

**JAMES BARR AND BIBLICAL INSPIRATION:  
A Critique of Barr's View of Biblical Inspiration in the Light of Recent  
Exegetical and Theological Developments in Evangelical Theology**

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by

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This dissertation is dedicated to:  
Miriam Ruramai Kahonde/Dzawanda  
my dear wife and best friend  
and  
Linda (Tariro), Martha (Nyasha) and Mildred (Rutendo)  
my daughters

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## ABSTRACT

Dr. James Barr is a prolific writer who has contributed significantly to theology and biblical studies for over four decades. Indeed, he is a writer and a Bible scholar who deserves a hearing. I became aware of Barr's works and influence on theological trends in the summer of 1991 while taking a graduate course in hermeneutics under Dr. Kenneth Shoemaker at Prairie Graduate School in Three Hills, Alberta, Canada.

This study is on Barr and his view of biblical inspiration. The main body of this dissertation is composed of seven chapters:

Chapter One (Introduction) locates Barr in the broad context of biblical studies, especially in the arena of ongoing issues concerning the difference between evangelical and liberal scholarship. Attention is given to the inquisitiveness of the human mind, the place of the Bible in Christianity, and the ongoing need to study the Bible with an open mind in order to enhance biblical studies. Barr is introduced within the context of his academic standing and contributions to theological studies.

Chapter Two gives an overview of the history of the doctrine of biblical inspiration and the formation of the canon of Scripture. This chapter provides the important background for analysing and evaluating Barr's view of biblical inspiration within a broader context. Various theological camps (evangelical and non-evangelical) are discussed showing their attempts to address the issue of biblical inspiration. The history of the evangelical development of biblical inspiration is also presented.

Chapter Three attempts to help the reader to understand Barr's view of biblical inspiration. It starts by exploring his hermeneutical conclusions on biblical inspiration, his interpretation of two key biblical texts used, conventionally, to support inspiration. The chapter also identifies and discusses specific assumptions Barr makes about the Scriptures. The chapter ends by presenting his preferred view of biblical inspiration.

Chapter Four analyses and evaluates, exegetically, Barr's interpretive conclusions on key biblical texts and his preferred view of biblical inspiration. The chapter also provides a detailed analysis of and treatment of the crucial texts Barr uses to formulate his conclusions on inspiration. Attention is given to the

exegetical issues and understanding of specific texts vis-a-vis their relation to the doctrine of inspiration.

Chapter Five critically evaluates Barr's preferred four-point view of biblical inspiration, his hermeneutical principles, and their implications for the Scriptures.

Chapter Six discusses the perennial issue of biblical authority as the point of departure for evangelical and liberal approaches to studying the Scriptures. This chapter shows clearly that our presuppositions about the Bible affect how we handle the Bible.

Chapter Seven responds to the discoveries of this dissertation and assesses Barr's contribution as being part of the contemporary theological trend to help us sharpen our tools. Thus, a four point view of biblical inspiration is suggested. Considering that theology is a human contrivance, the four views are offered within the context of trying to establish a view of biblical inspiration that is biblical in the light of recent theological and exegetical developments.

Chapter Eight, the conclusion, summarizes this dissertation and offers some specific comments on the biblical doctrine of inspiration. Attention is given to the need to bring the reader into the world of the biblical text, if the voice of God in the written Scriptures is to be heard in our generation as well as in the generations to come. Barr's constructive comments are considered and carefully integrated into these comments. The dissertation closes with a suggestion for further study on the topic of biblical inspiration.



## PREFACE

In the course of my theological studies I have deliberately chosen to interact with views contrary to mine with a view to understanding other people's notions and tenets. The first time I came across Professor Barr's works I was intrigued by his linguistic skills and thought provoking reflections. Hence, I decided to do this study: "JAMES BARR AND BIBLICAL INSPIRATION - A Critique of Barr's View of Biblical Inspiration in the Light of Recent Exegetical and Theological Developments in Evangelical Theology."

Unfortunately, studies of this nature sometimes have a propensity to generate more polemical heat than edifying light. Furthermore, it becomes expedient that the researcher-critic be so absorbed in the works of his subject that he can fairly represent the views of his subject with balanced sense.

Therefore, two reasons make this study an exceptional and profitable one. Firstly, there is a deliberate effort to make a constructive contribution to doing theology based on proper biblical exegesis. Secondly, Barr's views have been willingly and objectively employed, not to measure them simply against a fixed, conservative, evangelical orthodoxy, but to challenge the evangelical position.

The inspiration of the Bible is a significant doctrine among evangelicals. However, this doctrine is not as lucid as some of us would like it to be. This is evidenced by the several historical views on biblical inspiration often included in Systematic Theology books. Current studies on the topic also indicate that there is still more to discover about the doctrine of inspiration. Both evangelical and liberal scholars find this topic inexhaustible. The fact is, the Bible as we have it today, did not fall down from heaven in a ready-made prepackaged form. It has an origin, author(s). Who is the author? Who is he or who are they? How did he/they write the Bible? How did the Bible come into being? How should we think of the whole process that led to the production of the Bible? These questions are neither peripheral nor simple.

Barr's view of biblical inspiration shows that there is a need to re-examine (if not adjust) our positions if we carefully consider the biblical data available to us today. However, conceding that theology is a human activity, this study shows that the assumptions or principles one brings to theological or biblical studies remarkably influence how one treats and interprets the Scriptures. Indeed, the foundation determines the structure to be erected. Furthermore, the perennial difference between the liberal and evangelical scholarship should never be downplayed. One's view of the Scriptures colours his/her way of doing theology.