

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

(1) INSPIRATION and INTERPRETATION of OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURE

PREAMBLE: The aim of this study is to uncover information that might -

- (1) assist us in interpreting what we are reading in the Bible, and
- (2) provide some insights into the use of revelatory or prophetic gifts and ministries in the church today.

In any meaningful discussion of this topic there are two Key Bible Readings which cannot be ignored. They are from the 'pastoral epistles' of the apostles Peter and Paul, and are generally considered to be pivotal statements in establishing the authority of Scripture as the Word of God.

2 Timothy 3:14-17 The author is Paul and he is writing to Timothy from a prison in Rome towards the end of 66 AD. The old apostle expects to die soon (*For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand.*) and so he reflects on those influences that make up the spiritual heritage he is leaving his 'son.'

“But as for you, continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. ALL SCRIPTURE IS GIVEN BY INSPIRATION OF GOD, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

2 Peter 1:19-21 The author is Peter and he is writing to an unspecified group of early believers. The date is 66-67 AD and this apostle is also preparing for his death (*‘knowing that shortly I must put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me.’*). His concern in this testimonial letter is to warn against the corruption of the church's spiritual inheritance by false teaching, and so he urges them to be mindful of the words of the prophets and the commandments of the apostles. (3:2, 15-16).

“We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morningstar rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that NO PROPHECY OF SCRIPTURE IS OF ANY PRIVATE INTERPRETATION, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but HOLY MEN OF GOD SPOKE AS THEY WERE MOVED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT.”

Defining “Scripture” in the Key Bible Readings

In the Key Bible Readings, the word ‘Scripture’ is used to denote the Old Testament, which is made up of those prophetic, poetic, and historical books regarded as canonical (or ‘legal’) by the Jews.

Note that this is rather a strict interpretation of the word Scripture. Some would expand it to include the New Testament, and there are other verses which justify this expansion. However the examples of “**prophecy of Scripture**” in 2 Peter 1:20 and “**All Scripture**” in 2 Timothy 3:16, are both references to holy writings that have been in existence (and recognised as unique) for some time.

ALL SCRIPTURE IS GIVEN BY INSPIRATION OF GOD

Inspiration is translated from the Greek ‘*theopneustos*’ and traditionally commentators have explained it as meaning ‘God-breathed’ - from the elements ‘*Theo*’ ‘God’ and ‘*pneo*’ to breathe.’ However this may not be quite right. The phrase ‘God-breathed’ tends to evoke an image of the prophet as an inert storage vessel, simply carrying around a pre-formed message that he is to deliver.

In classical or non-biblical Greek, the word is used in the opposite sense to ‘*phusikos*’ (which refers to ‘natural’ things). It therefore distinguishes those things that are of a spiritual origin, from those things which have their roots in the physical realm. Scripture given by inspiration then, is that which originates from God, rather than something conceived by the natural intellect of man.

A broader definition of ‘inspiration’ along these lines would allow some involvement by the person, beyond simply receiving a pre-packaged message all ready to be directly relayed to an audience. Whatever the outcome of this debate however, it is unlikely that the prophets of the Old Testament were passive recipients. For example, they could not be compared to a secretary taking dictation, or a tape recorder making a voice copy.

The Old Testament prophets were all individuals, with their own unique backgrounds, before they came into Yahweh God’s office of prophet. Each has a first name, and often a paternal name, such as “**Isaiah the son of Amoz..**” Many have addresses, like “**Micah of Moresheth..**” and some even have occupations - “**Amos, who was among the herdsmen of Tekoa..**”

There was also a distinctive way of describing the way these men went about their task of prophecy. The Scripture talks of the prophets seeing the word of God:

- Is 2:1 “**The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.**”

- Is 13:1 “**The burden** [‘oracle’ or ‘prophecy’] **against Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw.**”
- Mi 1:1 “**The word of the LORD that came to Micah of Moresheth ... which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.**”
- Am 1:1 “**The words of Amos ... which he saw concerning Israel ... two years before the earthquake.**”

The significance of the word ‘**saw**’ is revealed in the exegesis of Ezekiel 13:3 by Andrew Fausset (p 242, vol 2, Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown’s Bible Commentary). The passage he is referring to reads, “**Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Woe to the foolish prophets, who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing.’**”

‘A distinction lay between the false and true prophets. The source of their messages respectively: of the false ‘their own hearts’; of the true AN OBJECT PRESENTED TO THE SPIRITUAL SENSE (named from the noblest of the senses A SEEING) BY THE SPIRIT OF GOD FROM WITHOUT, not produced by their own natural powers of reflection. The word, the body of the thought, presented itself not audible to the natural sense, but directly to the spirit of the prophet; and so the perception of it is properly called a SEEING, he perceiving that which thereafter forms itself in his soul as the cover of the external word (DELITZCHE); hence the peculiar expression, SEEING THE WORD OF GOD (Isaiah 2:1; 13:1; Amos 1:1; Micah 1:1).’

First comes the *perception*, or awareness, in his spirit, and then comes the *forming*, or outward-working of expression in his soul (which includes the intellect, emotions and personality). The full significance of this sequence of events is unravelled here: the initial ‘*perception*’ is related to the ‘*spirit*’ - and it ‘*thereafter forms*’ in the ‘*soul*’ as the ‘*external word*.’

The initial revelation presents itself “*directly to the spirit of the prophet*” and is “*not audible to the natural sense*.” But the actual words the people hear (or we read in the Bible) are of necessity thereafter formed by the minds of men.

It is as if God’s revelation simply floats in from above and then gently settles itself down on the human spirit in an as yet unintelligible form. Then, using the potential of the mind and other soulish attributes, it begins to ‘translated’ into words that ‘crystallise’ and faithfully express the original revelation.

The point is that the actual translation of it into real words is a process which involves a person’s mind in a way that reflects his personality, and yet without interfering with the spiritual input. This is reflected in the Gospel writers. Matthew the tax collector, wrote in much detail, giving us the fullest account of the discourses of Jesus. On the other hand Mark was abrupt, concise, and yet graphic. Luke the

physician, reflects his own personality by deciding to “set in order a narrative to write an orderly account.” And John’s writings reflect his accent on love and spirituality. Obviously God selects his servants and then prepares them for His work. But this does not mean He erases their personality.

To some extent then, whether we are reading the Bible, or listening to a prophetic word, we are receiving God’s truth in a form which is influenced by the thoughts and experiences of another human being.

NO PROPHECY OF SCRIPTURE IS OF ANY PRIVATE INTERPRETATION

Private interpretation has as its Greek roots - ‘idios’ or ‘one’s own’ and ‘epilysis’ meaning ‘to release’ or ‘unloosen.’ In other words, ‘no prophecy of Scripture is of anyone’s own release or unloosening.’ Which is to say, ‘no prophecy of Scripture is of anyone’s own issuing or instigation.’

The words ‘**private interpretation**’ may therefore be a bit misleading in this case. It implies that the prophet must be an automaton--someone so stripped of their humanity that there is absolutely no likelihood of their ‘message’ being ‘contaminated’ by who they are, or what their experiences have been.

A rendering more faithful to the original terms would be, “**No prophecy of Scripture is of any private [or personal] origin.**” This is an important difference. The real issue in dealing with God’s word is ‘Who is the source?’ rather than ‘What do we know about the prophet?’

The problem with false prophets is not that they speak crudely, or use images from their own circumstances, or seem to be agitated or aggressive, but that “**They speak a vision of their own heart.**” So in interpreting Scripture, or in discerning God’s truth in a spoken word, the principle responsibility of those in the church is to establish the real author. We should judge the spiritual origin and content of the word rather than looking at the prophet.

For example, we may judge our own spiritual reaction or response to the word. ‘Is this God’s word for me right now’? ‘Is the Holy Spirit impressing this word on my heart at this time?’ ‘Does this word quicken within me?’ ‘Am I cut to the heart?’ ‘Do I feel convicted of truth?’ ‘Is there a witness in my spirit?’ ‘Do I fear with a holy dread?’ ‘Am I in godly sorrow, leading to repentance’?

HOLY MEN OF GOD SPOKE AS THEY WERE MOVED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

What does it mean to be “**moved by the Holy Spirit.**”? The original Greek word is ‘*phero*,’ meaning ‘to bear’ or ‘to carry.’ Its translation here as ‘**moved**’ indicates that they were ‘borne along’ or impelled by the Holy Spirit’s power; not acting according to their own wills, or simply expressing their own thoughts.

The word contains a suggestion of speed or force. For example it is used of the power of Pentecost in Acts 2:2. “**And suddenly there came** (*‘phero’*) **a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind..**” And in Acts 27:15, 17 it is used to describe the effect of a storm at sea upon a small sailing ship. “**So when the ship was caught, and could not head into the wind, we let her drive** (*‘phero’*) **and fearing lest they should run aground they struck sail and so were driven.** (*‘phero’*)...”

The impression of these “**holy men of God**” being swept along by forces greater than themselves, is supported by the prophets’ reports of their own experiences:

- Ezek 8:1, 3 “**...the hand of the LORD God fell upon me [in Babylon]...and took me by a lock of my hair; and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem...**”

This experience was sometimes so unexpected and overwhelming for the prophets that they had to ask for special help in interpreting what they had seen and heard:

- Dan 7:15-16 “**I, Daniel, was grieved in my spirit within my body, and the visions of my head troubled me. I came near to one of those who stood by, and asked him the truth of all this. So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of these things.**”

And sometimes it was just too much to take in all at once and the prophets were compelled to take time out in order to recover:

- Ezek 3:14-15 “**So the Spirit lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit; but the hand of the LORD was strong upon me. Then I came to the captives at Tel Abib, who dwelt by the River Chebar; and I sat where they sat, and remained there astonished among them seven days.**”

But whatever the dramatic circumstances surrounding the revelation, there was always an attitude of great care towards publishing that material, so that it was an accurate and faithful reflection of what they had observed.

- Dan 7:1 “**In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head while on his bed. Then he wrote down the dream, telling the main facts.**”

The prophetic writings in these cases were not reckless or ill-considered outbursts. Each revelation was carefully considered before

publishing it. To say the prophets “**..spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit...**” does not mean their utterance was instantaneous to His giving revelation to them. Rather it means that when the words came, there were obedient reflections of what He had shown them.

SUMMARY: So far we have examined three key phrases referring to the inspiration of Scripture (or Old Testament). We have confirmed that to be genuine, the origin of the material must be in God. However this does not mean that the prophets themselves have no effect on the actual words that are used to transmit the revelation to His people.

The fact that God uses real people in this vital ministry of communication should not alarm us, or remove our confidence in the validity of His written and spoken Word. What it should do is get our eyes and minds off the prophet (and what he is wearing, or where he comes from, or whether anyone knows him), and onto the ‘word’ itself.

Interpretation based on who is presenting the information is bound to fail in the long-term. When we start interpreting the truth by considering the speaker’s background, we take a major step towards demanding ‘theological soundness,’ and ‘denominational conformity