

**“I take up the Bible and I read. Here are a million or so printed words, in which divine gold and human clay are mixed, and I have to take the gold and leave the clay” Austen Farrer, *The Inspiration of the Bible*.
Do I? What theologies of the inspiration of Scripture lead you to your answer?**

“And the words of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times.” Psalm 12:6.

INTRODUCTION

Austin Marsden Farrer (1904- 1968) was a theologian, philosopher and statesman in the Anglo-catholic tradition who was known for his humour and deep spirituality. Although proposed for the position of Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, he was never appointed, perhaps due to his theological position which was considered somewhat outside the mainstream by many academic theologians at the time¹. Farrer, who was both a university academic and college chaplain, sought to bring together an intellectual rigour with a prayerful engagement of the heart.

The quote above, which forms the catalyst for our exploration of the theologies of the inspiration of Scripture, is part of what was first a radio broadcast for the BBC in June 1952. In this broadcast, Farrer sought to provide an apologetic for why Christians through the years have called the words of (for example) Jews written thousands of years ago, “the words of God”. In other words, the piece seeks to make sense of what has been named “the dual authorship” of Scripture.

In summary, Farrer adopts what we might call a “variegated view” of Scripture. In the same way that in the gardening world some leaves are zoned into different regions- a light and a dark green- Farrer sees within the words of the Bible different levels of authority. Some parts of the bible reflect the limitations of the human author, and should be considered the human clay, which need to be treated with a lesser value. On the other hand, Scripture in part speaks with a “simple and absolute authority”². Farrer is not a radical theologian, and his position is not as extreme as it may sound. In his mind, the “human clay” does not refer to large portions of the Bible which may not be to the reader’s tastes (and which he or she can therefore discard), but rather to some more tangential aspects of Scripture such as the gospel writers’ chronology and Paul’s astronomy or “national prejudices”, which may not necessarily have a bearing on the theological import of the text.

Nevertheless, Farrer does ask how we “strain out St Paul, so as to be left with the pure word of God” and “draw the line between the Apostle’s oddities and the word of God”³. Farrer’s position does treat the Bible as a mixed book⁴, and therefore part of the reader’s task as one of discerning the Word of God (his message) within the “Word of God” (the book we have in our hands).

As we attempt to understand the inspiration of Scripture, it will become clear that in my mind, for all Farrer’s brilliant insights, any variegated view of Scripture has serious flaws. I will seek to demonstrate that the words of the Bible do not *contain* the words of God, but rather the words of the Bible *are* the words of God. There is no part which must be left behind as human clay, but the Bible in its entirety can be fully trusted as the infallible Word of God, even though many fallible human authors were involved in the process. To use an image from Psalm 12, these words are already refined, and need no further purifying. There is no part of Scripture that is not divine gold: our question can be answered in the negative.

¹ For example Farrer published a paper entitled “On dispensing with Q” (contained in D. E. Nineham (ed.), *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), pp. 55-88) in which he challenged the (widely held) hypothesis that Matthew and Luke relied on a (now lost) *Quelle* source with which they supplemented Mark to provide an account of the life of Christ.

² In *Loades and MacSwain* (2006), p18.

³ *Ibid*, p16.

⁴ *Ibid*, p18. “People will always ask why God gives us his truth in such a mixed form”.

THEOLOGIES OF THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE

The noun “inspiration” in its theological setting is derived from the Latin and English translations⁵ of *qeo,pneustoj* in 2 Tim 3:16, and should not be confused with the non-theological term “inspiring”, as though the Bible simply captures the imagination of the reader in the same way that a Shakespeare sonnet might. The Greek term could more accurately be translated “breathed out” or “ex-spired” and it speaks of God’s direct activity in bringing about the words written.

Our starting point is this: the words of human writers in the text of the Bible are in some way related to God’s words. Christians of all traditions through the centuries have declared, as Farrer does⁶, that Scripture must be read as the “Word of the Lord”⁷. Calvin has spoken eloquently of the experiential work of “the secret testimony of the Holy Spirit”⁸ speaking to the human soul through the words of the Bible. Our question is exactly how, and in what form are the human words of the text of Scripture related to God’s communication to his people. There have been several answers to this.

I) DICTATION

It is a commonly held view (particularly by those outside the church) that some Christians believe that God gave the words of Scripture by bypassing the faculties and the personal experience of its writers, either through some sort of mystical trance or vision in an act of divine dictation. Muslims have a concept of “wahy”, which is closer to the idea of dictation: that Allah revealed the words of the Qu’ran directly to Mohammed in a series of visions over twenty-three years involving the angel Gabriel (Jibrīl)⁹. Although there is no reason why God could not have chosen to work in this very direct way, in practice very few if any Christians hold to this view of revelation. Farrer himself denounces a dictation view of Scripture: “It is a disastrous mistake to suppose that God can only make men his instruments by suspending their normal consciousness and wagging their tongues and hands for them as a showman does for his puppets”¹⁰.

The closest which the Bible comes to this concept is perhaps the provision of the Ten Commandments to Moses at Sinai, or the “thus says the Lord” motif used by the Old Testament prophets (eg Elijah, 1 Kings 21: 17-19; Isaiah 43:1; Jeremiah 5:14). But even here it is clear that the prophets (perhaps excepting one or two strange occasions in the experience of Ezekiel) were completely in control of their faculties. The norm in Scripture is that the writers use their own vocabulary and syntax and style (some of which is more stylish than others!) and are clearly taking control of their own words (for example Luke 1:3 RSV: “It seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus”).

Occasionally, parts of the Old Testament have much in common with other ANE texts, such as Proverbs 22:17-23:14 which shares almost all its material with the Egyptian document *Amenemope*. It is probable that this “secular wisdom” which was in existence in a form in the ancient near east was subsequently included into the Jewish tradition by a redactor of the Proverbs, and it has thus entered into the canon.

⁵ Vulgate *divinitus inspirata* and Wycliffe “*All Scripture of God ynspirid ...*”, and Tyndale “*All Scripture given by inspiration of God*”.

⁶ *Loc. Cit.* p15. Farrer goes on in the next sentence to say that “Christians read the Bible because they want to listen to God”.

⁷ Though some liberals in the school of Bultmann, Robinson or Cupitt have come such a distance from an understanding of Scripture as in any way divine or historical, that they may have difficulty in making this ascription.

⁸ Calvin’s *Institutes* I.vii.4. “For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded”.

⁹ Tom Smail (in personal conversation) described “Islam as the religion of the book, but Christianity as the religion of the incarnate God”. Incidentally, the Talmud, the Fathers and Philo also speak of concepts of dictation.

¹⁰ *Loc. cit.*, p15.

Although we shall argue that this portion of Scripture with all others can still be taken as God's express communication to us, this is very far from a concept of divine dictation.

2) ACCOMMODATION

If we grant that the authors of Scripture were in control of their faculties, and wrote the words they wanted to write, to what extent are they the words which God intended? Many argue that because "God's ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts are higher than our thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9), no human words will ever fully be able to contain divine thought. God must graciously "accommodate" himself and condescend to speak through human language, but this will never quite be able to express all that he intends to express because of the limitations of the human speaker. An analogy which is commonly given is that as light that passes through stained glass is coloured in the process, so the divine revelation of Scripture is discoloured, tainted, conditioned or even curtailed by the personality and limitations of the human writers, and to that degree it ceases to be the pure word of God.

While no-one would deny that there is more knowledge about God than can be contained in Scripture, nor that some form of accommodation will always be necessary for man to hear God speaking, the question still remains as to whether the words of Scripture themselves are an accurate portrayal of all that God wants us to know. Could it not be that God, the master architect, conditions the glass, prepares it and superintends it in such a way that it brings the perfect tone of light which he intends? As we shall see, many evangelical theologians use the term "verbal inspiration" to suggest that God supervised the exact words which the Bible writers used. Farrer both agrees and disagrees with this term. "Verbal inspiration is a misleading expression, if it means that every word is guaranteed to be free from human error or bias... but in another sense verbal inspiration is a proper expression... it is true that the inspiration is to be found in the very words and nowhere else"¹¹.

3) PARTIAL INSPIRATION

We may use this term for those theologians who believe that the Bible in part, but not in whole, contains the word of God, and therefore that some sort of differentiation process is needed to determine which parts have authority and which do not. Although Farrer agrees with one definition of verbal inspiration, it is still clear (as we saw in the introduction) that he believes some parts of Scripture need to be separated from others. "The Scripture expresses the whole work of God- what his work does, what it works with, and what it works against, all are there; sin and error appear beside truth and holiness, fantasy and idealisation beside the unflinching delineation of failure, and, as we know, Satan quotes nothing but the Bible. If Christ were not there to set Satan right, we should not know what to think"¹². Farrer therefore would not ascribe to the evangelical principle of the infallibility of Scripture: he would permit that it may contain errors, albeit ones that do not in his mind make a significant difference.

A theologian who adopts a more extreme view of the partial inspiration of Scripture is Rowan Williams. In one of his essays, he sees within the Revelation of John two voices, one with a clear and haunting authority, and the other "tightly written, pen driving into cheap paper, page after page of paranoid fantasy and malice, like the letters clergymen so frequently get from the wretched and disturbed"¹³. Although these both contribute to our hearing of the word of God, they are not to be received equally, since the

¹¹ *Loc. cit.*, p17.

¹² *Ibid.*, p9. The context here makes clear that Farrer is not here limiting "sin and error" to the words of Satan recorded in Scripture, or those of say, Job's comforters, where the spoken words are expressly denied by their context.

¹³ Williams (2002) p112-113.

bible writers themselves are grappling with the revelation they receive¹⁴. In Williams' mind there is the possibility that not all of the words of the Bible writers are binding upon the church: "We aren't called to believe and endorse all they say, only to ask ourselves what we are taught here about the strangeness and sometimes the terror of the Word of God to fragile minds"¹⁵. The Bible can therefore be seen more as an example of theological method than final statements of theology¹⁶.

There is no doubt that some parts of Scripture are not easy to read or understand as we shall see. Nevertheless, whenever a "partial" or "variegated" view of the inspiration of Scripture is proposed, there must always be someone to decide what is in and what is out, and this removes the authority from Scripture itself to a human authority¹⁷. Although it may (rightly) be argued that the Bible must be interpreted Christologically, with Jesus Christ as the centrally defining authority, and with respect to the understanding of the wider catholic church through the centuries, there is a danger that a human reader takes up the position of defining what is acceptable and what is not, and we end up placing ourselves "above" Scripture rather than "under" it.

4) PLENARY VERBAL INSPIRATION

The mainstream evangelical position with regard to the inspiration of Scripture is "plenary verbal inspiration". This means that *all* of the words of the Bible are understood to be inspired (breathed out) by God although they take the form of words which the human authors themselves freely wrote. These words are fully human, and have involved the critical, cultural and linguistic limitations of the human authors, but the Holy Spirit of God providentially superintended the very words that they wrote, so that they were the words that **he** intended, and therefore fully divine¹⁸. Therefore Jesus can speak of the editorial words of the writer of Genesis 2:24 as "*the Creator...said*" (Matt 19:4,5 NIV), and Paul can call words recorded as being from God for Pharaoh in Exodus 9:16 the "*the Scripture says*" (Romans 9:17). We will argue that this understanding is the most Christian (because it honours Christ's own attitude to Scripture), the most biblical (because it is a position which comes out of Scripture's own self-attestation¹⁹) and is in fact the most Anglican (because it is the position which best reflects the stated historical understanding of the Church of England through the centuries).

Christ's attitude to the Jewish Scriptures

Jesus, as viewed by those around him, held an incredibly high view of what we now call the Old Testament. He quoted the Scripture in all of its three main parts: the Law (Matt 4:4), the Prophets (Mark 7:6) and the Writings (Mark 12:10)²⁰. He referred to it as "the Word of God" (Mark 7:13), and saw it as a revelation of God's Holy Spirit (Mark 12:36). In his mind, he accepted Old Testament history as true, including the historicity of the patriarchs (Matt 22:32), God's appearance to Moses at the burning bush (Mark 12:26), Noah's flood (Luke 17:27), and the miracles in the days of Elijah and Elisha (Luke 4:25-27).

¹⁴ "We read with a sense of our own benighted savagery in receiving God's gift, and our solidarity with those writers of Scripture caught up in the blazing fire of God's gift who yet struggle with it, misapprehend it, and misread it", *Ibid* p159. He is therefore able to speak of the parable of the unjust steward as 'a story which St Luke does not seem to have understood particularly well', p158.

¹⁵ *Ibid* p116.

¹⁶ "The New Testament is less a set of theological conclusions than a set of generative models for how to do Christian thinking, our own consideration of how we should speak of the unity of doctrinal language must be shaped by the methods displayed in these writings", Williams (2000) p22.

¹⁷ Either the individual reader or an authorised "magisterium", mystic, or a community of scholars with greater insight than others.

¹⁸ "What Scripture says, God says; for in a matter comparable only to the deeper mystery of the Incarnation, the Bible is both fully human and fully divine." Packer (1993) p 5.

¹⁹ We need not mind the charge of circularity here, because a) epistemological questions of authority will always to a degree be circular, b) we can start with Christ's attitude to Scripture recorded by the eyewitnesses (a position they themselves give - Luke 1:1-4; John 1:14, 20:30-31, 21: 24,25), even if we do not yet call Scripture inspired or authoritative.

²⁰ Although Jesus obviously did not quote all of the Jewish Scriptures, the fact that he quotes from all three parts extensively, should warn us against the idea that for him there was a canon within a canon, or gold to be extracted from clay.

He spoke in John 10:35 of the “word of God... which cannot be annulled”²¹. Is it possible that the Son of God himself who held such a high view of Scripture, using it to refute his enemies (Luke 4:1-13, Matt 22:31) and to teach his followers (even ahead of revealing himself on the day of his resurrection- Luke 24:25), and never separating “gold” from “clay” was mistaken in his attitude to the Bible?

The apostles’ view of the Old Testament

A key passage relating to the inspiration of Scripture is 2 Peter 1:19-21. In it Peter teaches about the origin of the prophetic word. Negatively, no scripture had its origin in the will or interpretation of the writer, but positively, “men of God spake” (KJV). Further, the verb used (‘moved’ or ‘borne’ of the Holy Spirit, φερο,μενοι) has the connotation of a boat carried by the wind (it is used in this exact way in Acts 27:15), rendering the subject totally under the control of the Holy Spirit, and therefore bringing to light the words (indeed the written words- γραφη) which God the Holy Spirit intended.

In 2 Tim 3:16, which we have already referred to, Paul speaks of the written Scriptures (which Timothy has known from infancy) as being the product of God’s creative breath or Spirit (another result of his powerful word and breath being the creation of the universe - Psalm 33:6). In the context, Timothy the Jew would not have needed convincing that the Scriptures were inspired, but rather that because they are inspired they are useful for the work of ministry. Barr (who unhelpfully downplays this text as a “fairly marginal source”²²) is therefore right when he says that the text is “concerned with [Scripture’s] practical effects as a useful source of moral correction” but wrong when he claims that “it does not for a moment suggest that this is the foundation of Christian doctrine or practice”. It is the foundation for Christian thinking and practice precisely because of its divine origin- the mouth of God.

Moreover, there is clear evidence in the New Testament, that the Scriptures were not simply inspired in the past, but have a continuing ability to act as God’s mouthpiece in the present. The writer to the Hebrews quotes the Old Testament frequently in order to warn his Jewish-Christian audience from drifting from Christ. Of particular interest are chapters 3 and 4, where Psalm 95 is repeatedly quoted, and the writer records “As the Holy Spirit says...” (Hebrews 3:7), “God has said...” (4:3) and “God...spoke through David” (4:7). The first of these makes clear not only that God speaks through Scripture, but that he continues to speak through Scripture, for the verb is in the present tense. The third proves that a text can be spoken of as both human and divine simultaneously, proving that the “divine gold” and “human clay” can co-exist without the carat value of the gold being reduced!

Christ’s preparation for the New Testament

If we grant that the Jewish Scriptures are a product of divine inspiration (and continue to speak with authority), a case still needs to be made for the New Testament. Jesus not only witnessed to the authority of the Old Testament, but made provision for the new, by selecting authorised eye witnesses, and empowering them to be proclaimers of his identity and work after his ascension. In this regard John 16:12-15 are important verses because Jesus recognises that in their pre-passion, pre-Pentecost state, the disciples are unable to bear all the truth about him, but the Holy Spirit will come and lead them into all truth, so that they are prepared to be his authorised witnesses. They are conscious of this authority in their preaching (1 Pe 1:12) commands (2 Thess 3:6) and writing (1 Cor 14:37). Paul seems to quote Luke as “Scripture” in 1 Timothy 5:18, and Peter puts Paul’s letters alongside “the other Scriptures” to be

²¹ BB Warfield argues that it is significant that Psalm 82:6 is quoted by Jesus in this way, since it is “one of the most casual (ie most tangential) clauses...It belongs to scripture through and through, down to its most minute particulars, that it is of indefectible authority”. Warfield (1958) p53. What to some may be considered a less “golden” passage than others is to Jesus pure gold.

²² Barr (1980) p63. Granted that there is a question in scholarly circles concerning the authorship of the Pastorals, they are not “marginal”.

tampered with at the reader's risk of "destruction" in 2 Peter 3:16. As Apostles sent by Christ as his ambassadors, their words are his words²³.

The Anglican heritage

This position that the Old and New Testaments are the authoritative and unmixed voice of God is not a newfangled idea in Anglican thinking, but in fact the mainstream position that has been held since the Church of England's inception²⁴. The formularies of the Church²⁵ teach that the Bible is "God's Word written" (Article XX) and of note for our topic, "the *very pure* Word of God" (Preface, Concerning the Service of the Church, BCP). The order for the Lord's Supper also implies that the ancient words of Scripture still speak today because we are to "hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ *saith*" (not said)²⁶.

Objection: But what of some difficult texts?

For all these theological statements, it cannot be denied that the Bible contains some parts which are "hard to understand" as Peter admits (2 Peter 3:16). But these difficulties (which we will divide into 4 broad categories below and illustrate briefly) do not negate the doctrine of dual authorship and full verbal inspiration which we have outlined. Difficult texts must be grappled with and ultimately still submitted to as the authoritative Word of God, rather than dismissed as simply the human clay.

Some texts may be considered **uninspiring** (purely in the sense that on initial reading they do not seem to contribute a great deal to our theology or spirituality). Included here could be the lists in Numbers and Ezra, and the genealogies of Genesis, Matthew and Luke. But deeper study demonstrates that these lists have an essential place in setting the historical context of these books, and theological information is still to be gleaned²⁷. And even if these texts do not have as central an importance as the Sermon on the Mount or Paul's exposition of Justification by Faith, they still make an important contribution to the whole canon, and are no less divine words than others.

Some texts are culturally **uncomfortable**. A shallow reading of the Old Testament might lead to the idea that the God of Israel delights in ethnic cleansing. The wider context in fact shows that to a Holy God sin has consequences and it was the *iniquity* of the Amorites that led in their case to their destruction (Gen 15:16)²⁸. This does not mean that the Hebrew concept of *herem* (to devote something to destruction- eg Josh 6:18) is to be carried out today. Just because a narrative records that something happened, it is not therefore normative, unless it can be proven by a clear command (and especially when that command is rejoined in the New Testament- as the Commandments are²⁹). This differentiation is not a subtle extraction of "human clay from divine gold" (what we have been trying to avoid) but rather the reading of Scripture with Scripture so as to understand the difference between what is descriptive (eg

²³ Although it is true to say (as Farrer does) that Christ is the hermeneutical centre, "the golden heart of Scripture" p18 *loc.cit.*, it is unhelpful to say that only in Christ's spoken words in the Bible, do we have a pure form of the word of God: "Is there clay everywhere mixed with the gold, does no part of the text speak with a simple and absolute authority? Indeed it does in some part, for some part of it is the voice and recorded action of Christ, and in Christ the divine does not need to be sorted from the human, the two are run into one, for here is God in human nature by personal presence". While we may delineate between levels of importance, we cannot say that the Apostle's writings are less authoritative contributions than Christ's. Therefore strictly speaking "red letter Bibles" should be red throughout, and not just in Christ's recorded speech.

²⁴ And indeed before that in the traditions of the historic Church. The Roman Catholic Church still holds to a view of the Inspiration of scripture, even though it differs from Protestants on the perspicuity and sufficiency of Scripture.

²⁵ Which according to *Canon A5* record the doctrinal position of the denomination: "The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal".

²⁶ See also Common Worship (2000) p163 "Hear the words of comfort our Saviour Christ says to all who truly turn to him".

²⁷ Such as the theme of the exile in Matthew's genealogy (1:12) which will become a key theme in the early chapters of the gospel.

²⁸ Incidentally the idea that the OT teaches a God of wrath, and the NT one of love could not be further from the truth. Both Old and New speak of the eternal punishment of sinners (see especially the teaching of Christ), which can be avoided through gracious sacrifice.

²⁹ Although they are reworked and deepened (for example Matt 5:27-32), and new avenues open up for our understanding of the Sabbath.

Abraham sacrificing Isaac) and what is prescriptive for today. Where the Bible's teaching challenges current cultural norms (as it does on heterosexual and homosexual relationships, divorce, greed and justice), careful interpretation of scripture needs to be carried out (which will mean respect to the concepts of progressive revelation, and the church's historic understanding), but ultimately the Bible must be obeyed as God's gracious and life giving word for today.

Some texts appear to contain **dissonance with other parts of Scripture**. Some scholars point to contradictions between the gospels, or the two Creation accounts, or between adjacent proverbs (see Prov 26:4,5), as arguments against the purity of God's word, but these can all be answered in terms of the genre of literature which is being written. Wisdom literature should not be read as law, and gospels which are theologically laden biographies, should not be read through the lens of strict scientific report (hence chronological differences need not be termed "error"). Careful comparison of one text with another will give careful weight to the contribution of both inspired texts. Many "contradictions" disappear when the text is approached sensitively and humbly.

Some texts appear to **contradict the results of secular scholarship**. An example of this that is often given is the "proven" discovery of Darwinian evolution over billions of years against the teaching of a six-day creation in Genesis 1. In fact evolution is a provisional hypothesis for our understanding of the formation of life and the universe as we currently understand it. And although many scientists would consider it a very dependable hypothesis for the facts at the moment³⁰, it should not be considered absolute. Nor do the six days of Creation have to be taken as literal 24 hour periods. ~Ay (yom- day) has a range of meanings in Genesis and again attention must be paid to the kind of literature at this point of the book- which has been described as "retrospective apocalyptic" rather than science text book. Other scientific enterprises, such as archaeological investigations of first century Palestine actually often confirm what the gospels teach us³¹.

CONCLUSION

The Lord Jesus Christ is never recorded as having taught his disciples that the Scriptures needed sieving to separate "divine gold" from "human clay", but rather he submitted to them, taught from them and obeyed them. If we are to be truly Christian we must follow in his footsteps. As soon as we decide that part of the Scriptures can be left (to use Farrer's verb), even if only in peripheral matters, then we become the masters of Revelation, rather than God, and we fall into the danger of idolatry. Our God is not hiding from us; it is normally the other way around (Gen 3:9, Isaiah 53:6). He is able to speak, and does so very well. The correct response to his Word has always been to be "humble and contrite" and "tremble" at it (Isaiah 66:2).

³⁰ And this would be my position after a degree in geology.

³¹ We would be wise to follow Augustine when he stated that "if we cannot reconcile such a contradiction (*sc.* Between the apparent results of secular study on the one hand and Bible study on the other) we are to suspend judgement, not doubting either the Holy Scripture or the results of human observation and reasoning, but believing that it is possible, given sufficient knowledge and understanding to reconcile the apparent contradiction" (Quoted in Packer (1979) p31).