. Here is Piper's phrasing of this approach:

“No prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation” can mean no individual should interpret prophecy according to his own personal whim. You can't just give Scripture any old meaning you please. There is a true meaning (according to v. 21) which comes from God through the prophet and this is our standard.

Translation 1) describes the source of prophetic Scripture. Translations 2a) and 2b) describe acts of interpretation of that prophetic Scripture. We seem to be at an impasse here. The usual meaning of *epiluseos* argues for 2a) and 2b) ('interpretation'), and the usual meaning of *ginetai* argues for 1) ('origin').

Ultimately, context and the flow of thought provide the most important help in deciding on the interpretation and translation of this verse. For translations 2a) and 2b) the supposed connection of v. 20 with the preceding verses is that the false teachers were twisting Scripture: v. 16 refers to their cleverly invented stories. Peter would be saying, “Don't twist the prophetic Scriptures as the false teachers do, thinking only of their sinful goals.” Certainly this is a true and valid thing to encourage—correct interpretation of prophetic Scripture. Verse 20 would be then an exhortation not to do what they did.

But is that the issue here? The main point of vv. 12-19 is that believers have access to reliable information. They need not fall prey to cleverly invented stories (v. 16) but instead have prophetic Scriptures that are confirmed by the transfiguration (vv. 16-18) and *can now be seen to be* more reliable than we ever thought (the Scriptures were never objectively unreliable). I translate the first part of v. 19 as “We now have the prophetic word as more solid.”<sup>4</sup> Thus the reference to cleverly invented stories and the transfiguration and its result for our view of Scripture argue for a particular view of the reliability of Scripture, not how we are to interpret it.

Furthermore, v. 21 is a direct statement about the *origin* of prophecy. As such, it makes the best sense to see it as in *explanation* of v. 20—giving more detail about the origin—rather than a *reason* for proper

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<sup>3</sup> S. H. Hooke, ed., *The Basic Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments in Basic English*. Cambridge: The University Press, 1949.

<sup>4</sup> I base this on the fact that there are two terms in the accusative case after 'have' in the Greek text, one a noun ('prophetic word') and one an adjective ('solid'). In past research I identified this kind of construction as involving the assigning of the semantic category of *role* (if a noun) or *condition* (if an adjective) to the second accusative, in this case, the solidity. A more full translation would be 'We have the prophetic word in a more solid condition.' Similar to othis is 'We have Abraham as our father' (Mt. 3:9) and 'Set apart Christ as Lord' (1 Pet. 3:15).

interpretation. Verse 21b is then a powerful explanation of the origin of Scripture—the writers were carried along.

Michael Green has a good explanation of this interpretation of v. 20:

In the preceding paragraph, Peter is not talking about *interpretation* but *authentication*. His theme is the origin and reliability of the Christian teaching about grace, holiness and heaven. The same God whom the apostles hear speak in the transfiguration spoke also through the prophets. Thus the argument in verses 20, 21 is a consistent and indeed necessary conclusion to the preceding paragraph, i.e. we can rely on Scripture because behind its human authors is God. The prophets did not make up what they wrote. They did not arbitrarily unravel it. ‘They did not blab their inventions of their own accord or according to their own judgments.’ (Calvin). In the Old Testament, this was the characteristic of the false prophets, who ‘speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord’ (Je. Xxiii. 16, RSV, cf. Ezk. xiii. 3). But true prophecy came from God and, men as they were, the prophets were *moved* or ‘carried along’ by the Holy Spirit.

Peter, then, is talking about the divine origin of Scripture, not about its proper interpretation. If interpretation were his subject in this verse, then verse 21 would be utterly irrelevant to his argument. What is more, a very forced meaning would have to be given to *ginetai*, viz. ‘comes under the scope of’ . . . .<sup>5</sup>

This passage speaks of the process of revelation specifically from the point of prophecy. But there is no reason that we could not legitimately apply its teaching to the rest of Scripture. Peter speaks of ‘prophetic Scripture,’ not just ‘prophecy,’ so he is clearly thinking of Scripture itself.

### **The actual source of prophetic Scripture**

For Peter, the believer can trust prophetic Scripture because it was authenticated by the transfiguration (vv. 16-18) and did not arise from human beings themselves (v. 20). The transfiguration account in Mt. 17 and Mk. 9 presents Christ in his glory in His coming Kingdom. Peter speaks of his ‘majesty’ in v. 16. As striking as this must have been for Peter, one of the eyewitnesses, Peter does not use it as the basis for truth. Instead, he says that the event simply confirmed what the prophets had already said. Those who espouse feeling-based Christianity today with the need for exciting experiences would do well to remember Peter’s emphasis: Scripture takes precedence over feelings and happenings. The transfiguration only served to underscore the truth that had already been revealed: ‘We have the prophetic word as more solid.’ This is because God intended Scripture to be the permanently available source of information. Only three people saw the transfiguration. As the Bible is translated into various languages, large numbers of people have it available.

Peter underscores the superhuman origin of Scripture in two ways. To begin with, as we have seen, it did not arise through discoveries by the prophets who spoke in the Old Testament. Their prophecies as recorded in Scripture did not generate themselves. They were not spontaneous explanations of portions of the plan of the ages. No prophetic Scripture comes into being by its own unraveling of history. It was not as if the prophets had searched and searched on their own and were finally able to unravel the events of history and put together something later regarded as Scripture.

No, neither their minds nor their wills (v. 21) produced Scripture. They could not, because a higher source was needed. Instead, the prophets (and others who wrote Scripture, we assume) were ‘carried along’ (NIV) by the Spirit of God. Acts 27:15-17 provides a beautiful illustration of this ‘carrying,’ using the same word that Peter does of the work of the Holy Spirit here:

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Green, *The Second Epistle General of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 90-91

<sup>15</sup> The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along. <sup>16</sup> As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure. <sup>17</sup> When the men had hoisted it aboard, they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Fearing that they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along.

The NIV's 'driven along' provides an evocative description of the effect of the wind on the ship. Note that in the context of the story the ship was completely at the mercy of the wind. As a ship is empowered by and at the mercy of the wind, so also the writers of Scripture were totally dominated by God—here in bringing the prophetic writings to others. Nothing that the Holy Spirit did not want to be inscribed ever was. And everything that He did want to appear, was written.

It is not insignificant that the word order in the Greek text puts a strong stress on this controlling work of the Holy Spirit. A very rough translation of 1:21 shows that Peter has placed the Spirit's activity first in the sentence to highlight it: "But by the Holy Spirit being carried spoke from God men." A valid finished English translation (with raised voice indicated in reading by italics) would be: "It was *by the controlling work of the Holy Spirit* that men spoke from God."

I will repeat here words from Robert Reymond that I quoted in the thirteenth study, because I appreciate them so much:

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.<sup>6</sup>

### **The human element**

There are some qualifications that we should note, since some people have ridiculed this doctrine without having a proper concept of it to start with. First, the Bible indicates that usually God worked behind the scene, so to speak, leading in the writing, but not turning the people who wrote into robots. Only at times do we read that He directly dictated information to be inscribed (Jer. 30:2; Hab. 2:2), and then the writers were alert to what was going on.

It is also quite evident that God used people with normal human qualities that often surfaced in the inscription process, as in Rom. 9:1-3, where all of the longing for his kinsmen and the intense personal will of the Apostle Paul come to the fore:

I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated, from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh . . . .

### **Our only guide for life**

Once again, we should not overlook the connection in 1 Pet. 1 between inspiration and the life and service of the child of God. As was Paul's concern in 2 Tim. 3, in this passage Peter is concerned with showing the

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<sup>6</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 3. 6

value of Scripture in counteracting error. The Bible is the only beacon in moral darkness (v. 19), because it is from God. In the face of ever-present spiritual murkiness, the Bible appears as light—the only light—giving us hope that the things of God will prove to be lasting and worthwhile. (One of the main purposes of the epistle is to encourage the readers to maintain a pure life in the face of many spiritual dangers around them.) Anything less would make it part of the confusion. Scripture can only help us see through and rise above ever-present distortion of spiritual realities if it is from God.<sup>7</sup>

We began this study with a true story about terrible spiritual confusion and error—a woman who happily combines in herself Islam and Christianity, misleads others and is accepted by a so-called Christian group. This is where so-called Christendom is headed today, and the only way for true believers to see through the error is by using the Scriptures that are the result of the controlling work of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>7</sup> This is one reason we can never presume to pass judgment on the Bible. We are to study it but when we do not understand it we are to let it have the final say. Otherwise we contaminate it with the error that surrounds us and which we are trying to avoid (see 2 Pet. 1:19).

## Study questions

1. Why was it necessary that the writers be 'carried along' by the Holy Spirit?
2. The account of the transfiguration in vv. 16-19 is presented here in comparison to the prophetic Scriptures. What are some of the implications of the relative value of these two kinds of sources of spiritual information?
3. Verse 20 begins with 'Above all.' Taking the flow of thought into consideration, why might Peter have said this (as he was carried along by the Holy Spirit!)?
4. Can you think of other objects in life today that are carried along as the ships were in Acts? What might the carrying along by the Spirit have meant specifically for the prophets as they spoke and those who subsequently recorded it as Scripture?



## 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*.