

SYDNEY COLLEGE OF DIVINITY

**THE BIBLE IS THE WORD OF GOD IN HUMAN WORDS**

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## The Bible Is the Word of God in Human Words

### Introduction

The statement, “the Bible is the Word of God in human words”, acknowledges both the divinity and humanity of the Scriptures. Just as Jesus is the Word made flesh (Jn 1:14), therefore being fully divine and fully human, so too there is the “full divinity of the Scriptures”<sup>1</sup> and the “full humanity of the Scriptures”<sup>2</sup>. This paper explains how the Bible is the Word of God, written in human words by human beings, and concludes that “it can and must be read, studied, and interpreted according to the most scientifically critical methods at hand”<sup>3</sup>.

### The Word of God

According to 2 Tim 3:16 “all Scripture is inspired by God” – that is, the whole Bible is God’s inspired Word. “Men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (1 Pet 1:21). In the context of biblical inspiration, *Dei Verbum* states: “It pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will (see Eph 1:9) . . . By this revelation, then, the invisible God (see Col 1:15; 1 Tim 1:17), from the fullness of his love, addresses humankind as his friends (see Ex 33:11; Jn 15:14-15).”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the Church can dare to speak of God only because God has spoken to it.<sup>5</sup>

Noted Protestant theologian, J. I. Packer, observes:

Both testaments view the words of Scripture as God’s own words. OT passages treat Moses’ law as God’s utterance (1 Kgs 22:8-16; Neh 8; Ps 119; etc.); NT

writers view the OT as a whole as ‘oracles of God’ (Rom 3:2), prophetic in character (Rom 16:26; cf. 1:2; 3:21), written by men whom the Spirit moved and taught (2 Pet 1:20-21; cf. 1 Pet 1:10-12). Christ and the NT constantly quote OT texts not merely as recording what men such as Moses, David or Isaiah said through the Spirit (Mk 7:6-13; 12:36; Rom 10:5, 20; 11:9), but also as recording what God has said through men (Mt 19:4-5; Acts 4:25; 28:25; 1 Cor 6:16; 2 Cor 6:16; Heb 1:5-13; 8:5; 8), or what the Holy Spirit says (Heb 3:7; 10:15).<sup>6</sup>

In his article, “How the Bible Came to Us”, author Donald S. Deer writes, “the fact that the record of God’s revelation to God’s people as preserved in the Bible has come down to us is nothing less than a miracle.”<sup>7</sup> He supports this claim by stating that the original authors of the books of the Bible composed their books in times, cultures, and languages quite different from ours – and unaware that they would one day be collected into one book.<sup>8</sup> Neither were they cognizant of the complex processes involved in copying, preserving, re-copying, and translating (into the thousands of languages of the world today).<sup>9</sup>

In sum, the subject matter of the scriptural revelation is transcendent – it is an otherworldly spiritual revelation miraculously made manifest through fully human witnesses who had inherent weaknesses.

### In Human Words

The Bible came into being as the traditions relating to the people of God, reflected in each of its books, were written, collected, selected, copied, and finally translated.<sup>10</sup> Each

community of faith had produced a variety of kinds of literature in response to its needs such as allegories, apocalypses, fables, history, hymns, letters, parables, prayers, prophecies, proverbs, rituals, speeches, stories, and treatises.<sup>11</sup> Levoratti writes that “at the pinnacle of God’s dealing with Israel stands the incarnation of the Word: the Word that was present to God in the beginning and through whom all things came into being, the Word that had found a human voice in the Law and on the lips of the prophets, this same Word of God ‘became flesh and lived among us’ (John 1:14). In the fullness of time it was not the historical event that became word: the Word itself became historical event.”<sup>12</sup>

Packer notes, however, that the writing of the Scriptures was not through mechanical dictation or any process that suspended the action of the human writer’s mind.<sup>13</sup> Further, the style, outlook, personality, and cultural conditioning were not obliterated.<sup>14</sup> Schneiders supports this view in writing that “in order to maintain the immediate linguistic causality of God, the literalist must reduce the human author to a passive instrument, a scribe taking dictation from the divine speaker.”<sup>15</sup> Such a literalist view is difficult to reconcile with “the fact that the biblical texts carry irrefutable evidence of the very human character of their composition . . . and in the historical and scientific errors and outright contradictions that cannot be eradicated or harmonized by ingenious exegesis.”<sup>16</sup>

In not acknowledging the full humanity of the Scriptures, the full divinity can be over-emphasized. This may then lead to a fundamentalist (that is, literal) interpretation of Scripture where the social, cultural, religious, and historical contexts are not carefully considered. Rather, infallibility (author’s incapability of erring) and inerrancy (text’s freedom from error) become central issues. The foundational premise is that the Scriptures originated miraculously (such as through a form of “divine dictation”). The authority of a

literally interpreted Bible, based on “attributing inerrancy to the Bible, constitutes a kind of biblical Docetism. . . an inerrant Bible would only appear to be a genuine human text”.<sup>17</sup>

### Conclusion

God’s self-disclosure in words and actions has been recorded in history. However, bridging the gap between “then” and “now” is needed.<sup>18</sup> The world today, facing unprecedented global challenges, is twenty to thirty centuries removed from the times when the biblical writers penned their words. This necessitates careful hermeneutical work if one is to better understand the biblical texts<sup>19</sup> and their religious, literary, historical, linguistic, and socio-cultural contexts. Consequently, the diverse scientific methods and approaches – such as textual criticism, form criticism, source and redactional criticism, historical and sociological criticism, literary and narrative criticism, as well as canonical criticism – have their necessary functions.

Nevertheless, two cautions are appropriate in the context of this paper: While modern methods of historical-critical and literary interpretation have their place, Scripture is not a strictly human text that can be understood by discerning the meaning of its many human authors and redactors, without the presence of God’s gracious Spirit.<sup>20</sup> “In a similar way modern fundamentalist and patristic exegesis have also secularized biblical interpretation in that they assume that scripture itself is the Word of God, whose meaning is readily evident from the words on the page and no longer requires the gracious gift of God’s action and presence to make its meaning manifest.”<sup>21</sup>

In closing, “if we undervalue either the full divinity of the Scriptures or the full humanity of the Scriptures, we will not understand the Bible correctly”<sup>22</sup>.

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Stephen J. Binz, *Introduction to the Bible: A Catholic Guide to Studying Scripture* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2007), 47.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Richard P. McBrien, *101 Questions and Answers on the Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 53.

<sup>4</sup> David A. Lysik, ed., “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation”, in *The Bible Documents – A Parish Resource* (Liturgy Training Publications, 2001), 59.

<sup>5</sup> A. J. Levoratti, “How to Interpret the Bible”, in *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. William R. Farmer (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 10.

<sup>6</sup> J. I. Packer, “Scripture”, in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 629.

<sup>7</sup> Donald S. Deer, “How the Bible Came to Us”, in *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. William R. Farmer (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 178.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>12</sup> Levoratti, “How to Interpret the Bible”, 16.

<sup>13</sup> J. I. Packer, “Inspiration”, in *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1962), 566.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, “The New Testament as Word of God”, in *The Revelatory Text – Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 33.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>18</sup> Levoratti, “How to Interpret the Bible”, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>20</sup> Michael T. Dempsey, “Biblical Hermeneutics and Spiritual Interpretation: the Revelatory Presence of God in Karl Barth's Theology of Scripture”, *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 22 September 2007; available from <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-168088544.html>; Internet; accessed 13 December 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Dempsey, “Biblical Hermeneutics and Spiritual Interpretation, Internet.

<sup>22</sup> Binz, *Introduction to the Bible*, 47.

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