

ANCIENT WORD, CHANGING WORLDS

the Doctrine of Scripture in a Modern Age

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CROSSWAY BOOKS
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Ancient Word, Changing Worlds

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Published by Crossway Books

a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers

1300 Crescent Street

Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Jon McGrath

Cover photo: iStock

First printing, 2009

Printed in the United States of America

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PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-0547-8

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-0548-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nichols, Stephen J., 1970–

Ancient Word, changing worlds : the doctrine of Scripture in a modern age / Stephen J. Nichols and Eric T. Brandt.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4335-0260-6 (tpb)

1. Bible—Evidences, authority, etc. I. Brandt, Eric T., 1984– . II. Title.

BS480.N48 2009

220.1—dc22

2008040948

VP 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

INTRODUCTION

Mark Twain, as only he could, once said, “It is full of interest. It has noble poetry in it; and some clever fables; and some blood-drenched history; and some good morals; and a wealth of obscenity; and upwards of a thousand lies.”¹ Of course, you have figured out that he was speaking of the Bible, otherwise referred to as the Good Book. That book has had its defenders and detractors, champions and critics, friends and foes. Perhaps in no time has the Bible been more a subject of controversy, however, than in the modern age, this age of Mark Twain and of the rise of modern science and of rapid and cataclysmic change.

It seems that each age of the church has its unique challenges and opportunities. The early church faced the crisis of persecution and the crises of the heretics who challenged the biblical teaching on, among other things, Christ. The medieval church wrestled with the union of church and empire. The church in the era of the Reformation not only had to withstand the religious and political establishment but also had to reconstruct the church itself, from the platform planks of significant doctrines all the way to the structure of the church service. The church in the “modern age,” a rather ambiguous descriptor, also faces unique challenges and opportunities. Perhaps chief among them is the role of the supernatural in light of the ascendancy of naturalistic and scientific worldviews. To put the matter differently, what does an ancient book, the supernatural revelation from God contained in the pages of Scripture, have to say to an increasingly complex and changing modern world? How does an ancient word speak to our changing world?

In the past eras of the church, various theologians and church

¹Mark Twain, *Letters from the Earth: Uncensored Writings* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2004), 14.

leaders rose to the occasion of the challenges facing the church, leading the church into deeper reflection on Scripture and clearer expression of theology and worship. The Christological heresies of the early church yielded the treasures of the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds. The Reformation's recovery of both Scripture and the apostolic teaching produced the Reformation *solas* of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone), *sola fide* and *sola gratia* (salvation and justification by faith alone and by grace alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone), and *solī Deo gloria* (for the glory of God alone). And so it is in the modern age. The challenge to supernatural revelation, the challenge to the Bible, has been met with deeper reflection on and clearer expression of the doctrines of Scripture. These doctrines orbit around three words, words that have received a great deal of attention in the nineteenth, twentieth, and now into the twenty-first centuries. These three words are *inspiration*, *inerrancy*, and *interpretation*. This book tells the story of these words, and particularly the story of how these words were developed in these last few centuries. It is the story of how the ancient word of God speaks to and in our changing world.

Chapter 1 begins with the first of these words, *inspiration*, the doctrine that stresses the divine origin of Scripture. Religious writings claim to be the words of the divine. The Bible is not unique in laying forth such a claim. But the Bible claims not simply to be another revelation by another deity. The Bible claims to be the true and authentic word of the one and only Triune God. This claim is out of step with the modern world on two counts. First, it's a claim to the reality and reliability of the supernatural. Secondly, it's an exclusive claim. The first claim is out of step with a naturalistic worldview, while the second is out of step with a pluralistic worldview. Yet, the doctrine of inspiration is foundational to the Christian view of revelation. And since Christians endeavor to build their faith and practice upon Scripture, the doctrine of inspiration arguably plays a central role in all doctrine.

Closely related to the doctrine of inspiration comes the second

word this book treats, *inerrancy*. B. B. Warfield, one of the figures who casts a long shadow over this discussion, made the connection to inspiration and inerrancy by simply claiming that if Scripture is inspired, of divine origin, then it follows that it is authoritative, reliable, and true, which is to say inerrant. Now the debate, especially as the twentieth century goes, really heats up. As one book title has it, we have embarked on *The Battle for the Bible*. Is the Bible true? Is it accurate? These questions are fundamental to the Christian faith and the Christian claims.

Just as you cannot speak of the Bible without addressing inspiration and inerrancy, one more word merits attention, *interpretation*. Like inspiration and inerrancy, this word too has drawn a great deal of attention in recent decades. Developments in the fields of linguistics and literary criticism have had quite a ripple effect on biblical interpretation. In some ways, the ascendancy of these fields of linguistics and literary criticism stands behind this new age we have entered into culturally, the postmodern era. Many of the prominent and founding voices of postmodernism, such as Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard, were primarily literary scholars. These developments and these figures have changed the nature of the discussion of how individuals and communities understand and relate to texts. Interpretation of the biblical text is not immune from these developments. As can be expected, not a little debate has emerged over these developments in the field of biblical interpretation. Indeed, if every age of the church has its unique challenges and opportunities, it does seem that in the modern age, and now in the postmodern age as well, the doctrine of Scripture has been on center stage.

This book looks at each of these words. Chapter 1 relays the narrative of the development of the doctrine of inspiration, chapter 3 treats inerrancy, and chapter 5 explores interpretation. These narrative chapters are complemented by chapters 2, 4, and 6, which provide readings in the primary source documents. These readings present the voices of the major figures in these debates, allowing

these figures to speak for themselves. These readings also provide succinct summaries, pointing readers, should you want more, to a whole wealth of material. This book covers roughly a 150-year history, from the 1850s right up until this first decade of the twenty-first century. Of course, these three words—*inspiration*, *inerrancy*, and *interpretation*—continue to garner much interest and are the subject of no little controversy, in days past and recent.

The Bible has a rich history in the modern world. Copies are given away at weddings and births and placed in hotel room nightstands. Hands are placed on it for the taking of oaths. And, as many country songs point out, it is almost ubiquitously regarded as the Good Book. But the Bible also faces its share of attacks and criticism. In the face of those attacks, many biblical scholars and theologians have taken up the challenge of defending and commending the Bible. They have labored to show that an ancient book does indeed have something to say to modern and even postmodern people. This book seeks to tell that story.

SACRED WORD IN THE MODERN WORLD: THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE

1

We believers in the full inspiration of the Bible do not merely admit that. We insist upon it.

J. GRESHAM MACHEN

I've often thought the Bible should have a disclaimer in the front saying this is fiction.

IAN MCKELLAN

No less than the famed “Lion of Princeton,” B. B. Warfield, nearly built a whole career on two words: *inspiration* and *inerrancy*. And from the late nineteenth on into the twentieth centuries, these were fighting words. Some have claimed that Warfield spent so much time with these words because he was a contentious man, that he was always up for a good fight. This portrayal has Warfield on the prowl for some argument that he could win, scouring for some controversy through which he could showcase his theological talents. No doubt, Warfield could handle himself, he could win arguments, and he had plenty of theological ability and mettle to display if he wanted to. But he took up this challenge not because he was a pugilist by nature and not because he belonged to some theological persuasion that relished controversy. Instead, if we take him at his word, he engaged the discussion over these words because they are so crucial to Christianity. Warfield indeed fought for these doctrines,

but he fought for them because he knew how important they are to the “doctrine and duty,” the thought and practice, of the church.

These two words that occupied so much of Warfield’s time and energy, inspiration and inerrancy, are used by theologians to discuss the authority of Scripture, one of, if not the chief of, Scripture’s attributes. One way to get at the nature of Scripture is to explore its attributes, which tend to be summed up in a list of four: authority, necessity, clarity, and sufficiency. It might be helpful, though, to add a fifth attribute: *beauty*. Scripture is beautiful. Think of the simple poetry of Psalm 23 or the compelling force of Paul’s argument structures or the finely spun narratives in the Old Testament or in the Gospels. Scripture is remarkable as literature, as beautiful literature. Scripture is also *sufficient*, sufficient in relaying the message of redemption, sufficient in laying out all that we need for living the Christian life, and sufficient in proscribing the life and praxis of the church. The gospel message and the fundamental teachings of Scripture are also *clear*. Older works refer to this as the perspicuity of Scripture, perspicuous being a rather complicated word that simply means “clear.” You don’t need a decoder ring to get the message of Scripture; the message of Scripture is clear. Scripture is also *necessary*. Again, it is necessary in terms of the gospel message and in terms of what God would have us believe about the world he made, about his own self and nature, and even about our own selves and nature.

That brings us to the last attribute of Scripture: *authority*. You could likely make the case that this is the fundamental attribute from which the other four stem. Scripture as authority means that it speaks with solid credibility and legitimacy to all that it addresses. Scripture as authority means that it demands something of its readers, something that other books don’t demand. Scripture insists that its readers submit to it. The reason Scripture makes such a unique demand is that it makes a unique claim in reference to its authorship. Scripture claims to be the word of God, to be an inspired text. Scripture’s authority derives from its authorship, which leads you back to those two words that Warfield engaged and that dominate the discussion relating to Scripture in the

modern world—inspiration and inerrancy. Chapters 3 and 4 take up the discussion of inerrancy; this chapter and the next concern inspiration.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE MODERN AGE

Scripture's unique claim on its readers and its unique authorship make it a bit of a challenging book in the modern age. That's actually an understatement. Scripture's uniqueness is at the heart and center of the challenge it faces in the modern world. In the nineteenth century, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel introduced a philosophy of history that became quite popular during and after his lifetime. The particular idea is that ideas evolve through a process that he calls the dialectic. One idea dominates the prevailing worldview and outlook, which Hegel called the thesis. A different idea begins to counter that prevailing idea, which Hegel calls the antithesis. Over time and usually involving painful adjustments the two ideas begin to merge, which he terms a synthesis. The new synthesis becomes the thesis, which, you guessed it, eventually faces a new antithesis, and the process continues on and on. Hegel saw this process as always spiraling up, as always making progress.

To illustrate Hegel's theory, consider how Karl Marx applied it to economics. According to Marx, feudalism (the thesis) reigned in the medieval era, followed by capitalism (the antithesis) in the modern era, which then, after battling it out, merged into socialism (the synthesis). Another illustration concerns the one Hegel himself used. The ancient world, Hegel observed, was the mythological age, the age of gods (the thesis). The latter ancient era and the medieval period may be marked as the religious age, the age of the one God (the antithesis). Hegel declared the modern age as the age of science (the synthesis). In Hegel's worldview, there's always progress. It makes no sense whatsoever to look in the rearview mirror. It's silly, infantile, to live in the past. Now comes the application to how the Bible gets perceived in the modern world. The Bible belongs to the past, not to the present. As an ancient book, it does not speak with credibility and legitimacy (authority) to life in the modern world.

The ancients needed myths or religious texts to explain the phenomena they faced. They needed a vehicle to understand storms and suffering, disease and death. Sacred texts, texts claiming to contain the words of God or of the gods, supplied the answers. Moderns, however, have science. Storms are related to gulf streams and weather patterns and water cycles. Diseases come from germs and viruses. Science explains the phenomena, pushing God (religion) or the gods (myth) aside. In Hegel's worldview, one doesn't look back. One just keeps pulsing ahead.

The Bible and the events it records occur in a particular place and time geographically and historically, which is to say the Bible is an ancient book. But the Bible also claims to transcend its age. The Bible as an ancient book speaks to the ancient world, but it also speaks to the medieval world, to the modern age, and even to the postmodern age. The reason? Scripture claims to be more than the words of ancient authors dispensing ancient wisdom for ancient people. The Bible claims to be *inspired*. As such, the Bible lays claim to transcending its age and speaking authoritatively to the modern age, the age of science and of reason.

THE HISTORY OF A WORD

"The word 'inspire' and its derivatives," B. B. Warfield informs us, "seem to have come into Middle English from the French, and have been employed from the first (early in the fourteenth century) in a considerable number of significations, physical and metaphorical, secular and religious." Warfield proceeds to explain one of those religious significations, perhaps the chief one:

The Biblical books are called inspired as the Divinely determined products of inspired men; the Biblical writers are called inspired as breathed into by the Holy Spirit, so that the product of their activities transcends human powers and becomes Divinely authoritative. Inspiration is, therefore, usually defined as a supernatural influence exerted on the sacred writers by the Spirit of God, by virtue of which their writings are given Divine trustworthiness.²

²B. B. Warfield, "Inspiration," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols., ed. James Orr (Chicago: Howard-Severance, 1915), 3:1473.

Then Warfield takes us to 2 Timothy 3:16. This definition of Warfield's and this text that he turns to first become the virtual template for discussing inspiration, though most are not as intrigued by etymology as Warfield was and consequently tend to overlook the French derivation of the English word. Second Timothy 3:16 is a good place to start, for in it Paul uses the Greek word *theopneustos*, translated "inspired" in many English versions. The word, as Warfield's definition informs us, points to the divine origin of the text. While the doctrine of inspiration is well served by starting with 2 Timothy 3:16, the formulation of the doctrine by no means stops there. Second Peter 1:21 also informs us, "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." Alongside these two texts, Scripture is replete with its claim to divine authorship. Paul consistently makes the case that the authority of his words does not derive from himself; it derives from his office as apostle, one who has been appointed to speak for God (Gal. 1:11–12).

The Old Testament prophets consistently and widely refer to their role as mouthpieces for God. "Thus says the LORD . . ." is repeated again and again throughout the prophetic books. What makes Christ's own words in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7 so striking is the way in which he contrasts himself with the prophets of old. Christ speaks on his own authority. "You have heard that it was said, but I say to you" becomes the refrain punctuating the sermon. The prophets in comparison would never make such a claim. It's not "Hear the word of Isaiah . . . or of Jeremiah . . . or of Malachi." Rather, it is the word of the Lord spoken through the prophet. Scripture consistently and widely claims to be the very words of God.

Throughout church history, this belief in inspiration, the divine origin of Scripture, has been a central hallmark of Christian orthodoxy. In the early church the biblical authors were called *theologians* because they literally spoke (the Greek word *logos* in its verb form means "to speak") for God (the Greek word for God is *Theos*). Moses was a theologian in the truest sense of that word.

The biblical prophets, David, the Gospel writers, Paul, Peter, and the other writers of the New Testament epistles were all theologians. The early church fathers also recognized that because the biblical authors spoke for God, their words carried the weight of authority with them. These early church fathers often wrote their own epistles to the churches under their care, and in these letters they would pass along their advice on all sorts of matters. When, however, they wanted to make a particular point to these churches, they stepped out of the way and quoted the Bible. They didn't defend it; they didn't offer arguments for the authenticity of the text. They just quoted it, revealing the level of authority ascribed to the biblical books in the early church.

The Reformers approached Scripture in the same way. The Reformation, from one angle, can be seen as a debate around Scripture's authority. Either Scripture stands over and above us as individual persons and as the corporate people of God, or we, either as individuals or as the collective body of the church, stand over it. The Reformation plank of *sola scriptura* addresses this directly, proclaiming emphatically and explicitly that Scripture stands over us as individuals and over us as the collective body of Christ. The church's teaching and practice must be derived from its pages or the church risks running afoul. The Reformation was in one sense a debate over authority.

Curiously enough, the Renaissance carried on the same debate over authority with the later medieval Roman Catholic Church. The figures in the Renaissance, like the Reformers, turned away from lodging authority in the ecclesiastical structure. Unlike the Reformation, however, the Renaissance promoted looking within at the human mind or looking without to nature. Eventually, born of those seeds, rationalism and science would flower as the bases for knowledge, as the authority. The Reformers, however, looked past themselves and past nature to the one who created both. They not only looked to the Creator, they also listened to the Creator. They listened to his revelation as the authority.

This can be seen in John Calvin's magisterial *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin scholar Edward Dowey has made a good case that Calvin's thought can be understood against this Renaissance quest for knowledge in light of the meltdown of the medieval Roman Catholic Church. Consequently, Calvin begins his theology with a discussion of God as Creator who has revealed himself. Revelation is the starting point. It's not just a convenient starting point. According to Calvin, it's the only viable one.³ Since Calvin, theologians on the side of orthodoxy have realized just how right he was and is.

This high view of Scripture, stemming from the idea of inspiration and divine origin of the text, was not without challenge. The early church fathers contended with those who promoted false books of the Bible, books termed pseudepigrapha. These include books like the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Judas, books that are falsely (*pseudo*) written (*grapha*) in that they are written by later groups who claim to be written by apostles like Thomas. These books are not only faulty because of their authorship but also because of their content. The Reformers, as mentioned above, had to contend with those who tried to hem in the word of God, circumscribing it with tradition. This gets to the heart of Luther's efforts at reform. He saw the word bound to the church and not the other way around.

The Reformers also battled the loss of the word. Widespread illiteracy, not to mention the powers of superstition, had captivated much of the laity. Copies of the Bible were extremely scarce, and then only in Latin, the language of a privileged few. William Tyndale expressed the Reformation opposition best in his herculean efforts to bring the Bible into print in the language of the people.

CHANGING ATTITUDES

Neglect, abuse, distortion—these were the culprits over the centuries that weakened the level of authority that people both inside and

³Edward A. Dowey Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974); John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1.

outside the church ascribed to the Bible. The modern age, however, introduced a new culprit, one that might just be a bit more pernicious: the judgment of the Bible's irrelevance. The Bible in the modern world is sort of like a long-term employee who is about to get sacked. The employee is called into the manager's office to be told what wonderful contributions he's made to the company in the past. He's told what great qualities he has, what a fine person he is. Then he's told that his department is being restructured, that he is redundant. All of which is interpreted as saying, you are no longer needed or wanted. The Bible was good at one time but is outmoded and can't keep up with the times. Or so goes the judgment of the modern age.

Mark Noll once wrote, "On the face of it, it would be hard to imagine a nation more thoroughly biblical than the United States between the American Revolution and the Civil War."⁴ His opening phrase, "On the face of it," is instructive. The reigning attitude toward the Bible in American culture was not that it was the Truth, but that it was the Story that provided the backbone for the American story. Nevertheless, Noll makes the case that the Bible had a presumed prominence up to America's War Between the States. Post-Civil War America is another story. This is the story of how the Bible, like that longtime employee, got sacked.

In the cold Boston winter months of 1891, Harvard professor Joseph Henry Thayer presented a lecture that would later be published under the title *The Change of Attitude Towards the Bible*. Thayer's first line reveals that he is hesitant, and for good reason. He's about to articulate what all of his colleagues are thinking, and he realizes that what he and they are thinking is dangerous. By saying what he's about to say, he risks "forfeiting" the "general approval of his fellow Christians." To stem off the forfeiture, he pleads his *bona fides* as a Christian scholar and gentleman. Then he proceeds to say what he wants to say.

Thayer begins with the "Reformed or Calvinistic" view of

⁴Mark A. Noll, "The Image of the United States as a Biblical Nation, 1776–1865," *The Bible In America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 39.

Scripture, which is his not so veiled way of referring to Warfield and the Princetonians, a constellation of biblical scholars and theologians at Princeton Theological Seminary from the 1850s until the 1920s including Charles Hodge, his son A. A. Hodge, B. B. Warfield, and J. Gresham Machen. The Princetonian view “has laid a disproportionate emphasis on the full and final character of the Scriptural teaching relative to the whole range of speculation and conduct, life and destiny.” This is Thayer’s way of expressing the view of verbal, plenary inspiration. This view, given full expression by Charles Hodge in 1857, contends that all (*plenary* means “full” or “entire”) of the words (*verbal*) of the Bible are from God. Thayer continues, observing that this view, held by “a certain class of rough and ready controversialists,” “furnishes” them “with a bludgeon which they are prone to mistake for the sword of the Lord.” Again, that “certain class” would indeed be Warfield and the Princetonians, caricatured as always trolling for a good fight. The Princetonian view, Thayer continues, was “comparatively harmless in bygone days.” Now it has “become a yoke.” Here’s why:

But by reason of improved methods of philological study, of progress in science and discovery, of accumulating results in archaeological and historic [sic] research, the theory has come to occasion restlessness and perplexity, at times not a little distress, in thoughtful souls. It has become a yoke which they—unlike their fathers—are unable to bear.⁵

This quotation deserves unpacking. “Improved methods of philological study” is a reference to higher criticism, the upshot of which is to see the Bible as a significantly human book. “Progress in science” refers to what the above pages outlined. The scientific worldview of moderns is not the same as the mythological worldview of the ancients. Progress means that you don’t go back. Thayer does not outline the archaeological or historical research he alludes to, but he’s likely referring to the gaps in the archaeo-

⁵Joseph Henry Thayer, *The Change of Attitude Towards the Bible* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1891), 10–11.

logical record concerning biblical events. All of this is enough to make a “thoughtful” person blush in embarrassment. To borrow from a car commercial a few years back, the Princetonian view of Scripture was your father’s view. This new generation needs a new view, a view that’s not that of their fathers. It is also important to note what Thayer does not advocate. He does not advocate turning away from Scripture altogether or even in the main. He just wants a milder view, one that allows for some fuzzy boundaries and wiggle room—one that’s not so distressful to thoughtful souls. This is the new view of Scripture that Thayer commends.

Between the American Civil War and the beginnings of the twentieth century, attitudes toward the Bible had changed indeed. These new attitudes brought about a whole new set of categories: *modernists*, those who saw no need for keeping the ancient book of the Bible or for keeping the religion it spawned; *liberals*, those who wanted to keep the ancient book of the Bible and Christianity but needed to retool both to fall in line with modern sensibilities; and *fundamentalists*, those who thought the Bible was as true in all of its particulars for moderns as it was for ancients. Admittedly, *fundamentalism* is a complicated term, meaning different things to different people at different times. The term does serve well, though, to describe theological conservatives who held to a high view of Scripture during the decades roughly from the 1890s through the 1930s.

THE LION’S DEN

These theological conservatives, especially when it came to the doctrine of Scripture, had found a home at Princeton and had a de facto leader in Benjamin B. Warfield, affectionately dubbed “The Lion of Princeton.” Born in the South in 1851, Warfield first began his academic career at Western Seminary near Pittsburgh before moving on to Princeton in 1887. He was returning to his alma mater, having studied there under Charles Hodge. Charles Hodge passed the mantle on to his son A. A. Hodge. After A. A. Hodge’s death in 1886, the mantle passed to Warfield. Warfield not only studied

at Princeton, he also spent a year studying overseas in Europe. By 1887 he had already published a number of significant works and had quite a reputation. He was poised, in other words, to carry on Princeton's role in defending and commending the authority of the Bible and its supernatural worldview.

Warfield's role in the Bible's defense actually predates his return to Princeton as a professor. In 1881 he and A. A. Hodge coauthored an article for *The Presbyterian Review* simply titled "Inspiration." Charles Hodge had first written on the topic in 1857. Since then, however, new challenges to the doctrine had arisen. The new challenges orbited around higher criticism and those recent developments in philology mentioned in Thayer's lecture. The activity of higher criticism analyzes the Bible in order to determine its authorship and historicity. This analysis consists of unraveling the various literary sources underlying the biblical books. Higher criticism can take the shape of "form criticism," which looks for literary units marked off by a particular form or pattern. It can also take the shape of "tradition criticism," which looks for literary units that adhere to a certain tradition or a certain set of beliefs and understanding.

Whichever approach, higher criticism starts with the presupposition that the Bible or even particular books of the Bible are composites, made up of various strands. From the perspective of higher criticism, authors of biblical books function more like editors who cleverly and creatively weave the strands, coming from a variety of sources, together. Advocates of higher criticism see their task as teasing the strands apart. The two main areas of the Bible that received a great deal of attention by higher critics in the nineteenth century were the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament ascribed to Moses, and the four New Testament Gospels. The upshot of this higher criticism, or to use a term by Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, "rationalist biblical criticism," is to see the Bible and its books not as the product of divine agency but as the product of human endeavors.

Consider higher criticism and the Pentateuch. Various higher

critics had identified four authorial strands: the Yahwist, the Elohist, the Deuteronomist, and the Priestly strand. These strands were identified by the four initials J-E-D-P. Building on this, Julius Wellhausen argued in his *History of Israel* (1878) that much of the Pentateuch comes from the time after the exile and that Moses certainly was not the author. The Pentateuch is more about the beliefs of these four groups than it is an accurate and reliable revelation from God.

Similar attacks came against the Gospels. While higher criticism of the Gospels stretches back to the eighteenth century, David Friedrich Strauss took it to new heights (or depths?) with the publication of his *Life of Jesus* in 1835. This set off a virtual cottage industry of scholars on a quest for the historical Jesus. The historical Jesus, as this approach has it, lies buried somewhere in the texts of the Gospels, which were more concerned with the Jesus of faith, the fictitious Jesus who was a creation of various Christian communities who had attached names of the apostles to their own books. According to the scholars questing after Jesus, the Bible is viewed as a book of faith, not to be taken for granted as historically reliable. As with the Pentateuch, the Gospels are more about the beliefs of the communities that produced them than they are an accurate and reliable revelation of Christ from God.

On the one side of biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century were these higher critics or rationalists who were committed to the presupposition that the Bible is a human book. On the other side were those committed to the presupposition that the Bible is the word of God. To put the matter directly, either the Bible is a supernatural book (the orthodox view) or it is a natural book (the higher or rationalist criticism view). The rationalist criticism view nearly dominated European biblical studies in the nineteenth century. By 1881 young Warfield saw it as a burgeoning problem in America. In attempts to stem it off, he proposed the article to one of the editors of *The Presbyterian Review*, A. A. Hodge, who decided to sign on as a cowriter.⁶

⁶For a history of European rationalist criticism, see Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

Probably neither Hodge nor Warfield had any idea what controversy this article would cause, both then and now. As for the controversies then, this article was the first in what would be a series of eight articles in *The Presbyterian Review* on the topics of inspiration and biblical criticism. The writer of two of those articles and also an editor of *The Presbyterian Review*, Charles A. Briggs, would face heresy trials for his views in his denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA, in the 1890s. Briggs will factor more significantly in the story of inerrancy in chapters 3 and 4, but for now it suffices to say that Briggs could not countenance the view of inspiration laid out by Hodge and Warfield in their article. More recently, Jack Rogers and Donald McKim have taken issue with the view as well, in their 1979 book *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach*. The so-called Rogers/McKim proposal has Hodge and Warfield inventing the modern evangelical view of verbal, plenary inspiration and a concomitant view of inerrancy. This particular view ran perniciously through fundamentalism, from the ivy-strewn halls of Princeton Seminary to the pages of Harold Lindsell's *Battle for the Bible* (1976). Rogers and McKim argued for another view, which they understood to be held by the biblical authors and by the leading lights of church history from Augustine on through the Reformers. The Princetonians had created the doctrine of verbal plenary inspiration and inerrancy *ex nihilo*. The Rogers/McKim proposal points to a less exacting view of inspiration and a more flexible view of inerrancy, which restricts inerrancy to matters of faith only.

Even more recently, Stanley Grenz contended that while the Princetonians were not as revisionist as Rogers and McKim made them out to be, their particular emphasis on inspiration was far too much. Grenz counters, "We can no longer construct our doctrine of Scripture in the classical manner," with the Princetonians holding the honor of the classical manner. Even Islamic websites will cite the Hodge and Warfield article when speaking of the

Christian view of plenary inspiration. Did Hodge and Warfield have any idea of the firestorm of controversy they were setting off with their article or how widely distributed it would be? They certainly couldn't foresee being cited on Islamic websites. But they are. The sheer controversy surrounding this article is enough to warrant a close look at it. The article takes its place as one of the most significant texts in the formation of the orthodox view of the authority of Scripture.⁷

Figure 1.1 Inspiration Timeline

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|-----------|---|
| 1857 | Charles Hodge publishes "Inspiration." |
| 1881 | A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield coauthor "Inspiration" in <i>The Presbyterian Review</i> . |
| 1881 | Charles A. Briggs publishes "Critical Theories of the Sacred Scriptures" in <i>The Presbyterian Review</i> in response to Hodge and Warfield. |
| 1887 | B. F. Westcott publishes <i>Introduction to the Study of the Gospels</i> . |
| 1888 | Basil Manly publishes <i>The Bible Doctrine of Inspiration</i> . |
| 1889 | Robert F. Horton publishes <i>Inspiration and the Bible</i> . |
| 1891 | Briggs gives inaugural address at Union Seminary, "The Authority of Holy Scripture." |
| 1891 | Joseph Henry Thayer publishes <i>The Change of Attitude Towards the Bible</i> . |
| 1892 | PCUSA General Assembly issues Portland Deliverance. |
| 1893 | Briggs is suspended from the PCUSA. |
| 1910 | James Orr publishes <i>Revelation and Inspiration</i> . |
| 1910 | PCUSA General Assembly adopts the "Five Point Deliverance." |
| 1910–1915 | <i>The Fundamentals</i> are published in twelve volumes, edited by R. A. Torrey, A. C. Dixon, and others. |
| 1915 | Warfield publishes articles on revelation and inspiration in Orr's <i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i> . |
| 1922 | Harry Emerson Fosdick preaches "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" |
| 1923 | J. Gresham Machen publishes <i>Christianity and Liberalism</i> . |
| 1925 | PCUSA drops "Five Point Deliverance." |
| 1958 | J. I. Packer publishes "Fundamentalism" and the Word of God. |
| 1963 | Dewey M. Beegle publishes <i>The Inspiration of Scripture</i> . |
| 1966 | G. C. Berkouwer publishes <i>Holy Scripture</i> (English translation in 1975). |

⁷For a discussion of the 1881 Hodge and Warfield article, see Mark A. Noll, *The Princeton Theology 1812–1921: Scripture, Science, and Theological Method from Archibald Alexander to Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 218–231; Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (New York: Harper, 1979); Stanley Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 116.

VERBAL, PLENARY INSPIRATION (AND WHY IT MATTERS)

The Hodge and Warfield article starts by expressing a particular definition and use of the term *inspiration*. They are not talking about a generic inspiration or about influence but about inspiration in a “fixed and narrow sense.” The closest synonym they offer is superintendence, adding, “This superintendence attended the entire process of the genesis of Scripture, and particularly the process of the final composition of the record.” This superintendence also includes “historic processes and the concurrence of natural and supernatural forces.” They conclude that this superintendence results in “the absolute infallibility of the record . . . in the original autograph.” By speaking of concurrence with the human authors, Hodge and Warfield acknowledge that the verbal, plenary view does not allow for the dictation theory or a mechanical view of inspiration. In the dictation view, the biblical authors might as well be in a trance as God takes over. Hodge and Warfield’s view allows for the personality and even the idiosyncrasies of the biblical authors to shine (or in some cases glare) through.⁸

After giving the definition of inspiration, three presuppositions are set out. First, inspiration is put in its place, which is to say that Hodge and Warfield acknowledge that while inspiration is true, “it is not in the first instance a principle fundamental to the truth of the Christian religion.” In a later article on inspiration, Warfield would say, “We found the whole system of Christian doctrine on plenary inspiration as little as we found it upon the doctrine of angelic existences.”⁹ This doesn’t mean they downplayed the doctrine, but it is important to see this qualification.

In the second presupposition, they observe that inspiration “must be conditioned upon our general views of God’s relation to the world, and his methods of influencing the souls of men.” This is their way of expressing the difference between supernaturalistic

⁸A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, “Inspiration,” *The Presbyterian Review* 2 (April 1881), 225–260. The following quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from this article.

⁹B. B. Warfield, “The Real Problem of Inspiration,” *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, 4 (1893), 177–221.

and naturalistic worldviews. They express this directly: “The only really dangerous opposition to the church doctrine of inspiration comes either directly or indirectly, but always ultimately, from some false view of God’s relation to the world, of his methods of working, and of the possibility of a supernatural agency penetrating and altering the course of a natural process.” This leads to the third presupposition, the “continuity between all the various provinces and methods of God’s working.” Each of these, the supernatural and the natural, God and the human authors, constitute “one system in the execution of one plan,” with “all these agents and all these methods [being] so perfectly adjusted and controlled . . . [that] all together infallibly bring about the result God designs.” This is the notion of *concurus*. Warfield offers a fuller discussion of *concurus* in his essay “The Divine and Human in the Bible,” published in *The Presbyterian Review* in 1894.

After setting out these three presuppositions, Hodge and Warfield turn next to the genesis of Scripture, again returning to the idea of the human agency in the writing of Scripture. Such human agency is “everywhere apparent, and gives substance and form to the entire collection of writings.” This means in short that the Scriptures have been generated “through an historic process,” with the Holy Spirit ever present throughout the process. Then they put forward their definition of inspiration as plenary, verbal inspiration, anticipating various objections or alternative views to the claim of verbal inspiration. The first is that to some the verbal theory sounds like the dictation theory. They dispense with that handily. The second is an alternative to verbal inspiration that instead pictures the biblical authors as inspired in a general way who then set out to write in their own abilities and limitations of divine truth, resulting in an adequate but not infallible text. A third objection also puts forth an alternative view, claiming that “while the thoughts of the sacred writers concerning doctrine and duty were inspired and errorless, their language was of purely human suggestion, and more or less accurate.” Yet another view sees the biblical authors as inspired and

therefore inerrant when it comes to matters of faith and practice or of matters pertaining to “doctrine and duty,” but not so when it comes to matters of history or science or geography and the like. These elements of the Bible are deemed of secondary importance and contain inaccuracies and discrepancies. In reply, Hodge and Warfield assert, “the Scriptures not only contain, but *are, the word of God*” (emphasis theirs).

So far much of the article has been on the side of definition and assertion. In the next sections of the article, Hodge and Warfield offer proofs and evidence. They start with the text of Scripture itself and its self-claims. The New Testament authors “continually assert” that the Old Testament is the word of God. The apostles, the writers of the New Testament, also consistently claim to speak for God. Hodge and Warfield next point to Scripture’s congruity despite its having so many human authors over such a long stretch of time. They also refer to the work of others who demonstrate Scripture’s compatibility with the natural sciences. Finally, they turn to church history, running through the litany of those from the church fathers on down through the Reformers who held to Scripture as the very words of God. They reach the following conclusion concerning the inspired and inerrant text: “This has been from the first the general faith of the historical church and of the Bible-loving, spiritual people of God. The very letter of the word has been proved from ancient times to be a tremendous power in human life.”

Having said all this, Hodge and Warfield can now turn to the issue of criticism, the section of the essay entitled “Critical Objections Tried.” After this essay, Warfield returned to the subject of critical objections and responses again and again. In summarizing his contributions here, a number of things can be noted. First, Warfield does not advocate a naive view of inspiration or of biblical studies and scholarship. Warfield was well schooled in the difficulties and problems the text presents to biblical scholars. He was well aware of discrepancies in the biblical narrative, be

they the different numbers given in Old Testament accounts or problems of harmonizing the Synoptic Gospels. He was well aware of the problems of textual criticism. Scholars sometimes refer to this as “lower criticism,” the challenge of the differences between manuscripts of the Bible in the original documents. Warfield wrote a book on textual criticism and was so bold as to publish an article showing why the longer ending of Mark (Mark 16:9–20) is inauthentic and should be discarded. He even admits that this means “we have an incomplete document in Mark’s Gospel.” What’s more, Warfield published this article in the very conservative and very fundamentalist *Sunday School Times*. Moisés Silva, himself a rather prominent New Testament scholar, has come to the conclusion that Warfield has espoused anything but a naive view of inspiration, adding, “The contemporary debate regarding inerrancy appears hopelessly vitiated by the failure—in both conservative and nonconservative camps—to mark how carefully nuanced were Warfield’s formulations.”¹⁰

Warfield offers a succinct treatment of the challenges raised by higher criticism in his 1894 article in *The Presbyterian Review*, “The Divine and Human in the Bible.” The Bible is fully and entirely human and fully and entirely divine continuously and harmoniously. This again is Warfield’s doctrine of *concursum*. Warfield puts it this way: the Bible is “a divine-human book in which every word is at once divine and human.” Ignoring this in either direction, Warfield observes, ends in disaster.

From the end of the Civil War until the turn of the twentieth century, American attitudes toward the Bible had changed. And in the midst of all the flux, the Princetonians were simply not ready to give up on the authority of the Bible without an argument. They offered a carefully nuanced but firm doctrine of inspiration, that of verbal, plenary inspiration. But, as to be expected, not all saw it the same way.

¹⁰B. B. Warfield, “The Genuineness of Mark 16:9–20,” *Sunday School Times* 24, No. 48 (December 2, 1882): 755–756; Moisés Silva, “Old Princeton, Westminster, and Inerrancy,” *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, a Challenge, a Debate*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 68–69.

THE SHEKINAH FROM THE SHRINE

While Charles Briggs disagreed with Hodge and Warfield, he certainly did not go as far in his disagreement with them as would Harry Emerson Fosdick. Fosdick had a wide following, preaching in large churches, speaking to massive audiences on the radio, and writing best-selling books. Behind all of that popular speaking and writing was a well-trained and very clever mind. While the fundamentalists were digging in their heels and looking at best outdated and at worst mean-spirited, Fosdick finessed his audiences, and they, by the tens of thousands, listened. To win them over, he proposed what amounted to a new religion, one that had the skeleton of Christianity but with a fresh face and body acceptable to moderns. He knew the power of words and used those words to proffer a new view of the Bible and a new Christianity.

Fosdick could turn a phrase; so he spoke of “the Shekinah distinguished from the shrine.” He wanted the “Gospel freed from its entanglements.” On the surface this may sound good, but digging a little deeper reveals that the shrine and entanglements that Fosdick refers to are nothing else but the Bible. The Bible in its form is the shrine, but inside it, if we get past the particulars, we are led to the abiding truths. The words are historic, but underlying those words is the abiding sense. The beauty of liberalism and modern sensibilities, Fosdick argues, is that they offer “intellectual liberation from an old literalism” and consequently “incalculable spiritual enrichment” for moderns. Fosdick, who retooled Scripture so it could better speak to human needs, transformed the sermon into therapy.¹¹

By the time Fosdick was in full swing, Archibald Alexander Hodge had long since died.

Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield too had passed. But the mantle they bore had not fallen by the way altogether. It had been picked up by J. Gresham Machen. Actually Warfield essentially placed it on Machen just before he died. Machen, perhaps a little reluctant, was nevertheless well qualified for the task. Like Fosdick, Machen knew

¹¹Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Modern Use of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), 272–273.

his way around words. He had also been well trained at Princeton and at Germany. But unlike Fosdick, Machen did not see the teaching of Scripture and historic creeds as cause to blush. He didn't look for the abiding truths hidden on the surface of the historic words of the text.¹²

Machen offered a full reply to Fosdick in *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923). In sum, Machen charges that Fosdick's view of authority boils down to individual experience. According to Machen, one's view of inspiration and consequently of the text of the Bible itself has to do with one's starting point. If you start with the supposition that God has revealed himself in all of the words of Scripture, then you submit to the teachings of Scripture, however hard they may be for a modern person or however seemingly challenging they are. If you start with the legitimacy of modern sensibilities, then you can conveniently overlook and downplay those difficult elements. Machen did not deny Fosdick the right to his view of Scripture. Machen just had problems with Fosdick claiming that his view was Christian.

WHAT'S BARTH GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Fosdick had packaged German liberalism for American popular audiences. In the main, he was quite comfortable with such liberalism. Not so with Karl Barth. Barth felt that the old liberalism, in which he had been schooled, suffered two fatal flaws: it didn't preach well, and it was too tame. The old liberalism didn't preach well because it taught biblical interpreters to tease out the strands of authorship. One is left with a dissected text, with pieces strewn about. How one goes from that to a meaningful sermon is a difficult (if not impossible) task indeed. Barth also thought liberalism's view of the Bible to be too tame. The Bible was domesticated or gentryfied, made more palatable to modern tastes.

¹²For the Warfield and Machen connection, see Stephen J. Nichols, "'The Vital Processes of Controversy': Warfield, Machen, and Fundamentalism," in *B. B. Warfield: Essays on His Life and Thought*, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 169–194; see also Stephen J. Nichols, *J. Gresham Machen: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004).

Instead, Barth advocated a position that has the Bible encountering us, standing over us. There is central to Barth's view of Scripture the notion of mystery. It is a mystery how the living God confronts us in the human words of the text. It is this mystery that is missing in liberalism. It is also this mystery that causes Barth to be suspect in the minds of orthodox biblical scholars and theologians, especially on the American side of the Atlantic. Barth's view of inspiration stops short of ascribing the finished product, the sixty-six books of the Bible, as inspired. Instead inspiration is a more active dynamic in Barth. Donald Bloesch, sympathetic to Barth, observes, "For Barth inspiration rests on God's decision to speak his Word ever and again in the history of the church and throughout the text of the Bible."¹³ Again, it is this dynamic understanding of inspiration that gave Barth a bad reputation among conservative American theologians such as Carl F. H. Henry, Cornelius Van Til, and Charles C. Ryrie. All three weighed Barth's view and found it wanting.

These days, however, there is a change toward Barth in American evangelical circles. The chilly reception of a generation ago has been exchanged for more welcoming treatments. We are likely too close to see how this paradigm shift will fully impact the American evangelical doctrine of Scripture. For now, however, it is likely safe to venture two comments. One is that it is highly likely that Warfield and the Princetonians will not feature so prominently vis-à-vis Barth. Barth has moved from the margins to a place at the center. He has moved from being a figure who is at best suspect to becoming one who is well-regarded. Secondly, and building on this paradigm shift, evangelical doctrines of Scripture will likely shift toward the Barthian understanding of inspiration. The Barthian view moves away from emphasizing and focusing on a static view of the text toward a more dynamic view of the text. Inspiration is more of a dynamic concept, something that happens as the word is proclaimed in the living Christian community of the church. This latter point reflects a broader epistemological shift occurring

¹³Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration, and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 103.

culturally from a more objectivist epistemology of modernity to a more community-based epistemology of postmodernism. The work of John Franke and the late Stanley Grenz indicates that this may become more the case for evangelical doctrines of Scripture. Again, time will tell.

CONCLUSION

It is not too much of a stretch to say that the Princetonians, that constellation of biblical scholars and theologians at Princeton Theological Seminary including Charles Hodge, his son A. A. Hodge, B. B. Warfield, and J. Gresham Machen, gave more thought to the expression of the doctrine of inspiration than at any other moment in the life of the church. They bequeathed to the twentieth century the fully formulated doctrine of the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture. They forged this doctrine in the cauldrons of controversy, against those who preferred a more natural explanation of the origin and genesis of the Bible. Liberalism attempted a middle way, desiring to be at home with modernity and to have Christianity too. By the middle of the twentieth century, yet another view was fast approaching, that of Karl Barth. While Barth certainly doesn't sound like Harry Emerson Fosdick, neither does he sound like B. B. Warfield. Barth's view of inspiration would dominate the closing decades of the twentieth century and on to the present time. His view also engendered and continues to engender discussions of inerrancy, which according to Warfield and the Princetonians is the necessary correlate of the doctrine of verbal, plenary inspiration and is the subject of chapters 3 and 4.

Addressing the positive advances of biblical studies in the nineteenth century, Warfield also observed that "It has not been a century of quiet and undisturbed study of the Bible. Fierce controversies have raged throughout its whole length." He was speaking from personal experience, at least in reference to the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Then Warfield adds, "But fierce controversies can rage only where strong convictions burn. And amid, or rather

by means of, all these controversies knowledge has increased.” Warfield had learned to place his confidence in Scripture. After all, as he quips, “The Bible has emerged from these fires, as out of all others, without so much the smell of smoke upon its very garments.” Warfield held a strong conviction in the word of God because he knew it to be the word of God, the inspired text of Scripture. Warfield concludes his article, written for the *Homiletical Review* in March 1900, with this look ahead to the next century: “It is the whole Bible that is committed to the twentieth century—to receive from it, as we believe, an even deeper reverence and an even completer obedience.”¹⁴

As the twentieth century moved in, controversies over this ancient book in the modern world by no means abated. Challenges would roll in like the shore’s relentless waves. Of course, the names would change, as would the exact nature and contours of the controversy, but underlying that change, the constant of the challenge of the modern world remained. The term *inerrancy* would come to the fore. Those who held to it with strong convictions would encounter those who preferred alternatives. Those who revered the Bible deeply and sought to obey it, as Warfield predicted, would also find that there are those who would just as soon move away from the Bible or those who, while professing to revere it on the one hand, subtly dismantle it on the other. If the nineteenth-century history of Scripture in America was a tale of both strong convictions and fierce controversies, so too would be the story of the twentieth century.

It is worthwhile, though, to pause over inspiration for a moment. Inspiration demands something of the modern and now postmodern world. It demands that we look beyond ourselves and beyond our own experience. It demands in the end that we submit to it. This can be difficult and humbling for someone of any era, but for whatever reason it seems to be especially difficult for those of us in the twenty-

¹⁴B. B. Warfield, “The Century’s Progress in Biblical Knowledge,” reprinted in *Benjamin B. Warfield, Selected Shorter Writings*, 2 vols., ed. John H. Meeter (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1970, 1973), 2:13.

first century. Perhaps it is because we have accomplished so much and have gone so far in unlocking our world. Consequently, for all of us, Christians and non-Christians, it is helpful to remember that despite our accomplishments and despite our progress, we may not have all of the answers.