

## THE INSPIRATION AND TRUTH OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

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In Sacred Scripture and in Tradition, one can find the affirmation that Sacred Scripture was entirely *inspired by God*. The affirmation belongs to faith. Since Sacred Scripture is inspired by God, the consequence follows that it is *true*, that is that Sacred Scripture teaches divine Revelation *without error*.

Nonetheless, it has never been precisely stated in a definitive (infallible) way in what does such an *inspiration* and *truth* (or *inerrancy*) of Sacred Scripture consist.

Therefore, I shall take the liberty of proposing a particular hypothesis, which could also be mistaken<sup>1</sup>. I fully realize that in such matters the definitive judgement belongs to the Supreme Authority of the Church because the unfailing assistance of the Holy Spirit was promised to the Church, and not to the individual theologian.

### *Revelation*

God made known to the Hebrew people a Revelation regarding religious truths, more precisely, regarding: 1) God himself; 2) the destiny of man; 3) moral law.

Such a Revelation was not made directly by God to every Israelite, but was made directly to the Patriarchs and to some men chosen by God, who were called «prophets». God revealed

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<sup>1</sup> Previously, I have already dealt with this issue in my article «*L'inerranza biblica e la progressività della Rivelazione*», in *Humanitas* (1967) 3, pp. 324-340; then this article was published again, together with another essay on the same issue: «*Precisazioni sull'ispirazione e l'inerranza della S. Scrittura*», which can be found in my book «*Questioni dibattute di Teologia*», vol. 1, Pont. Univ. Lateranense, Città Nuova, Roma 1977, pp. 11-44. I am now taking up the issue again after further reflections, because I believe I can deal with it in a more organic and simple way.

some truths to such prophets and then ordered them to communicate these truths to the people. Therefore, in general, Revelation was diffused orally and only subsequently it was written. This also occurred in the case of the Revelation made known by Jesus.

Revelation was not made known by God all at once, but rather in a gradual way.

This notion of the gradualness of Revelation is entirely common and peaceful. Nonetheless, this can be understood in two different ways.

a) One can think that the Hebrew people may have possessed, in every period of its history, only the religious ideas, which were revealed up to then, by God. This means assuming that God has, in some way, eliminated from the mind of the Hebrew people, all those wrong religious ideas which otherwise, under ordinary conditions, might have been inherited by the original people. According to this supposition, the Hebrew people from the beginning, might have only had true religious ideas: perhaps a few ideas, but not mixed with errors.

b) Another way to understand the gradualness of Revelation is that of thinking that initially the Hebrew people, beyond possessing the religious ideas revealed by God, may have maintained religious ideas of pagan origin in all the other questions which were not yet clarified by God.

To give an example, the patrimony of the religious ideas of Israel would not have been only constituted by a light which gradually intensifying, but would have been constituted by a mixture of light and fog, in which gradually light was intensifying itself, and then gradually fog was diminishing itself. Desiring to give the example a more biblical flavor, instead of speaking of light and fog, one could speak of a struggle between light and darkness with a victory of light.

According to this supposition, God would not have eliminated from the mind of the Hebrew people, from the beginning, all the wrong religious ideas inherited from pagan people of origin; thus, the Hebrew people, initially, would not have only had true religious ideas, but true ideas mixed with wrong ideas. Then, during the history of the Hebrew people, some ideas (those taught of God), would have been progressed until being totally diffused, while others (those mistaken) would have been regressed until they disappeared: that is, there would have been *progressive and regressive ideas*.

Of the two ways of conceiving the gradualness of Revelation, it seems to me that the first is, already *a priori*, artificial and, in

fact, it does not correspond to historical data. It seems to me, therefore, that Revelation may have proceeded in the second way, which is the ordinary pedagogical method; for example, every missionary uses this method to teach Christian doctrine to new converts. This fact, if it is true, is *fundamental* and its consideration can resolve, in an entirely natural way, some biblical difficulties which would be otherwise, unsurmountable.

Furthermore, it is necessary to remember that, as its object, Revelation has only had *religious* truth, not *scientific, geographic,* and *historical* truth (unless certain historical truths did have religious value, such as the coming of the Messiah).

### *Sacred Scripture and Inspiration*

Sacred Scripture is constituted by various works of different literary genres: historical, poetic, didactic, sapiential, etc. Human authors of these books have been induced and guided by God, that is, they have been *inspired by God*<sup>2</sup>, to write them, and thus, to expose *their* patrimony of ideas, which was corresponding to the patrimony of their people in that period and in that phase of Revelation.

Given that the patrimony of ideas of the sacred authors contained, beyond the *revealed* religious ideas, also ideas of *human origin* (scientific, geographic, historical and even religious ideas), thus one can also find *scientific, geographic, historical and religious errors* in Sacred Scripture.

Why did God want that the human writers write not only *His revealed ideas*, but also all *their* own ideas? It is entirely probable that he wanted it this way because in this way (which is also the most natural, less artificial) he obtained the scope of maintaining the *documentation of Revelation just as He had gradually realized it*. And in fact, if we read the biblical writings in the order of time in which they were written (often an order which does not correspond with the order in which they are commonly published today), we will realize the progressive diffusing of the revealed ideas and the corresponding regression of human ideas. God wanted that the documentation of His pedagogy, with which he had taught the Hebrew people, remained throughout the ages.

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<sup>2</sup> The inspiration occurred through the influence of God, both on the intelligence and on the will of the sacred authors. The sacred authors were not necessarily aware of being inspired; rather, it is probable that they were generally not aware of it.

*Examples of mistaken religious ideas.*

J. Coppens says in one of his articles: «Sacred Scripture, the Old Testament in particular, contains in fact, even in the strictly religious and moral field, some affirmations which the Christian faith cannot subscribe to. We are referring to the proclaimed sentiments of the Psalms of maledictions, to the pessimism and scepticism of Qoheleth, and to several texts which deal with the survival in the otherworldly life or which describe the eschatological coming of the world and the people of God in a modality of thinking which no one takes literally any more» (*Nouvelle Revue Théologique* (1964), 86, p. 934).

The most typical case is that of the ideas about the condition of souls in the otherworldly life. Consider, for example, the following verses of Psalm 88:

«Among the dead my resting place lies, equal to the mortally wounded who lie in the tomb,  
whom you do not remember any more, and who are separated from your care.

.....

Perhaps you will do wonders for the dead?

Or the deceased will arise to praise you?

Will one talk about your goodness in the sepulchre, your fidelity in the underworld?

Will your wonders be shown in the darkness, and your grace in the land of oblivion?»

These phrases do not seem to express only an uncertainty of the author concerning the otherworldly life, but it seems that they express his convictions in thinking about the otherworldly life as a «diminished» life: the other world is the «land of oblivion» and these, who find themselves there, are «separated from your care». It is important to note that the same ideas, contained in the quoted text, are exposed in numerous other texts; therefore, this is not a sporadic text.

Another example: the Hebrews behaved in a ferocious way during the wars for the conquest of Palestine, exterminating all the inhabitants of the conquered cities. This was not an exclusive behaviour on the part of the Hebrews, but it was also common to all the pagan people of those territories. Nevertheless such behaviour, in the Bible, is attributed to the will of God. Furthermore, in 1 Sam. 15, it is said that God rejected Saul precisely because he did not exterminate all the Amalecites.

In light of the New Testament, it is justified to think that this behaviour does not correspond at all to the will of God; the Hebrews interpreted, even thought in good faith, as the will of God that which was in reality, a barbaric custom, independent from Revelation. Neither is it valid, to say that God wanted the extermination of pagan people in order to defend the monotheism of Israel from polytheistic contaminations: a benign and merciful behaviour would have much better proved the superiority of the God of Israel over the false pagan gods and, thus, would have defended the monotheism of the people of Israel much better.

It is necessary to add that one can find wrong religious ideas not only in the Old Testament but also in the New Testament: for example, in the first decades after the Ascension of Jesus, in the thought of the Apostles and of the Christian communities, the idea of the imminence of the final coming of Christ was diffused. This idea is found in various writings of the New Testament, precisely because God wanted that the sacred authors expressed all *their* own ideas (and thus, those of the Church). The idea of the imminence of the final coming of Christ then gradually disappeared; this fact was probably due, not to Revelation, but to the simple, historical development of facts. In the Gospel of John (90-100 A.D.), such an idea is no longer present.

### *The successive phases of Revelation*

It is now convenient to expound, in a more precise way, the various phases of Revelation in the Old Testament, concerning three fundamental, religious themes: 1) God; 2) the destiny of man; 3) moral law.

#### 1. *God.*

It can be considered well proved that the Israelites initially thought that there were many Gods and that each people had its own God. Jahweh was the God of the people of Israel, that with whom the people of Israel had made the covenant at Sinai, according to which they would have observed His laws and, in exchange, He would have given them help against their enemies, long life, and abundance of harvest. However, every other people also had their God.

Subsequently, the idea that Jahweh was the greatest of the Gods followed: no other people had a God as powerful as the God of Israel

Finally, the belief prevailed that Jahweh was the only true God: the gods of the other peoples were only idols, pieces of

wood, stone or metal, which had eyes but could not see, which had ears, but could not hear. The affirmation of the uniqueness of God can be found in Deutero-Isaiah, which goes back to the sixth century B.C.; however, one can also find that affirmation in Deuteronomy that, according to some authors, would be much earlier.

The Revelation on Jahweh went still further along, being enriched: He was holy, faithful to his promise, omniscient and omnipotent; he had created all things from nothing, without any effort, with only the act of his will (or, in a way more adhering to Hebrew mentality, with only His «word») and all that He had made was good<sup>3</sup>.

Then, in the New Testament, Jesus will affirm the passionate love of God for us, right up to the point of the folly of the Cross.

From the gradual modification in the way of conceiving God, the gradual modification in the way of conceiving the relationship between God and man, is derived.

For many centuries the Hebrew people considered his relationship with God as a covenant; the notion of «covenant» dominated the spirituality of Israel. The word «*berith*», translated as «covenant» or «alliance» or «pact» (and, less well, as «testament») indicates a contract of bilateral exchange, freely stipulated, in which there is a «do ut des», that is, an advantageous exchange for both parties. The following convictions were at the base of this conception of the relationship with God:

- 1) There are many Gods;
- 2) Israel obtains the advantage of receiving its well-being from Jahweh (that is, the victory over its enemies, a long life, rich harvests and numerous herds, etc.) and Jahweh obtains the advantage of receiving glory from Israel (that is adoration, the observance of his commandments, sacrifices).

The conception of the covenant resulted in being the less ac-

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<sup>3</sup> This objection might come to the mind of the reader: «What is said here one can already find in the first chapter of Sacred Scripture, therefore it is not true that there was a gradualness in Revelation». The answer is simple: the first chapter of Genesis (including the first three verses of chapter two) is a very recent text, belonging to the post-exilic period, written by a sage who used a very elevated language and a complex and refined scheme. The following chapters are much more ancient than the first chapter. The first chapter was subsequently placed at the beginning of Genesis, really to begin Sacred Scripture with a particularly elevated and beautiful, dignified text.

ceptable the more Israel understood that Jahweh was the only God, who had no need of anything, who had created the heavens and the earth for the sake of love, without having any egoistic advantage as a scope.

Jesus speaks of the covenant only once, at the moment of the institution of the Eucharist, and He does this in order to link Himself with the entire long, prophetic succession of the Old Testament and to affirm He is that Messiah or Saviour who was expected for centuries. Jesus, insofar as we know, in all His public preaching never spoke about the «covenant» with God; He always speaks about God as the *Father*, to whom one can only give that joy which comes from the fact that His children love Him and that His children love each other<sup>4</sup>.

I would say that in our Christian spirituality the idea of «alliance» has had very little importance or actually none at all.

## 2. *The destiny of man.*

From the beginning the conviction was widespread in Israel that the dead did not cease to exist, but continued to exist in the «underworld», in Sheol. However, their life was conceived as being sad, a diminished life. The idea of an otherworldly reward or punishment was completely lacking. This conception probably does not come from Revelation: it was also common to the surrounding peoples (as it was for the Roman people; Sheol corresponds to Hades). The Israelites were convinced that God rewarded the good and punished the bad, but they thought that this sanction occurred during the earthly life. The conception of an earthly sanction began to enter into a crisis during the exilic period. A typical expression of such a crisis are the Books of Job and Qoheleth. Qoheleth believes in God, but he explicitly states that the good often suffer and the bad remain well; he verifies this fact with profound pessimism and does not suppose, not even in a vague way, that this injustice can be resolved. In the Book of Job there is also the sour cognition of earthly injustice, but there is also a step further with respect to Qoheleth, since there is the mentioning of the idea that God, in a misterious way, will resolve this injustice<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> The idea of the covenant with God is an «infantile» idea, similar to the pact that a child makes with his father: «If I am promoted, you will buy me a bicycle.» Obviously, it is a pact in which all the advantages are only on one side.

<sup>5</sup> In the first Mass of November 2nd, the passage of Job 19: 23-27 is read and this translation is given for verse 26: «and after my skin has

The clear affirmation of the otherworld retribution appears in the Book of Daniel (2nd cent. B.C.), and in the Book of Wisdom (1st cent. B.C.)

Jesus will then affirm the *true life* is the otherworldly life in the vision of God.

### 3. Moral law

The second commandment of love: «Love your neighbour as yourself» (Lev. 19:18) initially was understood in a restricted sense: the neighbour was a relative. Then, it was amplified to include every Israelite, since all the Israelites considered themselves to be descendents of Abraham and thus, like relatives to each other. Then the foreigner, who lived in the midst of Israel and had also accepted their laws, was thus accepted as a «neighbor».

In the decades which preceded the birth of Jesus, among the Rabbis there was a dispute about the word «neighbour», concerning whether or not one should give it a more amplified sense.

Jesus will clearly give the word «neighbour» the sense of «every man»; He maintains the word, but forces the sense of it.

### *The truth of Scripture*

Given that there are errors in Scripture, how can it be said that «Sacred Scripture teaches *the truth revealed by God without error*»?

One can say it for these two reasons:

1) *Sacred Scripture contains the revealed doctrine which is without error.*

2) *This revealed doctrine is identifiable.*

The second point is essential, otherwise one could not say that *Sacred Scripture teaches the revealed doctrine without error.* In fact, in order to speak of the inerrancy of a book, it is not enough that the divine teaching, which is contained in it, is in itself, without error; it is also necessary that such a teaching is discernible (identifiable) for the reader. Only then does the book communicate the divine teaching *without error.*

The revealed doctrine, contained in Sacred Scripture, is not something *which cannot be discovered*, but something *identifiable, recognizable, determinable.*

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been destroyed, then without my flesh, I shall see God». Thus translated, the verse clearly would affirm an *otherworldly* happiness («then without my flesh»). Unfortunately, the original text is very obscure.



This is the essential point of the whole question of inspiration and of biblical inerrancy. This is that which is important for us, for our faith and our salvation.

*Theological Criteria to Recognize the Revealed Doctrine*

In order to recognize the divine teaching in Sacred Scripture, the following criteria, at least, can be proposed (I say «at least» because I do not intend to exclude at all the fact that there also can be others).

1) The first and fundamental criterion is that of the *direct communication of the divine teaching*, and this happens precisely when the hagiographer explicitly reports that which God has said. This criterion is verified in its most complete form when, in the New Testament, the hagiographers report the words and the life of Jesus, who is God<sup>6</sup>. It can, however, also be verified in the Old Testament, although to a much lesser degree, when the hagiographer explicitly reports that which God said to himself (for example, in some of Jeremiah's and Isaiah's prophecies). However, in order to apply this criterion, it is not enough that expressions like «Oracle of Jahweh» and others similar, occur in the text.

2) A second criterion is that of the *progressive ideas*, which is founded upon the way in which God realized Revelation. This criterion consists in admitting that those are ideas<sup>7</sup> taught by God whose clarification and diffusion in the Old Testament has always *progressed gradually*, little by little as the times advanced, until reaching their culmination in the New Testament. The religious ideas, instead, which initially were diffused within the He-

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<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it is necessary to keep in mind the freedom with which the New Testament hagiographers also referred to the words of Jesus. For example, think about the slight differences with which the Synoptics and St. Paul report even phrases which are as important as those of the Eucharistic consecration. Furthermore, there are ample incompletenesses and numerous modifications in the order of reporting the discourses of Jesus.

<sup>7</sup> With the term, «idea», I do not intend to refer to particularly abstract cognitions, but to *any cognition of natural or supernatural reality (and facts)*, and thus, also to the cognition of divine salvific work. Furthermore, these ideas were not taught by God *only through words*, but also through historical facts; and, at least in some cases (as in that of the problem of retribution), divine teaching has not been independent from human cooperation, that is the acquisition of certain ideas was the fruit of human research under the guidance of God.

brew people, but then gradually disappeared, until being denied in the New Testament (*regressive ideas*), were not ideas taught by God, but human ideas, in a large part derived from the pagan environment.

One must note that this criterion is not new; in fact, although it is not explicitly formulated, it has always been known and utilized by the Church. The Church has always known that Revelation has had God as its unique author (and thus, it cannot contain contradictions) and has reached its fullness in the New Testament. Therefore, if in reading the Old Testament, for example, the Church has noted some phrases whose sense (at least, according to the obvious interpretation) was not in accord with what was then affirmed in the New Testament, the Church has always thought that this sense was not acceptable, even if it was not yet in a position to resolve the «difficulty».

These two criteria by themselves, are already sufficient to understand the substance of divine Revelation. However, some particular points remain unclear. For these, it is necessary to draw upon the following criterion.

3) A third criterion for recognizing what are the truths taught by God in Sacred Scripture is constituted by the *deepening of Revelation realized by the Church*, under the guide of the Holy Spirit. This criterion is an amplification and continuation of the second criterion, since the illuminating, progressive divine action is not finished with the drafting of the last book of the Bible, but rather it continues in the Church.

The divine teaching becomes *completely discernible* when the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, individuates it out and defines it exactly. Therefore, Sacred Scripture reaches its full inerrancy *in the hands of the living Church*.

### *The Imminence of the Parousia*

If one admits that God has inspired also the human authors of the New Testament to write not only His ideas (God's), but to write *their* ideas<sup>8</sup> (which were the ideas of the Church in that given period), then many problems of exegesis regarding the New Testament would immediately be resolved in a smooth and natural way.

For example, the hypothesis which has now been formulated

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<sup>8</sup> In order to document the fact and the ideas of the Church, ideas which to a large degree were of revealed origin.

accords itself well with the undeniable fact that in the letters of the Apostles the conviction often appears that the final Parousia of the Lord is imminent. The diffusing of this conviction in the Christian communities was entirely probable and foreseeable, if one keeps in mind the idea (which was habitual for the Hebrew people for a long time), according to which there would have been *only one* coming of the Messiah, with the inauguration of the Kingdom of justice and well-being *on this earth*. The Christian disciples, who were born and lived in the Hebrew environment, were inevitably influenced by this idea and initially they shared it. Therefore, they had the tendency to draw nearer (and thus to unify) the coming of Christ which was already accomplished with His final coming. It was a way to maintain the common mental scheme unchanged.

If one admits that God inspired the human authors to express *their* ideas, the difficult problem of Christ's eschatological discourse can also be resolved easily and without artifices. From this discourse, as it is reported in the Synoptics (even with some internal incoherencies and discordances) it seems that Jesus himself affirmed the imminence of his own final coming. On the other hand, from the rest of the Gospels and from the New Testament, we have valid reasons to admit that Jesus was the Christ and God, and therefore that, not even as a man, could he make a mistake concerning a fact so fundamental as his final coming.

This problem is resolvable in a more natural way thus: *Jesus spoke (more than once) of his final coming; the disciples did not understand his discourses well (precisely because these discourses did not accord well with their own mental scheme) and, therefore, they reported them badly.*

That is all the more probable if one keeps in mind that: 1) Jesus, in general, spoke more extensively than what was reported in the Gospels<sup>9</sup>; 2) therefore, the evangelists must have made a synthesis of what Jesus said; but it is practically impossible to synthesize well a discourse which has not been understood well; 3) when one synthesizes discourses which he has not understood well, he has the spontaneous tendency to modify them according to his own ideas; now the evangelists were accustomed to the idea of only one coming of Christ and therefore they had the ten-

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<sup>9</sup> It has been calculated that to read all Jesus phrases reported in the Gospels, it would take about two and one-half hours. Now, it is clear that in more than two years of public life Jesus spoke longer than two and one-half hours.

dency to draw nearer (and thus to unify) the two visible comings of Jesus: that one already accomplished and the final one.

One can even go further: it is probable that Jesus repeatedly spoke of his *various* coming, which were visible and invisible: 1) the *invisible* coming in the day of Pentecost with the abundance of His grace; this was a permanent coming and was that which was foremost in his mind, to which He gave more importance, since it was the new Kingdom of God on earth; 2) the *invisible* coming at the moment of the death of every man; with every probability the parables on the necessity of vigilance refer to this coming, since we do not know the hour in which the Son of Man will come; 3) the *visible* coming at the end of the world, which was the least important of all.

It is probable that the disciples, under the influence of the mental scheme of an unique coming of Christ *unified all of these comings*.

One should add that this mistaken interpretation did not impede the Church and us in understanding what Jesus really wanted us to understand.

As for the final coming, the least important, the same historical events soon made it understood that it was not so imminent. The coming of Pentecost, with the power of sanctification, was well understood by the Church. Equally well understood was the necessity for every man to always be ready to appear before divine Judgement, because death can suddenly arrive in the most unforeseen moment (and it is in this sense that the parables on vigilance are continually being employed by the Church in preaching).

#### *The assistance of God to the hagiographers and to the Magisterium of the Church*

In my book *Questioni dibattute di Teologia* (vol. 1, Pont. Univ. Lateranense - Città Nuova, Roma 1977, pp. 32-34), I treated the problem of whether there is a difference between the assistance of God in the drafting of Sacred Scripture and the assistance of God in the Magisterium of the Church. In conclusion, in my opinion, there is not an essential difference, but, rather, it is more a matter of degree.

Many hagiographers of Sacred Scripture had, more or less, an assistance of the type which the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council had in elaborating and approving the various documents of the Council.

In fact, God certainly by being prayed to insistently, inspired

the Pope *to summon* the Council and assisted the Fathers of the Council *in* the drafting of texts, even if not to the point of guaranteeing that they would avoid every possible imprecision and error<sup>10</sup>. In this sense, He «inspired» them.

It is entirely presumable that the assistance of God to the writers of the four Gospels was particularly intense, given the importance that these writings would have had for the Church. But it is also probable that many documents of the Magisterium had a divine assistance which was much greater than that given to various books of the Old Testament: e.g., Qoheleth<sup>11</sup>. That follows also from History: in the first millennium A.D., the Gospels and the conciliar texts were placed on the same level; both the former and the latter were said to be «inspired by God».

### *Synthesis*

God accomplished His Revelation in a gradual way, such that the ideas truly revealed have been gradually increasing, while the mistaken ideas (of human origin) have been gradually diminishing.

God inspired the sacred authors to write all their ideas (both those revealed and those which were human), so that the documentation of Revelation remained as He had gradually made it.

For this reason, Sacred Scripture also contains some scientific, geographic, historical and religious errors.

One can say that «Sacred Scripture teaches the truth revealed by God without error» for these two reasons:

- 1) Sacred Scripture contains the revealed doctrine which is without error;
- 2) this revealed doctrine is recognizable by means of various criteria.

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<sup>10</sup> One must keep in mind that in the Vatican Council II there were no infallible definitions.

<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the Magisterium of the Church has the power of defining a particular truth of faith, with total infallibility.