

# “Letters from that City . . .”

A Guide to Holy Scripture  
for Students of Theology

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Lincoln, Nebraska

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*The Evangelist John and Wedric*

miniature from Liessies Abbey, France

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*To the brothers of Chémeré-le-Roi,  
in token of gratitude and fraternal esteem*



*De illa civitate unde peregrinamur,  
litterae nobis venerunt.*

Letters have come to us from that City  
whose pilgrims we are.

St Augustine, *On Psalm 90*, Sermon 2.1



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## Preface

THIS SHORT BOOK is not a commentary on the contents of the Bible. Its object is the Bible taken formally rather than materially—that is, my aim is to show what we should believe about the Bible insofar as it is an inspired book or collection of books. In the first place, I seek to show what the Church believes about Holy Scripture, and what she has defined. In the second place, I seek to show what further things it is reasonable for a Catholic to hold.

I hope that this book may be useful especially to those who are studying theology as seminarians or for a degree, but I have written it also with a wider readership in mind.

St Dominic's Priory  
London



## Fittingness of Inspired Writings

NO STRICT NECESSITY REQUIRES that the word of God to man be written down. God could have ordained that it be communicated by speech alone, from one generation to another. We have no proof that it was put in writing before the time of Moses.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, it was for many reasons fitting that God provide mankind with a written record of His word, especially as public revelation grew, and the number of accredited teachers multiplied. Revelation contains not only doctrines but also many histories and exhortations which support and illustrate these doctrines, which it would have required a constant moral miracle to preserve intact by oral transmission alone. Yet divine wisdom does not normally work miracles to achieve what may be done without them.

Again, men, conscious of their weakness, are accustomed by a kind of instinct to attempt the preservation of great truths by the use of some abiding material.

Again, it is in some way connatural to man to be taught by writings, as these appeal to sight, the most perfect of the senses, and serve his convenience, being portable.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ex. 17:14, 34:27; Deut. 31:24.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. St Augustine, *Against Julian*, II.37: "God, as it pleases Him and He judges expedient, Himself distributes His stewards, faithful and

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Again, a written record both reassures those taught that their teachers are not speaking from themselves, and humbles the teachers, lest they be elated by their office.

Again, to receive a letter from a friend makes a deeper impression on us than to have that same friend’s words reported to us by an intermediary.

Finally, an inspired book, or some excerpt from it, may be liturgically venerated, as when the Church processes with and incenses the book of the gospels.

For all these reasons it was fitting that an inspired record exist of God’s word to man.

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few and excelling many others, in diverse ages, times and places. So you see them gathered from various periods and regions, from the East and the West, not at a place to which men are obliged to travel, but in a book which can travel to men.” He is, however, speaking of his own book, not of the Bible.

## Primary Author of Scripture

WORKING IN SECONDARY CAUSES in accordance with their nature, God therefore moved prophets, apostles, and others to record that which He had taught them for the benefit of all. He has sent into the world seventy-two books,<sup>3</sup> like the seventy-two disciples who were sent on ahead to every place to which He was to come.<sup>4</sup> Together these books comprise Sacred Scripture.<sup>5</sup>

God is the primary author of Sacred Scripture in all its parts. This is affirmed, first, by revelation itself: “All scripture, inspired of God, is profitable to teach.”<sup>6</sup> The word translated as “inspired

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<sup>3</sup> Counting Jeremiah and Lamentations as one; CCC 120.

<sup>4</sup> Lk. 10:1 (Vg.).

<sup>5</sup> Note however that just as the word “sacrament” has a wider and a stricter sense, so in the patristic and medieval period, the words *Scriptura sacra* or *divina pagina* were sometimes used more broadly, to include also “the Fathers, the conciliar canons, and even the pontifical decrees and (more rarely) the more outstanding treatises of theologians”: Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions* (New York: MacMillan, 1966), 92, with references. St Thomas Aquinas notes this in his writing on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard: “Here by ‘Scripture’ he means not the canon of the Bible but the sayings of the saints”; *Scriptum super Sententiis*, II, dist. 24, *expositio textus*.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Tim. 3:16. The verse may also be translated, “All Scripture is inspired of God and profitable,” etc.

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by God” is θεόπνευστος, literally, “God-breathed.” Speaking of prophetic writings, but using words that apply to the scriptural writers in general, St Peter states: “Prophecy came not by the will of man at any time: but the holy men of God spoke, inspired by the Holy Ghost.”<sup>7</sup> Here, the word translated as “inspired” is φερόμενοι, literally, “being carried.”

The Church’s tradition upholds the plenary divine inspiration of Scripture. Speaking of the mysteries of the incarnation and redemption, St Athanasius declares: “This text and that, and, in a word, the whole inspirited Scripture cries aloud concerning these things.”<sup>8</sup> Pope Gregory the Great, writing to the imperial physician Theodorus, asks: “What is sacred Scripture but a kind of epistle of almighty God to His creature?”<sup>9</sup> Five hundred years later, his successor, Pope Leo IX, in his *Profession of Faith*, sent to the patriarch of Antioch, affirmed: “I believe in the almighty God and Lord, author [*auctorem*] of the New and the Old Testament, of the Law and the Prophets and the Apostles.” The Council of Trent, in its *Decree on Sacred Books and Traditions*, refers to God as the “author [*auctor*] of all the books of the Old and New Testament.”<sup>10</sup> The two subsequent ecumenical councils have repeated the phrase.<sup>11</sup>

An attempt is occasionally made to argue that “author” is not in this context a good translation of the Latin word “auctor,” on

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<sup>7</sup> 2 Pet. 1:21 (Vg.).

<sup>8</sup> *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 33.

<sup>9</sup> *Epistles*, IV. 31. For an abundance of patristic and later references, see Eugène Mangenet, “Inspiration de l’Écriture,” in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (DTC).

<sup>10</sup> Session IV.

<sup>11</sup> First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*, cap. 2; Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 11.

## *Primary Author of Scripture*

the ground that the latter term has a wider meaning.<sup>12</sup> In fact, while both the Latin and the English word can be used more generally for “cause,” the Latin phrase *auctor libri* appears to be no more ambiguous than the English “author of a book”: it means the one who directly causes the book to exist and thus makes himself responsible for the statements which it contains. “Everything which the inspired authors or sacred writers assert must be held as asserted by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>13</sup> Hence all parts of Scripture enjoy equal authority.<sup>14</sup>

Summing up the tradition of the Church, the Dominican theologian Melchior Cano wrote:

We are to confess that each and every thing that was published by the sacred authors, whether great or small, was dictated by the Holy Spirit. This is what we have received

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<sup>12</sup> For example, Raymond Collins, in the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, states that the word means simply that God is the “ultimate source” of the biblical books, and that it does not ascribe “literary authorship” to Him; *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. R. Brown, J. Fitzmyer, and R. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), “Inspiration,” 65:31. Louis Billot refuted this opinion a life-time earlier, *De Inspiratione sacrae Scripturae* (Rome: St Joseph’s Press, 1906), 31, n. 1. God is the “ultimate source” of all books whatsoever. The *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* and its 1968 predecessor *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* are curious works, in that in each case their editors are also their censors: in other words, Brown, Fitzmyer and Murphy, having produced their book, were charged by a bishop with judging whether or not it was doctrinally sound! A review of the later version is available online: John Young, “Destroying the Bible,” [www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/destroying-the-bible-12293](http://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/destroying-the-bible-12293).

<sup>13</sup> *Dei Verbum* 11.

<sup>14</sup> St Augustine, for example, speaks of “the Acts of the Apostles, joined to the gospels with equal authority”; *Against the Fundamental Epistle of the Manicheans*, 10.

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from the Fathers; this is impressed and as it were engraved on the minds of the faithful; and this is what we also must maintain, especially as the Church so teaches.<sup>15</sup>

For this reason, Holy Scripture is rightly referred to as *the written word of God*. Pope Clement I told the Corinthians: “Look carefully into the Scriptures, which are the true utterances (ῥῆσεις) of the Holy Spirit” (45). St Cyril of Jerusalem instructed his catechumens in similar terms: “The Holy Ghost Himself spoke (ἐλάλησε) the Scriptures.”<sup>16</sup>

The Scriptures are referred to as the *written* word of God rather than simply as “the word of God” since He did not constitute the deposit of faith simply by inspiring writers but also by instructing prophets and apostles, whom He inspired to declare His message by both the spoken and the written word. “Hold the traditions which you have learned,” said St Paul, “whether by word or by our epistle.”<sup>17</sup>

The Scriptures are called the word of God not only “objectively” inasmuch as, like the Nicene creed or the creed of Pope Pius IV, they contain only things revealed by God, but also “formally,” in that God has expressed Himself to man *by causing them to exist*, with the result that they contain all and only that which God willed to express in this way.<sup>18</sup> Hence, the Fathers of Vatican I expressly taught that the biblical books are not called

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<sup>15</sup> *De locis theologicis*, II.17.

<sup>16</sup> *Catechetical Lectures*, 16.2. St Irenaeus, likewise, declared that Christians must be confident that the Scriptures are perfect (*perfectae*), “since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit” (*Adversus haereses*, 2.28).

<sup>17</sup> 2 Thess. 2:14. This fact is generally denied by Protestantism, which tends to use “the Bible” and “the word of God” as synonyms.

<sup>18</sup> *Dei Verbum* 24 suggests both senses: “The Sacred Scriptures contain the word of God and since they are inspired, really are the word of God.”



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“sacred and canonical” simply because they contain revelation without error, or as if “having been composed by human industry alone, they had afterwards been confirmed by her [the Church’s] authority,”<sup>19</sup> but because “having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God for their author.”<sup>20</sup> It therefore anathematised anyone who might deny that they are divinely inspired (*divinitus inspiratos*), “entire and with all their parts.”<sup>21</sup>

Despite these clear assertions, some Catholic writers have claimed that only certain categories of scriptural statements are inspired, for example those pertaining directly to faith or morals.<sup>22</sup> The popes have therefore felt obliged to reject this error explicitly. Leo XIII, in *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), described this opinion as entirely impious, *nefas omnino*, and Pope Benedict XV repeated his words in *Spiritus Paraclitus* (1920).<sup>23</sup> Pope Pius XII

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<sup>19</sup> This suggestion had been made by Daniel Haneberg (1816–1876).

<sup>20</sup> *Dei Filius*, ch. 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, canon 4.

<sup>22</sup> St John Henry Newman favoured this position in his short work *What Is of Obligation for a Catholic to Believe Concerning the Inspiration of the Canonical Scriptures?* (London: Burns and Oates, 1884). He suggested that just as someone can be in a state of grace and yet commit venial sins, so the scriptural authors could have been continually inspired and yet have committed minor errors of fact that did not impede the message that God willed to convey to mankind. The mistake here lies in thinking of inspiration as a habitual gift rather than as a present act of God. Just as no one can sin insofar as he is moved by God, so no one can err insofar as he is inspired by God. It is strange to find the great Newman writing as a forerunner of the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*. One is reminded of some words of Chesterton, that many forerunners would have felt rather ill had they seen some of the things that they foreran.

<sup>23</sup> For the exercise of the infallible magisterium in *Providentissimus Deus*, see John P. Joy, *Disputed Questions on Papal Infallibility* (Lincoln, NE: Os Justi Press, 2022), 86–92.

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also repeated the condemnation in *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) and *Humani Generis* (1950). Since it has nevertheless proved a stubborn error, it may need to be anathematized in set terms by the next ecumenical council.

## Human Authors

THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE INSPIRATION does not exclude but rather implies the truth that certain human beings were also the authors of the scriptural books. Human beings are true but instrumental authors of Holy Scripture. They are true authors, since that which they wrote proceeded not only from their hands, but also from their minds and wills. They are instrumental authors, since their minds and wills themselves were used by God as means to express His message.

Inspiration must be distinguished from merely material or external dictation, by which one person tells another what words he must write, without acting on that person interiorly. Such dictation, which is the only kind that one human being gives to another, does not cause the second person to be an author, but only a secretary.<sup>24</sup> We do not call a letter by the name of the secretary to whom it was dictated, whereas we do speak, for example, of

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<sup>24</sup> It is apparently such external dictation that the founder of Islam claimed to have received from a violent spirit. By contrast, St Jerome, writing of the prophets of the Old Testament, says: "It was not that air, struck by a voice, reached their ears: rather, God spoke in the mind (*loquebatur in animo*) of the prophets, according to what another prophet says, *The angel who was speaking in me*" (*Prologue to the Commentary on Isaiah*, with final quotation from Zech. 1:9).

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the epistle of *St Paul* to the Romans. However, inspiration, acting upon faculties higher than can be reached by men, may be called *divine* dictation.<sup>25</sup>

What then is biblical inspiration? The question was debated extensively by Catholic theologians in the modern era, especially from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.<sup>26</sup> We need not follow the twists and turns of the debate here, but may offer the following definition, which seems necessary to render justice to both the divine and the human authorship: inspiration means that God so moves the intellect and will of a human being that this latter shall, with a certainty exceeding the forces of nature, conceive and express a thought, intend to write it down, and execute this intention.

In so acting, God is therefore not necessarily revealing a new truth to the writer; He may be causing the writer to call to mind a truth which he already habitually knows. Yet in virtue of divine inspiration, this very truth is now known in a more perfect way. Hence, St Thomas speaks of an intellectual light which may be “divinely infused into someone not so that he may know some supernatural things, but to judge, with the certainty of divine truth, about some things which can be known by human reason.” Likewise, speaking of those Old Testament writers who are not reckoned among the prophets, he notes that while they often wrote of such humanly knowable things, they spoke “with the help, nevertheless, of divine light.”<sup>27</sup> If it were not for such divine

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<sup>25</sup> The Council of Trent uses the verb *dictare* to describe the action of the Holy Ghost upon the apostles; Session IV, *Decree on Sacred Books and Traditions*.

<sup>26</sup> For a very detailed account, see DTC, vol. 7, pt. 2, “Inspiration de l’Écriture,” II. Nature; III. Étendue.

<sup>27</sup> *Summa theol.* II-II, Q. 174, art. 2, ad 3.

light, it would not be possible to distinguish God's action on the inspired author's intellect from His action as first cause on the intellect of any person conceiving a true thought. Thus, someone who composes a diary may fill it entirely with true statements, and he could neither think nor write any of them without the universal causality of God: yet his diary is not thereby inspired, nor is God its author.

Hence, inspiration cannot be reduced to mere "negative assistance," as if God's relation to the biblical authors differed from His relation to other authors only in that He willed to prevent them from thinking or writing anything other than that which He willed and therefore intervened if they did so;<sup>28</sup> for this would not suffice to make God the *primary* author of Scripture.

Should inspiration be considered a form of prophecy? Prophecy in the fullest sense is a divine gift by which God teaches a man that which he could not otherwise know.<sup>29</sup> As such, it sometimes precedes the gift of inspiration, but need not do so. For example, St John in the Apocalypse was first given prophetic knowledge of future events and then commanded and inspired to record them, whereas other biblical writers gathered their information by ordinary human means, as St Luke affirms of himself at the start of his gospel. Yet St Thomas states that "the mind of a prophet is instructed by God in two ways: both by an express revelation, and by a certain instinct, which human minds sometimes experience unbeknownst to themselves"; this latter instinct is "something imperfect in the genus of prophecy."<sup>30</sup> Again, since prophecy

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<sup>28</sup> This was the suggestion of the Premonstratensian Johann Jahn (1750–1816).

<sup>29</sup> *Summa theol.* II-II, Q. 171, art. 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Summa theol.* II-II, Q. 171, art. 5.

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consists more principally in the infusion of divine light for the purpose of judgement than in the infusion of information,<sup>31</sup> it appears that the gift of inspiration, without being prophecy in the full sense, nevertheless pertains to the category of prophecy: it is a light by which the writer judges with a more than human certainty about what he is to say, whether or not he is conscious of having received such a gift.

It is true that God may speak to mankind through a human being without enlightening him in any special way, and even while this human being misunderstands the meaning of his own words. This is presumably what happened when Caiaphas prophesied (ἐπροφήτευσεν) that it was necessary for one man to die for the people (Jn. 11:51). Is it possible that He acted sometimes in this way when speaking through the biblical authors? A contemporary theologian has made this suggestion, arguing that otherwise we should be obliged to accept as the divinely-intended meaning of Scripture certain things that are false or otherwise objectionable.<sup>32</sup> On this view, we may sometimes believe the Scriptures without believing the original human authors of the Scriptures.<sup>33</sup> This author argues that we nevertheless may accept “the traditional position that the meaning that God intends to communicate in the Scriptures is the meaning intended by their human authors,

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<sup>31</sup> *Summa theol.* II-II, Q. 173, art. 2. This is because it is the act of judgement that perfects the process of knowledge (*est completivum cognitionis*).

<sup>32</sup> John Lamont, *Divine Faith* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 155. For example, “it is quite likely . . . that the author of Psalm 137 really meant to bless those who bashed out the brains of Babylonian children.” St Thomas speaks in this way of the imprecatory psalms: “The prophets in the Scriptures sometimes call down evils on sinners, as it were conforming their will to divine justice, although such curses may also be understood as prophecies” (*Summa theol.* II-II, Q. 76, art. 1).

<sup>33</sup> Lamont, *Divine Faith*, 157, n12.

## *Human Authors*

if it is understood that the human author of the Scriptures is the Church.”<sup>34</sup>

One problem with this suggestion is that it does not seem to do justice to the great respect with which the Church has always spoken of the biblical authors: “the holy men of God spoke, inspired by the Holy Ghost” (2 Pet. 1:21).<sup>35</sup> It also seems to run contrary to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that “everything that the inspired authors or sacred writers (*auctores inspirati seu hagiographi*) assert must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit” (*Dei Verbum* 11). It is the meaning of one’s words that one asserts, not the bare words themselves. Finally, it also seems hard to reconcile with the teaching of the First Vatican Council, mentioned above, that the biblical books did not become sacred and canonical in virtue of something that the Church did after they had been written.

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<sup>34</sup> Lamont, 176, n49.

<sup>35</sup> “Holy men of God” is the Vulgate reading; the Greek text according to the modern critical edition has “men of God.”





## Verbal Inspiration

IN RECENT CENTURIES, it has been discussed whether inspiration extends only to the meaning intended by the human author, or also to his very words.<sup>36</sup> Certainly it cannot extend only to the meaning in the sense of some general truth which the human author would then elaborate as he chose: as if God had simply inspired both St Peter and St Paul to teach the necessity of baptism, and the former had chosen to express this doctrine by the figure of the Ark, and the latter by the image of burial and resurrection. This would not be compatible with the divine authorship of Scripture “in all its parts.” But does it follow that the words themselves must be given by God, in the same way as the meaning? A problem with this view is that translations of the Bible would then not be Holy Scripture except in an equivocal sense. On the other hand, it seems that in some sense divine inspiration must extend as far as the words themselves, since it is the biblical *books* which are inspired, and books consist of words and not thoughts. Hence Vatican I says that the books of the Bible are called “sacred and canonical” insofar as they were

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<sup>36</sup> This question was agitated especially from the time of the Jesuit author Leonard Lessius (d. 1623). See *DTC*, vol. 7, pt. 2, “Inspiration de l’Écriture,” II. Nature; III. Étendue.

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written (*conscripti*) by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.<sup>37</sup> Yet on this view, one will naturally wonder whence comes the difference in styles of the various sacred writers.

It is reasonable to suppose that divine inspiration may relate to the words in at least three ways. First, there are certainly cases, especially in the prophetic books, where words are directly given by God. The vocation of Jeremiah is typical: “The Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth: and the Lord said to me: Behold I have given my words in thy mouth” (Jer. 1:9).

Next, there are biblical books that depend upon human research and reflection, such as the Acts of the Apostles. Since it is connatural to man to think with words in his imagination, it follows that when he is thinking in this way and is enlightened by God to make a correct judgement, he makes it in words. These words may thus be said to be included secondarily and “materially” in his divinely enlightened judgement, while the preexisting differences of character and native idiom among the biblical writers sufficiently explain the difference of their linguistic styles. “A secondary, instrumental cause,” writes St Thomas, “does not share in the action of the higher cause, except insofar as it

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<sup>37</sup> *Dei Filius*, cap. 2. Similarly, Pius XII in *Divino Afflante Spiritu* wrote (no. 15): “It is the duty of the exegete to lay hold, so to speak, with the greatest care and reverence of the very least expressions which, under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, have flowed from the pen of the sacred writer (*minima quaeque, quae divino Flamine inspirante, ex hagiographi calamo prodire*).” Cf. Melchior Cano, *De locis theologicis* II.17: “Since the law of Moses, which is the *ministry of death*, was written with such care and precision that not one jot or tittle could pass from it, much more certainly is the gospel of Christ, which is the *ministry of spirit and life* written with such care and such in-breathing of God’s aid, that there is not only no word in it, but not even any tittle, which is not supplied by the Spirit of God.”

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performs something proper to itself which disposes the way to the effect of the principal cause.”<sup>38</sup> Thus a pen has for its proper act the making of marks on paper, which disposes the way to the effect intended by a writer, namely the expressing of himself in writing by means of *these* marks. A human being has for his proper act the conceiving of thoughts with the help of words expressed in the imagination; when he becomes an instrument of the Holy Spirit, this proper act disposes the way to the effect intended by God, namely the expression of the divine thoughts through *these* human thoughts and words.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, it may be that God sometimes infused into the minds of the biblical writers some truth, which they themselves had to “translate” into their own imagination.<sup>40</sup> In such a case, inspiration would imply a guarantee that God will not permit the author to err in this process of translation.

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<sup>38</sup> *Summa theol.* I, Q. 45, art. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Billot, *De Inspiratione*, 51–54.

<sup>40</sup> See *Summa theol.* II-II, Q. 174, art. 1, for the distinction between prophetic truths conveyed to the bodily senses, to the imagination, and to the intellect.



## Inerrancy

SINCE HOLY SCRIPTURE IS THE written word of God, who can neither deceive nor be deceived, it is immune from all error. Christ Himself declared that “Scripture cannot be broken (λυθῆναι).”<sup>41</sup> Since the meaning of a statement is that which it bears in the mind of the person who affirms it, all the statements affirmed by the scriptural writers are therefore true in the sense in which they understood them. This is normally referred to as the “literal sense” of Scripture, though it is compatible with the conscious use of metaphor or allegory on the part of the human author.<sup>42</sup> The exegete should not, however, interpret the literal sense of Scripture by means of allegory or metaphor unless this is necessary. St Robert Bellarmine remarks: “One should not have recourse to figures, and leave the proper sense of the words, except when some absurdity would otherwise follow.”<sup>43</sup> To do otherwise, he

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<sup>41</sup> Jn. 10:35. In the context, these words can also be understood to refer to the particular passage of Scripture that was in question, namely Ps. 81:6.

<sup>42</sup> For example, the allegory of the eagles in Ezekiel 31. Such allegories *within* the literal sense should not be confused with the three non-literal senses of Scripture, for which see Section 10, The Plurality of Senses.

<sup>43</sup> *Controversiae*, “On the Church Triumphant,” Bk. 1, ch. 3. Leo XIII asserted the same principle in *Providentissimus Deus*.

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remarks, would be like entering a house by the window when the door is open. Since a figurative use of some word is by definition secondary, it would be perverse to interpret the Scriptures, or indeed any work, in such a way if the author has given no indication that we should do so.

Since they taught the plenary inspiration of Scripture, the Fathers naturally also taught its inerrancy. St Justin Martyr writes: “If there is any Scripture which can be urged as apparently contrary to some other, then, since I am convinced that this can never really be so, I should rather confess that I do not understand its meaning.”<sup>44</sup> St Gregory Nazianzen declared: “We who extend the accuracy (*ἀκρίβεια*) of the Spirit to the merest stroke and tittle, will never admit the impious assertion that even the smallest matters were written down and elaborated at haphazard by those who have recorded them.”<sup>45</sup> St Augustine expanded on this theme in a letter to St Jerome:

I have learned to yield this respect and honour only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error (*nullum . . . aliquid errasse*). And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it.

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<sup>44</sup> *Dialogue with Trypho*, 65.

<sup>45</sup> Oration 2.105; *PG* 35:504. For similar patristic teachings, see St Clement of Rome, *Letter to the Corinthians*, 45; St Hippolytus, *On Daniel*, 4.6 and *Against Artemon*, quoted in Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.28; St Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 70.7; and St Jerome, *Letter* 27.1, *To Marcella*.

## *Inerrancy*

As to all other writings, in reading them, however great the superiority of the authors to myself in sanctity and learning, I do not accept their teaching as true on the mere ground of the opinion being held by them; but only because they have succeeded in convincing my judgment of its truth either by means of these canonical writings themselves, or by arguments addressed to my reason.<sup>46</sup>

Elsewhere, writing to the same recipient, the bishop of Hippo emphasized that God could not be supposed to have permitted errors to occur in the Scripture for the sake of some greater good:

Most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that anything false is found in the sacred books: that is to say, that the men by whom the Scripture has been given to us, and committed to writing, put down in these books anything false. It is one question whether it may be at any time the duty of a good man to deceive; but it is another question whether it can have been the duty of a writer of Holy Scripture to deceive: nay, it is not another question — it is no question at all. For if you once admit into such a high sanctuary of authority one false statement as made in the way of duty, there will not be left a single sentence of those books which, if appearing to any one difficult in practice or hard to believe, may not by the same fatal rule be explained away, as a statement in which, intentionally, and under a sense of duty, the author declared what was not true.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Letter 82.3.

<sup>47</sup> Letter 28.3. The theory of “tacit or implicit citations,” put forward by some authors at the start of the twentieth century, must be rejected

“Letters from that City . . .”

St Thomas Aquinas refers to the inerrancy of Scripture in several places. Having explained that the Fathers, although they expounded the Scriptures under the influence of the Holy Spirit, nevertheless said certain things fallibly by their own judgement, Thomas pointedly adds: “This, however, must be held: that whatever is contained in Sacred Scripture is true.”<sup>48</sup> Commenting on the opinion of certain Greek writers who had claimed that St John corrected the earlier evangelists about the date of Passover in the year of Christ’s death, the Angelic Doctor writes: “It is heretical to say that something false is found, not only in the gospels but in any of the canonical Scriptures, and so it is necessary to say that all the evangelists say the same, and disagree in nothing.”<sup>49</sup>

The popes, likewise, have taught that it is a matter of faith that Scripture is free of all errors, not only in matters of faith and morals, but in all matters. Pope Pius X formally condemned the following proposition: “Divine inspiration does not extend to all of Sacred Scriptures so that it renders its parts, each and every one, free from every error.”<sup>50</sup> Pius XII in *Divino Afflante Spiritu* described the attribution of any error to Scripture as entirely unlawful, *nefas omnino*. He went on, quoting from Leo XIII:

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for the same reason. This theory held that the biblical authors, when apparently relating historical facts, were in fact quoting from uninspired documents, intending simply to relay the contents of these unknown documents and not to vouch for their accuracy. See *Responsio* of the Biblical Commission, February 13, 1905, Denzinger-Hünermann (hereafter DH), 3372, and Billot, *De Inspiratione*, 148ff. By contrast, if a biblical author makes it clear that he is reporting another’s words, these words may contain errors; the description of the Roman constitution in 1 Macc. 8 seems like an example.

<sup>48</sup> *Quaestiones Quodlibetales* XII, Q. 17, ad 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Commentary on the Gospel of St John* XIII, lect. 1.

<sup>50</sup> *Lamentabili Sane* 11.



## *Inerrancy*

Divine inspiration “not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God Himself, the supreme Truth, can utter than which is not true. This is the ancient and constant faith of the Church.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Divino Afflante Spiritu* 3; internal quotation from *Providentissimus Deus* 20. In no. 2 of the same letter, Pius XII described *Providentissimus Deus* as the principal norm, *princeps lex*, in biblical studies.