Recap from Previous Lecture

In the last lecture we looked at: “What is hermeneutics, and what is interpretation? What are we doing when we do that? Also, what are the barriers or the distances, the gaps, that necessitate hermeneutics? We said that although many would prefer to just sit down and read the biblical text, that also, reveals assumptions about hermeneutics, but is also unaware of the distance that might create misunderstanding, and hermeneutics allows us to overcome that distance.

What I want to talk about in this session is the character of or the assumption that we hold about the Bible that we interpret. What is it that we interpret when we talk about interpreting the Old and New Testaments? What assumptions about the Bible influence the way we do hermeneutics? I want to look at the character of the literature that we are interpreting and how that might affect the way we approach interpreting the Old and New Testament.

Introduction to Inspiration

Theologically, a key word for describing how we understand the Bible is the word “inspiration.” Basically, when we say that the Bible is “inspired,” that word itself can generate a variety of understandings. What they all have in common is inspiration simply means the Bible has some connection with religious literature, with God himself. There’s a connection between God and the Bible. The question is: how we understand that connection? What do we mean when we say that the Bible is inspired, that it is literature that claims to be the word of God? What do we mean by that? How does that affect the way we read the Old and New Testament? What do we mean when we say that the Bible is inspired? In its theological sense, in its full theological sense, the Bible owes its origin both to human beings, and also to God himself. Part of the issue is to wrestle with how do we understand the Bible as a fully human document, that demonstrates its full human dimension and the fact that it is produced by human beings, but yet at the same time, it
claims to be nothing less than the very word of God. How do we understand this? Actually, a lot could be said about this, but I want to restrict most of my comments to the issue of how that affects the way we interpret. I do want to look at the biblical text itself and examine just two factors in understanding what we mean by inspiration that must be taken into account when we consider the Old and New Testament texts as inspired literature. Obviously, when we think in terms of hermeneutics and interpretation, this is what sets the Bible apart from other forms of human communication and other forms of communication that we would interpret. By calling the Bible inspired, we recognize that it is religious literature that is set apart. It is in some way the very word of God, and that’s what we want to explore.

But there are two factors that need to be taken into account when we think of the Old and New Testament as inspired literature or as the word of God. The first one is: statements about the Bible itself. The second one is: the phenomena that you actually find in the biblical text. What do we find going on in the text? Again, the first one is what does the bible say about itself as far as what it is; and then, what phenomena do we find in the text itself when we start to examine its details?

**Biblical Statements on Inspiration**

The two perhaps most significant statements, at least when you start reading treatments of inspiration, two texts that seem to always surface as kind of the classic texts when it comes to inspiration are both found in the New Testament, though there are a number of Old Testament texts as well that attest to its character, and I think particularly of a lot of the prophetic literature, where it’s clear that the prophets are consciously claiming to speak God’s word to the people.

But two passages: the first one is found in the Pauline literature, and that is 2 Timothy 3:16. Paul instructing Timothy says: “All scripture is God-breathed” – and that word “God-breathed” is the one from which theologically we get the word “inspiration.” There are some questions that perhaps Paul created this word himself out of two Greek words that basically resemble this translation “God-breathed,” but we’ll look at that later on in a moment. But, “All scripture is God-breathed, and is profitable for teaching,
rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.” Then verse 17: “So that the person of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” So 2 Timothy 3:16 – we’ll look at it later – although primarily Paul is referring to the collection of texts as the word of God that would have been available to him and his readers—primarily the Old Testament. Although, I think you could make a good case that Paul might also include the gospel in that as well, if not obviously his own letters and other New Testament documents. Paul is primarily perhaps then referring to the Old Testament, but clearly sees it as – and if I understand this text correctly – he’s including the entirety of the Old Testament, the entirety of scripture, as nothing less than the product of the very breath of God, the very speech of God. So this text is an important sort of a meta-statement about the entirety of the Old Testament. Again, it’s possible when you read before and after this text, Paul might also include the gospel that he preaches in this as well, as that to which the Old Testament testifies. But clearly, Paul, in this sort of meta-statement, would see the entirety of Scripture available to him as nothing less than that which is the product of the very breath of God, the very word of God.

The other text that in the New Testament that is prominent in establishing the Bible’s own view of itself – again, sort of a meta-statement that encompasses the entirety of the Scripture available to the author – is found in 2 Peter 1:20, and I’ll back up and read verse 19 as well. Starting at verse 19: “We have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it as to the light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” Verse 20: “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy” – verse 21 – “prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” And we’ll return to this text very briefly later on. Again, there may be some limitation to this text in that the author is primarily referring to prophetic texts, but clearly, to prophetic texts at least, he sees them as a product of God’s spirit moving the persons along to speak God’s very word to his people.
So these two statements establish the fact – again sort of meta-statements that transcend Scripture – establish the fact that Paul and Peter, these two authors, look at the Old Testament and see it as nothing less than the product of the very speech of God, as the result of God’s divine activity, of God’s spirit, working in the lives of human beings to produce this. So it’s from these two texts primarily that we get the understanding of inspiration—that the biblical texts are to be seen as the product of God’s speech, as the product of divine activity, of God working and moving individuals to speak what is nothing less than the word of God.

**Phenomena of Scripture: God Speaking to Human Authors**

Yet, not only do we need to look at statements of the biblical text itself, and what it says about itself, but the phenomena of the Bible. What do we actually find in the biblical text? And again, I’ll give kind of a painfully brief survey of some of the details of what we find in the text that have to be taken into account when we understand: “What do we mean when we say the Bible’s inspired and how does that affect the way we read and interpret the biblical text?”

The first thing we find – and again, I’m just going to list a handful of things and give some very brief examples – the first thing we often find in the biblical text is God speaking directly to human beings, to human authors. The best example of this is the prophetic literature. Here you find that repeated formula throughout the prophetic text: “The word of the Lord came to Isaiah the prophet,” or “The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel,” or “The word of the Lord came to whoever.” And then often: “Thus saith the Lord,” which is a prophetic speech formula. The prophets seem to be, at the very least, whatever else they are doing, the prophets seem to be aware that what they are speaking is nothing less than the result of God directly speaking to them or through them. So often, in some theological textbooks, you find prophets described as the mouthpiece of God or something like that. But a text such as the prophetic text where the prophets are aware of the word of the Lord coming to them and “thus says the Lord.” They are aware of directly reporting a message that is a result of God directly speaking to them. You can think in the Old Testament of the Decalogue, that God himself writes and gives to his people or a
book like Daniel or Revelation, in apocalyptic works where God – especially in Revelation – where in the very first verse of Revelation chapter one, the very the prologue to his book, John labels his book “the revelation of Jesus Christ,” and I am convinced Jesus Christ is the source of the revelation, the one who is giving the revelation. But notice he says: “The revelation of Jesus Christ”—it is the revelation that comes from Jesus Christ which God gave him to show to his prophets. So ultimately, John claims – again, whatever else he’s doing in revelation – ultimately, John claims it is nothing less than a result of the revelatory activity of Christ, and ultimately God himself, to John. So in a number of texts in the Old and New Testament, especially prophetic type texts, we find the authors recording a message that God speaks directly to the human author.

Another interesting sort of text is: you have a few places where human words, words apparently spoken and written by human beings unaware that they're doing anything else than writing their own words, are, by later authors, often attributed to God. Just to give you one example: in Genesis 2:24 – I’m a little uncomfortable using Old Testament examples because I have an Old Testament scholar videoing all this, and so if his head starts shaking “no” I know I’m on the wrong track – Genesis chapter 2, and verse 24, a passage that later gets picked up a few times in the New Testament as well. But in 2:24: “For this reason” – at the end of Genesis 1 and 2 being two accounts of the creation from different perspectives, at the end of the account in chapter two, the author ends by saying: “For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” Interestingly, a number of commentaries think that this is what is often called “an interpretive aside”—that is, it is kind of the author’s own comment. In modern day, we might put it in parenthesis or in a footnote or something. It’s kind of an aside comment, that as the author’s narrating something he says: “Oh, by the way, let me make this comment to help you understand.” So, this is probably the author’s own interpretive comment, his own narrative aside on the biblical text. It’s his own words, his own evaluation of what he’s written so far.
But it’s interesting when Jesus himself picks this text up in Matthew 19, in one of his debates with the Pharisees, the Pharisees come to him and say: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” and in verses 4 and 5, Jesus responds by quoting this text, but notice how he introduces it. Jesus says: “‘Haven’t you heard,’ he replied, ‘that at the beginning, the creator’” – a reference to God himself – “‘made them male and female and said: ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’” Apparently Jesus thought that God himself, the creator, was responsible for saying these words. There are a few other examples of this, but this is, I think, a very straightforward example of human words in their original context of Genesis 2 now being attributed to the creator, to God himself. So, there are places where God speaks directly to his human authors and they appear to record what he says. There are other places—a few places, where the human author says something and then later on it is attributed to God himself, such as Jesus does in Matthew 19.

**Human Authors Speaking to God**

There are also examples of human beings speaking to God, where it doesn’t appear that God is addressing them at all, but its solely human beings addressing God. The Psalms, in the Old Testament, are full of examples. Psalm 103: “Praise the Lord, O my soul. All my inmost being praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.” Psalms such as this, and you could turn to just about any one, are expressions of praise, lamentation, or other sorts of expressions of the psalmist to God. They are not a record of God speaking to the psalmist, but a record of the psalmist pouring out his heart to God. So this is a record of a human being speaking to God. How is that the inspired word of God?

**Authors of the Biblical Text Use Sources/References**

Other biblical texts seem to reflect very human processes of compilation, production or writing. That is, you have – I’m thinking especially of having in mind references, explicit references in the biblical text, of the human author relying on previous writings, even secular writings, and making that clear. For example, I could
point to a number of examples, but in 2 Kings – and this happens in several places – but 2 Kings 12:19 at the end of recording the exploits of one of Judah’s kings, in verse 19, the author of Kings says: “As for the other events of the reign of Joash, and all he did, are they not written in the book of the Annals of the king of Judah?” which I’m not sure what that is, but apparently the author of Kings has been relying on another source, which would have been common during the day. He is researching and utilizing another document that he calls the Annals of the Kings in order to provide information for his own written work.

You find something similar going on in the New Testament in the Gospel of Luke, the third Gospel, where in a sort of prologue type statement at the very beginning, Luke actually tells us something about the means by which he produced the Gospel of Luke. He tells us a little bit about the workings of his Gospel, and how it was that he produced it and it came about. Chapter 1:1-4: “Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,” – who may have been the patron that funded the work and the research for Luke to produce this – “so that you may know the certainty of the things that you have been taught.”

Now, notice what’s going on in this text. A couple things: first of all, Luke uses a quite a bit of language that was common in other narratives or biographical works that Luke’s resembles, such as: “writing an orderly account.” A lot of this language resembles other works. Second, Luke seems to be aware of other accounts of the life of Christ. Notice his line: “Since others have undertaken to write up an account.” So Luke seems to be aware and seems to be utilizing the work of others, whether that’s one of the other Gospels, such as Matthew or Mark, is possible, but Luke doesn’t tell us what other resources he had available. But he’s clearly aware of other accounts of the life of Christ, and perhaps he’s intending to supplement them or maybe correct some of them. The other
thing Luke tells us is that he’s aware of eyewitnesses and others who testify to these accounts, and he’s relying on them as well.

So, putting this all together, Luke seems to reveal a very human process of interpretation. In fact, it is so human is it that I wonder if one of the motives – we’ll talk about this a little bit later on in another session – that there are a couple of manuscripts of Luke that in these verses where Luke says “It seemed good to me,” there’s a couple manuscripts that supply “and to the Holy Spirit,” which is also a phrase found elsewhere in Luke, so maybe they are drawing from that. But it’s also as if some scribes thought that this was too human, and they wanted to add a divine sanction that certainly Luke did not write this on his own, “It seemed good to me,” but it must have divine sanction behind it as well. But if those two manuscripts are incorrect in adding that, we’re left with Luke undergoing a very human process of production. He’s relying on other sources, he’s aware of eyewitnesses, he’s aware of other accounts of Jesus’ life, and now it seems good to him to write his own account, for Theophilus, perhaps at Theophilus’ request. So it doesn’t’ appear that Luke all of the sudden one day began to glow and felt compelled by the Spirit to sit down and start writing this. It would seem to be the result of a very human process, much like the author of 2 Kings, using sources to compile his own account of the life of the king. So how is this inspired Scripture? How does this fit with an understanding of the Old and New Testament as inspired?

**Authors Distinguish Their Own Words From God’s Words**

Another type of evidence that we find in the Old and New Testament is, especially this example comes from the New Testament, it’s interesting that Paul seems to distinguish at times his own words from the words of God, or the words of Christ. Some have even on this basis called into question whether Paul thinks that what he writes is more his own opinion as opposed to what has been revealed to him through Christ. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul is addressing instructions to certain situations going on in Corinth. Chapter 7 would be another wonderful example of the distance that exists between the modern reader and our history, culture, and background, and the ancient text, and its culture, background, and history. But Paul’s addressing a situation related to different
issues, revolving around marriage, divorce, sexuality, abstinence and widowhood etc. In the middle of that, he says something interesting as he addresses the situation of some who are perhaps questioning about whether they should get divorced or not, and I won’t go into details about what may have prompted some of the Corinthians to think this. But in verses 10-12, Paul says: “To the married, I give this command,” but he says, “not I, but the Lord.” And then, here’s the command: “A wife must not separate from her husband, but if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband, and a husband must not divorce his wife.” Now verse 12: “To the rest I say this,” – Paul qualifies it by saying: “I say this, not the Lord.” And here’s what he says: “If any brother has a wife who’s not a believer, and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who’s not a believer, and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him.”

So what’s going on in this text? Is Paul really distinguishing his own words which are his own opinion when he says, “I say this not the Lord,” from something that was revealed to him through Jesus, so that he’ll say: “the Lord says this, not I”? Is Paul distinguishing his own opinion that can be taken more lightly from the very word of Christ that he now communicates to his readers? I think there’s probably a better explanation for this text. Instead, I think that Paul is not distinguishing levels of authority, that somehow, “If Christ reveals this you should obey it, but this is my opinion so you can take it with a grain of salt or you can decide what you want to do with it.” Instead, I think he’s distinguishing simply whether his words can find support in something Jesus taught or not. So when in verse 10 Paul says, “To the married I give this command, not I but the Lord,” I think he’s drawing on a specific saying of Jesus from the Gospels. You go back to Matthew, the Matthew text in chapter 19 and the Sermon on the Mount, or the Gospel of Mark where they record the sayings of Jesus regarding divorce. I think that’s what Paul is referring to in this text. We read part of that when we read Matthew 19, in Jesus’ instructions regarding divorce. So I think Paul when he says, “I give you this command, not I but the Lord,” he’s not saying that this is something that Jesus revealed to him, therefore it’s on a higher level of authority. He’s simply saying, “I can appeal to a
direct command of Jesus from the Gospels, or from the traditions of Jesus’ teaching.” But then in verse 12 when he says, “To the rest I say this, I, but not the Lord,” he’s not saying that this is merely his own opinion. He’s simply saying: “I don’t necessarily have a saying of Jesus to back this up.” Yet it’s interesting, at the end of chapter 7, he can say: “And I think too that I have the spirit of God.” So the entirety of chapter 7, Paul seems to be aware that what he’s saying is authoritative and is to be obeyed. In fact, later on in chapter 14, Paul will basically say that: “Anyone should realize that what I say is nothing less than the command of the Lord.” So Paul does not seem to be distinguishing levels of authority that what he says is somehow his opinion to be taken with less seriousness, and therefore what Jesus says is what has been revealed to him and they should listen to that. But instead, I think in chapter 7, Paul is simply distinguishing whether he can appeal to a saying of Jesus, from Jesus’ earthly teaching or not. Yet even when he can’t, Paul is still convinced that he has God’s spirit, and he speaks a message that is authoritative, and he expects his readers to obey.

Differing Accounts of the Apostles

Another detail, another phenomenon, that one finds in the biblical texts – again, I appeal to the New Testament for this one, though you could probably find similar examples in the Old Testament. It’s interesting that when you read the gospels, especially Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the so-called Synoptic Gospels because there appears to be some literary relationship between them in the wording, and the order of events. We’ll look at this later under “source criticism” in a different section. But the Synoptic Gospels seem to be recording the same, at times, the exact same wording, and the exact same statements of Jesus. Yet it’s interesting that they don’t always appear to be interested in recording the exact words of Jesus. So for example, how do you handle this: in Matthew 5:3, one of Jesus’ so called beatitudes in his Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:3, Jesus says “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” But Luke 6:20, in Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount, you have “Blessed are you who are poor.” Now my point, my intention, at this point is not too adjudicate between these two or solve the issue, but merely to point out that the wording is very different. Matthew has “poor in
spirit,” and Matthew has it in the third person, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Luke just has “Blessed are the poor,” and he has it in the second person “blessed are you who are poor.”

Furthermore, if Jesus – although I think Jesus was probably tri-lingual; probably spoke Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek – if Jesus as many think spoke this in Aramaic, the fact that these are recorded in Greek clearly suggests that we don’t have the exact, precise words of Jesus. Did one of them get it wrong? Did Matthew have it wrong by saying: “The poor in spirit”? or did Luke get it wrong by leaving out “spirit”? Or, more likely, should we understand the Gospel writers as not so concerned to preserve the precise, exact words of Jesus, but instead to produce accurate summations or accurate accounts and summaries of what it was Jesus said? Yes, at times they may record close to precisely what Jesus said, but at the other times is it possible that Matthew and Luke both accurately are getting at exactly what it was Jesus was communicating, without necessarily recording the precise words? I think we have to come to a conclusion like that, or else we have to conclude that one of them was wrong. If Matthew and Luke are trying to preserve the exact words of Jesus, one or both of them got it wrong. But, if, as was common, and we’ll say it again: one of the distances we experience is a literary distance; in the first century it was very common for persons to summarize, to give an accurate and adequate summary of what was said. As long as it accurately portrayed what someone communicated, it was fine. It didn’t appear that they were as interested as we were in quotations, where you put quotations around and preserve the exact, precise reading. Instead, they were often more interested in providing an accurate summary, so that Mathew and Luke both got it right. They both captured the meaning of exactly what it was Jesus was trying to communicate.

Or another interesting example is the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5-7, the longest version of it. If you took time to sit down and read it in a good English translation, I would guess it would take, ten or fifteen minutes maybe, give or take a few minutes. I seriously doubt that Jesus taught for ten or fifteen minutes. More likely, it went on for a day, perhaps, or longer, maybe a little bit less, but for the greater part of a
day. So that even the cherished Sermon on the Mount of Matthew 5-7 is – at times it may capture some of the exact wording – but more likely, again, is an accurate summary and an accurate portrayal of what it was that Jesus said. So that had Jesus read the account itself that Matthew wrote, he would have said, “Yes, that captures exactly what I was communicating.” So how is that the word of God? The fact that we have writers in the New Testament, especially in the Gospels recording the words of Jesus that never exactly portray the precise wording, but they feel free to summarize, and sometimes they do it differently. Matthew seems to emphasize being poor in spirit, where Luke seems to emphasize physical poverty, and there’s, I think, a way to harmonize that. But how do we understand that as the inspired word of God?

The Evolution of Salvation from Old to New Testament

The last phenomenon that we find – and there’s a number of others we could refer to, but – the last phenomenon that we find in the Old and New Testament is: the Bible seems to be arranged salvation historically. That is, the Bible seems to be arranged so that the New Testament brings to fulfillment, even at times, eclipsing the previous revelation in the Old Testament. Christians today can reflect on the question, “Well, why don’t we offer sacrifices, when that was commanded of God’s people in the Old Testament?” That’s a biblical precept, a biblical command. Yet, most of us don’t offer sacrifices today. Most of us don’t keep the Sabbath, as far as keeping all the regulations on the Sabbath day that God’s people, Israel kept. How is it that that’s the word of God, the fact that certain parts of the revelation in the Old Testament are no longer applicable? Sometimes Jesus and New Testament writers even overturn them, such as the sacrificial system and some of the regulations related to the Old Testament sacrifices. How do we understand that as the word of God?

So, taking all this information into consideration—the different phenomenon that we find in the Old and New Testament. Sometimes God speaks directly to the authors. Sometimes the authors speak to God, such as the psalmist when they praise and expressions of praise, lamentation and worship. Sometimes human authors speak and a later author will attribute that to God. Sometimes we see revealed very human processes
of composition and production. Sometimes we find authors not interested in producing and preserving the exact words, but summaries, and sometimes the summaries even differ. How is that the word of God? Then relating that to the Bible’s own meta-statements, that the Bible is inspired, or that the Bible is the product of God’s spirit moving human authors to produce what, at least in 2 Timothy, is nothing less than the very words breathed out from God, the very breath of God.

**Four Differing Views on Inspiration**

Historically, there have been at least four ways this has been understood. I’ll just summarize them briefly, and then communicate what I think might encapsulate or might account for this evidence. First of all is, historically, there are four views of inspiration that have wrestled with this – and again, these all could have sub-views and different ways of looking at them. This is not exhaustive; there might be some other views that could be added. But I’ll paint this with very broad brush strokes. One view has often been labeled the “fundamentalist view,” and that is that God actually dictated the words of Scripture. So not just the prophets, but the prophets in the sense – some have called this the prophetic model – the prophets in a sense provide the model for understanding Genesis to Revelation. It’s the result of God actually dictating and speaking directly the words to the biblical authors, so that the author basically becomes a passive secretary, simply reporting and inscribing “Thus says the Lord.” So the prophetic: “Thus says the Lord” is extended to the entire Bible, so that God has sometimes in the past has been understood as actually dictating the words of Scripture to the human author.

Another view, in exact contrast to that, is known as the “liberal view,” and that is that the Bible is not to be equated with the word of God. The first view, the “fundamentalist,” would find a very strict equation with God’s word with the biblical text itself. The liberal view would say that the biblical text itself is not to be identified with the word of God, but merely, and largely, the record of human religious experience. Its inspiration is to be understood in line with other inspired and inspiring types of literature. So it’s really not any more important, or at least no more authoritative, than any other religious texts or any other text.
Another, a third view, that in a sense is meant to respond to the second one, was a view often associated with the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, and that is known as “neo-orthodoxy.” And Barth said that the Bible, the written word of God, is not to be equated with the word of God, but it can become the word of God. To kind of just put this in simple terms: it can become God’s word when God chooses to reveal himself to his people through this record of revelations. The Bible is a witness to – often you’ll find in Barth or others discussing Barth describing the Bible as a witness to revelation – the Bible is a witness to God revealing, but it can continue to become God’s word. It can continue to when God chooses to reveal himself through this record of revelation to us. It stems from Barth’s understanding God is wholly other, and no human language or document could hope to reveal and capture God’s revelation. So the Bible is basically an errant and fallible human document, but it can become God’s word when God chooses to continue to reveal himself through this witness to his revelation.

A fourth view is known as – often for lack of a better term, I’ve labeled it, and others have labeled it – an “evangelical view.” That is: the Bible, much like view number one, is to be equated with the word of God, unlike number two and three, but unlike view number one, the fundamentalist view, the evangelical view realizes that the Bible is the very word of God, but it’s communicated through human authors and through very human and diverse methods and means. So God was at work throughout the entire process. So, for example, Luke chapter one, where Luke is utilizing other sources and doing his research based on eyewitnesses. He is aware of other accounts of Jesus’ life, perhaps sees shortcomings in some of them, and now decides to write his own account. God is at work through the entire process, so the result is nothing less than the very words of human beings, but at the same time, nothing less than the very word of God. So the divine production of Scripture, the divine involvement, the fact that the Scripture is to be identified as God’s word, does not diminish the human aspect.

Some have compared this to the incarnation: the fact that Jesus is at the same time fully God yet fully human. This can be seen as the incarnate speech of God and at the same time fully the word of God, yet somehow the words of human beings. And so, we
can read the scriptural text and see the different emphases that we see between Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount and Luke’s, or Old Testament narrative and the Psalms as the psalmists crying out and expressing their praise to God. We can see very human processes of communication and writing. So we can distinguish Paul’s Greek from the Greek of James or Mark. An evangelical view affirms that the Bible is in some way God’s word without in some way diminishing the full human element as well.

**Interpreting the Meaning of “God-Breathed” Scripture**

Let me return to, just briefly, to look at the two biblical texts that we raised at the very beginning: 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:20f. The 2 Timothy 3:16 passage—it’s important with both of these texts to understand not only the contribution they make to our understanding of inspiration, but also the limitation. Then we’ll summarize what do we mean by inspiration perhaps in the next session. What do we mean by inspiration? How does this affect interpretation and hermeneutics? With the 2 Timothy 3:16 passage: “All scripture is God-breathed and inspired by God.” First of all, we’ve already mentioned that although this text by extension, perhaps by deduction and extension could apply to the entirety of the Old and New Testament, Paul is rather clear, or at least this context he’s rather clear that the Scripture that he’s primarily referring to, although it may contain the gospel as well and the teachings of Jesus, Paul is primarily referring to the Old Testament, the Scripture that would have come down to him.

The other thing is that – to emphasize this text and its contribution to our understanding of the Bible and inspiration – is that it focuses and emphasizes the product and not the process. Although it says that the entirety of Scripture (primarily Old Testament) is God-breathed – it’s the very breath of God, the very word of God – it doesn’t tell us how it does so, or how that works. One attempt to answer that question was the first view, the fundamentalist view, that God dictates it, but there’s too much evidence to the contrary that suggests that there’s very few places outside of the prophets where the biblical writers are aware of speaking God’s word or God speaking his word through them. But in what sense then are they still inspired?
So 2 Timothy 3:16 emphasizes the product, that the end product, the Scriptures themselves, the text themselves are, in some way, the very word of God, that have their genesis in the very speaking of God, have their origin in the very speech, in the very breath of God. Yet it says nothing of how God does this. How was it that Luke reading other accounts of the life of Christ, perhaps aware of some shortcomings, doing his own research, wanting to produce – desiring himself, in response to a man named Theophilus, to write his own gospel; how is it that that is the very breath and the very word of God? 2 Timothy 3:16 doesn’t focus on the process, but assures us that the product is nothing less than, while still being the words of human beings, the very word of God.

The last thing I want to say about this text is that inspiration is not theoretical, but is pragmatic and practical. Verse 17 reminds us that the inspired text is not something that we put on a shelf for safe-keeping and say: “Look, there’s the inspired word of God.” But it does not good if it does not reach into our being and transform us and evoke obedience. If the Bible is really the inspired word of God, then we cannot help but respond in a way consistent with that. If it’s the very word of God, then it stands in authority over us, and we must respond in obedience. The last text then, 2 Peter 1:20-21, when the author said that the prophets did not write on their own accord and according to their own interpretation but were individuals moved by God’s spirit. Again, I think we need to realize the limitations in that Peter does not seem to be, at least here, explicitly addressing all texts. I think he makes clear and if you read the context and understand what’s going on in 2 Peter is Peter is primarily defending the Old Testament prophets and even perhaps the apostles as well when he says that when they prophesied, it was not a result of their own human desire, human ingenuity, and their own interpretation, but prophecy came as a result of human beings moved by God’s spirit to speak the very word of God. Although we don’t want to exclude other New Testament books, certainly 2 Peter 1:20 as we have it mainly addresses prophetic literature, and doesn’t say anything about how narrative or poetry or other types of literature or other texts were produced, but certainly it does provide a helpful model for understanding how God’s spirit could work through human beings to produce something that was nothing less than the product of the
human author, but still in some way at the same time was nothing less than the very word of God and something that owed itself to the very breath of God.

**Interpreting the Inspired Word of God**

How does this affect biblical interpretation? First of all, because the Bible is a human document, then the various methods of criticism that we’re going to talk about – we’ll define what we mean by criticism later on – the very methods of interpretation, the different criticisms that we’ll discuss, and how we analyze human understanding, are all valid and necessary because we are dealing with documents that are thoroughly human. They're produced by human beings in a specific historical context in response to human problems, etc. etc. So because of that, because of the human dimension, it validates using the different methods and the different criticisms that we will be talking about.

But second, because these documents are divine, because the Bible is nothing less than the word of God, it has a claim on our lives. It demands to be obeyed; we must submit to it, and obey it. In other words, historical methods can only take us so far in understanding the biblical text, as necessary as they are. But the biblical text is also a spiritual document and behind it lies the God who has inspired it and who communicates to his people, and who desires to be our God and desires us to be his people. So as a spiritual book, as a divine book, it has a claim on our lives and it must evoke a response of obedience.

The third thing is the text itself is, and must be, the locus of our interpretive activity. Not the traditions or sources behind it, as helpful as that may be. We’ll talk about the necessities; we’ve already seen the historical and cultural distance that often separates us from the biblical text, but ultimately it’s the text itself that is the locus of our interpretive activity, not the reconstruction of the historical background or a so-called hypothetical reconstructed source. But ultimately, it’s the finished text, the product, that is, the locus or the center of our interpretive activity as the product of the very speech of God as the very inspired text.
The other assumption that I just want to mention very briefly is that I will assume that the canonical Old and New Testament that we now confess, especially evangelical scholars confess, the 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 of the New Testament, are the inspired word of God or are the canonical scriptures, based on the testimony of Jesus and other ancient Jewish authorities, based on the evidence of the early church from the 4th and 5th century AD, as they were wrestling with and working out which documents they would accept as historical Scripture and recognize as the very word of God. Based on the evidence, the center of, locus, and object of our interpretive activity will be the canonical Old and New Testament.

**Conclusion and Preview of Next Lecture**

So with that we’ve considered the origin of Scripture and how that influences the way we interpret, and how that influences the way we approach interpretation. The next step that we’ll take is a preliminary one, and that is: how can we be confident that we have the inspired text of Scripture, or something close to it, perhaps? This is the process known as “text criticism,” and I want to talk about that a little bit in our next session. But now that we have discussed the origin and production of the Bible as the inspired word of God, how do we know that what we hold in our hands is in fact the inspired word of God? That deals with issues of textual criticism and also translation that we’ll talk about in the next two sessions.

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