

Systematic Theology for the Local Church

#18—Bibliology—Part IX¹

Plenary Inspiration

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For the next study—Inerrancy—please review Section 10 in House’s *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*. Please read the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.

For the upcoming studies in Theology Proper: Become familiar with Sections 13-26 in House’s *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*. Also, read Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, ch. 6, Introduction to the Doctrine of God, ch. 7, the Names and Nature of God, ch. 8, God as Trinity, ch. 9 (except for the sections on Christ and the Holy Spirit), The Trinity in the Creeds, ch. 10, The Eternal Decree of God. Later in the section on Theology Proper we will suggest readings in Wayne House’s *Charts on Open Theism and Orthodoxy*.

Up to this point we have explored in detail the meaning of inspiration, the process of inspiration and the accuracy resulting from that process. We saw in the last study that the breathing out from God includes the words (verbal inspiration) and much more (‘whole message inspiration’). We have not yet dealt in sufficient detail with the question of the breadth of the result of inspiration.

Someone might say that they can believe some of the details of the Bible are a product of the creative and supervisory activity of God, but that there might be some question as to whether every single section or book of the Bible is included in that activity. In other words, the statement in 2 Tim. 3:16 certainly includes all of the Old Testament, since we have every reason to believe that Paul saw the Old Testament Scriptures as a canonical unit even in his own time, but it doesn’t necessarily say that any of the New Testament is ‘breathed out.’

Most conservative theologians speak of the breadth of inspiration as being ‘plenary,’ or ‘full.’ So ‘plenary inspiration’ means that inspiration extends to all the books of the Bible. A frequently heard summary is that the Bible demonstrates ‘verbal, plenary inspiration.’ But there are several questions that we have to deal with in connection with plenary inspiration:

- What is the breadth of the apostles’ reference to ‘Scripture’?
- What books have constituted the Bible since the apostolic age?
- What about translations and copies of what the writers penned? Are they inspired, too?

We will treat these questions individually.

What is covered by the word Scripture in the minds of the apostles?

We have already seen in Study #15 on 2 Tim. 3 that it is likely that Paul viewed already written New Testament books as coming under his view of what constitutes ‘Scripture.’ Is there other help in the Bible for the question of how far inspiration extended in the minds of the apostles?

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We have help in this in Jn. 14:26, where Jesus, in predicting the coming ministry of the Holy Spirit, said, “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” Now that is just the kind of ministry that would give the Gospels, especially, the same qualities as the Old Testament Scriptures, which were given through the ministry of the Spirit. Also to the point is Jn. 16:12-15:

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But, when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make known to you.

This broadens Jn 14:26 to include material not already spoken by Jesus, and especially mentions prophetic truth. Together these two passages describe all the material of the New Testament written after Jesus’ death as being under His authority and from Him.

There are other lines of evidence that we are to regard the New Testament as just as much a product of the creative breath of God as the Old Testament. In 1 Cor. 14:37 Paul indicates that, at that point at least, he was aware that what he was writing was “the Lord’s command.” Similar to this is 2 Pet. 3:2, where Peter places his writings on a par with the Old Testament: “I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.” For a first-century Jew to elevate his writings to the same level as those of the revered prophets was quite a claim! A few verses later Peter specifically places Paul’s writings in the category of ‘Scripture,’ which for Peter must have been, as for Paul in 2 Tim. 3:16, the Old Testament writings: “He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.”

Although not all of the writings of the New Testament are specifically assigned to the category of ‘Scripture,’ the process of canonization, the acknowledging that books had their source in God, argues for the inspiration of all twenty-seven. Even in the last book of the New Testament there was a consciousness of writing God’s words (Rev. 1:1-3; 1 Cor. 2:13). We will treat the topic of the canon next.

How do we know which books constitute inspired Scripture today? or The gathering of inspired Scripture: The Canon

A question foundational to all Bible study concerns what books we consider to be inspired today and therefore authoritative in spiritual things. Conservative Protestants view the present sixty-six books of the Old Testament and New Testament as forming a complete revelation from God. Yet there are other groups within the broad umbrella of nominal Christendom that hold different views. Further, agreement as to the acceptability and desirability of the sixty-six did not come instantly.

The collected books that are considered (by anyone) to be spiritually authoritative for Christianity are called the *canon*. This is actually a transliteration of a Greek word that means ‘rule’ or ‘standard.’ As employed in reference to the Bible, it denotes the set of writings that are taken as normative under some set of guidelines or principles for evaluating spiritual worth. The existence of a canon is a fact. The questions, then, are what elements went into decisions made many centuries ago and how guidelines vary for different groups. Practically speaking, the answers to these questions involve a study both of the history of the gathering of books and of views that we have access to concerning reasons for compiling and approving. Here is a definition of ‘canon’:

Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning ‘standard’; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).

We need to be very clear on what the basic idea of the canon is. If we allow the Bible to speak for itself, we arrive at the fundamental belief that it carries with it its own authority and qualities of excellence, because it is a product of the creative breath of God (2 Tim. 3:16). It stands as an inspired revelation, no matter what human beings think about it. Therefore, determining the extent of accepted and profitable books is not at all a matter of the granting of approval by an individual or an institution, such as a church body, or investing a book with spiritual quality. Rather, it is solely a matter of people being led by God to recognize what He had already placed in existence as authoritative revelation, and, conversely, of determining what books did not have their source in God. In other words, the Church did not create Scripture; instead Scripture has primacy and is the basis for the Church. Gleason Archer states:

The biblical authors indicate very clearly, whenever the matter comes up, that the various books of the Bible were canonical from the moment of their inception, by virtue of the divine authority (“Thus saith the Lord”) behind them, and the books received immediate recognition and acceptance by the faithful as soon as they were made aware of the writings.²

A place where it is quite easy to see this is in the attitude of our Lord and the New Testament writers toward the Scriptures. Jesus always put Himself under Scripture and often asserted its unalterable authority. Hence, when in Mt. 5:18 He declares, “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.” He is teaching that the Bible stands on its own and needs no help from human beings to accomplish its ends. To have this quality it must be from God. Jesus is thus putting His stamp of approval on that portion of the Old Testament as He quotes it. In 2 Pet. 3:16 Peter puts Paul’s writings on a par with the Old Testament Scriptures. Thus, probably even before they had been circulated widely, at least some of Paul’s books were viewed as authoritative. No councils were needed to give approval.

This brings us to the key factors that must have been used in determining the canon, especially for the New Testament: apostolic source, connection with an apostle, correspondence with known apostolic doctrine, doctrinal harmony with other accepted writings, evidence of divine origin, and spiritual profitability. The last three were evidently determinative in establishing the canon of the Old Testament.³

Evidence for the Old Testament Canon

Our knowledge of the process of recognition of Old Testament books is not as extensive as that concerning the determination of the canonicity of New Testament books. The earliest written indications of conscious thoughts of a canon date to the early part of the second century B.C. Individual books as we know them appear at various times in different combinations, e.g. 1 and 2 Sam. are considered a unit in some systems of division. However, as far as the Hebrew text is concerned, records indicate that only a few books were debated as to their canonicity, with records of resolution of questions about some books coming in the first century A.D.⁴ It is significant that the Hebrew canon of apostolic times is identical to the present thirty-nine-book Old Testament familiar to Protestants.⁵

² Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 79.

³ Archer, 77; Edward J. Young, “The Canon of the Old Testament,” in *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 156-164.

⁴ Archer, 69.

⁵ Archer, 68.

Fourteen books form the disputed Old Testament Apocrypha, a term meaning “hidden,” and here denoting books that are in some way ancillary to others:

Apocryphal Books

Additions to Esther
Baruch
Bel and the Dragon
Ecclesiasticus
1 and 2 Esdras
Judith
1 and 2 Maccabees
Prayer of Manasses
Song of the Three Holy Children
Susanna
Tobit
The Wisdom of Solomon

Today the Roman Catholic Church views most of them as canonical. Some people trace their authoritative nature to the Septuagint, but different manuscripts of that translation contain varying combinations of apocryphal books. Hence, their status was in doubt, especially during the early centuries of the Christian era. They were never included in the Hebrew canon, and it is significant that the New Testament writers never clearly quote from any apocryphal book. For these and other reasons, conservative Protestants today deny canonical status to the apocryphal books.

Testimony to the Canon of the New Testament

The earliest testimony to the canonicity of the New Testament lies in the New Testament itself, where, as indicated above, writers give obviously unsolicited affirmation of the spiritual worth of other writings. Some examples are found at 1 Th. 5:27 and 2 Pet. 3:15-16. Apparently, in a very natural process, the early Church used writings in both public and private situations as they appeared, circulated them, compared them with other early Christian writings and the Old Testament and assessed their spiritual worth. Many people in the first century would have known firsthand of the sayings of Jesus, and could compare written documents and the New Testament books with them for accuracy. Perhaps the Old Testament canon as a fixed collection formed a model for establishing a set of documents presenting works of God in the new age. The earliest testimony outside the New Testament appears toward the end of the first century in the writing of Clement of Rome, where there is apparent reference to Mt., Rom., 1 Cor., Heb., and perhaps other books. Discussion and presentation of opinions continued until the end of the fourth century, when there was widespread unity on the present twenty-seven books as canonical. The process included separation of evidently apostolic books from inferior ones such as 1 and 2 Clement, The Didache, etc. The principles listed above, centering on apostolic connection and spiritual worth, were the overriding criteria.

Many have raised the question of why the church settled on 27 books—without specific guidelines being revealed from God as to how the canon of the New Testament was to be formed. Raymond addresses this question:

The Christian must accept by faith that the church, under the providential guidance of God’s Spirit, got the number and the “list” right since God did not provide the church with a specific list of New Testament books. All that we know for certain about the history of the first four centuries of the church would suggest that God’s Spirit providentially led his church—imperceptively yet inexorably—when it asked its questions, whatever they were, to adopt the twenty-seven document

canon that the Godhead had determined would serve as the foundation of the church's doctrinal teaching and thus bear infallible witness throughout the Christian era to the great objective central events of redemptive history, and that *this* "apostolic tradition" *authenticated and established itself* over time in the mind of the church as just this infallible foundation and witness.⁶

What is the relation between inspiration and copies and translations?

We do not possess any of the original writings of the Old and New Testaments. Instead, we have many copies and translations. But there is no indication in the Bible that we are to assign to any copies or translations of the Bible the same qualities as those of the original writings. Some might ask how we could have a Bible that could help us if the translations or copies we read are not just as accurate as the originals. Or, what good does it do to talk about the inspiration and accuracy of the originals if we don't have them? Don't we need to talk about the Bibles we have and the qualities they possess today? One answer is that, because we have copies that disagree, we would be faced, if we looked for inspiration of the copies, with the problem of deciding which one is inspired. But to answer this problem well we have to look at the issue of determining the text of the Bible. This is done through textual criticism.

Textual criticism is a foundational area of biblical study. As it applies to biblical studies, textual criticism attempts, through guidelines and procedures, to determine the original content of the biblical books. It attempts to answer the question: What is the text of the Bible? Actually, textual criticism is needed for any hand-copied document where we do not possess the original and where it is important for us to find out what the author wrote. This is absolutely necessary where two or more copies are in disagreement at any point. Such alternate wording is called a *variant*. Because the Bible contains variants and is such an important document, textual criticism is essential to biblical studies. As a matter of fact, it is the most foundational of all endeavors related to Bible study, since it determines the nature of the text we study. Here is a definition of textual criticism:

Textual criticism is the science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.

Part of the process involves working backward through variant readings, attempting to determine how changes in the text may have arisen, and deciding what variant has greater claim to originality. It is important to realize that we cannot call a particular variant an error, since we do not know for sure which of two or more alternatives represents the original.

When we do textual criticism, we are asking which text represents and corresponds to the original. It is generally assumed that we are one step away from an original text that possessed perfection of content. And to get anywhere, we assume in doing textual criticism that one of the variant readings at any point represents the original, although it is hypothetically possible that we *do not* have what represents the original at particular points. In that case, we would have a text that was not preserved by God during the process of transmission through the ages. It is generally accepted by textual critics that the New Testament text is in such a state of preservation that we have all the material needed to make adequate decisions as to originality. In the case of the Old Testament, however, there are times when even theologically conservative textual critics are willing to agree that the standard Hebrew text and other texts (such as the Septuagint) may not contain satisfactory readings. It should be stressed that the number of such instances is remarkably low, and that textual critics, especially conservative ones, are very reluctant to suggest readings beyond what is contained in manuscript evidence.

⁶ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 67.

Doing textual criticism

In attempting to determine the original text, modern textual critics use two main lines of evidence. Manuscripts have individual characteristics (handwriting style, a history of circulation and use that may be known, etc.), can often be located as to time and place of writing or use and can sometimes be grouped with other similar manuscripts. Such features are said to constitute *external evidence*. On the other hand, there are details in the text itself at the point of variant readings. These particulars, such as grammatical elements, similarity to other passages, pronunciation of words in question, etc., are called *internal evidence*. Most textual critics today work with a combination of internal and external evidence in making decisions at particular points in the text.⁷

A description of the whole process is beyond the scope of this study. However, we will look at two examples that are found in some translations. Scribes introduced changes in the texts they were copying for two basic reasons. They may have altered wording intentionally or may simply have copied incorrectly. The latter class of changes is far more frequent than the former. Intentional changes may have occurred because a scribe knew of a passage parallel to the one he was copying and attempted to bring his text into line with the other, thinking that a scribe before him had erred and caused a divergence between the two texts. Such a change is called a *harmonization*. Another reason was to introduce a particular doctrinal feature that the scribe wished to present. This type of change was, as far as we can tell, very infrequent. Scribes who were very conscious of grammatical niceties such as spelling variations, alternative suffixes, etc., sometimes made alterations in the text—again, in order to reverse what was felt to be a place where an earlier scribe had made an error, since only in the rarest instance would a scribe change what he believed the author wrote.

Some changes introduced by scribes are entirely unintentional, and involve such mundane things as reading and writing the same suffix or other letter sequence twice (*dittography*), eliminating one of two repeated elements (*haplography*), misreading letters that are similar in appearance (such as the Hebrew equivalents of English *d* and *r*; the Greek equivalents of English *a*, *d*, and *l*; *e* and *s*), or confusing two letters or sequences of letters that sounded similar or alike (such as Greek omicron and omega), a practice called *homoeoteleuton*.

For example, in Gen. 10:4 some Hebrew manuscripts and the Septuagint have, as in 1 Chr. 1:7, *rodanim*, i.e., a reference to the Rhodians of the Aegean Sea. Other Hebrew manuscripts have *dodanim*. The textual problem is apparently due to the confusion of the Hebrew equivalents of English *r* and *d*. The reading *rodanim* is taken by most today to be the better reading, due to the possibility of connection with the Rhodians.

In Eph. 5:9 there are two variant readings, ‘spirit’ (*pneumatōs*) and ‘light’ (*phōtōs*). ‘Light’ could have arisen under the influence of the presence of the same word in the preceding verse, but it is more likely that ‘spirit’ was introduced as an intentional or unintentional harmonization to Gal. 5:22, where “the fruit of the Spirit” occurs (see the marginal note in the NASB at Eph. 5:9).⁸

Reasons for Confidence

The existence of variants in the text and attempts to piece it together might tend to make one uneasy about the trustworthiness of the Bible. Actually, despite the fact that not all the manuscripts of the Bible are in agreement, there are many reasons for being very confident about the state of the text (a manuscript is simply any hand-copied portion of the Bible, whether a few words or a whole testament). To begin with, as compared with other ancient literature, the existing manuscripts of the Bible come remarkably close in time

⁷ See Eldon J. Epp, “The Eclectic Method in New Testament Textual Criticism: Solution or Symptom?” *Harvard Theological Review* 69 (1976): 215.

⁸ Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 607.

to their sources. For instance, some New Testament manuscripts have been dated at less than a hundred years from the time of writing of the original they represent. In general, copies of classical works in Greek and Latin are much further removed in time from their originals. Also, there are large numbers of manuscripts attesting to the text of the Bible, especially in the case of the New Testament, for which there are probably over five thousand Greek manuscripts alone, not to mention those in other languages, such as Latin and Gothic. These and other factors should lead us to believe that we can proceed confidently with biblical studies that build upon the work of textual critics.

As with all biblical study, we should keep in mind that anyone who works with the text and expects to put it together accurately must have a high regard for its integrity and inspiration and must allow it to speak for itself. Just as there have been some who have written commentaries and theological studies who do not have a high regard for the text, there have been some who have engaged in textual criticism who have not held to the divine source of the text. However, most textual critics have attempted to be genuinely fair with the text of the Bible. Every Bible student must simply be on guard in this area, as in every other, for teaching and conclusions that are not consistent with a high view of Scripture. Aside from this, the results of textual criticism are indispensable to anyone who seeks to discover the message of the Bible. In fact, without such study down through the ages, we would not have a coherent text to work with in any language.

We must further assume in all of this that God has preserved for us reliable texts of both the Old Testament and New Testament. Although certainly not all of the textual problems have been resolved, we must believe that God has not led us astray in regard to the words of the text of the Bible. In fact it should always be kept in mind that no variant reading affects a major doctrine. There is always enough information elsewhere for us to determine the full counsel of Scripture on any given teaching.

It is historically and theologically realistic to acknowledge that some textual criticism on the Bible is necessary, and the Bible student should not glibly accept the verdict of those who assert that it isn't. Even those who hold that the type of text underlying the AV is homogeneous, and therefore the mainstream text preserved by God, must face the fact that some textual criticism on that type of text is necessary.

Further, all evidence points to the fact that although we talk about error-free originals and flawed copies, the Bible still possesses God-given authority over our lives. It never gives human beings justification for passing judgment on it. Instead, it stands as a standard for us, a measure that we must always bring ourselves into line with.

Subsequent Forms

The missionary nature of Christianity has engendered a unique phenomenon in the history of written documents. Prior to the writing of the New Testament, very few ancient works were translated into other languages. The Old Testament was translated into Greek, although not to bring the message to other ethnic groups, but because a large segment of the Jewish people had changed their language. However, with the intensive evangelizing thrust of the first few centuries after the apostolic age, the need for adequate translations of both the Old Testament and the New Testament became apparent. It is interesting that some of these translations comprise some of the earliest records we have of particular languages, e.g. Gothic and Slavic. As such they are of great value in even non-biblical linguistic studies.

The wide range and larger number of early translations of the Bible provide a significant source of evidence for the nature of early Greek and Hebrew texts, and as such are utilized extensively by textual critics. Close to ten thousand manuscripts in Latin and other languages (besides Greek and Hebrew) provide information

for the process of working back to the autographs (the original manuscripts) and for other aspects of biblical studies. There are many good books on translations of the Bible into English and other languages.⁹

People living in every generation owe a great debt to those preceding them who have labored in establishing the canon of Scripture, in attempting to determine the exact nature of the text and in translating it into different languages. Speakers of English have been especially favored by God to possess so many equitable translations of the Bible.¹⁰

Here is the statement of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy concerning the transmission and translation of Scripture. It forms a fitting conclusion to our study:

Since God has nowhere promised an inerrant transmission of Scripture, it is necessary to affirm that only the autographic text of the original documents was inspired and to maintain the need of textual criticism as a means of detecting any slips that may have crept into the text in the course of its transmission. The verdict of this science, however, is that the Hebrew and Greek text appear to be amazingly well preserved, so that we are amply justified in affirming, with the Westminster Confession, a singular providence of God in this matter and in declaring that the authority of Scripture is in no way jeopardized by the fact that the copies we possess are not entirely error-free.

Similarly, no translation is or can be perfect, and all translations are an additional step away from the *autographa*. Yet the verdict of linguistic science is that English-speaking Christians, at least, are exceedingly well served in these days with a host of excellent translations and have no cause for hesitating to conclude that the true Word of God is within their reach. Indeed, in view of the frequent repetition in Scripture of the main matters with which it deals and also of the Holy Spirit's constant witness to and through the Word, no serious translation of Holy Scripture will so destroy its meaning as to render it unable to make its reader "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15).

⁹ There are many good books on this topic. See, for example, Sakae Kubo and Walter F. Specht. *So Many Versions? Twentieth-century English Versions of the Bible*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983; J. Harold Greenlee. *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964; F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English*. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

¹⁰ See the chapter on the language of the Bible in my *Handbook to Bible Study* for more information on translating and translations.

Study questions

1. What is the relationship between 2 Tim. 3:16 and John 14:26/16: 12-15?
2. Why do we need a canon?
3. What made (or makes) the book of Ephesians canonical?
4. What is a variant reading?
5. Why is textual criticism needed?
6. Evaluate the following statement: “We have the Word of God today.”

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, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning "standard"; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).