

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

Human beings have always been inquisitive creatures. Hence, in most cases, they have endeavoured to approach critically any data made available to them with a view to offering palatable answers to satisfy their quest for truth within their milieu. However, to their surprise, every new answer to a query raises new sets of questions, and so the cycle goes. This is true of all other academic disciplines. Even in Christian theology and its family of related academic disciplines, as the Church attempts to answer questions about God and his relationship to the world, new questions continue to emerge. By and large, we are still wrestling with the same biblical data, but from different perspectives.

For many centuries, Holy Scripture was indisputably held by many Christians as the very Word of God. This was the case to such an extent that questions dealing with God's words and man's words in Holy Scripture were not raised. According to one of the views held in this respect, the Scriptures were regarded as infallible—a direct product of God himself, having unquestionable authority. The understanding in this regard then was that since the Scriptures were dictated by the Spirit of God, they had a divine guarantee of freedom from error.¹

¹ Fergusson, Sinclair and David F. Wight, eds. *New Dictionary of Theology*. Inter-Varsity Press, 1988. The Westminster Confession (1647), the Belgic Confession (1561) and the early Christian tradition believed the “normative authority of Scripture rested from the start on confidence that all Scripture is God's true teaching through the human authors.”p.337.

However, since the period of the Enlightenment, a time of tremendous scientific discoveries in all aspects of life, these previously uncontradicted views about the Bible could no longer be embraced without thorough investigation or scientific scrutiny. There is no doubt that the time of enlightenment was an epoch which shaped and influenced the conceptual patterns as well as people's ability to ask the hard questions of life.² Whether we like it or not, our present day's quest for truth is heavily influenced by this revolutionary epoch. Reason began its critical work in all the disciplines, the natural sciences, the historical sciences, the humanities, *et cetera*. In the domains of ecclesiastical dogma and teaching, people began to ask: Is the Bible God's word or man's word? What in the Bible is God's word and what is only man's word? Some of these questions are still alive today and have not yet been silenced. Indeed, the Bible is one such book that has not been spared this on-going critical analysis. As a result, its authorship, authority, credibility, origin, to mention but a few, have been questioned, if not refuted, by some of its renowned scholars.

Several years ago on the Zimbabwean front, in his "The Case for a New Bible,"³ Canaan Banana (who was then, an honorary Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of

² Ibid. It was during the Enlightenment that the 'trustworthiness of biblical history and theology' were challenged and new interpretative procedures were formed.

³ Cox, James L., Isabel Mukonyora and Frans J. Verstraelen, ed. in "Rewriting" The Bible: The Real Issues - Perspectives from within Biblical and Religious Studies in Zimbabwe. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1993, pp.17-32. This was a paper presented by Prof. Banana on April 6, 1991 at Hatfield, Harare, Zimbabwe on the task of African (Third World) theologians on the Middle East issues.

Zimbabwe, who was also an ordained clergy with the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe) shows that the questions about the origin and development of the Christian Bible are still far from being settled. In his address, Banana argues for re-writing “a Bible that reflects the realities and possibilities of today’s world.” All this shows that questions after questions arise about the Bible. We cannot silence the controversy about these questions.

In the past, some Bible believers used to be appalled by some of the critics' remarks and treatment of the Bible, and they vehemently reacted to all such scientific criticisms instead of constructively responding and giving palatable answers. Ostensibly, logic and the Christian faith were sometimes perceived as arch rivals by some Bible scholars because scientific investigations of God's word were viewed to be ways of undermining the authenticity and reliability of the Holy Scriptures. Now, times have changed. Some conservatives see the need to interact with other scholarship and their academic works even though they embrace a totally different theological position. Such an interaction helps us to be up to date in our theological pursuits as well as exchange ideas on some issues, and sometimes even adjust our positions. There is always a need for dialogue if we are to understand each other’s point of view. Listening carefully to the views of others enhances our ability to be sympathetic, respectful, and ultimately dialogue with greater understanding. It is with these considerations in mind that this study was born.

Dr. James Barr is an outstanding Bible scholar who has remarkably contributed to biblical studies and theological trends since 1955. He is famous for his works on biblical semantics, interpretation, and authority. He has authored twenty-five books and many papers

and articles. In addition, he has also served in various educational institutions. Dr. Barr has been Oriel Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture at the University of Oxford, Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford University, Professor of Old Testament Literature and Theology at the University of Edinburgh, and editor of Westminster Old Testament Library. He has also delivered lectures in biblical studies and theological issues in Great Britain and North America. Dr. Barr has also held teaching positions at the University of Montreal, Princeton University, and the University of Manchester. Currently, he is Professor of Old Testament at Vanderbilt University, Tennessee, in the United States of America.

Hermeneutics is, indeed, Barr's specialty in the fields of biblical and theological studies. He is one of the foremost biblical interpreters in the hall of academia. One of Barr's distinct contributions that he will be remembered for is the hermeneutical debate in *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, in which he convincingly advanced that the meaning of a word is to be determined less by its etymological history than by its contemporary use in context.⁴ He unearthed the exegetical bankruptcy and fallacy in semantics dealing with the linkage of language and mentality, - the correspondence theory of language and reality, a problem grossly overlooked by the famous *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1967.

In the light of Barr's well-informed insight of biblical studies issues, we can safely conclude that his contributions are of the kind that invite us to look at issues with a new perspective. He is a scholar

⁴ James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

who, when he speaks, deserves a careful hearing. His theological diagnoses must be taken seriously. During the last several years, Barr has become a significant and controversial figure in exegetical and theological issues. One arena of controversy to which he has contributed through some of his works has been the perennially crucial topic of biblical inspiration.⁵

This study, therefore, is a critique of Barr's view of biblical inspiration in the light of some of the recent exegetical and theological developments in evangelical theology around the world. This dissertation is an endeavour to elucidate and evaluate Barr's view of biblical inspiration in the light of recent theological discoveries. Furthermore, in this study, Barr is viewed as a representative of various recent nuances of inspiration, a theological direction that warrants, in my view, a full-length critical theological reflection.

To facilitate the goals of this research, the purpose of the next chapter is to acquaint the reader with a summary of the history of the doctrine of biblical inspiration. This provides a crucial foundation for the developments and sub-titles highlighted in this dissertation.

⁵ Some of Barr's works pertinent to the topic under investigation include: *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (London: SCM, 1980); *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983); *Beyond Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984); and *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM Press, 1973).