

CHAPTER THREE

JAMES BARR'S VIEW OF BIBLICAL INSPIRATION

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a clear statement of James Barr's view about the nature of biblical inspiration, documenting his position with references to some of his most significant published works on the topic of inspiration. Barr's approach to biblical exegesis and his interpretation of key biblical passages on inspiration will be examined along with his four-point summary of the nature of biblical inspiration. The chapter will begin with an overview of Barr's understanding of biblical inspiration, and conclude with a concise summary of his position.

1. Barr's Hermeneutical Conclusions

In his book, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, Barr argues:

The Bible is in its origin a *product* of the believing community. Modern biblical study has made this much more plain to us than it could ever have been in the past. Traditional doctrines of scripture suggested to Christians over many centuries that the Bible was a message *from* God to the community. And of course we can still say this, but we can say it more indirectly: in the sense, perhaps that scripture grew out of the tradition of the believing community

but, having so grown, became in its turn the Word of God to the community.¹

Therefore, he concludes:

Scripture arose *out of* the traditions of the community. Certainly it *contained* various speeches made to the community by representatives of God, such as the prophets, who formed in a way the paradigm case for the idea of a Word of God addressed to the hearing people; and indeed in narrative passages it cited speeches literally made by God himself, or so depicted. But much of it, equally, was the community's address to God.²

Barr argues further:

The Bible, then, is the product of tradition, editing, and revision on the part of the community. But this means that the argument traditionally considered to be 'Catholic,' namely that the Bible derived from the church, is in many ways generally valid as against the position esteemed as 'Protestant,' which was reluctant to see the Bible as deriving from the church and which therefore sought to give the Scripture priority over the church in order of revelation.³

These quotations provide some insight into Barr's understanding of Scripture from which his view of biblical inspiration is formulated. His perspective is heavily influenced by the assumptions he makes about the Scriptures. There are at least two principles Barr advances in his view of

¹ James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, London: SCM, 1980, 113.

² Ibid.

³ James Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983, 28.

biblical inspiration. The purpose of the next section is to highlight and examine these critical principles.

A. Scripture is the Product of the Community

The first principle Barr makes about the Scriptures is that Scripture is the product of the community. The key issue related to this principle concerns the process by which the Scriptures came into being. Barr makes his view of the origin of the Bible clear when he postulates:

Scripture emerged from the tradition of the people of God. Instead of the traditional model which reads something like God ÿ revelation ÿ scripture ÿ church we should have a newer model which would read something like ÿ God ÿ people ÿ tradition ÿ scripture, with revelation attached to no one place specifically but rather deriving from all the stages alike.⁴

Hence, he concludes, “Thus scripture was preceded by tradition and tradition came from the people of God, from the believing community.”⁵ Indeed, we ought to recognize that the Bible writers sometimes used existing sources or tradition during the inscripturation process. According to Barr, everything they wrote was not all given by immediate revelation. However, his view of the Bible as a product of believing communities extends far beyond this obvious fact. In essence, he does not view the entire process that led to the production of the Scriptures to be a totally

⁴ Barr, *Scope*, 60.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

special act of God distinct from God's communication with mankind today.⁶ He explains:

And, more important, scripture was not created by a totally special act of God through a very small number of inspired writers: it came to be through the crystallization of the tradition of the people of God.⁷

Commenting on this communal crystallization of the tradition of the people of God into the Bible, Barr suggests that "the primary direction of movement is not from God to man, but rather earlier to later."⁸ He comments further:

Rather, it is graded and selected presentation from within the totality of ancient tradition of the people of God. It is not just all tradition, but certain leading and dominant traditions; and it is not just any person, but persons of leadership, approved and accepted in the believing communities. It is not just tradition as it happened to be, but tradition shaped and edited in such a necessary presentation of that tradition, as the older community wanted it to be known to the later community.⁹

Barr also advances the view that "the Bible, then, is the product of the tradition, editing, and revision on the part of the community."¹⁰

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 115.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 28.

This theological development can be traced to the Barthian and Biblical theology movements where there was a shift of “theological thoughts from an authority-centred structure to one which is less concerned with authorising statements by means of a priori norm.”¹¹ This shift in doing theology has the propensity to empower the reader or the theologian to decide how the biblical text is to be affirmed or interpreted instead of allowing the text to set its agenda and define its exegetical parameters. It seems it is from such an understanding of the origin and the nature of the Bible that Barr appears to discount the authority of the Bible over the community it grew out of. He makes this point even clearer when he argues:

The authority of the Bible does not operate inductively, that is, we do not derive from the Bible information that in itself authorizes or gives the foundation for such and such a doctrinal or ethical position. Rather, our doctrinal and ethical positions have as their point of origin a total vision, a conception of what Christian life, action and society should be like. These visions come from Christian man, informed by the Bible but also informed by all sorts of other influences which play upon their lives: actually many of the beliefs which are most adamantly defended on the grounds of their biblical basis cannot be derived from the Bible at all, for instance the idea that inspiration of scripture is a guard against historical error and is the foundation of faith and practice.¹²

In other words, by virtue of the fact that the Bible grew out of the tradition

¹¹ Paul Ronald Wells, *James Barr and the Bible*. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980, 3.

¹² Barr, *Scope*, 62.

of the believing community, Barr seems to suggest that the community has authority over the Bible and vice versa. This is evidenced by his proposal to move away from the God ÷ revelation ÷ scripture ÷ church model to the God ÷ people ÷ tradition ÷ scripture model.¹³

At best, this view of scripture does not claim that the Bible is the final authority in matters of doctrine and practice. Instead, the Bible's authority becomes one limited to interrogating or raising questions. Barr explains:

The Bible exercises a critical role: it questions what people think, it queries the basis of their judgments, it asks whether the tradition which modern men form is really in continuity with its biblical origins. It is through this checking and questioning role that the Bible exercises its authority: the Bible queries the tradition of its own interpretation.¹⁴

B. Inspiration Does Not Guarantee Inerrancy

The second significant principle Barr makes is that biblical inspiration does not guarantee that the Bible is an inerrant book. This principle concerns the theological status of the Scriptures. Barr expounds this principle:

The fact is that the Bible is not an absolutely inerrant book. To force upon it such a designation is to insist on ascribing to it a character derived from human opinion and contrary to its own actual nature. . . Any realistic approach to the subject must begin by accepting that the Bible *does* contain some factual error. It is simply not the nature of the Bible that all its statements are correct.

¹³ Ibid., 60.

¹⁴ Ibid., 62-63.

To insist that they *must* be correct is to impose a false character upon the Bible. Any account of inspiration must therefore begin by accepting that inspiration does not guarantee inerrancy, and indeed that inerrancy was not at all the purpose of divine inspiration.¹⁵

Barr explains further:

To impute inerrancy to the Bible is simply to mistake the sort of book it is. The Bible contains statements that are not factually accurate and statements that are discrepant with other biblical statements; and it contains, at the very best, theological assertions that differ in tendency and emphasis from others within the Bible. As has been said, no doctrine of inspiration is of any use if it does not take into account of these realities, for they are the realities of the Bible itself. However, it should not be supposed that the errors and the discrepancies of the Bible are in themselves so very important. They are important because they are a powerful indicator to what the Bible really is. But in themselves they are not so very important. It is fundamentalism that magnifies the importance of any possible or conceivable erroneous statement in the Bible, by arguing that the presence of any such statement would utterly destroy the reliability of the Bible and make it useless as a guide to faith.¹⁶

According to Barr, the conventional link between inspiration and inerrancy ought to be discontinued because it is theologically enigmatic and misleading. Hence, he argues that the Bible could still be viewed as a “substantially reliable” book although it is not “absolutely true to fact.”¹⁷

¹⁵ James Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984, 124-26. See also James Barr, *Fundamentalism*. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1977, 281-84, for selected examples of “factual errors” in the Bible, for example: Who killed Goliath? cf. I Sam. 17, II Sam. 21:19 and I Chron. 20:5. Was it David or Elhanan?

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

He explains:

Theologically this is not difficult: why should God not have inspired a scripture with error in it through which he might nevertheless truly communicate with men? The Gospels themselves, after all, are full of parables, which are fictions. All this can be argued. But as a matter of practical semantics it is not easy to get rid of the burden which past history has loaded upon such a word.¹⁸

Indeed, Barr advances that biblical inspiration does not imply that the Bible is an inerrant book. He argues that it is possible to have an inspired Bible that is also not absolutely true to fact.

The next section will examine Barr's understanding of the term "inspiration" within its biblical context.

2. Barr's Comments on the Term "Inspiration"

The issue of biblical inspiration is a dominant theme in three of Barr's books, *The Bible in the Modern World* (1973), *The Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (1983), and *Beyond Fundamentalism* (1984). Barr asserts that "biblical inspiration is hard to describe,"¹⁹ and he asks crucial questions: "But *in what way* does scripture come from God? In what way can he be thought to have inspired it?" Barr admits, "This is the thorniest problem of any idea of biblical inspiration."²⁰

Barr believes that the term *inspiration*, in its traditional usage,

¹⁸ James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*. London: SCM Press, 1973, 16.

¹⁹ Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism*, 125.

²⁰ Barr, *Modern World*, 13.

places emphasis on “the *origin* of the Bible,” that it somehow “comes from God, and this differentiates it from other writings, which are the work of men.”²¹ Commenting on the contemporary usage of the term *inspiration*, Barr says:

To the average layman, no doubt this is the term which is most likely to be applied to the Bible: it is ‘inspired,’ it somehow comes from God, what is in it is true, it does not contain falsehood. Among theologians, however, the term ‘inspiration’ has not been very much used in modern times. . . . Thus the term has been definitely out of fashion: the World Council of Churches study found it a ‘surprise’ that they were led to think of it.²²

Furthermore, Barr concludes that the historical account of the roots of biblical inspiration is not clear.²³ Therefore, he sees the need to redefine the term “inspiration.” Hence, he provides a probable etymological explanation about the concept of “inspiration” that goes back to the Old Testament imagery of a God who spoke “with a grammar the same as that of human speakers.”²⁴ Here, Barr challenges the orthodox view which claims that the words and ideas expressed by the human authors were

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Barr, *Scope*, 115. Barr says, “One of the peculiarities of scripture was that by the nature of its own formation it obscured its own earlier history.” He also concludes that “inspiration is a rather abstract term: the simpler and more direct term which lies behind it is ‘to breathe,’” See *Beyond Fundamentalism*, 1.

²⁴ Ibid., 13-14. Barr comments, “But not only did God himself thus speak in articulate language; he also had agents who spoke for him, and the words which they spoke were words which God was believed to have given them to speak. . . . Yet the term ‘inspire,’ though it appears in the Bible itself, does so only in a late and marginal document (II Tim. 3.16).”

exactly what God intended to communicate. Although he acknowledges that God through his Spirit had a significant role in the production of the Scriptures, he believes that the Bible authors' responses "were in adequate measure true and valid responses, which thus formed some sort of index to his nature and activity."²⁵ He explains further:

God did not tell Israel how many kings there had been in the land of Edom (Gen.36), nor did he have to intervene to tell that Jehoshaphat began to reign over Judah in the fourth year of Ahab king of Israel (I Kings 22.41); they knew this already, things of this kind were normal human information.²⁶

In other words, Barr views part of the process that led to the production of the Bible as nothing more than a purely human outcome. Therefore, according to Barr, the process of 'inspiration' implies that God played a significant role in the process but he is not fully responsible for the quality of the end product, that is, the Bible as we have it in its final composition. Basically, Barr advances a very broad meaning of this biblical term "inspiration." He seems to drive a wedge that separates the text (the written word) and the process that led to the production of the Bible.²⁷ As a result, he concludes that it is the believing community that is inspired²⁸ although in some sense we might also say that the Bible somehow comes from God.

Barr's views of biblical inspiration are based on his overall view

²⁵ Barr, *Scope*, 124.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

of scripture which in turn colour his exegetical interpretations of the two passages of scripture that address overtly the issue of biblical inspiration, namely, II Timothy 3:16-17 and II Peter 1:20-21. According to Barr, these two passages of scripture have been misconstrued, taken out of their contexts, and used as proof texts for the doctrine of inspiration by fundamentalist and/or some evangelical scholars.²⁹ Hence, he directs specific attention to explaining his preferred view of inspiration.

The next section will analyse Barr's interpretation of II Timothy 3:16-17 and II Peter 1:19-20.

3. Barr's Interpretation of II Timothy 3:16-17

One of the most explicit New Testament texts on biblical inspiration is II Timothy 3:16-17:

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All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (NIV)

Commenting on the difficulty of the key phrase in II Timothy 3:16, Barr explains:

Even there its scope and syntax may be variously interpreted: contrast the AV

²⁸ Barr, *Modern World*, 13.

²⁹ Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism*, 1.

with its ‘All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine. . .’ and the NEB with its ‘Every inspired scripture has its use for teaching the truth. . .’³⁰

The real grammatical or syntactical issue in the II Timothy 3:16 passage, however, is whether the key phrase *ἡ γραφή* (*the word*, *the scripture*) functions attributively or predicatively in the clause. However, although Barr is aware of the distinct difference between interpreting II Timothy 3:16 as picturing the entirety of the Bible, and focussing on each individual text or sentence,³¹ he reasons that one’s exegetical choice makes no “great difference to the idea of inspiration.”³² In a word, the phrase *ἡ γραφή* (*the word*) in the text under consideration did not have in mind the same collection of Hebrew and early Christian literature that constitute the Bible (the Protestant Bible) as we have it today.

Furthermore, even though the term inspired or inspiration, appears in the Bible in II Timothy 3:16, Barr considers the book of II Timothy to be “a late and marginal source of the New Testament.”³³ Therefore, he argues that it is not clear whether this passage refers to or includes Old and/or New Testament materials, or simply shows “the function of this divinely-inspired scripture.”³⁴

According to Barr, II Timothy 3:16 does not tell us much about

³⁰ Barr, *Modern World*, 14.

³¹ Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism*, 1

³² Ibid.

³³ Barr, *Modern World*, 14.

³⁴ Barr, *Scope*, 119.

its author's intention, whether the focus is on the origin of scripture or its present method of operation. We may not be able to establish whether "God 'breathed' in or into, the original production of it, or whether he now 'breathes' through it."³⁵ Barr argues further, that the author of this passage seemed to have no intention of addressing this question of inspiration in detail.³⁶

Therefore, Barr concludes that this uncertainty about the meaning of the term 'inspiration' "is symptomatic: it is a correct indication of the fact that the Bible is not very interested in its own inspiration and provides very little evidence about the matter."³⁷ As a result, Barr asserts:

In the structure of Christian doctrine, inspiration has a secondary or tertiary status: that is, we can seek to give an account of it by showing that it is related to, or analogous to, other elements of Christian doctrine which are more solidly evidenced and more widely based.³⁸

To help us understand the idea of divine breathing, Barr offers three images. The first image arises from the Bible's concept of "God's breath as the basis for man's life,"³⁹ as in Gen. 2:7, "God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being." In this image, Barr proposes that we consider scripture "as having life given by God or as communicating life

³⁵ Ibid., 2.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 125.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism*, 2.

in the same way as God's spirit in other ways communicating life."⁴⁰

The second image Barr offers is to understand breath as a "vehicle of *speech*."⁴¹ Since man speaks via breath, inspiration of scripture would mean that scripture is the final outcome of God's speech because he breathed into it.

The third image carries the idea of "the association of the man or woman who is specially appointed or used as the mouthpiece of God, as the speaker on his behalf."⁴² This image depicts someone speaking under the guidance of the spirit or breath of God within him, as in the case of Old Testament prophets."⁴³

Barr believes that II Timothy 3:16 is not clear enough to lead us to any specific conclusion on the nature of biblical inspiration.⁴⁴ Rather, he suggests that a study of II Timothy 3:16 within its context leads us to the practical effects of scripture; that is, "scripture is *able* to instruct!"⁴⁵ Indeed, Barr even proposes that II Timothy 3:16 may be understood as referring simply to how scripture had worked in Timothy's past life as well as how it would then function in his future ministry.⁴⁶ Therefore, according to Barr, obviously responding to the fundamentalist interpretation, this text says nothing about the Bible becoming the

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 126-127.

governing criterion for defining the Christian faith because it is ‘God-breathed.’ Furthermore, he advances the notion that inerrancy of scripture, that is, the belief that all historical statements in the Bible are accurate and without error, ignores the context of this passage. Barr summarizes his conclusions about II Timothy 3:16:

It is absolutely certain that II Tim.3.16 cannot be taken as a clearly delimited definition of the unique inspiration of the sixty-six books of the modern Protestant canon. The idea is not that of a quality that attaches uniquely to a precisely defined set of books: it is rather a quality that is possessed by the entire body of writings upon which Timothy has been educated and which are recognized in the church as religiously wholesome and authoritative. . . . One other point: it is highly significant that the inspiration of scripture received explicit mention not only rarely (indeed here only) but also on the margin rather than in the centre of the New Testament.⁴⁷

Basically, for Barr, II Timothy 3:16-17 highlights nothing beyond the usefulness of scripture, that is, “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” According to Barr, the theological accent is on the Scripture’s capability to instruct a person on how to live properly under God’s instruction.

4. Barr’s Interpretation of II Peter 1:20-21

The second passage of scripture Barr considers in II Peter 1:20-

⁴⁷ Ibid.

21:

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Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (NIV)

Barr first observes that the writer of this passage is concentrating primarily on prophecy and not necessarily on the nature of scripture or biblical inspiration. He elucidates this point:

The interpretation of prophetic scripture is not something that the individual can legitimately do. It is a matter therefore that lies in the hands of the church community and its tradition of understanding. The writer is concerned by the outgrowth of wild and undisciplined interpretations of prophecy, with their consequent violent effects upon the Christian expectation of the end of the world. He devotes a strong rhetoric to condemning the excesses that may result from these tendencies. But how does he hope to control them? There is indeed scripture, like the letters of St. Paul, but it can be twisted and distorted (II Peter 3.16), and this is exactly happening. The implication that seems to underlie the argument is: there is a central and accepted understanding within the church, and all interpretation must be in accordance with this understanding. No one can properly set out to give interpretations of his own which differ from it.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Ibid., 5-6.

Barr does not dwell at length on II Peter 1:20-21. Since this passage focuses primarily on prophecy and prophetic interpretation, he basically considers II Peter 1:20-21 irrelevant to the topic of biblical inspiration. He concludes, therefore, that it should not be cited as a text that teaches about biblical inspiration. According to Barr, any reference to or argument for biblical inspiration based on II Peter 1:20-21 is a violation of biblical hermeneutics since the context of the passage does not address the issue of biblical inspiration.

Barr believes that the emphasis of this biblical text is “on the centrality of the church’s communal understanding and custom as the locus for the interpretation of scripture” since biblical prophecies came as people were moved by the Holy Spirit and not by their individual private interpretation.⁴⁹ Therefore, he concludes:

Once again, then, one of the key passages upon which fundamentalist apologetic has heavily relied turn out to mean something different. It looks in a quite different direction. Only when the text is read through the spectacles of fundamentalism does it appear to support that cause.⁵⁰

In summary, Barr provides an exegetical analysis of the two biblical passages (II Timothy 3:16-17 and II Peter 1:20-21) which the evangelical scholarship has traditionally used as proof texts for the doctrine of inspiration. He concludes that these passages have been misinterpreted and used to espouse the ‘doctrine of biblical’ inspiration, a

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 7.

concept they do not address. Barr caps his argument by saying that, ultimately, inspiration is a minor topic in the Bible. Furthermore, since Barr concludes that inspiration is an abstract term in the Scriptures, he exercises the liberty to redefine biblical inspiration.

Therefore, the next section will draw together and summarize the previous discussion in this chapter and identify Barr's understanding of biblical inspiration.

5. Barr's Own Summary of His View of Inspiration

In his book, *Beyond Fundamentalism*, under the heading 'How then Think of Inspiration?' Barr presents four propositions that summarize his conclusions about biblical inspiration. These four propositions also shed light on the underlying assumptions Barr makes the Scriptures.

A. Inspiration is not a Central Doctrine

First, Barr concludes that "the idea of inspiration is only a minor note within scripture itself: to make it into something central is to falsify the balance of biblical teaching."⁵¹ He says:

For the fundamentalist, to say anything that questions his idea of biblical inspiration will seem to be totally negative, to be an attack upon the whole essence of religious faith.⁵²

⁵¹ Ibid., 124.

⁵² Ibid.

Barr believes that fundamentalists have mistakenly turned the doctrine of inspiration into a central theme in the Scriptures. Therefore, he explains further that “the person who escapes from fundamentalism must realize that *it is the fundamentalist who falsifies the inspiration of scripture.*”⁵³

Here, Barr is clearly reacting to the notion prevalent in evangelical scholarship, that the inspiration of Scripture is “an absolutely central and pivotal doctrine, without which, it is supposed, nothing can be positively believed. It is a keystone of the arch of faith, without which the entire structure will collapse.”⁵⁴ Barr believes that the evangelical scholarship’s view of biblical inspiration makes the Bible an inerrant book.⁵⁵ Therefore, he vehemently opposes this view of biblical inspiration because he believes it imposes a false character upon the Scriptures. He concludes, “To force upon it such a designation is to insist on ascribing to it a character derived from human opinion and contrary to its own actual nature.”⁵⁶

Therefore, given the fact that there is only one biblical passage (II Timothy 3:16-17) that explicitly addresses the topic of inspiration, Barr concludes that inspiration is an inconsequential matter in the Bible.⁵⁷

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 124.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Barr states that “the fact is that the Bible is not an absolutely inerrant book.”

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 4.

Basically, Barr is saying that biblical inspiration should not be regarded as a major topic in theological studies because the Bible is virtually silent on this topic.

B. Inspiration Applies to the Community of Faith

Second, Barr proposes:

Any account of inspiration must go beyond the ‘writers,’ a very limited circle of persons who committed the books to paper, and extend to the whole process of the production of scripture, including stages of oral tradition, editing and redaction, and transmission. To suppose that inspiration is a momentary process, guiding the writers once and for all at one decisive stage of the production of scripture and protecting them from all error, is on the one hand impossibly artificial and on the other completely lacking in evidence within scripture itself. Scripture itself gives no suggestion that the writers, as ‘authors’ of biblical books, were anything different from what they were as human persons in the rest of their lives and activity.⁵⁸

Barr also argues that just as the nature of Jesus Christ was both human and divine, so also scripture can be considered to be both human and divine:

Scripture can be at one and the same time a completely human product, having all the weakness, the variability, the contingency, the historically-relatedness of the human, and yet at the same time be the Word of God, through which the

⁵⁸ Ibid., 125.

eternal God communicates with us, and we with him.⁵⁹

“Inspiration,” Barr says, “might then be thought of as the link, the bond, that holds the being of scripture as word of God and its being as word of man together in one.”⁶⁰ Biblical inspiration, according to Barr, would have to be perceived as the whole process by which the believing community, through oral tradition, editing, reduction, and transference of information, produced the Scriptures. Barr says that this process can be considered as a human act because their product, the Bible, has factual errors, typical of any human product.⁶¹ Therefore, the inspiration process cannot involve human beings and yet create an objective standard of truth.⁶²

C. Inspiration Includes the Contemporary Effects of Scripture

Barr’s third proposition about inspiration is that when the Bible, through the work of the Holy Spirit, becomes the word of God for us today, that is an extension of the inspiration process.⁶³

⁵⁹ Ibid., 126.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 124-125.

⁶¹ Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism*, 126.

⁶² Barr alludes to this view when he says, “The Bible does not have the property of perfection, which belongs only to God himself. It is not part of the Christian faith that the Bible furnishes a depiction of God’s possessing the maximum possible accuracy.” See Barr, *Scope*, 55.

⁶³ Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism*, 126. Barr reckons that this process of the Bible becoming the word of God for us is a continual phenomenon in both the believing community and the individual believer.

Moreover, in keeping with his view that the Bible is the product of the community of the biblical era rather than a package of books authored by isolated individuals, Barr proposes this derivative:

The inspiration of scripture is the conception that scripture is the result of exactly similar action of the Spirit within the community from which the scriptures themselves emerged. Inspiration is a way of affirming that God was present in his community in the Spirit as it formed and shaped the traditions that became scripture. As the Spirit gave understanding to the community and its leadership in the formation of these traditions and in the crystallization of them as scripture, so the Spirit today gives understanding to the community in the interpretation of these same scriptures.⁶⁴

In this third proposition about biblical inspiration, Barr asserts that inspiration is not limited to the process that led to the production of the Bible as we have it today, but it also extends and includes the contemporary effects of Scripture. According to Barr, the same Spirit who guided the believing communities to produce the Scriptures also guides today's believing communities to interpret the Word of Word as they interact with the Scriptures.⁶⁵

Therefore, Barr concludes that "The Bible is the word of God as and when the divine Spirit breathes through it."⁶⁶ In other words, Barr proposes that the Bible becomes God's Word for us at some particular moment when the Spirit guides us to interpret or apply it. He argues:

⁶⁴ Ibid., 128.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 126.

Just as, for Paul, the written law, though true, authoritative and the word of God, was in itself the minister of death and not of life, except when the Spirit breathed through it; so it may be for the Bible as a whole, including the New Testament.⁶⁷

Therefore, Barr attaches inspiration to the current effects of the Scriptures in the life of the Church and of the individual believer.

D. Inspiration Means Scripture is Inspiring

The fourth and final proposition about biblical inspiration which Barr posits is based on “the analogy of the *inspiring teacher*”⁶⁸ whose objective is that the pupils are inspired to receive “all the *essentials* of their subject, along with the atmosphere in which it has to be seen and the wider implications which it carries for life.”⁶⁹ Here, inspiration is regarded as an on-going process. Barr says:

Inspiration is not something done independently of all the other acts performed by the teacher: similarly, God’s inspiring makes sense only as part of the vast variety of acts that he carries out.⁷⁰

Barr explains further:

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 129.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 128.

Moreover, inspiration in this sense does not suddenly dry up and cease: it can continue after the original instruction has come to an end. This way of thinking of inspiration may prove helpful to many.⁷¹

Barr also advances that inspiration means Scripture is *inspiring*. In other words, the Scriptures are capable of stimulating the emotional and mental abilities of the reader. Such stimulation breeds creativity in thought or action within the realm of biblical interpretation.⁷² In this proposition, biblical inspiration should be understood as that intrinsic quality within the Bible that actuates the reader to be creative in his attempts to understand and interpret the Scriptures within the vast variety of God's dealings with mankind.⁷³

Barr sums up his proposition by asserting that any view of biblical inspiration that fails to incorporate the qualities he has articulated would be deficient because:

It vastly magnifies the importance of inspiration, . . . it produces a seriously artificial and disproportionate account of inspiration, and—as we have seen—it wildly contradicts the evidence of inspired scripture itself by going far beyond anything that the Bible itself had to say about the subject. . . We can use the concept usefully, and develop its contours creatively, only in so far as we integrate it with other aspects of Christian doctrine and seek to perceive it in the light of them.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 130.

Furthermore, Barr suggests that a proper view of biblical inspiration should recognize that:

God's communication with the men of the biblical period was not on any different terms from the mode of his communication with his people today. 'Inspiration' would then mean that the god whom we worship was also likewise in contact with his people in ancient times, and that in their particular circumstances, in the stage in which they existed, he was present in the formation of their tradition as scripture; but that the mode of this contact was not different from the mode in which God has continued to make himself known to men.⁷⁵

In summary, we have seen that Barr advances four propositions about his preferred view of biblical inspiration: (1) inspiration is not a central doctrine in the Bible; (2) inspiration should be applied or attributed to the entire tradition of the believing community that produced the Scriptures rather than to the books they wrote; (3) inspiration includes the contemporary processes of interpreting the Bible; and (4) inspiration means that scripture is inspiring, stimulating the reader to be creative in the on-going process of biblical interpretation.

Summary

In this chapter we have presented Barr's understanding of biblical inspiration. First, we observed that there are two key principles that influence his view of biblical inspiration: (1) scripture is the product of

⁷⁵ Barr, *Modern World*, 18.

the believing communities; and (2) inspiration does not guarantee that the Bible is an inerrant book. In both cases, Barr is highlighting the fundamental tension between the human and divine agency in bringing about the Bible as an authoritative document. For Barr, the highest point of reference in the production of the Bible is the believing community, that is, the community generates, out of its own processes, the Bible as an end product. In other words, the community determines the meaning of the Bible.

Second, from our inquiry into his interpretation of II Timothy 3:16-17 and II Peter 1:20-21 and his understanding of biblical inspiration, Barr makes four conclusions about inspiration: (1) the Bible is not very much concerned about its inspiration (this is at best a minor and secondary theme in the Scriptures); (2) inspiration is a process to be applied to the tradition of the believing communities and everything that led to the production of the Bible; (3) inspiration includes also, and perhaps more significantly, the existential encounter between the ancient texts and its modern reader; and (4) inspiration, as a quality of Scripture, refers to the inspiring effect it has on those who read it rather than to the nature of the Scriptures.

Third, we also observed that Barr believes II Timothy 3:16-17 and II Peter 1:20-21 have been seriously misinterpreted out of their contexts and misused to support the doctrine of inspiration. He presents two points that challenge the fundamentalist view: (1) These two passages do not say that since Scripture is inspired, it ought to be the controlling criterion for defining the Christian faith; and (2) Scripture, for the Bible

authors, was not the same collection of the Old and New Testament books that make up our modern Christian Bible. Basically, Barr concludes that the inspiration of Scripture was not a pivotal concept for the writers of the Bible.

The next chapter will make a critical inquiry into Barr's interpretive conclusions on II Timothy 3:16-17 and II Peter 1:20-21.