THE WRITTEN WORD IN THE CHURCH

By IAN BRAYLEY

IN HIS GRACIOUS GOODNESS, God has seen to it that what he had revealed for the salvation of all nations would abide perpetually in its full integrity, and be handed on to all generations'.[1] God has revealed himself. Through the power of his word he has shown himself to men. And man's response to the word spoken by God is what constitutes the attitude of faith. God's self-manifestation has been various. For the people of Israel the power of Yahweh was experienced in and through the events of their history. It was a power that could create; it was a power that could destroy. But it was not a power that left itself without interpreter, for in Israel there existed the spokesmen of Yahweh, the prophet, in whose mouth the divine word became human speech. Their preaching was recognized as embodying insights into the reality of God's activity more profound than anything that man unaided could attain.

The origin of the sacred books

Naturally enough, there was a desire that their words should not be forgotten as soon as uttered, and we have indications that disciples and followers made records of the inspired oracles, perhaps even at the request of the prophet himself. The structure of many of the prophetic books in our bibles suggests that they are collections of collections of such sayings, sometimes with a good deal of adaptation and re-working to adjust the original message to a new scene.

What was true of the prophetical collections was true equally of historical and legal traditions, in which many strands and sources provide the material of which our present books are constructed. In both history and law Yahweh spoke, no less than by the prophets, and a consciousness of a community of belief and the possession of a common tradition and destiny acted as a natural dynamic towards religious record.

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[1] *Dei Verbum*, 2.

To emphasize the activity of the believing community in this work does not intend to suggest that the actual production of the individual books did not owe a great deal to the work of some single literary figure, though it should be borne in mind that these authors to some sense embody and express the faith of the community of which they are part. The community provides the continuity, the seed-bed in which books could develop.

The recognition of the sacred books

If one thinks of the Old Testament for a moment, it is manifest that its contents did not form the total output of israelite religious literature. In fact, archaeology assures us otherwise. Why then do we possess what we possess in a certain privileged collection? What process seems to be demanded by which certain literary works should be set apart and regarded as in some sense endowed with a special authority, as being a special expression of God's word? In other words, how is a canon of scripture formed?

It is possible, perhaps, to lay down a kind of *a priori* condition for the formation of a canon, by positing in the believing community a certain sense or awareness of the formulations of its faith which most completely and authentically expressed it. But it is not very easy to suggest any machinery or process through which this insight or instinctive recognition might operate.

The proces of canonization, in the sense of providing an exclusive list of sacred books, is bound to be a long one; and the oldest works will long have enjoyed the reputation of sanctity before they are joined by the latest. Furthermore, the actual historical circumstances in which individual books were acknowledged as having a certain unique value are difficult if not impossible to determine. Perhaps the three great divisions of the hebrew Old Testament, the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings, indicate the line of development in the process of canonization. Nevertheless, it is clear that there was no easily accessible standard for determining what books should be included in the canon, for the greek text of the Old Testament, reflecting the use of the diaspora, contains a number of works additional to the hebrew list. What is more, it is not altogether clear why, despite certain doubts and hesitations, it was this longer canon that was eventually accepted by the christian Church.

The formation of the New Testament canon, though spread over a considerably shorter period, abounds likewise with historical

perplexities. Once again it is possible to suggest a basic condition for recognition: that in some way the books that were admitted were felt to contain the essence of the apostolic preaching. That they were felt to do so may to a great extent derive from their use in the worship of the primitive community. In large measure, it seems on the surface that the New Testament can be regarded as the work of apostles or their immediate disciples. But to claim apostolic origin in this sense is not peculiar to the works of the New Testament. Many of the apocryphal gospels, those, that is, not admitted to the canon, do no less. So it must rather be that the Church found its preaching mirrored in these works, and then mirrored in its preaching.

This does, in a way, give expression to a truth about the scriptures of the New Testament: that they sprang from the faith of the existing Church, and yet are able to guide the development of that faith. This is because, as the authentic expression of the Church's faith, they have an authority that is not conferred upon them by the recognition accorded them. They are recognized to be a communication of God's word, and as such they have the authority of that word.

Because of this authority, it is possible to regard the canonical scriptures as one of the constitutive elements of the Church. They are not a mere possession held passively, as books might be stored in a library, but, because they contain the living creative word of God, determine the shape and fashion the development of the believing community. If they are regarded as a norm of belief, it is an internal norm, something demanded by the nature of the community; and hence it is possible to see in the growth of the Church's awareness of the scope and implications of its faith something akin to an act of self-recognition. The development of doctrinal formulations is a process of great subtlety, for the number of elements influencing any particular development is so vast. It is by no means a question of logical deduction or the trained insights of the theologian; popular piety, social and historical factors all have their part to play; and all the time there is the invisible guidance of the Spirit acting not in spite of but through these forces. So it must be with the Church's recognition of scripture: it is an operation which it is impossible to analyze fully, because it deals with something belonging to the inner nature of the Church, where it is never possible to neglect the dimension of mystery.

The nature of the sacred books

Having said something about the importance of the community as the background against which the sacred books appeared, and as the context in which they are recognized, one should say something about the essential element in the notion of a sacred book. What is basic to the idea seems to be the relationship of the book to God. This may be expressed in various ways. It may be said that they have God for their author, or, that they were inspired by God, or, that they contain God's message, or, that they are God's word. The expressions may seem to be equivalents, and to a great extent they are, insofar, that is, as they express in their several ways the fundamental truth that these books are somehow God-related. To take any one formulation as if it were *the* expression of this truth, and then attempt to deduce from it alone a systematic account of this elusive relationship, leads inevitably to distortion.

This relationship was often conceived practically rather than theoretically. The sacred books can be relied upon to furnish authorities in religious argument; whence the use of the introductory 'it is written,' 'it is said' before the allegation of a probative text. In this matter scripture itself tends to remain at the level of practice rather than speculation. Thus Paul says to the romans: 'For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope'.[1] And it is as a refutation of unauthorized interpreters that St Peter mentions divine inspiration: 'No prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the holy Spirit spoke from God'.[2]

There is clearly the idea that in the composition of the books God is at work: men are 'moved', the resulting composition is 'inspired by God'. But these statements give rise to questions and also to misunderstandings. For example, does the inspiration of a book imply the inspiration of the human author?

The philosophical and religious systems of the world into which christianity was born were given to speculations about the various types and degrees of inspiration; and naturally enough there was some hesitation among christians whether it was proper to speak of the state of a scripture author in the technical terms of these

[1] Rom 15, 4; cf 2 Tim 3, 16.

[2] 2 Pet 1, 20–21.

theories: whether, for example, it would be correct to speak of his condition as an ecstasy.

On the whole there was a tendency to express the divine-human co-operation in the production of the sacred books in other ways. One set of phrases is derived from the realm of music: the human author is compared to an instrument (a lyre or flute) upon which God plays. Language of this sort has its value, but it has its dangers too. Unless carefully understood it seems to reduce the contribution of the human author to a mere passive receptivity. And in fact the history of scriptural interpretation shows that there has been a strong tendency to stress the divine activity in the composition of the books at the expense of the human. Thus St Gregory the Great in his *Moralia* on the book of Job cuts short his own discussion of the authorship of the book by observing that it is written by the holy Spirit, and that it is as pointless to wish to find out who the human author was, as to enquire with what particular pen some important man may have written us a letter.[1]

But it is precisely with the human characteristics of the inspired books that modern investigation tends to be most concerned. Questions about the background of the author, his linguistic ability, his theological interests, his preoccupations, his aims, his limitations are important for gaining an insight into the real meaning of the text. Of course there is the danger of distortion on this side too, for in maintaining the truly human character of the scriptures one may unconsciously begin to treat them as merely human.

The tension between the two aspects cannot simply be resolved but must be maintained in any account of what is necessary in order that a book may be called inspired. The recent Vatican Council, when treating of the question left a great deal of room for further discussion on the exact nature of inspiration, and contented itself with providing a frame of reference within which this discussion might take place. Thus it took over from Vatican I the statement that the Church holds the books of scripture to be sacred and canonical because 'having been written under the inspiration of the holy Spirit they have God as their author, and have been handed on as such to the Church herself'.[2] In addition, however, care is taken to stress that the human element is to be properly valued. Thus the text continues: 'In composing the

[1] PL 75, 517.

[2] *Dei Verbum*, 3; cf D-S 3006.

sacred books, God chose men and while employed by him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things he wanted'.[1]

This statement, without any profound analysis, expresses the main points of the Church's understanding of inspiration. Firstly, the initiative in the process comes from God, who selects men for his purpose, and what is more sets them to work. Secondly, the work they do is through the use of their own human gifts, as true authors. Thirdly, there is a divine action in and through them. Fourthly, without loss of their freedom they produce just what God wanted to have written.

Inspiration and the community

Attempts have naturally been made to obtain a deeper insight into what is involved in inspiration by the analysis of the imagery underlying certain descriptions of it. For example, God is spoken of as the author of the scriptures. Does this mean that his relationship to the final book is in some way analogous to that of a human author to the productions of his pen? We may leave aside for the moment the question of the way in which God's authorship may have been understood in antiquity, since it is clear that many weighty authorities have in fact accepted this literary sense of the word author as representing God's relation to scripture. This approach was influential at the time of Vatican I owing to the work of Cardinal Franzelin, who had made the analysis of the term author a central feature of his system of explaining the process of inspiration. The criterion of any statement on the subject becomes: If one says this about scripture, can one still say that God is its author? And it was in this fashion that the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* expressed what might be called the minimum requirement for inspiration.[2]

Apart from any subsidiary difficulties to which such an analysis might give rise, there is a general one the force of which is more easily felt in an age when the extreme complexity and variety of the stages by which the books of scripture came into existence are generally acknowledged. A book is often the terminal product of a long period of collection, of additions and omissions, of glosses and comments, of continuing insights and reflections. This being so,

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[1] *Ibid.* [2] Cf D-S 3292.

it becomes clear that much that we should think necessary to the concept of the author of a book is simply derived from the practice of literary composition customary in our society, with its bias against plagiarism, its sensitivity to copyright and its craze for originality. It is often a puzzle to decide who should be described as the author of a scripture book. Is it the man who, to some extent, initiated the traditions it contains, or the man who collected or composed the bulk of the material, or the man who gave a new dimension to this material by providing a theological framework, or simply the last editor? A notion such as that of author which raises problems almost beyond solution when considered at the human level is unlikely to function with superior clarity when applied to things divine.

None the less, historically the analysis of the idea of authorship played its part in our developing understanding of the nature of scripture. Perhaps even more fruitful was the analysis of the idea of the human author as an instrument employed by God to produce an effect. Crudely understood, this could suggest a dehumanizing of the created agent. However, there was available to scholars the refined treatment of the notion of instrumental causality based on the works of St Thomas; and though he did not compose any formal treatise on biblical inspiration, the sections of the *Summa Theologiae*[1] dealing with prophetic inspiration provided many valuable insights into the psychology of the human author under the divine influence. As might be expected, dominican writers have made a special contribution to the refinement and development of this line of investigation. Among them, at the present time, perhaps the most influential is Pierre Benoit, whose extremely subtle and versatile proposals have, though not without being strongly criticized and significantly modified, formed the basis of a theory of inspiration in keeping with the modern critical approach to the scriptures.

The importance of this aspect can be seen if one recalls that many of the older treatises on inspiration were theological constructions which took small account of the literary style and forms of the scriptures; or rather, insofar as they concerned themselves with the matter at all, tended to list the types of literature which must be excluded from scripture, since to indulge in such compositions would be, it was confidently asserted, contrary to, for

[1] II-II, 171–178.

example, the divine holiness or the divine veracity. The stress laid upon the investigation of the various literary forms to be found in scripture by the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* has helped to turn the attention of all, exegetes and theologians alike, to the actual text of scripture as the primary datum from which speculation must proceed.

As was observed earlier on, one of the new dimensions revealed by critical work has been the complexity of the genesis of so much of the content of scripture. This in its turn suggests the importance of the community as the vehicle of those developing traditions that come to expression in scripture. The author, the editor, call him what you will, is not so much a private person as one in whom the religious experience of the community is for the time being embodied, and through whom it finds its expression. This literary expression itself becomes part of the patrimony of succeeding generations and is capable of receiving a new expression from a later writer. So, in some sense, the charism of inspiration can be extended to the whole religious body from which the sacred books take their origin.

Reference was made at the outset to the scriptures as a constitutive element in the Church. This way of speaking derives from the attempt made by Karl Rahner in his essay *Inspiration in the Bible* to find an approach to the question of inspiration that would be an alternative to systems based on psychological analysis. The suggestion was that the divine authorship of scripture should be seen in the context of God's authorship of the Church: the divine choice of this actual structure involves as a correlative the existence of the scriptures.

Other approaches, for example that of J. L. McKenzie,[1] tend to take into account rather the whole pattern of literary transmission in the ancient world, especially in that cultural milieu in which the bible found its origin. Perhaps it is still too early to say whether any of the suggestions put forward on these lines will afford the basis for a new systematic survey of the question of the divine-human co-operation in the production of the sacred books. It is beyond question, however, that in any account of inspiration room must be made for its social aspect, especially for the understanding that a man cannot be defined as an author without reference to the social structure of which he is part.

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[1] *Myths and Realities*, chap. 4, 'The Social Character of Inspiration'.

Sacred scripture in the life of the Church

We can briefly return now to our starting point, the statement of Vatican II that God has provided for the handing on of the saving knowledge of himself to all generations. This knowledge is mediated to the world through the work and witness of the Church, and we have at various points touched upon the interrelation and interaction of the Church and the written word of God. In the sixth and last chapter of the constitution on divine revelation we find a summary of what scripture is in the Church, not in terms of theory, but in terms of the practical influence it exerts.

The Council testifies to the living power of God's word in the sacred books: '. . . they impart the word of God himself without change, and make the voice of the holy Spirit resound in the words of the prophets and apostles'.[1] Clearly then, to read and meditate upon these texts is to find oneself in touch with God who is speaking in them, to experience 'the force and power of the word of God . . . so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church'.[2] In other words, there is in this contact with the scriptures a sacramental aspect, for it is through the human activity of hearing and reading them that an unseen divine power is made available to work for sanctification. To this truth the constitution gives witness in its closing words where it says: 'Just as the life of the Church grows through the persistent participation in the eucharistic mystery, so we may hope for a new surge of spiritual vitality from intensified veneration of God's word which lasts for ever'.[3]

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[1] *Dei Verbum*, 6. [2] *Ibid.* [3] *Ibid.*