

A SECOND THOUGHT ABOUT INSPIRATION

Robert W. Jenson

Throughout most of my theological writing, I have tried not to rely on the proposition "Scripture is inspired." My aversion to the notion of inspiration was partly occasioned by the uses to which it was often put in my original midwestern Lutheran milieu, and partly was reasoned agreement with Wolfhart Pannenberg that modernity's historical consciousness made the classical doctrine of inspiration irretrievable. Recently, however, it has been more and more born in on me that Christian exegesis of the Bible, and specifically of the Old Testament, does not itself work without something like the old doctrine of inspiration.

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I retain the opinion that a doctrine of inspiration is not required to establish the Bible's *authority*, which I earlier took to be the doctrine's only function. That the Bible is authoritative for the church is simply an observable fact of the church's life; and the various modes of its authority there make simply another set of observed phenomena. That this authority is then proper and necessary is established by argument — not to be repeated here — that if the existence of the church is willed by God then so is the Bible's authority within it. In some developments of the doctrine of inspiration, to be sure, it appears to be argued that the Bible needs to be inspired to be authoritative also outside the church. Since I do not believe that the Bible has authority outside the church, or even exists there,¹ I do not need the doctrine in that capacity either.

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1. The only reason for binding these diverse documents in one volume and reading them as one text, is that the church assembled them for its specific purposes. Where those purposes are not shared, the Bible promptly falls apart into various relics of ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean religion. For proof of this latter assertion, scan the program book of any session of the Society for Biblical Literature.

But I have come to believe that already churchly *reading* of the Bible requires a doctrine of inspiration. Without it, churchly reading, specifically of the Old Testament, must in modernity or postmodernity always undercut itself. This is disaster, for the Old Testament is — so to speak — the *Scripture* in the church's Scripture. Scripture in the proper sense is text which precisely *as* text, as a sequence of signs inscribed on a surface, is by divine ordination a constant orienting presence in the life of a community. The Old Testament is such Scripture, but the New Testament is not; the New Testament's textuality is instead a *substitute* for something other than text, for a *viva vox*, the voice of the living Apostles.² Thus it is the Old Testament which — again so to speak — anchors the Bible as a sheer object of necessary reference in the church's worship and proclamation and catechesis.

The Apostles had Scripture and we have the same Scripture; that is the first establishment of our communion with them as one diachronically extended community. Unexpectedly the Apostles died before the Lord completed his coming, precipitating the church into reliance on memory of their message. The New Testament is one part of a structure of institutional memory the church built when this became apparent; bluntly, the New Testament is an *aide memoire*. If the Lord had returned as expected, or if the Apostles had proven immortal, the church would have needed no New Testament; but she would still have needed the Old — which, to be sure, would then have been known in the church by some other name. Just so, if we cannot read the Old Testament we cannot read the New either.

Perhaps we cannot retrieve the classical doctrine; then we must discover an unclassical one. The following section is an attempt to say why that is so.

II

There is a growing consensus among scholars concerned for the churchly relevance of their biblical studies:³ the church and her exegetes must, *somehow*, read what Christians — properly for them — call the Old Testament from the viewpoint of the history the New Testament narrates and comments, "the gospel." Just as Jewish exegetes read what they — properly for them — call the Tanakh from the viewpoint of the Mishnah and the oral *Torah* in general. For an obvious fact becomes ever more irksome: whether called Old Testament or Tanakh, if the collection of documents so referenced is taken as an artifact of ancient Israel's faith, it unsurprisingly turns out to be indeed just that, the artifact of a period of religious history inhabited by neither synagogue nor church. We will read the Old Testament from the New — or the Tanakh

2. Loss of this distinction in theological practice is, by the way of this article, a cause of much confusion and even heresy.

3. See, for a remarkable testimony to this consensus, Ellen F. Davis & Richard B. Hays, eds., *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

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from the Mishnah — or we will not be able to read these texts as *Scripture* at all. The consensus, however, goes little further; it seems blocked at the point of that “somehow.”

We come to a chief suggestion of this essay: a principle source of Christian scholarship’s modern inability to resolve the “somehow” is a certain distinction that we all tend to make, that indeed is so ingrained in our habits as to seem inevitable. When it is proposed that Old Testament texts have a christological or ecclesial sense, many scholars will now agree, but this sense will then promptly be contrasted with another sense which the texts are supposed to have “in themselves” or “originally” or “for their own time” — unless of course we are in so post-modern a conversation that the distinction is held to be meaningless. These days, the official exegetes will not often simply brush off proposals of christological and ecclesial reading of the Old Testament. But they will still quickly say, “On the other hand, we must not override their original sense” or something to that effect; and all of us will automatically resonate to the point. The trouble is: when reading Old Testament texts christologically or ecclesially is contrasted with another reading which is said to take them “in themselves,” or in their “original” sense, the churchly reading inevitably appears as an imposition on the texts, even if an allowable one. Christological or ecclesial readings will be tolerated for homiletic purposes, or for such faintly suspect enterprises as systematic theology, but are not quite the real thing.

We need to question this all too automatic distinction. The place to start is by observing some obvious but generally overlooked phenomenological points: an author’s intention or a community of first readers’ reading is *not* identical with the texts “themselves” or an “original” import. An author constantly interprets her own writing, before, during and after formulating text. We are not the only ones with a particular hermeneutic and with resultant interpretations of the texts an author produces; he has his own, and these are no more identical with those texts than are ours. Moreover, first readers are just that and no more: they are not pure receivers of meaning but first *readers*, which is to say, the first to have a chance to impose their hermeneutical prejudices.⁴ Therefore what are really on the table at this point in the analysis are not a christological-ecclesial reading and a reading of the texts in an original entity, but a christological-ecclesial reading and an author’s-first readers’ reading.

So soon as we see that *these* are the readings to be considered, we are liberated to ask: Which grasps the texts “in themselves” or as they are “originally”? And the answer to that question is not necessarily that the author’s or first readers’ reading is original, not if there is someone in the picture besides the author, first readers and us — not, that is to say, in this context where the text is supposed to be Scripture, if there is

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4. If we were left at this point, we would be with Derrida and company. Absent inspiration, they are probably right about texts and “presence.”

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God. It was — I now have come to see — a function of the old doctrine of inspiration⁵ to trump the created author and first readers with a prior agent, the Spirit, and prior readers, the whole diachronic people of God, preserved as one people through time by that same Spirit. And then we may very well take the christological-ecclesial sense of Old Testament texts as “original,” as their entity “in themselves,” if we have grounds to suppose that it responds to the intention and reception of this primary agent and these primary readers. We presume here, of course, that the Spirit, since he is God, is in the theological sense “simple” and therefore not in the ambiguous position of created authors and first readers: his intention is not distinguished from the text he initiates or reads.

If christological-ecclesial reading of Old Testament texts is alien to the texts “in themselves” or as they “originally” were intended and read, we should in my judgment acknowledge what our modern uneasiness suggests, and openly do what we have long done covertly: use the Old Testament not really as Scripture but as religious “background” for the New Testament. If we are unwilling to continue on that way, we need a doctrine of the Old Testament’s inspiration by the Spirit. And if we work this out for the Old Testament, the New will take care of itself.

III

The great flaw of the Old-Protestant doctrine of inspiration, particularly as it sought to enable Christian reading of the Old Testament, was that it was itself too little christological, that it did not reckon systematically with that very presence of Christ in the Old Testament whose authenticity it intended to support.

The great flaw of the Old-Protestant doctrine of inspiration,⁶ particularly as it sought to enable Christian reading of the Old Testament, was that it was itself too little christological, that it did not reckon systematically with that very presence of Christ in the Old Testament whose authenticity it intended to support. Inspiration was indeed thought to guarantee the legitimacy of some christological interpretations of the Old Testament, in that the New Testament’s christological interpretations were themselves taken to be inspired. But the actual work of the Spirit in inspiring Moses or the writing of the prophetic or sapiential books was described as a transaction between two apparently individual agents, the Spirit and the writer. The Old-Protestant theologians agreed with the Fathers that divine speeches and appearances recorded in the Old Testament were to be understood as entries into Israel’s life of the Second Person who is Christ. But they describe the inspiration of the Old Testament texts as if this had no bearing.

When it is seen that this is a flaw, two birds can be killed with one stone. First, it becomes apparent from another side that Christian exegesis of the Old Testament lacks warrant without a doctrine of inspiration. Second, we have one indication of what a viable doctrine of inspiration would be like.

5. Even if unbeknownst to the propounders of the doctrine.

6. The tradition’s only doctrine of inspiration sufficiently developed to serve as a model and foil.

It was a great maxim of all pre-modern interpretation: that very Word who is incarnate as Jesus was not first heard when he “became flesh and dwelt among us.” God speaks throughout the life of Israel and in her Scriptures; and when he speaks this utterance is not another than that same Word who is named Jesus. That is, when God speaks to Abraham or one of the Judges or by a prophet, he does it — in the language of the earliest Western trinitarianism — *in persona Verbi*: it is the second triune person who in this fashion is a *persona* within the story of Israel.

It has been increasingly plain to me: the Fathers have to have been right. If they were not, if the word of the Old Testament is not *the* Word, the one who is incarnate as Jesus, then — once again — the Old Testament cannot be properly Scripture for the church. Then those like von Harnack who exhorted the church to cast off its bondage to the “Jewish” Old Testament, had the right of it. And then one of two unsavory possibilities is the truth. Perhaps the real Christianity is the pusilanimous religiosity of “mainline” denominationalism. Or alternatively the real Christianity is one or several of the late-modern appropriations of Christian language by some “theory,” such as Aryan racial theory. Both of these sorts of perversion historically grew and continue to grow out of a New Testament without its Old Testament.

Moreover, however we manage the metaphysics of the matter,⁸ it must be in *some* way true that the Word in the Old Testament is the Word incarnate as Jesus. For if the formulas of Chalcedon have any import at all it is to classify the proposition “The Logos is Jesus” as an identity-proposition. If they do not say at least that, they say nothing at all.⁹ And that “The Logos is Jesus” is an identity-proposition has to imply at least this much: one cannot meaningfully refer to the Logos without referring to Jesus — or to Jesus without referring to the Logos. Which again has to mean at least: hearkening to the Word in the Old Testament, one should always be listening for the self-identification and for the intonations and rhetoric of the Gospels’ Protagonist.

Nor do such observations impose alien doctrine on the Old Testament. Gerhard von Rad’s observation, that it was not a succession of words that came to the succession of prophets, but always the same Word who came to each prophet in turn, passed me by when I was hearing his lectures, but has latterly worked its way into the very fabric of my theology. That “the word came to...” cannot mean that God sent some words to one prophet and then another batch to another prophet and so on, if for no other reason than that they quote each other. This latter phenomenon would utterly falsify the prophetic claim, were it not that they are all hearing the same thing, or rather, indeed momentarily embodying the same One. Were all the prophets one prophet, they would

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7. It is fascinating and appalling that these two often appear in the same persons.

8. Was there a *logos asarkos*? And whatever can “was” mean in such a sentence?

9. And of course “monophysites” and others have always suspected that Chalcedon’s formulas were indeed finally empty.

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The text produced by Israel's law-givers and prophets and sages, and by their tradents and editors and canonizers, can be the textuality of the one Word — who is Jesus — because the Spirit made and makes all of these one community with that Word, because also with them the Spirit took what is Christ's and declared it to them.

be the incarnate Word — which is precisely what is supposed to have happened with Jesus.

The reason it can be *true* that "the prophets tell of" Christ is not that they made promises that happened to be fulfilled by his coming — and others that were not — but that Christ is the one who spoke by them, testifying to himself. Moreover, once we note this we will perceive similar structures in the other genres of Old Testament witness.

Thus, for a key instance, we may ask: Who cries out to the Lord in the Psalms, or praises him, or celebrates pilgrimage to the place of his Presence? The answer that emerges from the Psalms themselves is the people of Israel. For even the "individual psalms of lament" are in the Psalter because they did not remain the property of whoever first uttered any of them, but were incorporated in a prayer- and hymn book for the "great congregation." But if the church's basic christological claims are true, the congregation of this congregation is Jesus as the Christ. St. Augustine would speak of the *totus Christus*, Christ as head of his body and just so as one person with those who are his body. It is finally this *totus Christus* who prays — who always prayed — in the Spirit's Temple, whether of Jerusalem or of the church.

The Old Testament must be read christologically and ecclesially because the one who "comes to word" in it is Christ himself. This happens differently according to genre. But one general question applies to all: How do these texts come to be a presence of the Logos who is Jesus? A key passage in John — the same Gospel who teaches the Incarnation most dogmatically — supplies the answer. Jesus promises the disciples, "The Spirit of Truth ... will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:14). Therewith a major part of the Spirit's role is revealed: as in the immanent Trinity he unites in personal truth, so in the economy. A chief part of his uniting work is to unite the Word with the testimony of his witnesses. And whatever may be the difference between the work of the Spirit in the Old Testament and in the New, his role does not change, for the triune persons are not finally other than their roles.

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IV

The above is far from a complete doctrine of inspiration. It is no more than a sketch even of the area covered. But perhaps it may do for a start. □