

Inspiration in the Bible: An Orthodox Perspective

1. Introduction

The conference title “The Text and its Interpretation between *al-waHy* and *al-tanzil*” refers first of all to a theological problematic fundamentally linked to Christian-Muslim dialogue. Both Arabic terms are indistinctly rendered in European languages by the words inspiration and/or revelation (see for instance Wehr and Corriente). In this contribution, I shall opt for the Arabic term *al-waHy* as having the semantic field and background of the Latin term *inspiratio* and the Greek *theópneustos* (2 Tim 3:16; or the late theological term *émpneusis*) in order to point out the peculiarities of the Orthodox understanding of inspiration in contrast to the Muslim doctrine of *at-tanzil*.

The *Verbum Dei* paragraph 11 that has been chosen for the conference invitation card urges the theological discussion since, on the one hand, it contains traditional Christian statements, such as: “(The Bible books) have God as their author,” “(the writers) were employed by Him,” “they... consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted.” On the other hand, it also contains a modern concept of authorship: The chosen authors “made use of their powers and abilities” and they were “true authors.” According to Luis Rivas, the first time that a document from the Roman Catholic Church calls a hagiographer an author is in 1965, in the Vatican II dogmatic constitution *Verbum Dei* (20). Until that time, the biblical writers were only considered hagiographers, because, according to Rivas again, Western Christianity since Manichaeism and through the rationalism of the 19th century was exposed to doctrines that either refused or denied the divine origin of Scripture in general and particularly the divine origin of the Old Testament. Therefore, the Roman Catholic Church was engaged in emphasizing the divine authorship and created theological statements such as:

"God dictated Scripture," or "the writer was under divine dictation" or "the hagiographer was like a feather in the hands of the Writer."

As usual in a research for an Orthodox perspective, I have consulted not only modern Orthodox writings that have a certain influence in the church to which I belong, but also the writings of theologians who belong to other confessions and whose points of view were also useful in the understanding process of our sources of faith.

In this paper, I shall emphasize the dynamic dimension of inspiration, i.e., an inspiration that reaches its peak in the interactive action of communication. Writing and reading are two indivisible parts of the one reality called inspiration. The Bible in the Orthodox Church is understood as an intrinsically historical book that expresses its inspiration to the community of believers in the act of reading. This perspective leads us to approach to inspiration as a living reality in the community that is always ready to establish a dialogue with the world.

2. A Systematic Approach

In Orthodox theology, the discourses on inspiration and revelation often overlap and are very similar. The American Orthodox theologian Thomas Hopko argues that there is no pronouncement of the Orthodox Church on the subject of inspiration because the issue has been raised primarily in Western theology and not in the East (68).

In his closing sentence of the paragraph on inspiration, Hopko sums up the Orthodox view as follows: "The Bible is wholly the Word of God and the word of man, one Word. And this is affirmed and confessed not on the basis of speculative theories about its production, but primarily on the basis of its existence and use within the community of those who through Christ and the Spirit are, by means of it, being united with God" (75). Georges Florovsky goes further and says that the Bible as a whole has been created by the community of believers. The Bible is not a collection, but a selection of writings that the community of faith has produced granting them a certain authority over the community (18).

This means that we must distinguish between two different stages when we talk of inspiration: the stage of writing and the stage of presence as a constitutional book for the community. Hopko, Florovsky and the Greek scholar P. Vasiliadis do not hesitate to affirm that the Scripture gains the quality of inspired in the assembly of believers and in their act of reading. When the Scripture sanctifies and renews the community by the force of its Word, it proves to have been inspired. *Mutatis mutandis*, this concept can be compared to what the Apostle Paul said about his kerygmatic work: "Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction;" (1Thes 1:5) and he adds, "for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted *it* not *as* the word of men, but *for* what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe" (1Thes 2:13).

This sort of discourse might be misunderstood and could lead to extreme theories of inspiration such as the subsequent inspiration theory and the concomitant inspiration theory, which have been both fruit of modern rationalism and refused in Vatican I (Rivas, 18). Under the name of subsequent inspiration, it is understood that Scripture has human origins and becomes holy and inspired only with the later approval of the Church. Sixtus of Siena (1566) and later D. Haneberg in the 19th century were the most relevant advocates of this theory. The concomitant inspiration theory, also called the negative assistance theory, claims that the hagiographer wrote the book by himself and that God preserved him from any mistake. The writings of J. Jahn and Holden defend this understanding. Neither of these positions is reflected in Orthodox theology. The Bible proves to be holy because of the effectiveness and the truth of the Word that is revealed in its books throughout history. However, this statement cannot be said but in the context of a confession of faith.

The doctrine of inspiration is rooted in the doctrine of the divine-human relationship as conceived in the Christological terminology, which defined the Orthodox ecclesiology, as well. Two fundamental aspects of this doctrine are to be mentioned:

a) God's revelation is truly from God. He revealed himself in a multitude of divine manifestations, uncreated energies, emanations, deeds and graces.

b) God's revelation takes always place *through* the Logos and *in* the Holy Spirit.

From the Christological principles can be deduced that inspiration respects the authors' humanity as a whole: their cultures, their tendencies, their tastes, and their writing styles. It is correct to state that since the divine revelation addresses human beings, it has used human language and that, therefore, God's word has become human word (Rivas, 15; Florovsky, 26 - 27).

The historic character of the Bible, in the sense that it narrates stories of ordinary people and common concerns of the average mortal, let scholars approach the Bible as a merely human product and consider its authors as simple chroniclers (Achte-meier, 31). In fact, this academic misunderstanding should be seen as a compliment to the Bible authors since it highlights the perfect symbiosis of the divine mystery present in the human witness of the Bible. This phenomenon is very similar to the misunderstanding of the incarnation mystery by those who claimed that Jesus was merely a man (Florovsky, 27). Indeed the Scriptures constitute the perfect expression of the divine-human encounter. The divine dimension of Scripture is not to be corroborated in its external form and in its factual and verbal inerrancy, rather more Scripture is divine in as much as it is effective in giving life and in conveying to man the will of God and in guiding men to God's encounter. This is an immeasurable mystery experienced by men and women in the Church.

Another Greek scholar, John Karavidopoulos, deals with the topic of inspiration in his study on modern biblical interpretation. Karavidopoulos affirms that inspiration in Orthodoxy is far from being an act of dictation and that the human being cannot be just an instrument. It is not the form neither the language, which defines the quality of inspiration, but rather the truth revealed in the contents of each book:

"Therefore, the divine inspiration in Orthodox theology does not refer to the literal form of the Bible but to the revealed truth that has been preserved

in the community of believers and conveyed from generation to generation. If we do not accept this approach to inspiration, we may tend to extreme standpoints as the ones given by some western scholars of the historical-critical exegetical methods as well as by some isolated cases among the Orthodox scholars (116).”

Those extreme standpoints among the historical-critical scholars have claimed that the Bible was plenty of mistakes and the product of pure human creativity (Achtemeier, 28-34). That is to say, that they did not doubt to deny the divine aspect of Scripture. In order to avoid this kind of tendencies in certain modern studies, some modern Orthodox theologians such as John Breck opt for a conservative approach to inspiration and consider both tradition and inspiration as a closed and impermeable hermeneutical circle. Scripture demarcates the limits of tradition and tradition guides the believers to interpret Scripture correctly (Breck, 299). Therefore, there is no need to introduce new elements to tradition and it only remains to repeat the ancestral doctrine and try to understand it from itself. In fact, this point of view is quite dangerous because it turns Christianity into a hermetic movement that does not come in contact with the world, preventing Christians from bearing witness and preaching in the world. Breck states "it is necessary that the hermeneutical circle be preserved and remain intact" (p. 299). This is a misleading Orthodox perspective that denies the dynamics of dialogue and, thus, eliminates the dimension of the human contribution to the inspiration phenomenon. It makes of the human being a mere passive and repetitive recipient.

3. The Practice in the Church

In the paragraphs below we shall analyze some practices of translation, interpretation and liturgical use of the Bible in the Orthodox Church which express how Orthodox assume the principles of inspiration mentioned above in their daily life. We shall first go through some graphical examples about the use of Bible by scholars and then enter into the role of Bible in liturgy. The following illustrations have been chosen to explain in a practical way, how inspiration is perceived in Orthodoxy.

3.1. *Orthodox Churches and the Bible*

Despite the several nationalist movements that rose in the Orthodox world

of the last two centuries, modern Orthodoxy in general does not argue for a holy language that would express in the purest way the word of God and, hence, should not be translated. On the contrary, Greek, Serbian and Romanian churches did not doubt to translate the Bible into their vernacular languages and particularly in the printed editions that reach every believer's home.

Furthermore, text criticism has seldom been a matter of commotion in the Orthodox Church. Quite the contrary, the Institute of Text Criticism in Münster has had for decades the help of Greek biblical scholars. The GNT 4th edition mentions Professor J. Karavidopoulos as a major partner in the field. Orthodox comprehend that the Word is alive and see its fluctuation among the manuscript texts and translations as a phenomenon that moves people to search that living Word and to make it understandable and accessible to their fellows.

Even the fact that the canon list fluctuates between a Church father and the other and between a council and the other should be understood as a witness that Orthodoxy see the Bible as a living book in the Church. For Roman Catholic institutionalism, the situation of the canon in the Orthodox Church might look irregular. However, for Orthodoxy this is another example of respecting different traditions and keeping dialogue alive among the communities.

Finally, Orthodox scholars see no impediment in applying modern exegetical methods that could help the Church interpret the Bible for contemporary generations. Orthodox Biblical scholars are incrementing in number year after year and their publications are well received in the community of theologians and church leaders worldwide. Let us mention, for instance, the works written by interpreters such as Savas Agourides, Paul Tarazi, John Karavidopoulos, Theodore Stylianopoulos and many others.

3.2. The Bible in the Liturgy

The Word of God is a revelation witness given by a certain author of a holy book; this is why in the Orthodox liturgy biblical texts are always read in reference to its source, which is mostly in direct relation to a witness'

name: The Evangelists, the apostle Paul, and the other apostles. It is a person's witness, accepted and recognized by the reading community, which validates the contents of the text. The eucharistic and communitarian dimension of the revelation is manifested in this ritual of reading.

Furthermore, the word of God is always present on the altar and is the basis of the Eucharist and, by extension, of every sacramental celebration. In any daily prayer other than the Eucharist, when there is neither chalice nor paten, then we find the Evangeliarion on the holy table. The word of God is there present on the most sacred place of the Church having the key role of congregating people to meet before God. There is no sacrament in which this book should not be open to give sense to the service and to guide the celebration into the right sense and meaning. The centrality of the Evangeliarion in Orthodox liturgy expresses with no doubt the assembly's conviction that the biblical canon is the inspired Word of God.

Another relevant aspect to be mentioned is that both the Old and New Testaments have the same value of revelation and are considered of equal inspiration by the Orthodox Church. This is undeniable from the very moment in which the New Testament quotes the Law and the Prophets to substantiate its teachings. It is true, in modern practice the Orthodox Liturgy should give a better place to the Old Testament readings, which have been displaced from the Eucharist celebration to the former vesper service, mainly because of the influence of monastic rubrics.

Since we are talking about Orthodox liturgy, we cannot overlook the influence of icons to express matters of faith. I have observed that the Evangelists' icons coming from classical schools do not depict them under the imposition of a certain divine imperative or dictation, as we can find in several Western works. On the contrary, the icons show the Evangelists very much concentrated on their composition and in a constant inclination gesture as if they were obeying the divine will. So we notice the Evangelists working in complete freedom. Their leaning represents their devotion to God and their being part of the worshiping community. Their attitude and presence is primarily the one of a writer devoted to his work. These features can be observed in the Icons 1 and 2 (Greek and Russian tradition) depicted in the table below. I also include a third example from

the Radoslav Gospel illuminations in which Saint John the Evangelist is helped by the personified divine wisdom, who touches him with her head expressing inspiration and unity with the divine revelation.

Icon 1: St Matthew (Late Byzantine style)	Icon 2: St Mark (Russian icon 15 th century)	Icon 3: St John (Radoslav Gospel 1429)
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4. Conclusions

In the Orthodox Church, inspiration is a community action. It is not a romantic question about the genesis of the text but rather about its influence in the community and throughout history. A text is inspired when it functions as such.

Having been written within history, the Bible has a certain dynamic of communication, which takes place within the community of believers. When the assembly has been congregated around the Word, the Bible shows its fullness of authority and effectiveness to the people of God. Every means of interpretation proposed by modern sciences to help the exegetical work in benefit of the people are to be seen as a positive input of sciences in the long and awkward way interpreters must walk.

To conclude, the Orthodox approach to inspiration is primarily a functional one, i.e., it focuses on the positive effects of reading the Bible for those who believe in the incarnated Word.

5. Bibliography

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