Biblical Inspiration and the Paraclete

Geoffrey Turner

Never reluctant to provoke their readers, the Hanson brothers declare roundly that,

> The ancient doctrine of the inspiration and the inerrancy of the Bible not only is impossible for intelligent people today, but represents a deviation in Christian doctrine, whatever salutary uses may have been made of it in the past by the Holy Spirit, who often turns human errors to good ends.[1]

This vapid dismissal of an ancient doctrine is discordant with current Roman Catholic tradition represented by the Vatican Council's document *Dei Verbum,* which maintains that 'the books of Holy Scripture were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit'. So what has led the Hansons, in the name of intelligent people of the present day, to abandon the inspiration of scripture as an untenable belief? One reason is that the Hansons equate inspiration with inerrancy, for they allege that inerrancy has been the only practical outcome of the tradition of biblical inspiration, and certainly it is the case that inerrancy was made to bear much weight in Roman Catholic tradition in the late nineteenth century and, during the early part of this century, in the anti-modernist campaign. We may refer to Leo XIII, for example,

> For all the books which the Church receives as sacred and canonical are written wholly and entirely with all their parts at the dictation of the Holy Spirit; and so far is it from being possible that any error can exist with inspiration, that inspiration is not only essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God himself, the Supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true. (*Providentissimus Deus,* 1983)

Similar language was to be found in the first draft of the Second Vatican Council's constitution on Divine Revelation, but by the 1960s this had to be rejected as a basis for further discussion.

Protestant fundamentalist exegesis, however, still hinges on a strict understanding of inerrancy so that the Bible can never be admitted to contain error. In practice this is usually accompanied by a purely literal interpretation of the text. But this need not be the case. Non-literal exegesis remains a possibility for the fundamentalist, but

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that the Bible could ever be wrong is not!

For those familiar with the practice of the critical-historical method, however, it is evident that there are errors in the Bible, and contradictions and fictions. It is no longer contentious in mainstream Christianity to maintain that it is an error that Paul visited Jerusalem twice before the Apostolic Council of 48 AD (Acts 11.27-30; 12.25; contra Galatians 1. 18-2.1); or that Mark and John contradict each other in holding that the last supper was (Mk 14.12-25) and was not (Jn 19.14) a Passover meal; or that the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke are not exactly accurate historical accounts of the events surrounding Jesus's birth.

In fact the Roman Catholic tradition has never produced a conciliar document committed to the inerrancy of the Bible, though as number of papal encyclicals have so committed themselves.[2] Yet the Bible clearly is errant in some respects. If one still wanted to retain some notion of inerrancy, any absence of error would have to be restricted to a limited, though perhaps wide, selection of texts (rather as papal infallibility is formally limited to very restricted statements) but it is difficult to imagine by what criteria a selection of inerrant texts could be made; and even if that were done a variety of interpretations would be precluded. But to select a limited number of inerrant texts would lead to a canon within the canon, a most unsatisfactory position that in a different context a number of Lutheran authors have argued themselves into.

There is a further methodological difficulty about the idea of biblical inerrancy. Once an exegete is free to use the critical-historical method he becomes free to raise critical questions and to doubt the truth of *any* text. This does not mean that in approving the use of the critical-historical method the Church as a whole or any individual scholar will admit the legitimacy of *any* interpretation, but as a matter of practice one cannot be committed to a use of the critical-historical method *and* preclude consideration of certain interpretations because of a conviction that the Bible can contain no error. These are two opposed methodological principles.

So a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible cannot be sustained either methodologically or as a result of critical interpretations of specific texts. If we are to sustain belief in biblical inspiration we must cut it loose from inerrancy—precisely what the Hansons refuse to do.

The difficulty which, according to the Hansons, "intelligent people today" feel about this problem may be related to a literal understanding of in-spiration as a filling of the authors with the Spirit of God and what happens to them as a result. Such an approach to inspiration can be found in Philo among others, who thought that the Old Testament authors were literally entranced and produced what amounted to automatic writing, and this perspective on inspiration

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has been dominant over the centuries, finally coming close to the Romantic view of artistic inspiration—Wordsworth pacing the lakeland fells, as it were, ecstatic at the sight of daffodils. In each case the author is said to produce language beyond normal human resources. This unfortunately leads to a psychologizing understanding of the author's creative process, examples of which can be found in many (more or less) recent Catholic writers. Here is a vivid example from Cardinal Franzelin by way of Leo XIII's *Providentissimus,*

> He (the Holy Spirit) so stirred and moved them to write by a supernatural power, he so stood by them while they were writing, that they correctly understood, willed to write down faithfully and expressed aptly and with infallible truth all that and only that which he ordered them to write.

Is it not grossly presumptuous to suppose that we can know what was going on inside the author, so to say, as he wrote? And, moreover, how does it help us to understand the text? It must be admitted that even Pierre Benoit and Karl Rahner, despite their sterling work in other respects, have been guilty of this kind of psychologizing description of inspiration.[3]

The fact is that we know nothing of what God intended and little enough of what the biblical writers and editors experienced or intended. All we have is the text. Occasionally the text tells us something of what the author experienced, for example the visions of Isaiah (ch. 6) and Ezekiel (ch. 1), but most often the biblical writers write impersonally and turn away from themselves towards the historical reality they are concerned with. Biblical texts, especially in the Old Testament, are often anonymous texts, edited and re-edited compilations of traditional material conspicuously failing to hide inner tensions of meaning.[4] From what we know of the history of the compilation of the Bible, the idea of biblical inspiration can have little in common with the Hellenic-Romantic tradition of ecstatic experiences and should not presuppose anything about the minds or intentions or emotions of God or the authors-amanuenses-editors of the Bible.

If 'inspiration' is retained as a metaphor to indicate some positive truth in the Bible, as opposed to the negative idea of an absence of error, there are still likely to be difficulties if that truth is specified as some aspect of the content of the Bible. This has been attempted in a number of ways in the modern period and each attempt has been fraught with difficulty. For example, just over a century ago A. Rohling restricted biblical truth to the doctrinal and moral content, thereby excluding historical and other incidental material—undoubtedly a brave suggestion in its time.[5] Similarly Lenormant and more recently Rahner have restricted biblical truth to

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that which pertains to salvation.[6] But how do we distinguish the doctrinal from the non-doctrinal, the moral from the non-moral, or the salvific from the incidental? In practice it works the other way about. If error is detected in some text, then it is not true in that respect and so is disqualified from pertaining to doctrine, morals and salvation. On a different tack, N. Lohfink has allowed that errors can be admitted in parts of the Bible provided we sustain the truth of the Bible as a whole.[7] But, again, what sort of truth can be located in the Bible as a whole which can supersede the untruths of its parts? The inadequacy of these attempts to uphold the truth of scripture is, I suggest, related to the determination of truth as content in the Bible.

The problem is how to give a positive sense to biblical inspiration which is seen to say something about the Bible as text rather than about the authors; which does not presuppose more than we actually know; and which is freed from the negative obsession with inerrancy. Instead of beginning with the psychologizing idea of God's inspiring or the author being inspired, we must begin with the text of the Bible because that is the primary datum on which any theory must be based. It is the text which makes the acquisition of knowledge possible.

In Christian theology it is the *books* of the Bible which are said to be inspired, so we must ask why it is just these thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and no others and just these twenty-seven books of the New Testament and no others which are said to be inspired? The number of inspired books is formally limited to the canon of the Old and New Testaments. Are these books inspired because they are in the canon, or in the canon because they are inspired? Traditionally Catholics have said the latter, but how do we recognize an inspired book to place it in the canon? There is no obvious characteristic and there was none in the early Church either. Perhaps we should say that a book is inspired because it is in the canon, but its inclusion in the canon clearly did not make it inspired. So it seems we are asking a false question. Maybe 'inspired because it is in the canon' and 'in the canon because it is inspired' come to the same thing. It is no accident that traditionally the range of inspiration and canonicity coincide and I suggest that at one level all this talk about inspiration has only been a metaphorical way of talking about the canon of Christian scripture. Under pressure from heterodox demagogues, e.g. Marcion and Arius, the Fathers of the Church felt the need to produce a list of approved books which were to be given authoritative stratus in the Church. The list of Old Testament books was taken over from the Jewish synagogue and by the end of the second century some sort of generally accepted Christian canon had emerged. Yet we know that there were all kinds of disagreement about what should go in (should The Shepherd of Hermas, The Epistle of Barnabas and The Letters of Clement be included?) and about what should be left out (should II

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and III John, II Peter, James, Jude and Revelation be omitted?). The present canon of twenty-seven New Testament books was agreed only in the last quarter of the fourth century at the instigation of Athanasius (367) and Pope Damasus (382). Nor do we know what criteria the Fathers used for fixing the canon. It seems most likely that they used the criteria of apostolic authorship and sound doctrine, but they made mistakes on the first count and there are problems on the second count with various chapters of the New Testament as well as the Old. Scholars would now generally deny apostolic authorship (in the narrow sense) to all the Gospels, Acts, possibly Colossians and Ephesians, certainly the Pastoral Epistles, Hebrews, II Peter, II and III John, Jude and Revelation. Yet it would be unwise to argue that the Fathers made a hash of it when determining the New Testament canon, for they had no magic formula for detecting inspired literature. To call a book inspired seems in the first place to give it official authoritative status as canonical literature. The Christian Church produced the individual books of the New Testament and they produced the canon. From what we know of it, the fixing of the canon, like the authorship and compilation of the books of the Bible, was a messy, unpredictable affair. It was not, so far as we can see, guided by any single motivation or with any clear objective in view. It was all rather haphazard. Yet despite the fact that the Bible was obviously produced by the Church, the Church does not control scripture but is rather controlled by it even though the Church has to interpret it. Scripture judges the actions of the Church and the world because, we may say, God is active in it. We must agree that the fathers made a wise decision when they fixed the canon as they did, especially when we consider what alternative decisions they could have made, because all the books that they included in the New Testament have Jesus Christ as their central reference point, and beyond that they have God as their final point of focus.

To reduce all talk of inspiration to the history of the formation of the canon would be to make a satisfying incision through a Gordian knot of problems, but it would be to say too little. More can be said if we focus attention not so much on what God does for the author or what the author does in his writing, but on the relationship betwen the text and the reader and implicitly on what God does for the reader by means of the text. And by extension we should look at God's activity in the Church by concentrating our gaze on the *function* scripture has in the Church. God's activity should not be seen as declaring inerrant doctrinal and moral propositions through the pen of the biblical writer, but as judging men and their values through the disparate and variegated language of the Bible and calling men to commitment through faith in Jesus Christ. It is in this way that scripture becomes a word of God.

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Apart from the subjective and non-communicable experiences of prayer, meditation and sacraments, if we want to know something about or encounter Jesus of Nazareth it will be through these books. In encountering Jesus we may encounter God, so something of the actions and the transcendental mystery of God may be discovered by reading these books. This is what we mean by calling them inspired. But we must also recognize that God can be discovered by reading any number of other Christian and non-Christian books, and some secular books too. To call the Bible inspired, then, is to make a minimal claim. It is in these books *at least,* but also in many other unspecified works, that we may discover a fragment of the reality of God. How can we know this? In the first place, by experience. The Bible must justify its own claim to be inspired by inspiring people in the sense of actually revealing God to the reader. And as a matter of historical experience, it has done this and continues to do so. We may recognize it in our own lives and in our religious assembly (ekklesia) and in the self-understanding and actions of countless other Christians. To call a biblical book inspired, then, is to assert more than the bare fact that it is in the canon. Inspired scripture has a special function—to reveal God—and we test this in people's lives. The veracity of the Bible is another matter, though a related matter, which must be judged by stating appropriate truth conditions for any particular claim in the Bible—bearing in mind the many levels of meaning that a statement might have—and testing whether it meets these conditions.

I have already suggested that we move away from considering the Bible as an object (and *a fortiori* its authors as objects) which has undergone an inspiring process, in favour of looking at it as an active agent revealing God to its readers. An alternative pathway into this understanding of inspiration can be provided by adopting an alternative vocabulary for 'spirit', an alternative which itself comes from the Bible. The Fourth Evangelist uses *parakletos* as an alternative term for the Holy Spirit and if we examine the functions that the *parakletos* has in the Fourth Gospel we will see that a direct parallel can be drawn with the various functions of the Bible in the Church. Let us for the moment drop the language of inspiration and consider the Bible as a kind of paraclete.

The meaning and background of the Fourth Evangelist's *parakletos* have already been discussed, perhaps definitively, by Otto Betz.[8] In the Fourth Gospel the word clearly refers to the Holy Spirit and means literally 'one who pleads on another's behalf'. It has been translated variously as 'intercessor' or 'consoler' (Origen), 'helper' (Moffat, RV margin), 'counsellor' (RSV), 'comforter' (AV, RV), rather eccentrically as 'someone to stand by you' (J.B. Phillips), and 'he who is to befriend you' (R. Knox), or more commonly as 'advocate' (NEB, Vulgate, RV margin) though it is not used in a

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strictly juridical sense. Sometimes it is simply Anglicized as 'paraclete', following Tertullian's *paracletus*. All this has been discussed elsewhere, but what is of much more importance here are the functions that the *parakletos* has in the Fourth Gospel. The *parakletos* is

(i) sent by the Father (John 14.16);
(ii) he will be with us for ever (14.16);
(iii) he is the Spirit of truth (14.17);
(iv) the world cannot receive him (14.17);
(v) he dwells or abides with us and in us (14.17);
(vi) he is a teacher (14.26);
(vii) he brings to remembrance all that Jesus has said (14.26);
(viii) he bears witness to Jesus (15.26);
(ix) he judges the world (16.8);
(x) he guides us into all truth (16.13);
(xi) he declares the things that are to come (16.13);
(xii) he glorifies Jesus (16.14); and
(xiii) he takes what is Jesus's and declares it to us (16.14).

It is no coincidence that in this Gospel Jesus in his own lifetime had comparable functions. Like the *parakletos* Jesus

(i) is sent by the Father (12.49 etc.);
(iii) he is the truth—and the way and the life (14.6);
(iv) he is hated by the world (15.18);
(v) he abides in us (15.4);
(vi) he is a teacher (13.13);
(xiii) he has manifested God's name to men (17.6);
(ix) his words will judge men on the last day (8.16);
(x) if we continue in his word we will know the truth (8.31);
(xi) he announces what is to take place (13.19);
(xii) he glorifies his Father (13.31f.);
(xiii) he makes known his Father's words (15.15).

Because Jesus says, 'If I do not go away, the *parakletos* will not come to you; but if I go I will send him to you' (16.7), R.E. Brown has argued that according to the theology of the Fourth Gospel the *parakletos* has taken Jesus's place in the world, and because the *parakletos* has adopted Jesus's function on earth we may say that the Spirit is the continued presence of Jesus in his physical absence.[9] Here, of course, are germinating the seeds of later trinitarian theology.

'Parakletos' is not, then, the name of a person with a circumscribed identity, i.e. the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, so much as a label indicating a role or function which may be adopted by a number of subjects. In 1 John 2.1 it is Jesus who is the *parakletos*. It would then be legitimate to go a stage further and call the Bible a *parakletos* because as a text it too fulfils the same functions

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as the Spirit and Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. The Bible

(i) has its origin, indirectly, in the Father and in the last analysis is a statement about God;

(ii) it is a permanent monument, in the sense that now the canon has been fixed it will not be diminished or be replaced by an alternative collection of writings;

(iii) it expresses the truth, or some fragment of the truth about God, and to some extent it is possible to state the truth in falsifiable propositions;

(iv) the world does not receive it—by definition, when one looks at what John meant by *kosmos;*

(v) it has an intimate effect on the pattern of our lives;

(vi) it teaches;

(vii) it brings to remembrance what Jesus said—this does not exclude radical criticism of the historicality of Jesus's sayings;

(viii) it bears witness to Jesus;

(ix) it judges the world and the Church;

(x) it guides us into the truth;

(xi) it has the eschatological function of declaring our final destiny in God;

(xii) it glorifies God through Jesus of Nazareth; and

(xiii) it proclaims the meaning of Jesus, the revealer of God.

In each of these thirteen cases the written text of scripture has functions which correspond to those of John's Spirit; they are each in their respective ways a paraclete. To suggest that the Bible is paracletic literature, so to say, is far from diminishing its status, and to criticize earlier attempts to make sense of biblical inspiration is by no means to reduce the doctrine out of existence, but, on the contrary, to make the remarkable claim that as a text the Bible operates parallel to the Holy Spirit, as a word of God.

Perhaps the chief problem with much of the older theology of inspiration was its reification of the Bible and its authors, who were portrayed as objects who had been subjected to the work of the Spirit. When understood as paracletic literature, on the other hand, the Bible can be seen as a subject made active in a dialectical process of understanding with the reader, representing one facet of the manifold activity of the Spirit, communicating God's word to humanity. This approach offers a rather different perspective for making sense of what I believe is meant by speaking of the Bible as a collection of inspired books. The Bible as paraclete is an advocate in the sense that it is a witness to Jesus Christ. It is often used as a sort of counsellor, certainly it is a helper, consoler and comforter. It is 'one who pleads on another's behalf' insofar as the Church presents Jesus's case in scripture, and it is one whose exhortation we can benefit from if we will listen.

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Brazil's "Dominican Affair"

James Alison OP

In late 1969 and early 1970 the Brazilian press carried a story which it called the "Dominican Affair". It told of how an important urban guerilla had been shot dead by the police owing to his betrayal by two student-brothers of the Dominican Order. The story had the widest implications for Church-State relations at a national and international level, and it got world coverage. Recently more information has come to light, which makes possible an hypothesis (but not yet a definitive statement) of what really happened. It is fascinating, whether or not one is a Brazilian or a Dominican. It reveals very dramatically the complexity of the ways in which the apparatus of government and the media may distort—and continue to distort—even the most localized of events. And it shows how, in spite of these distortions, a seemingly modest man, Frei Tito de Alencar, whose sufferings and ideals have been written about several times in *New Blackfriars*[1], can emerge eventually with the stature of a martyr.

1. The Story

On 31 March 1964 a military coup in Brazil ousted President João

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