

THE INSPIRATION AND INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE

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In its document on Catholic faith, *Dei Filius*, the First Vatican Council solemnly defined a proposition concerning the Bible: "If anyone does not accept as sacred and canonical the complete books of sacred Scripture with all their parts, as the Council of Trent listed them, or denies them to be divinely inspired, let that person be anathema."¹ The Church holds the biblical books to be sacred and canonical, Vatican I explained, precisely because they were divinely inspired: "written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, those books have God as their author, and as such have been delivered to the Church."²

Many scholars have tried to explain *how* the Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures, but no such account has been generally accepted and endorsed by the Church.³ The situation is similar to the conflicting theories about grace and free choice that gave rise to the famous controversy *De auxiliis*, which the Church has never settled. In both cases there is a tendency to try to determine precisely what God causes and explain how he can cause it without preempting the human agent's role. However, neither God's creative causality nor the causality of human persons' freely chosen actions need be limited to leave room for the other; and while the Second Vatican Council provides no explanation of *how* the Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures, the Council says everything essential about divine inspiration in the first paragraph of *Dei Verbum* 11:

The things divinely revealed which are contained and presented in sacred Scripture in written form have been attested under the influence of the Holy Spirit. For in their entirety the books of both the Old and the New Testaments, with all their parts, are held by holy mother Church from apostolic faith as sacred and canonical, because, written under the inspiration of the Holy

1 First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius* [The Son of God], Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, (April 24, 1870), Canon 2, in Henrich Denzinger, ed., *Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitonum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum* [Handbook of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations concerning Matters of Faith and Morals], 32nd. ed. (Freiberg: Herder, 1963), 3029 (1809 in original Denzinger); Eng.: *The Sources of Catholic Dogma* (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto, 2002). Hereafter abbreviated DS. All translations in this article of passages quoted from Vatican I and Vatican II are my own.

2 *Dei Filius*, Chap. 2, 7 (DS 3006/1787).

3 See Richard F. Smith, "Inspiration and Inerrancy," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, vol. 2, *The New Testament and Topical Articles*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 505–512.

Spirit (see John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19–21, 3:15–16), those books have God as their author, and as such have been delivered to the Church. In composing the sacred books, God indeed chose human beings whom he employed, while they used their own powers and faculties, so that with him acting in and through them, they, as true authors, would convey in writing all those things and only those things that he wanted [notes omitted].

Wishing to communicate with us, God created the human beings and their actions that caused the Bible to be written and accepted by the Church, with the result that these books convey precisely what God wished to communicate. Everything about the actions contributing to the result was inspired, but that takes nothing at all away from the complex set of factors ordinarily involved in human authorship. As for *how* divine creative causality works, since it is unlike any created causality, speculating about *how* the Holy Spirit did what he did is not just useless but sure to be confusing.

Being inspired, Scripture expresses and bears witness to divine revelation; it is, as Vatican II teaches, “the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the influence of the divine Spirit.”⁴ Vatican II also draws a conclusion crucial for all work in theology: “Now, the sacred Scriptures contain the word of God and, since they are inspired, truly are the word of God; and so the study of the sacred page is as it were the soul of sacred theology.”⁵

The New Testament and, within it, the four Gospels are especially important for Catholic theology. Vatican II reaffirms that they originate from the apostles, who preached as Jesus commissioned them to do, and then, along with some of their associates, were influenced by the Holy Spirit in putting the same preaching into writing.⁶ The Council also reaffirms that the four Gospels are historical: “they faithfully hand on what Jesus, God’s Son, while living among us, really did and taught, up to the day on which he was assumed into heaven.”⁷ The Council goes on to explain that the Gospel narratives benefited from the apostles’ growing insight, while pastoral needs shaped the selection and arrangement of material; but the Gospels “always communicate to us true and genuine accounts of Jesus.”⁸

If the Holy Spirit inspired the books of the Bible and they contain what God wanted to communicate to us, it makes obvious good sense to listen attentively to

4 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* [The Word of God], Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, (November 18, 1965), 9, in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Bécharde (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 19–33.

5 *Dei Verbum* 24.

6 *Dei Verbum*, 18.

7 *Dei Verbum*, 19.

8 *Dei Verbum*, 19.

them in the liturgy, read them privately, and seriously study them, always with one overarching purpose: to hear, understand, and take to heart what God wishes to communicate here and now, either for our benefit or the benefit of those he calls us to serve. But sometimes, even often, we may be puzzled and even perplexed by what we hear and read—and study, perhaps seemingly in vain. “Why didn’t the Holy Spirit see to it that things would be clearer to me?” we wonder.

Some cryptic remarks of Jesus explaining the parable of the sower are relevant here:

And he said to them, “Is a lamp brought in to be put under a bushel, or under a bed, and not on a stand? *For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret, except to come to light.* If any man has ears to hear, let him hear.” And he said to them, “Take heed what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to him who has more will be given; and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”⁹

The italicized sentence appears to be the key.¹⁰ It points back to Mark 4:11–12 where Jesus, paraphrasing Isaiah 6:9–10, seems to say he is not explaining his parables to the public at large lest people repent and be forgiven. Obviously, though, he does not want that; so what does he really mean?

Whatever God is revealing is not meant to be permanently puzzling and perplexing. Even the obscurities are there to help communicate the message. But to receive it, we must be careful about what we hear—about whom we choose to listen to. Hearing, reading, and studying Scripture will be beneficial in proportion to what goes into them. If people approach Scripture with sincere faith, their faith will be nourished; but if they approach it without openness to God’s communication, their alienation from him will only be deepened.

People can form intimate relationships by sharing secrets, yet even within such relationships people also can have good reasons for keeping secrets from one another, as parents, for instance, hide Christmas presents from their children to heighten the fun. Similarly, our risen Lord Jesus did not at once identify himself to the disappointed disciples on the road to Emmaus; and their ignorance created the context for them to learn gradually by listening to him and to grow in their relationship with him, until they finally recognized him: “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?”¹¹

Revelation as a whole includes more than information and facts. It is God’s self-manifestation for the purpose of forming a covenantal relationship with

9 Mark 4:21–25, italics added; see also Luke 8:16–18.

10 See Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, Anchor Bible, 27 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 318–322.

11 Luke 24:32.

us—the relationship with which he wishes to bless us. Since the success of this divine project depends on our cooperation—openness to understand and effort to appropriate what is being offered—he provides just what we need to engage us, to allow us to be active in suitable ways.

Perplexing messages sometimes are the most effective. Pondering subtle, allusive poetry engages us far more deeply than do the one-dimensional, unambiguous messages usually communicated by the media; puzzling out mysterious remarks of loved ones can lead to ineffable insights into their unique personalities. Similarly, by making things easier for us, the Holy Spirit would deprive us of opportunities to make an effort and so to grow; instead, the Spirit gives us what we need, so that we become who we are to be with God and for him by understanding and appropriating what he offers. Moreover, he speaks to us not only as individuals, but also, and especially, together, and together we must listen to and appropriate his message and be formed into the communities of faith we are called to be. Only the hearing of the whole Church is fully sound. Hearing God's word in the Church, we must move forward together "toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God are consummated in her."¹²

The Second Vatican Council on Scripture's Inerrancy

Despite the Church's teaching about the divine inspiration of sacred Scripture, many today who work at and study theology seem to assume that the writers might well have made mistakes or even told lies. In recent years, some able and respected Catholic scholars have encouraged that view. For example, Raymond E. Brown, holds that, due to the limitations of its human authors, the Bible contains errors, even on matters religious. It is a mistake, he thinks, to exclude error from the Bible *a priori*; one must look at the evidence and weed out the errors.

Brown is aware that his view is at odds with the Church's teaching prior to Vatican II. But he explains:

Many of us think that at Vatican II the Catholic Church "turned the corner" in the inerrancy question by moving from the *a priori* toward the *a posteriori* in the statement of *Dei Verbum* 11: "The Books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation." Within its context, the statement is not without an ambiguity that stems from the compromise nature of *Dei Verbum*. The Council in 1962 rejected the ultraconservative schema "On the Sources of Revelation" that originally had been submitted, and so it became a matter of face-saving that in the revisions and in the final form

12 *Dei Verbum*, 8.

of the Constitution the ultraconservatives should have their say. The result is often a juxtaposition of conservative older formulations with more open recent formulations. Those who wish to read *Dei Verbum* in a minimalist way can point out that the sentence immediately preceding the one I just quoted says that everything in Scripture is asserted by the Holy Spirit and can argue that therefore “what God wanted put into the Scripture for the sake of our salvation” (which is without error) means every view the human author expressed in Scripture. However, there is noncritical exegesis of Church documents as well as noncritical exegesis of Scripture [note omitted]. Consequently, to determine the real meaning of *Dei Verbum* one must study the discussions in the Council that produced it, and one must comb a body of evidence that can be read in different ways [note omitted].¹³

Brown goes on to mention a few facts about the conciliar debate and one theological interpretation of the evidence. Then he states his view: “Everything in Scripture is inerrant to the extent to which it conforms to the salvific purpose of God.”¹⁴

Though Brown does not speak of the spirit of Vatican II, what he says is a paradigm of the method of those who use that expression to suggest that the Council’s real teachings are different from the propositions asserted in its documents. Like many who appeal to the spirit of Vatican II, Brown is a careless exegete of the conciliar text. For he focuses on a single sentence: “The books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation,” and

13 Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 18–19.

14 Brown, *Critical Meaning of the Bible*, 19. The theological interpretation Brown cites is the commentary of Alois Grillmeier, “The Divine Inspiration and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 199–246. However, Grillmeier’s examination (at 210–215) of the underlying conciliar documents shows that even before Pope Paul VI’s intervention, the Council’s Theological Commission was explaining “the truth of salvation” (replaced by the phrase “which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation”) as implying no material limitation of the truth of Scripture but only indicating its formal specification. In his footnote, which I have omitted, Brown mentions another commentary but brushes it aside as “much more conservative”: Augustin Cardinal Bea, *The Word of God and Mankind* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1967), 184–193. Though Bea’s commentary undermines Brown’s position, Bea was not what is usually called conservative: he was an accomplished biblical scholar, creator and leader of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (1960–1968), a close collaborator of Pope John XXIII, and perhaps the most important person, other than the Pope himself, who was both heavily involved in preparing Vatican II and not a conservative; see also Giuseppe Alberigo, “Conclusion: Preparing for What Kind of Council,” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 1: Announcing and Preparing Vatican Council II, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo, Eng. version ed. Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995), xi–xii.

says those who want to read that “in a minimalist [that is, according to Brown, “ultraconservative”] way can point out that the sentence immediately preceding ... says that everything in Scripture is asserted by the Holy Spirit.” But what Brown speaks of as two sentences actually are parts of one complex sentence. He quotes one and inaccurately paraphrases the other. Moreover, the complex sentence begins with “Since, therefore,” which logically connects it with the preceding sentences, which I quoted above, on the inspiration of *the whole of* Scripture. It also includes “it follows that,” which logically connects its two parts. Thus, *Dei Verbum* 11, in fact says:

Since, therefore, all that the inspired writers or sacred authors assert must be taken as asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture are to be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error the truth which God wanted to be attested by the sacred text for the sake of our salvation [note omitted]. Therefore, “all Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in justice; that the man of God may be perfect, equipped for every good work” (2 Tm 3:16–17, Greek text).

Brown is mistaken in claiming someone can cite Vatican II as saying “everything in Scripture is asserted by the Holy Spirit.” What the Council actually says is that “all that the inspired writers or sacred authors assert must be taken as asserted by the Holy Spirit.” This is a significant difference. Scripture contains not only many sentences expressing no proposition, but many sentences that express propositions not asserted by their human authors.¹⁵ As evidence of error in Scripture, for instance, Brown cites, among other things, a passage in the book of Job (14:13–22), which Brown says “many recognize” denies an afterlife.¹⁶ But the passage occurs in one of Job’s speeches in a series of dialogues with his supposed friends—and it is

15 The distinction between making statements and asserting them is part of the theological tradition that was available to the Council in drafting *Dei Verbum* 11. In showing that every lie is sinful, St. Thomas Aquinas takes up the objection that the evangelists did not sin in writing the Gospels, but at least some of them said things that were false, because different authors report differently what Christ or others said; Thomas answers that in such cases the writers did not assert that those very words were uttered, but that words conveying that sense were uttered (*Summa Theologiae* 2a–2ae, q. 110, art. 3, reply obj. 1). (Thomas also points out that it is inadmissible to say that anything false *is asserted* in the canonical Scriptures, since that would undermine the certitude of faith.) The distinction between what is asserted and what is said without being asserted is one that Thomas uses regularly. For example, in dismissing objections based on mistaken statements quoted from the works of theological authorities such as Augustine and Anselm, he points out that the writers did not *assert* the views expressed in those statements, but only reported them or presented them as opinions: see, for example, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 77, art. 5, reply obj. 3; q. 100, art. 2, reply obj. 2.

16 Brown, *Critical Meaning of the Bible*, 16.

hardly clear that the author of the Book of Job asserts any of the views asserted by participants in that dialogue.¹⁷

Moreover, as the expressions, “Since, therefore,” and “it follows that” indicate, the two paragraphs of *Dei Verbum* 11 constitute a carefully crafted argument, which Brown apparently overlooked or ignored. With the sentence fragment he inaccurately paraphrases, Vatican II is not, as he alleges, making a concession to ultraconservatives before getting to its real point. Rather, that sentence fragment states both the conclusion drawn from the preceding paragraph and the premise for the fragment Brown quotes.

The Reasoning of Dei Verbum 11

Like most arguments informally stated, the two paragraphs of *Dei Verbum* 11 leave implicit some elements of the Council’s argument. It can be reconstructed in logical form:

- (1) In their entirety the books of Scripture, with all their parts, were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- (2) Books written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit have God as their author.
- (3) In their entirety the books of Scripture, with all their parts, have God as their author.
- (4) Books that have God as their author contain and present things divinely revealed and attested to by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- (5) In their entirety the books of Scripture, with all their parts, contain and present things divinely revealed and attested to by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- (6) Books that contain and present things divinely revealed and attested to by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit were the work of human authors whom God employed, they using their own powers and faculties, to convey in writing all those things and only those things that he wanted.

¹⁷ Toward the end of the book, after God speaks to him out of a whirlwind, Job says: “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (Job 42:3). And though God says Job has spoken “what is right” *of him* (42:7), he does not endorse everything Job has said. Marvin Pope offers a reading of Job 14:13–15 that differs from Brown’s. Pope says: “Job here gropes toward the idea of an afterlife.” *Job*, Anchor Bible, 15 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 108.

(7) In their entirety the books of Scripture, with all their parts, were the work of human authors whom God employed, they using their own powers and faculties, to convey in writing all those things and only those things he wanted.

(8) Books that were the work of human authors whom God employed, they using their own powers and faculties, to convey in writing all those things and only those things he wanted, include no proposition asserted by a human author that the Holy Spirit does not also assert.

(9) In their entirety the books of Scripture, with all their parts, include no proposition asserted by a human author that the Holy Spirit does not also assert.

(10) In their entirety the books of Scripture, with all their parts, have three attributes: they contain and present things divinely revealed and attested to by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (from 5, above), they convey in writing all those things and only those things God wanted (from 7, above), and they include no proposition asserted by a human author that the Holy Spirit does not also assert (from 9, above).

(11) Books having those three attributes are books that teach firmly, faithfully, and without error the truth which God wanted to be attested by the sacred text for the sake of our salvation.

(12) In their entirety the books of Scripture, with all their parts, teach firmly, faithfully, and without error the truth which God wanted to be attested by the sacred text for the sake of our salvation.

Restated like this, the premises of the Council's argument obviously not only establish its conclusion, but explain why it is true. In this way they also specify the meaning of the expressions used to state the conclusion. Thus, the meaning of the expression *the truth* in the conclusion must at least include the truth of all the propositions asserted by the human authors.¹⁸ In detaching the sentence on which Brown focuses (12 in my restatement) from the premise he regards as a sop to

18 Because the premises do not totally explain the conclusion, expressions in the conclusion can mean more than the premises specify, but not less. Thus, the truth without error that God wanted to convey through the books of Scripture logically must include the truth of all the propositions asserted by the inspired writers, but it can include more—that is, the truth conveyed by the *sensus plenior*, which emerges from considering all the biblical books together and in the context of the entire tradition of the Church's faith.

conservatives (9 in my restatement), Brown rejects Vatican II's conclusion, for he fails to accept (12) *keeping the same meaning and the same judgment*.

Dei Verbum 11 having made it clear that only propositions asserted in the Bible convey truths to be believed, *Dei Verbum* 12 goes on to set out norms for interpreting the biblical books and identifying the propositions asserted. One must take into account not only the human author's literary options (for example, the use of dialogue by the author of Job) and sociocultural context, but other expressions of faith articulated in cooperation with the Holy Spirit—other biblical books, the living Tradition of the Church—and the coherence of all the truths of faith.

Brown says nothing about identifying the human authors' assertions.¹⁹ Still, he does accept something of what the Council prescribes, for he holds that the Bible is an effective instrument of God's saving purpose when it is considered as a whole and proclaimed within the Church's living tradition as a whole. But *only* thus considered, he thinks, can the Bible, despite its errors, lead us to all the truth we need to help us on the way to salvation. In his view, for instance, later Old Testament passages and, especially, the New Testament make clear the truth about the afterlife, thus relativizing the error he thinks he finds in Job.²⁰ For Brown, any part of the Bible conveys God's Word only when considered as a part of the whole Bible and the Church's Tradition, and interpreted as such. But that is at odds with the teaching of Vatican I and Vatican II, that each of the Bible's books is part of the Bible and is recognized by the Church as divinely inspired.

Brown's implicit rejection of divine inspiration *as Vatican I and Vatican II understood it* is not surprising. Logically, anyone who denies Vatican II's conclusion (that all the propositions asserted by the inspired authors are without error) must deny at least one of the premises from which it follows. Brown implicitly denies not only that the sacred writers cooperated with the Holy Spirit in asserting what they asserted but that they were divinely inspired in the sense taught by both Vatican II and Vatican I—the latter with a solemn definition.²¹

The teaching in *Dei Verbum* 12 about biblical interpretation implies that Catholics are in a better position than Jews or Protestants to interpret the Bible, but Brown's view implies far more: that the Bible cannot mediate God's revelation either to believing Jews and others who do not accept the New Testament or to

19 Like most other Scripture scholars, Brown in his exegetical works provides little help for readers who wish to pick out the propositions that the human author of a biblical book is asserting. Indeed, Catholic exegetes seem to have ignored *Dei Verbum* 12; for a commentary on that state of affairs, see Ignace de la Potterie, S.J., "Interpretation of Holy Scripture in the Spirit in Which It Was Written (*Dei Verbum* 12c)," in *Vatican II Assessment and Perspectives: Twenty-five Years After (1962–1987)*, vol. 1 (New York: Paulist, 1988), 220–266.

20 See Brown, *Critical Meaning of the Bible*, 19–21.

21 Brown does not intend to deny divine inspiration: "I fully accept the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Bible as the word of God, and the whole discussion assumes that fact." *Critical Meaning of the Bible*, 3. He only implicitly denies inspiration by misinterpreting *truth* in the sentence on which he focuses.

non-Catholic Christians, who do not receive the Bible within the living tradition of the Church as a whole. If one were to take seriously what he says, it even would seem that most Catholics, who cannot possibly study each bit of Scripture in the context of the whole Bible and tradition, would do better not to read the Bible at all—a conclusion Brown surely would not have welcomed.

It does not follow from what I have said that we should look in the Bible for truths—scientific, historical, or other—unrelated to our salvation. It is reasonable to assume that God’s saving purpose in communicating with us will have limited the propositions the inspired writers assert to truths we need to know to form our relationship with him and live our lives in response to his love. But this does not amount to agreeing with those who take Vatican II’s phrase, “for the sake of our salvation,” to be a restriction upon the inerrancy of Scripture. They assume other propositions are asserted in Scripture and might be false. Vatican II denies this, and, in denying it, holds that the Holy Spirit inspires every part of every book of Scripture and makes no false assertions.

Moreover, in practice there is a great difference between these views. Someone who supposes that the Bible contains some false assertions tends to ask whether what is taken as an assertion is true and then looks to extrinsic criteria for an answer. This will lead to excluding some propositions that are saving truths but happen to be hard to understand and/or accept. God’s message will be mutilated, and what remains of it will be distorted. By contrast, someone who supposes, as the Church teaches, that the Bible contains no assertions of false propositions is inclined to ask how some things taken as assertions in the Bible can be true. To answer, it will be necessary to seek the statements’ meaning in their larger context and ultimate reference to salvation. In the last resort, too, one might conclude—with the help of other parts of the Bible, the whole of tradition, and current documents of the Church’s teaching office—that some apparently asserted propositions are not really such. In any case, by truly doing one’s best to discover God’s message in even the most perplexing passages, one will enjoy the benefit God intended by giving us those passages.

Perplexities regarding the Bible should not be dissolved by assuming the inspired writers erred or lied; rather, it is necessary to struggle with the perplexities, in the conviction that whatever the writers actually assert is God’s truth. Often, though, it is hard to tell whether they really are asserting the propositions they seem to assert, or even to know what proposition, if any, an inspired writer meant to express. Since most people can read the Bible only in translations and lack the historical knowledge required to interpret it, they do well to make judicious use of commentaries by competent exegetes, including Raymond Brown, which can help one avoid gross misunderstandings.