

Reading Symbols, and Writing words. A Model for Biblical Inspiration

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Abstract

Biblical Inspiration has long been considered an important concept for Catholic theology, but the difficulties experienced in trying to give an adequate and convincing explanation of how divine and the human authors could collaborate in producing Biblical texts has discouraged many writers from pursuing the topic. Some have considered that the difficulties are so great that the task of exploring a theology of Inspiration is too great to make the effort worthwhile.

This article, in attempting to sketch a model for Biblical Inspiration, begins by trying to identify exactly what is required for the theology of Inspiration, and then discarding what is not; it also sets out to distinguish clearly between Revelation and Inspiration, while recognising that the two are closely related, and using a model of symbolic mediation for Revelation. The article goes on to propose a model of Inspiration which satisfies not only the demands of contemporary Biblical scholarship and philosophical hermeneutics, but also the requirements of the doctrine of Inspiration as found in the Magisterial documents of the Catholic Church.

Keywords

Inspiration, Revelation, scripture, hermeneutics, magisterium.

Introduction

Opinions vary on the usefulness of the concept of Biblical Inspiration. For some writers, the concept insults human intelligence (A.T. and R.P.C. Hanson), others doubt if it is useful anymore (J. Barton), still others feel it is important, perhaps even essential for theology that we retain the concept (C. Martini). This article attempts to sketch a model that tries to satisfy not only the requirements of the Catholic Church's Magisterium on the doctrine of Inspiration, but also modern scholarship, biblical and hermeneutical.

I. Scriptural, Patristic and Magisterial Sources

Scripture: the model offered here for Biblical Inspiration will, I suggest, resonate with the language of the Bible. However, we would have to concede that scripture itself gives little support to the traditional doctrine. The passages most frequently cited to support Inspiration are 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:19–21. These say little, other than that (a) scripture is useful for teaching, because it is inspired and (b) that prophecy is from the Holy Spirit, and not from the human will. The second text does not even mention Inspiration. The Fathers never really produced a coherent theory for Inspiration; even those who did write on the subject did so from a Hellenistic viewpoint, and against a wide philosophical backdrop of Neo-Platonism; from these, three characteristics which became influential on later writings have been identified.¹ These are ‘Condescension’, ‘Dictation’, and ‘God-The-Author’.

Condescension occurs in John Chrysostom’s writings. This is possibly the most enduring line of thought on Inspiration to emerge from the Fathers, appearing in both Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* and the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 1993 Instruction on the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church.² The argument is analogous to that of the Divine Condescension by which the Word of God became flesh. Here, Divine Condescension is about how the divine word is transmitted in human speech and writing. Just as assuming human nature was essential for the Incarnation, so too does the communication of divine truths to humans require the involvement of total humanity.

Dictation Jerome suggested divine dictation to explain Paul’s Letter to the Romans. How else, unless the Holy Spirit dictated them, could we explain Paul’s perplexing order of words? Augustine, in his Confessions,³ imagines he is Moses, writing Genesis. He could only do this, he felt, if God dictated the content *and* the style of the book. John Calvin also favoured divine dictation; as the means by which prophets and apostles received God’s word, he cited Isaiah 59:21: ‘my words that I have put in your mouth . . .’ in support.

However, divine dictation highlights many of the problems associated with Inspiration: if the Holy Spirit dictated style and content of scripture, how do we explain the different styles within these

¹ Collins, R. F., ‘Inspiration’, 65:28–31, pp. 1027f., in Brown, R.E., Fitzmyer, J. A., Murphy, R. E., (General Editors) *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1997), pp. 1023–1033.

² C.f. *Dei Verbum*, article 13; Pontifical Biblical Commission’s Instruction ‘Interpreting the Bible in The Church’, 1993, in Houlden J. L., *Interpreting the Bible in the Church*, III.D.2.c, (London: SCM, 1995), pp. 78f.

³ Chadwick, H., (translator), *St. Augustine. Confessions, Book 12:36*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 266.

writings: various literary genres, and different authorial styles? And if texts were dictated, how come so many different personalities emerge from them? If God the author has dictated the text, what room does this leave for a human author?

God-As-Author Perhaps the fear of losing the sense of divine authorship caused scholars to lose sight of the importance of the human agent; but any valid theory of Inspiration must keep in balance the dynamic between the human and divine authors. At this stage it will be helpful to consider what the term ‘divine authorship’ actually requires. Briefly, we may say that ‘authorship’ is to be understood, not in a strictly literary sense, but in the sense of ‘ultimate source’. In fact, the Latin word *auctor* has a much broader range of meaning than its English counterpart, and can be applied to, e.g., the temple *architect*, the nation’s *founder*, the wound’s *cause*, as well as the texts’ *writer*.⁴

When we turn to those Magisterial documents of the Catholic Church which give their attention to Inspiration, we find that, firstly, they have little to say, and secondly, even when they do mention Inspiration, it is invariably in connection with some other concept. We could say with some justification that from the *Statuta Ecclesiae Antiqua*, (c. 5th Century), through the Councils of *Florence* (1441), *Trent* (1546) *Vatican I* (1870), to the encyclical of Leo XIII *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), the emphasis was on the divine authorship of scripture. The argument runs: God is author of the Old Testament, as well as the New (*Statuta*); God is the author of both Testaments because the saints who wrote scripture were inspired by the Holy Spirit (*Florence*). The canon of scripture was defended against the Reformers (*Trent*), and God is described as the author of the books of both Testaments (*Vatican I*). Biblical Inerrancy then makes its first appearance in the later Magisterial statements: the Bible is Inspired – has God as its author – therefore error is incompatible with the Bible.

Père Marie-Joseph Lagrange, of the *École Biblique*, in Jerusalem, and pioneer of modern Catholic Biblical Studies, introduced a change of emphasis. *Providentissimus Deus* appeared to rule out any possibility for using ‘Higher Criticism’ in Catholic exegesis. Lagrange, however, showed that there were almost no subjects on which either the Fathers or the Magisterium were opposed to the conclusions of ‘Higher critics’. Therefore, concluded Lagrange, except on the rare occasions when differences did exist, nothing should prevent Catholic scholars from employing critical methodology; but this did not resolve the question of error and the Bible. Lagrange tackled this problem, but not from the angle of Inspiration – *Providentissimus* had ruled

⁴ Vawter, B., *Inspiration*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), p. 22.

out any suggestion of partial Inspiration, or of attributing supposed error in the Bible to the human author. Instead, Lagrange asked, in good Thomistic fashion, what was the nature of truth and falsehood? These are properties of formal propositions; therefore, if the sacred writer had no intention of making propositions about historical detail, then the question of truth or falsehood was irrelevant. Now the human author's intention becomes of paramount importance, since Biblical writers intended to convey only matters relevant to human salvation.⁵ The quest for the intention of the human author would dominate Catholic Biblical studies until late into the 20th Century.

Pius XII's landmark encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) focussed on the human author's role, insisting that the prime task of exegesis was to determine the literal sense of scripture, now defined as the meaning the human author intended to convey (this idea of literal sense differs from that of Aquinas, for whom it meant 'what the words themselves conveyed'; since God was the author of scripture, the literal sense meant that which God wanted to convey). Now, Catholic exegetes were encouraged to use every modern means of study to determine the Literal Sense. Presumably, although unrealistically, Pius XII had hoped that discovering the literal sense would put an end to speculation that the Bible contained error: it would be shown that supposed error was no more than idiomatic expression, or language conditioned by historical context.

Much work in Catholic Biblical Studies was achieved following *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, and we will later explore some contributions that have relevance for the model for Inspiration being proposed here. Now, however, we turn to the *Second Vatican Council*, and the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* (1965). This Constitution did not aim primarily to deal with Scripture, and certainly not primarily with Biblical Inspiration or Inerrancy. Rather, it set out to deal with the Word of God, Revelation. Since Trent, with its definition that Revelation was to be found in the written books and unwritten traditions, it had been assumed that two sources of revelation were indicated here. Rather than be drawn into the debate of whether or not there are indeed two Sources of Revelation, *Dei Verbum* defines Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as Revelation. Article 2 of *Dei Verbum* states that "... (the) economy of Revelation is realised by *deeds and word*, which are intrinsically caught up in each other." In this way, *Dei Verbum* avoids making an absolute identification of Scripture with the word of God: article 9 says "Sacred scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit (... *Sacra Scriptura est locutio Dei quatenus divino afflante Spiritu scripto consignatur*). And Tradition transmits in its entirety

⁵ C.f. Robinson, R. B., *Catholic Exegesis since Divino Afflante Spiritu. Hermeneutical Implications*, (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars' Press, 1988), pp. 21–23.

the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles . . .” On Inspiration, *Dei Verbum* avoided *Providentissimus Deus*’ blunt assertion that Biblical Inspiration is simply incompatible with error; *Dei Verbum* article 4 merely states that the books of Scripture teach *without error* that truth which God, for our salvation, wished to see confined to the sacred Scriptures. Here also, the question of divine authorship is adequately covered, at least in the wider sense of *auctor* suggested above. Since the scriptures are the word of God consigned to writing, and since the words of scripture give us access to the Word of God, then we can say that the books of the Bible – Inspired since they impart Revelation to the Church through the Holy Spirit – convey to us the truth that God wished to communicate for human salvation.

Dei Verbum was careful to avoid endorsing any particular theory of how Biblical Inspiration operates, and at different times it stresses different aspects of Inspiration. Sometimes Inspiration is applied to the texts, at other times, to the writers, and at others, the stress is on the action of the Holy Spirit. *Dei Verbum* repeatedly invokes Inspiration as the reason for claiming that the scriptures contain the word of God.

II. How Might Inspiration Work?

So far, we have seen that when Inspiration appears in official Church documents, it tends to be overshadowed by another issue, such as divine authorship, or Inerrancy of the Bible. Perhaps the only real theology of Inspiration itself that was ever produced emerged from Scholasticism; and certainly, no study of Inspiration could proceed far without its consideration, and its greatest exponent, Aquinas, whose importance for Inspiration lay, not in introducing new ideas, but in systematising ideas already in existence. Aquinas considered that Biblical prophecy was the key to understanding Inspiration. This was not new; the Fathers had already come to the same conclusion, and like them, he rejected the classical Greek notion of prophecy, whereby the prophet, the *mantis*, was overcome by an alien spirit causing him to speak without being conscious of doing so. Early scholastics had considered prophecy to be an on-going condition in which the prophet could utter God’s word, but Aquinas noticed that this did not match the apparently *ad hoc* situation of biblical prophets, who clearly had no control over how or when the word of God would affect them. If prophecy were an habitual condition, how can we explain, for example, Jeremiah’s silence in the face of the ‘false prophet’ Hananiah, followed by his eloquent refutation, when the word of God comes upon him again? (Jeremiah 28:1–17). Therefore, for Aquinas, the prophet speaks only when moved (Inspired) by the word of God. The prophet can only speak in the light of new revelation.

Aquinas, famously, turned to the Aristotelian category of instrumental efficient causality to explain how Inspiration might operate. Here, the prophet was the *instrumental* efficient cause: capable of acting with its own power, but only able to act when employed by another, the *principal* efficient cause. The analogy often used to explain this model is that of a piece of chalk, capable of making a mark (the *instrumental* efficient cause), but only when acted upon by the person using the chalk (*principal* efficient cause). This theory was applied to Biblical prophecy, so that the result was the Word of God, since God is the principal cause, and the words are the prophets' since they are the instrumental causes acted upon. This analogy was used for centuries to explain how truly divine communication could occur in a way that allowed the written text to show every possible sign of human effort in its production. Contrary to what is often claimed, the principle of instrumental causality is not an integral part of the doctrine of Inspiration! Nor could it be. In the light of contemporary Biblical scholarship, there are serious deficiencies with the analogy. To begin with, this principle is tied to prophecy as the model for Inspiration – other writings are considered by Aquinas to be imperfectly related to prophecy. Only prophets were truly Inspired; other writers were merely hagiographers; but this view fails to recognise those scriptural genres which are clearly not prophetic. Moreover, the principle of efficient causality is an argument which is logically derived from *a priori* principles, one which bears little or no resemblance to what we actually encounter in Scripture. Can we honestly imagine that this is how any single book was written, given our present understanding of the complexity of composition of Biblical books? Our next section takes us to a consideration of what the Bible tells us about Inspiration.

III. Re-thinking Inspiration?

Since *Providentissimus Deus*, scholars have attempted to address the anomalies that remained regarding both Inspiration and Inerrancy. Some proposals have been more helpful than others. Worthy of mention is Newman's theory of *obiter dicta*. Newman considered that the Bible contained much writing that was not really revelatory: references to Tobias' dog, or Paul's salutations are 'verbal asides', as are historically incorrect details. These are not concerned with matters of faith or morals, therefore they do not have the same authoritative weight as statements of popes or councils. However, Newman's argument is not entirely consistent. Sometimes, he argues about a text's revelatory status: at others he appears to consider the inspired extent of 'verbal asides'. So, does he mean revelation or inspiration? Our proposed model Inspiration will depend on a clear distinction

between Revelation and Inspiration. This distinction is important: the traditional position has been that all scripture is Inspired, but not all scripture is Revelatory. Newman's biggest problem was perhaps lack of awareness of contemporary developments in studies!

Lagrange attempted to reconcile critical exegesis with Thomistic principles, retaining the principle of efficient causality to explain the relationship between the human and divine authors. Any theory of Inspiration had to maintain that the Bible was at the same time the word of God and the work of the human author. He describes Inspiration as an enlightenment that brings to the author a clarity to allow production of the written text. Inspiration diversifies according to the kind of truth being taught, and the literary mode in which it is expressed, but not according to the extent to which it occurs: Lagrange does not advocate partial Inspiration. Inspiration can occur no matter what sources the writer uses – old documents, profane writings, personal experience, direct revelation: it is God's action (Inspiration) that prompts the author to use some of these, and not others, and to form judgements about how they are arranged.

Pierre Benoit also tried to reconcile Thomism with Biblical scholarship. He tried to find in Thomism the grounds for maintaining the distinction between the charisms of prophecy and inspiration. He accepted the Thomistic premise that prophecy involved intellectual judgement, but he argued that Inspiration involved practical judgement, concerned with the collection, selection and arrangement of materials. This also shed light on other aspects of Inspiration: firstly, choice of material is not governed by questions of truth in an intellectual sense – what is the intellectual truth of poem, for instance; secondly, authors make practical judgements whether to write poetic, narrative, exhortatory, or whatever material. Benoit stresses the importance of identifying the Biblical literary forms, because then, the Bible is no longer seen as a collection of propositions requiring the assent of faith – a sort of “earlier Denzinger”.⁶ Now, we approach a theory of Inspiration which considers the nature of the Bible itself.

Benoit pointed out a remarkable fact about Inspiration in the New Testament (and also the Old Testament) – the divine mandate to write is never explicitly connected with the Holy Spirit (see Revelation 1:11). In saying this, he does not doubt Inspired Scripture; but he does draw attention to those necessary inspired actions that precede writing. He notes that most spirit-driven Biblical figures are inspired to ‘pastoral action’ – prophets are the exception: they are inspired to oral action. Only after pastoral/oral action is anyone inspired to *write*. Benoit notes that not only do we not read of anyone inspired to write; we do not even possess the original Biblical texts.

⁶ Vawter, B., *Inspiration*, p. 102.

R. A. F. MacKenzie⁷ posed a different question. With the book of Judges in mind, he asked, how can we locate the Inspiration of an author in a book whose composition may have taken 800 years? If the book is the end product of a long process, how much Inspiration goes into each stage?

John L. McKenzie at around the same time pointed to a major shortcoming of the principle of efficient causality: it may explain *why* a human author is Inspired, but where historical and critical investigation sheds light on the literary activity of the writer, the principle is silent on *I* that writer is inspired! McKenzie is also noted a tendency to extend Inspiration to more and more agents engaged in producing texts: but in order to bolster a theory, rather than to address the problem. The reality of Biblical authorship is that, by and large, the authors of Biblical books remain anonymous: presumably not from modesty, but from the author's recognition that he is only one voice in a whole community. The author performed a social, rather than a personal function, therefore the society for which he wrote was the real author of the literature. There are, however, difficulties with this social dimension of Inspiration. Firstly, if Inspiration is solely a feature of the community, rather than an individual, does this not lead to Inspiration by subsequent community approbation? Not necessarily. Certainly, if a book is considered Inspired *only* because the community so decided, then the accusation is valid. However, it is the community Inspired by the same Holy Spirit who moved the sacred author to write, which must make the decision about books that are, or are not Inspired. A more serious objection to the social dimension is that, if we reduce Inspiration to the community's role in maintaining tradition, then where do we locate divine input?

McKenzie argues that too often a sharp distinction is maintained between Revelation and Inspiration; my contention is that unless we see Revelation and Inspiration as distinct, but necessarily related, then there will be some justification for the above accusations. McKenzie sees Inspiration as the concrete experience of the word of God, and the knowledge issuing from that experience. But since experience varies from person to person, does this not mean that there must be degrees of revelation, and are degrees of Inspiration not exactly what Tradition opposes? Here, I use McKenzie's words, changing between revelation and inspiration; I suggest that this confusion between the two illustrates exactly why we should keep Revelation and Inspiration distinct, although related. McKenzie is correct in wanting to free Inspiration from identification with single authorship, but is he not simply confusing Inspiration with 'inspiring' here?

⁷ MacKenzie, R.A.F., 'Some Problems in the Field of Inspiration. The Presidential Address at the 20th Annual Meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association of America, Massachusetts, 4 September, 1957', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 20, (1958), pp. 1-8.

IV. Proposing a Model

These Biblical scholars have tried to deepen the understanding of Inspiration in a way that respects the nature of Biblical writings themselves. Each has raised questions about the applicability of traditional concepts to the subject of Inspiration, but, illuminating as these have been, there is still a lack of a workable model. Such a model is what I now propose to offer, one that will satisfy various needs:

- (a) Magisterial requirements. Apart from recognising both divine and human authorship, while avoiding partial or limited inspiration, these do not appear to be great.
- (b) The requirements of modern biblical studies. This builds on the model of T. A. Hoffmann,⁸ based on what we learn of the activity of the Spirit in the scriptures themselves.
- (c) The maintenance of a distinction between Revelation and Inspiration, while maintaining their inter-connection.
- (d) The needs of contemporary philosophical hermeneutics. We will do this through the theories of Paul Ricoeur.

Hoffmann suggests that Inspiration is best understood as one of three factors giving Scripture its Unique Sacred Character; the others are Canonicity and Normativity (which he calls 'Normativeness'). Scripture operates as sacred text within the faith community in virtue of these three. One consequence of this is to free Inspiration from restraints introduced to protect other concepts, like Inerrancy, rather than Inspiration itself. Also, if Inspiration is not the only component make Scripture unique, then we can also apply the concept to non-Biblical material: to say that non-scriptural books maybe inspired is not to threaten the idea of Scripture; neither does it blur the distinction between Scripture and non-scripture.

Hoffmann bases his model for Inspiration on the way it operates within Scripture, i.e. how Scripture says the Spirit operates. He notes that when Christian understanding of the activity of the Holy Spirit came in the early years of the Church, it drew heavily on Old Testament terminology. Two words in particular are significant: *rûah* in Hebrew, and *pneuma* in Greek. Of the 378 instances of *rûah* in the Old Testament, approximately 1/3 are rooted in the meaning of wind or breath; 1/3 relate to human life, emotions, life principles, etc., and 1/3 denote divine influence on humans – 'the spirit of Yahweh', or the 'spirit of God' – and describe all sorts of influence: skills, prophetic utterance, feats of strength and violence, charismatic leadership. Inspiration by the Spirit therefore has to be extended

⁸ Hoffmann, T. A., 'Inspiration, Normativeness, canonicity, and the Unique Sacred Character of the Bible', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Volume 44, (1982), pp. 447–469.

beyond writing. Hence, Hoffmann describes Inspiration as 'animation with the Spirit of Christ', thereby placing Inspiration to writing within the wider context of the whole range of human behaviour attributable to the Holy Spirit. So, we should distinguish Biblical Inspiration from other forms, because the Biblical variety involves being animated by the Spirit *specifically* to the act of writing. Further, we can say that what makes Biblical Inspiration unique is that it is a Spirit-prompted response to *something*, which prompts a written response. That *something* is Revelation, or divine self-disclosure. This is why we should keep Revelation and Inspiration distinct, while at the same time maintaining their relationship to each other. Of course, the question arises, how can the Spirit of Christ be invoked of those who wrote before the birth of Christ? Hoffmann's answer is simple: Jews and Christians both invoked Inspiration in defence of their choice of canonical texts; the Jewish people too were aware of the action of the Spirit of God in Scripture.

Hoffmann is not interested in Revelation, in what it is that causes the Spirit-driven response. Avery Dulles is, in particular, he is interested in the model whereby revelation uses Symbolic mediation to convey divine self-disclosure.⁹ Symbol as mediation of Revelation is favoured by authors including A. Dulles, P. Tillich, B. Lonergan, K. Rahner, J. Daniélou, S. Schneiders, T. A. Fawcett, K. Jaspers, and P. Ricoeur. For these, the attractive feature of symbol is its ability to mediate multiple meaning. All of them draw a distinction between a symbol, and a simple sign. Signs operate by convention – traffic signs, the mathematical figure p, etc. Symbols, on the other hand, open up new possibilities of understanding which are not available to signs, because symbols can speak of many things, and therefore symbols can mediate multiple meanings. This is not to say they have unlimited meaning; symbols are limited by what they represent, i.e. they can only reveal what is within them. Hence, when we use the word symbol, it is not in opposition to what is real.

Fawcett¹⁰ believes that the operation of symbols is most evidently at work in the world of religion, since it is the purpose of religious language to transcend the confines of the visible world's appearance of reality, to the reality that underlies that appearance. Indeed, he suggests that a religion could be described as a structured group of symbols, ones which are interpreted to explain reality, but also to point out the way to live out that reality. The Bible itself is a vast structure of symbols which communicate the nature and purpose of God. This much is clear: there is very little space devoted in the Bible to intellectual debate on the nature of God; but there is much that

⁹ Dulles, A., *Models of Revelation*, (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1983), pp. 131–154.

¹⁰ Fawcett, T., *The Symbolic Language of Religion. An Introductory Study*, (London: SCM, 1970), pp. 30–31.

explores the dialogic relationship between humanity and God. How this relationship is seen very much depends on the kind of symbols used: when nature symbols – light, darkness, water, fire – are invoked, the relationship may appear impersonal, but when the symbols invoke personal images, e.g. king, shepherd, father, we find an interaction more related to personal interaction.

J. Van Beeck¹¹ asks: should we see Revelation as Divine Intervention or Self-Communication? He assumes that Divine revelation is first and foremost about communication, and that language about God necessarily uses symbols taken from human experience of interpersonal communication. Symbols are necessary for this communication, because whatever God communicates to humans is about much more than content. If content is to be transferred in communication, it can only be done through an inter-personal exchange, a dialectic. But then, there is always a surplus value to communication, since more than just content is transferred, and symbols are capable of communicating more than content in an inter-personal exchange. Wheelwright writes of tensive symbols, which mediate meaning in a dialectic of tension. There is always something more to be learned from tensive symbols. Symbols, then, speak to us of a world beyond perceived reality, and they convey to us multiple meanings. They appear to be ideal as vehicles for the communication of divine self-disclosure. Therefore, we have the next stage in the construction of our model for understanding Inspiration. If Inspiration is, as we have suggested, being animated by the Spirit of God, we can take the argument a stage further: Inspiration is the Spirit-activated response in writing to the symbolic Divine self-disclosure which is Revelation. I will suggest that there is plenty of evidence for this in Scripture itself. Before that, we turn to Paul Ricoeur for the philosophical basis on which to construct this model.

Ricoeur strenuously opposes any notion of Revelation imposed from outside of the text, any sort of divine dictation; he is equally opposed to any interpretation of a text passed on by an ecclesiastical body's appeal to 'tradition'. Nonetheless, I believe that Ricoeur provides us with invaluable insights for the construction of a model for Inspiration; his theories on interpretation of symbols are especially of importance. I suggest that if Inspiration is a response to symbolic Revelation, then the act of Inspired writing is also caught up in the art of interpreting symbols – the hermeneutics of symbolic systems. The Biblical writer was engaged in the process of interpreting symbols which mediated revelation, then this writer's task must have been, by analogy at least, equivalent to what the Spirit-prompted reader of Scripture is also engaged in. Hence, the Inspired

¹¹ Van Beeck, F. J., 'Divine Revelation: Intervention or Self-Communication?', *Theological Studies*, Volume 52 (1991), pp. 199–226.

text has the capability of mediating Revelation to its reader. *Dei Verbum* said that Scripture is to be read and interpreted in the same spirit through whom it was written.¹² This, coupled with the idea that Scripture resulted from the interpretation of Revelatory symbols, suggests to me that we should speak of an inspired reading of Scripture as well as an Inspired writing. Since we have so far attempted to free Inspiration from a narrow interpretation, to include all forms of action prompted by the Spirit, this seems not unreasonable.

V. The Symbolic Nature of Language

Only the briefest summary of Ricoeur's theory can be offered here. The first point to consider links symbol and text. Ricoeur sees a significant difference between the nature of a conversation and that of interpreting a text: In conversation, a dialectic exists between two people engaged in communication; whereas, especially with an ancient written text, there is no possibility of a dialectic between author and reader; there is too great a distance between them. But there is the possibility of dialectic between *text* and reader. In a conversation, conversant A can explain to conversant B what his/her intention is. In a written text, there is no way of determining what the author intended. So, when interpreting a text, the search for authorial intention is pointless. Rather, the key to meanings of the text is to be found in the text itself; the multiple meanings are discovered in the process of interpretation, which is the engagement of the reader with the text. Hence, we have a connection between written text, and symbols. Both may convey multiple meanings, and both require interpreting if meanings are to be discovered.

Fawcett, Ricoeur, and others have written about the difficulty modern Western society has in interpreting symbols. There is the belief that the myths that arise from fundamental symbols are i) fictitious and unhistorical (e.g. myths of ancient Greek literature), ii) crude and unsophisticated, iii) compare unfavourably with scientific thinking, and iv) are to do with religion, therefore opposed to science. Fawcett claims that if we fail to understand myths and their symbols, it is because we have failed to understand what they were originally intended to express.¹³

Ricoeur introduced the concept of a 2nd naïveté to enable modern Western society to apprehend symbols anew. This involves a process of dis-location. We must withdraw from initial presuppositions about symbols and myths – the 1st, pre-critical, naïveté – and engage in a

¹² *Dei Verbum* art. 12.

¹³ Fawcett, pp. 101–102.

re-location through open interpretation, an embrace of the world of the symbol. This is appropriating the 2nd, post-critical, naïveté. We can see how this is analogous to the process of interpreting a text; for texts and symbols, multiple meanings will only be appropriated when they are engaged through an openness to the world of either. Ricoeur says, “To appropriate is to make one’s own what was ‘alien’”.¹⁴ Without such appropriation, our society will not be able to grasp the world of symbol.

Ricoeur sees too many problems associated with symbols to allow us to build an adequate theory for their interpretation. Firstly, there is the sheer diversity in the way symbols are used in various disciplines, and with different connotations; he gives as examples psychoanalysis, where dreams are recognised as symbols of deep psychic conflict; or Poetics, where they represent the images that make up the poem; and in the field of the History of Religions, where trees, mountains, labyrinths can all be symbols of religious experience. Ricoeur recognises, however, that what unites all symbols is the relation between their literal and figurative meanings. The figurative meaning is metaphorical in nature, and the connection between the literal meaning and the metaphorical meaning of a symbol relates every symbol to a language. Hence, knowing how to interpret metaphor allows us to interpret symbols.

Classically, metaphors were considered as substitutions, of one expression for another. Substitution was possible because of the similarity of one thing for another. However, Ricoeur adopts prefers a tension theory for metaphor, a reminder of Wheelwright’s tensive symbols. Tension needs to exist between the literal and the figurative meanings, because there is a multiplicity of meaning in the metaphor. For example, a sunrise in a poem signifies more than a meteorological phenomenon, and the tension only exists if we recognise that the figurative meaning is *not* the same as the literal meaning. For instance, a sunrise in a poem may have more than one meaning, but we can only understand the figurative meanings once we understand the literal meaning.

As we saw, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* claimed that the primary task of exegesis was to determine the literal meaning of the text, defined as the meaning intended by the author. Ricoeur insisted that we need to know the literal meaning before the figurative can be understood, he is equally insistent that authorial intention is *not* the key to the possible meanings of a passage. So, is this where we part company with Ricoeur? Fortunately, no. In 1993, the Pontifical Biblical Commission issued an important document, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, to celebrate the centenary of *Providentissimus Deus*.

¹⁴ Ricoeur, P., *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, (Texas: The Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p. 43.

For several years prior to this, writers had suggested a need for a wider definition of the literal sense of scripture, and that's what the Pontifical Biblical Council produced!¹⁵ The new formulation is: "The literal sense is that which has been *expressed* directly by the inspired human authors".¹⁶ This is more in keeping with Ricoeur's insistence that meaning must be found within the text itself, and not with the authorial intention, and the PBC document also acknowledges that texts are capable of mediating multiple meanings.

VI. Scripture and Symbols

So, the search for the literal sense of scripture is 'back on', insofar as it is only with knowledge of the literal sense of language – we have seen that it is its metaphorical sense that gives language its symbolic quality – that we can apprehend possible figurative senses. Within our proposed model, I suggest that it is precisely in the interpretation of symbol and metaphor that Inspired writing of Scripture, and its inspired reading within the Church are linked.

So far, discussion about interpreting symbols and/or texts has remained firmly at the level of philosophical hermeneutics. However, if Walter Brueggemann and others are correct, there is evidence of the process at work in the Bible itself. Two aspects of Brueggemann's work are significant, both to do with the life of the Hebrew people found in the Old Testament. Brueggemann wants to read Scripture without having to search for *the* meaning of the text; rather, he wants to confront the troublesome, open-ended, and often down-right difficult dialogue between humanity and God, one that frequently reveals friction and dysfunction in the relationship, and one that he feels can be expressed in three sets of opposites: a) Covenant and exile, b) hymn and lament, and c) presence and theodicy.¹⁷ If covenant defines Israel, so also does exile: both symbols are inextricably bound up in the dialogic relationship. Likewise Israel's hymns testify to Yahweh's goodness, fidelity and power; but Israel's laments testify to their complaint against Yahweh. In lament, Israel refuses to lie for God; therefore, symbols of a positive experience of life must be counterbalanced by those of the negative. Finally, although the concept of 'Yahweh's presence' is fundamental to Israel's worship, Yahweh's apparent absence must also be grappled with. By way of example, Brueggemann cites the capture of the Ark of the Covenant in 1 Samuel, and Israel's

¹⁵ Schneiders, S. M., 'Faith, Hermeneutics and the Literal Sense', *Theological Studies*, Volume 39 (1978), p. 719–736.

¹⁶ Houlden, J. L., *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, p. 52.

¹⁷ Brueggemann, W., 'Biblical Theology Appropriately Post-Modern', p. 5, in *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, Vol. 27, No. 1, Spring (1997), pp. 4–9.

shock at the 'defeat' of its God. We can carry this image into the New Testament, and the shock for his disciples when Jesus, having demonstrated the presence of God's kingdom, brings them face to face with the reality of the messiah who has to suffer and die, albeit to rise again (see Mark 8:31–32).

Another Brueggemann insight lies in his identification of the process of orientation, disorientation, and re-orientation in Israel's literature. This applies to the Psalms,¹⁸ where all three categories can be found, and he applies them to three prophetic figures from Israel's exile experience: Jeremiah, II Isaiah, and Ezekiel. Psalms of Orientation, which include creation psalms, reflect a world-view of orderliness, goodness, reliability etc., but they also include themes of retribution against those who challenge God's ways. Psalms of Disorientation are about a collapsed order. These are psalms of lament, individual and communal. The extent of the lament depends on whether the dislocation was accepted or was met with resistance and denial. The reaction to the dislocation may or may not make way for Re-orientation, which is his third category for the Psalms. If realisation has dawned that there is to be no reversal of the dislocation, that the old order will not return, then there is the possibility that new symbols of divine self-disclosure will be apprehended, symbols of a new order, to replace the old. But until the hope of restoration is abandoned, until disorientation is accepted, there is no possibility of re-orientation, or of a new order. But when re-orientation comes, it is with a sense of wonder and amazement, precisely because there was no hope of restoration.

Brueggemann also chooses as illustration three prophetic figures from the exile, and how each has identified a new symbolic significance for this most traumatic of all experiences for Israel.¹⁹ All three have to come to terms with the dis-orientation of exile, and embrace, each in a different way, re-orientation.

JEREMIAH was the reluctant prophet. His response to his call lead him to more and more dangerous and difficult circumstances, but he has to prophecy. Jeremiah warns that, because of their disobedience, God will do the unthinkable and hand his people over to Babylon. The symbol of Exile means *punishment*, although this was by no means apparent to Jeremiah's contemporaries. When re-orientation comes, it will be as a new covenant.

EZEKIEL believes that God alone arranges the people's home-coming, but only because God wants to, so that the nations will know God's Holy Name, and will come to know that God is

¹⁸ Brueggemann, W., ed. Miller, P. D., *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 10–15.

¹⁹ Brueggemann, W. *Hopeful Imagination. Prophetic Voices in Exile*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

Yahweh, who will vindicate his holiness before Israel's and the nations' eyes. In Ezekiel's perception of the symbol of re-orientation, God is not bound by a covenant. God offers Israel an un-merited gift; not a reward for its achievement.

II ISAIAH The chapters of Isaiah 40–55 are bound by the concept of 'the word' At the beginning, 'The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of God remains for ever.' (Isaiah 40:8); at the end, 'the word that goes from my mouth does not return to me empty, without . . . succeeding in what it was sent to do.' (Isaiah 55:11). In this vision, God's promise cannot be defeated. The word of God is contrasted with pagan gods who *cannot speak*. Speech is power. II Isaiah interprets the past (in scripture) as a sign of hope.

In each of these visions, there is progression from orientation (pre-exile) through disorientation (exile), on to re-orientation (re-settlement). But the symbol of exile and re-orientation is interpreted very differently by each.

These are Old Testament examples, but the model of orientation, dis-orientation and re-orientation also applies to the New Testament. Brueggemann cites as examples the blind (Matthew 9:27; 20:31); the demon-possessed (Matthew 15:23; Mark 5:7); Peter walking on water (Matthew 14:30). Many others can be added; most obviously the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus; the dislocation of the disciples from the orientation of previous career, through the dislocation of discipleship and the inevitability of the cross that this entails, to embracing the Risen Christ; the parables, which seem to invite us into the world that goes from orientation, to dis-orientation, through to the acceptance of the new order of re-orientation. And finally, although not exhaustively, we can think of the process that seems to be indicated by the encounters between Jesus and individuals in the Fourth Gospel. Nicodemus (John 3) comes to mind, as one who journeys from the orientation of darkness and disbelief in Jesus, through the dis-orientation which leads him on to limited belief, but on his own terms 'how can a grown man be born?' (John 3:4). We never really know if Nicodemus made it to re-orientation! John 4 gives a clearer example of the Samaritan woman at the well, of uncertain past (orientation), who is dis-oriented by Jesus, and comes to partial belief in her own terms: "You have no bucket, sir, and the well is deep: how could you get this living water?" (John 4:11), and on to re-orientation "Come and see a man who has told me everything I ever did; I wonder if he is the Christ?" (John 4:29).

Conclusion

This is no more than a sketch for Biblical Inspiration. There is much to be added. The model has, I believe, something to say about the role

of Tradition and Magisterium in how we read scripture in the Church in any given age, but that is not within the scope of this article. As regards this model, I believe that it provides a good philosophical grounding, based on contemporary interpretation theory, for allowing scripture to be called 'Inspired'. On the other, it allows us to recognise the validity of Biblical interpretations of the past, even when these are at variance with contemporaries readings derived from the use of modern critical apparatus. With a model which relies on the interpretation of symbols which are capable of multiple readings, we have a validation, not only of past readings of the symbolic language of scripture, but also the validation of the reading of symbols (including other scripture – Matthew's re-working of Mark; Deuteronomy's re-statement of the Law, multiple creation 'narratives' come to mind here!) by those who wrote Inspired Scriptures.

But can we justify the concept of a divine Inspiration at all? Briefly, Michael Polanyi²⁰ might provide some help here, in the way he draws attention to something that already happens in nature, which he calls the Principle of Boundary Control. In nature, limits are placed on operations existing within a hierarchy of operations. Polanyi gives the example of speech-making. At its most basic level, a speech depends on vocal chords which produce sound. Next, the sound must be shaped into words (vocabulary), then words into sentences governed by grammatical rules. But further, a sense of oratory, governed by intellectual and artistic ability, is required to turn the whole into what may or may not be a speech of note. Each level operates because a higher one governs its 'boundary'. It is, therefore, reasonable to suggest an analogy between the concept of Inspiration by the Holy Spirit, and Polanyi's Principle of Boundary Control. But it is also noteworthy that the limitations in operation, as it were, move in the opposite direction: the lower levels of activity create the limits within which the higher must operate. With Biblical Inspiration, therefore, the writer is Inspired by a higher level (Holy Spirit) to respond to symbols of divine disclosure. But the limitations of the human writer determine how the text will look when it comes into being; therefore, crucially, the Inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the 'animator', in no way diminishes the very human activity of the very human writer.

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²⁰ Polanyi, M., *The Tacit Dimension*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), pp 29–52.