

# Inspiration and the human element<sup>1</sup>

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“WHAT SHALL BE SAID then about the individuality of the writers being preserved in their work? . . . Because God was the ‘Inspirer of the ancient seers’, must it be concluded that all would use the same idiom, and all express themselves the same way? . . . The fact is, God so used the writer that in the resulting prophecy or epistle as the case may be, the personality of the writer is not obliterated, and yet the words are claimed by God as His. If it be pressed, How was this done?—it has to be answered that this is confessedly a miracle.”

These remarks quoted from Brother John Carter<sup>2</sup> express the orthodox Christadelphian view of this difficult subject. On the one hand there is an unshakeable belief in verbal inspiration, and on the other hand there is a deeply cherished idea that the Scriptures ‘bear the impress of the character’ of the prophets and apostles who recorded Scripture. But is it a fair argument to call on a miracle to cover the point where the two ideas would otherwise appear to pull in opposite directions? In practice, the way in which the subject of the individuality of the books of Scripture is often dealt with leads far away from the scriptural claim to be verbally inspired, and we should tread warily when following that line of study. This article, in refuting the liberal view of the human contribution to Scripture, but also in challenging the traditional Christadelphian assumption that the Scriptures ‘bear the impress of the character’ of the writers, is aimed at stimulating a more profitable approach to the study of this aspect of Scripture.

## Literary style

The fact we have to deal with is the existence of different styles of writing and expression in different parts of Scripture (though ‘literary style’ is an elusive concept, and few attempt to define it in relation to Scripture). As far as modern theologians are concerned, literary style provides the main basis for certain types of higher criticism. For example, it is supposed that different non-canonical sources of the Scripture can be dissected out by recognising different styles. Critics can do this without any qualms because they do not believe that Scripture is verbally inspired. Even conservative theologians follow this method of study, as the following example from F. F. Bruce shows. He states: “There is no doubt that the fourth evangelist has his own very distinctive style, which colours not only his own meditations and comments but the sayings of Jesus and John the Baptist.”<sup>3</sup> If John put words in the mouth of Jesus which Jesus did not speak, then we do not have an accurate account of the Lord’s ministry.

Views expressed in some modern Christadelphian writings, arguing from the assumption that literary style betrays the mind of the human writer, are only slightly less destructive, inasmuch as they divert attention away from the message revealed towards speculations about the writer which can never be proved. For example, we may believe that the Gospel record of Luke gives us a unique insight into the work of the Master and that it has a “singular charm”; but are we correct in assuming that these features reflect the fact that Luke had “a notable literary talent” and was “evidently a man of large sympathies”?<sup>4</sup> Such assertions could only be supported if we had uninspired writings of Luke to compare with Scripture, since the effect of the Holy Spirit upon Luke, whatever its mechanism, must, by any account of inspiration, have influenced the style of his writing.

## An example of style in Mark

It may be helpful at this stage to consider an example of literary style. In the Gospel of Mark the Greek word *eutheōs*, usually translated “immediately” or “straightway”, is used forty times, compared with forty times in the whole of the rest of the New Testament. The word imparts an urgency to the narrative which, it has been said, reflects the eagerness and energy of the writer; and this is said to fit with the character of Peter who, it is alleged, was the ‘mastermind’ behind the Gospel. But how then should we understand Mark 4:3-20, where the same word is attributed four times to the Lord Jesus in the parable of the sower? Did the Lord actually speak the words, or did Mark embellish the parable in a way fitting his own understanding and bias? If the latter is the correct explanation, then we can have no confidence in the Gospel records, and cannot be certain that the Lord Jesus did say the things he is recorded as having said. If the Lord did speak these words (and we do not doubt that he did), it follows that Mark selected these incidents, just as the other Gospel writers selected different aspects of the Lord’s sayings. (There is no reason to doubt that the Lord spoke the same parables several times on different occasions and with minor variations in detail.) In the case of *eutheōs* Mark would have selected these words from the Master’s lips in harmony with the use of the word in the narrative. But in what way did this selection work? Does it reflect the interests of Mark (or Peter), which meant that he would have particularly remembered this word? Such a view is contradicted by the Lord Jesus, since he says of the promised Comforter that “he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance,

whatsoever I have said unto you” (Jno. 14:26). Therefore, if Mark (or Peter) did select, it was from an unlimited choice. The personal foibles of their memories could not limit their scope.

But it is just this selection of events and the vocabulary used to describe them which make up the themes and the style of the book. For example, in Matthew, emphasis is placed on the sayings of the Lord which were quotations from, or allusions to, the prophecy of Daniel, and the theme of the narrative is that the Lord Jesus Christ is the king from heaven who will fulfil the prophecies of Daniel 2 and 7. A main theme in Mark, I suggest, is a development of Malachi 3:1, which is Mark’s opening quotation. That prophecy says: “. . . the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple”. The suddenness of the coming of Messiah is developed in Mark in several ways, but particularly relevant to this discussion is the word *eutheōs* (“straightway”), which makes up one aspect of the literary style of the Gospel. Since the apostles and prophets were under the influence of the Holy Spirit which was to lead them into all truth, it follows that the theme of Mark reflects the choice of God, and since the style of the Gospel record is an integral part of the development of the theme, the style must also be God’s.

The implications of this view of literary style are vastly different from the popular view. In the case of the Gospel of Mark we may study the passages which only Mark records, not to learn about Mark, the man, but to discover which aspects the Spirit is highlighting. An example may illustrate the point. In chapter 14 there is an account of “a certain young man”, who followed after Jesus but who then fled naked when the other “young men” arrested him (v. 51). Only Mark records this. Was this because only Mark knew? Or because only he was interested in the incident? And how does the recording of this incident develop the theme of the record? An expositional answer can be developed in this way. In 16:5 there is another unique reference to a “young man”. This second young man was sitting on the right side of the sepulchre where the Lord Jesus had been laid; but, in contrast to the young man who fled naked, this man was “clothed in a long white garment”. The significance of the contrast between these two men who appear in the record either side of the resurrection is found in Mark’s second opening quotation, from Isaiah 40. At the end of that chapter the power of the Almighty to perform His Word is described in the following terms: “He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might He increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: but they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles” (vv. 29-31). The two young men, one naked and mortal, and the other fully clothed and immortal, demonstrate the meaning of the prophecy. Man at his best and in his natural state is naked and ashamed before the presence of Christ. This is typified by the first young man. Man clothed in righteousness and immortality is the result of the work of God through the resurrection of His Son and is typified by the angel who sat at the empty tomb. The selection of these incidents involving the young men teaches the promise of immortality through the Lord Jesus. No doubt we will continue to speculate about the identity of the first man, but this is to miss the main point of the record.

### **Whose style?**

It has been shown from the above example of style in Mark that literary style in Scripture is an integral part of the unique revelation through the particular apostle or prophet. It cannot therefore be construed as a proof that the mind of the writer is therein revealed. The tone as well as the choice of material and the vocabulary used to record them are as much part of the message of Scripture as the historical details. But if the style is wholly God’s, does it follow that the style cannot also in some sense be that of the writer? The argument developed in this section is that the style of writing is determined by the form, content and emphasis of the message, and was suited perfectly by God to the needs of the people to whom it was delivered (as well as being profitable for later generations); but at the same time God raised up prophets and apostles who could become one with the message. The harmony between prophet and prophecy does not prove that the prophet made a causal contribution to Scripture. On the contrary, it can be explained by the fact that God raised up men fit to deliver the message and to become part of it.

The emphasis in this approach is upon the man being fitted to the revelation rather than the reverse. For example, Jeremiah was predestinated in his work as “prophet unto the nations.” He was to play a central role not only in delivering the prophecy but also in its content, enabling, through his experiences, the Word of God to take its predetermined shape. Yet at the same time the words in his mouth and, by implication, the words which he wrote were put there by God (Jer. 1:5-9). Jeremiah, the man, therefore becomes a legitimate subject for study, since his circumstances, thoughts and feelings are revealed in the book. But here we are not studying insights provided by the will of Jeremiah. Rather are we studying the result of the providential work of God in raising up Jeremiah to be a fitting example in the prophetic enactment. We are not at liberty to assume that the content of the prophecy stems from Jeremiah’s character independently of the will of God, since the message was God’s. At the same time, because Jeremiah was providentially raised up for the task there is no reason to object to the possibility that Jeremiah in all respects was in complete harmony with the message, and that even the

vocabulary and idioms used in the prophecy may have been in some ways the vocabulary and style of Jeremiah, the man. But the only way we could ever know this would be if we had uninspired writings or sayings of Jeremiah, which we do not have; and to speculate upon it is as unproductive as trying to work out the pathways of providence.

In accordance with this approach, when we study the unique styles of Scripture we should be looking, not for the hidden character of the prophet, but for the reason that the particular style (however we may define it) was chosen by God to convey perfectly His revelation. We are led to study the context of the revelation, to appreciate the audience to whom it was first delivered, before going on to ask why a particular man was raised up to deliver this message. For example, if in the purpose of God a record of the ministry of Christ was to be written which emphasised the humanity of Christ, and which was to use insights into human suffering, how appropriate to raise up a physician for that task who may have been uniquely in harmony with this revelation. If the Lord intended a record to be written which detailed places, distances, and so on, to prove the authenticity of Christ's ministry, who else would be chosen but an eyewitness of many of (though not all) the things he wrote about? But John was not the only eyewitness, and the choice of John cannot therefore be attributed to John himself. Furthermore, when the other apostles bore witness in John 21:24 to the truth of what John recorded, they did so by the command of Christ (see 15:26,27); so that, by virtue of the authority vested in them by the Holy Spirit, they could give the stamp of authenticity to the whole record.

### **Inspiration in the first person of the prophet**

The combination of (a) the prophets being given words to write from God, and (b) the providential hand of God in raising up prophets who would be so much a part of the revelation as to be living declarations of its truth, does not allow us to take a simplistic view of passages of Scripture which are expressed in the first person of the writer. How then should we understand the use made of "I" in Scripture when the subject is the prophet? Two scriptural examples are examined to demonstrate Scripture's own commentary on this point.

The first example is in Isaiah 8:18, where the prophet records, "Behold, I and the children whom the LORD hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from the LORD of hosts . . ." The personal pronoun in this passage clearly refers to the prophet himself; and yet this passage is quoted in Hebrews 2:13 about the Lord Jesus. The writer to the Hebrews does not consider it necessary to demonstrate that a passage referring in the first instance to Isaiah could in fact be speaking prophetically about Christ. He requires that it could, and assumes that his readers would do the same, since that passage is used by him to prove a different point from that which is being made in the first instance in Isaiah 8. The quotation from Isaiah 8 proves that the Christ was to be a flesh-and-blood relative of his "children"—his disciples. It must follow that the events which took place in the lives of Isaiah and his children were controlled by God, so that what was true of them was prophetic of Christ and his disciples, with the relevant details of style in the Isaiah record being a necessary consequence of this situation. This incident proves that when a prophet speaks in the first person it cannot be assumed that he is speaking of himself. When Isaiah said "I", it was the Spirit of Christ *speaking as Christ*. What may on the surface appear to be a human comment upon divine revelation, or an individual insight provided by the writer, is shown by biblical usage of the passage to be as much part of the Word of God as the "Thus saith the LORD" passages. The miracle entailed in this is not how two contradictory lines of argument can be reconciled, but how the ways of providence worked to produce, in a man's life, the type of Christ, so that the prophecy, structured sometimes upon the experiences of the prophet, portrays throughout the Spirit of Christ.

The second example is the prophecy of Balaam in Numbers 23. The record emphasises that the words which Balaam spoke were, as Balaam insisted, "the word that God putteth in my mouth" (22:38). The operation of inspiration is described in this way: "And the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth, and said, Return into Balak, and *thus thou shalt speak*" (23:5). The words Balaam was caused to speak included the following: "How shall I curse, whom God hath not cursed?" (v. 8). Balaam's own ideas may have been quite opposite to those expressed by the inspiration of God, for it appears that Balaam would have sold his services to Balak if he had been allowed to by the angel. Even so, Balaam was given words to speak which included expressions which would have been interpreted by Balak as portraying Balaam's own mind on the matter. Balaam may not have wanted to agree with the words which the Spirit put in his mouth concerning himself ("How shall I . . .?") since he had a mercenary nature, and he would have had to listen to his own words to learn how he should be thinking. If this was the case, the Spirit would have operated to overrule the thoughts of Balaam. If, however, Balaam had agreed with the prophetic word, inspiration would have operated with exactly the same result, although the mechanics of inspiration may have been different, for in this case the Spirit would have operated in harmony with Balaam's thoughts. Whichever way it was, the result was that Balaam spoke exactly the words given to him by the Spirit, even though he spoke of himself.

## Inspiration and the Psalms

The precedents of Isaiah and Balaam can be profitably applied to other Scriptures to understand how it is possible for men to speak of their own experiences, and at the same time be speaking the Word of God and be referring, not to themselves, but to Christ. Particularly is this helpful when studying the Psalms.

In 2 Samuel 23 the two ideas of the inspiration of Scripture and the role of the prophet are brought together. Verse 1 reads: "Now these be the last words of David. David the son of Jesse said . . ." But note what David said in verse 2: "The Spirit of the LORD spake by me, and His word was in my tongue." David's claim is not that God's ideas were put in his mind so that he could express them in his own words; it is that the words David spoke *were* God's words. These verses caution us not to impose our own preconceived notions about the possible ways in which inspiration worked. It is proper, however, for us to ask in what way the fact that the Psalms of David were written by David affects the way in which we should interpret these revelations.

To answer this question we should allow Scripture to lead us. In Acts 2:34 Peter, through the power of the Holy Spirit, quotes from Psalm 110. He introduces his quotation in this way: "For *David*. . . *saith himself* . . ." Emphasis is placed on the identity of the prophet so that the interpretation of the psalm might become clear. The psalm says: "The LORD said unto my Lord . . ." In this statement three persons are identified: Yahweh, David's Lord, and David. By emphasising that the psalm was written by David, Peter is drawing attention to the identity of the one who would sit at Yahweh's right hand. It was not to be David, for David said: "The LORD said unto my Lord . . ."; it was to be therefore one greater than David, for David called him "Lord". But even though this argument hangs upon the fact that it was the man David who recorded the psalm, the psalm still has the force of God's Word, for otherwise it would not have proved Peter's point.

In Psalm 110 the interpretation is straightforward because we can readily see that "my Lord" was David's Lord. "My" relates to David. This feature cannot, however, be generalised to all the psalms, as another New Testament commentary shows. Earlier in Acts 2 Peter quotes Psalm 16: "*I* foresaw the Lord always before *my* face . . . Thou wilt not leave *my* soul in hell . . . Thou hast made known to *me* the ways of life" (vv. 25-28). A straightforward reading of the "I"s and "my"s of David's psalm would lead to the conclusion that David was speaking of himself. Yet Peter argues that the psalm could not be speaking of David, *even though David wrote it in the first person*. The psalm deals with the resurrection from the dead which was to take place before putrefaction of the body took place; but David "is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day" (v. 29). Therefore the psalm could not have been speaking about David. The necessary inference which follows is given by Peter as: "*Therefore* being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, He would raise up Christ to sit on his throne; *he seeing this before* spake of the resurrection of Christ". Peter shows that David "speaketh *concerning him*" (v. 25), even though David says "I". The "I" referred not to David himself, but to the unborn Christ who was 'in his loins'.

In the case of Psalm 16 Peter's argument is not based on any indication in the psalm about the identity of the "I", but on the fact that the psalm spoke of things which could not have been true of David. Once again, however, we cannot generalise this truth to apply to all the psalms, for there are some psalms which speak of things which apply both to David and to Christ equally well. For example, when David was moved to write of the treachery of Absalom and Ahithophel (Psalm 41) he was also recording prophetically the treachery of Judas. David's experiences, on which the psalm is structured, were providentially controlled so that he was a type of Christ. The words put in his mouth by the Holy Spirit were therefore meaningful both to his own life *and* to the work of Christ. On the other hand, there are psalms in which it is not possible for the "I" to refer to Christ, since they speak of David's sins. Sometimes the identity of the "I" is switched within the same psalm. The following example illustrates the point.

In Acts 1 Peter quotes Psalm 69 and begins his argument: "Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy [Spirit] by the mouth of David spake . . ." (v. 16). The passage quoted is of Judas, and so it related to the days of the Lord Jesus. When we look at verse 5 of the psalm, however, that cannot be referring in a direct sense to Christ because it says, "my sins are not hid from Thee . . ." Between this verse and verse 9, which is quoted of Jesus in John 2:17, there is no indication in the structure of the psalm that the identity of the person speaking has changed. We have to conclude, therefore, that part of this psalm is speaking of David and another part of the same psalm is speaking of Christ. Only a careful searching of these Scriptures will enable us to 'rightly divide' them; but the point is established that, whether David was referring to himself or to Christ in the psalm, what he wrote was, as Peter affirmed, by the Holy Spirit.

When we look at psalms such as Psalm 51, which present to us the open heart of a repentant man, we are directed to see in the psalm words given to David by the Holy Spirit about himself. The example of Balaam opens up the possibility that David may have had to learn the truth of those things he wrote about himself, and to strive to make those thoughts his own. It is certain that at times, and in such

psalms, David did not readily understand what he wrote, and like the other prophets mentioned in 1 Peter 1:10-12, he would have had to search his own writings to understand their significance. David, like the Ethiopian eunuch, would have had to ask: “. . . of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?” (Acts 8:34).

### Conclusion

It needs to be stressed that the discussion developed in this article is not about the mechanics of inspiration. The questions raised are not about whether David wrote down the Psalms with his writing hand, as it were, being moved by an angel; or whether he had to concentrate his thoughts before the words came. The neurophysiology of inspiration has not been revealed to us. The discussion is about how the words given to the prophets could be God’s Word and yet could have differing literary styles and also reveal the character of the prophet. The answer proposed is that style is determined by the nature of the message, even when the prophet apparently is speaking of himself in the first person, and this is where our studies should concentrate. The signs we may see of the character of the prophet being preserved should not be interpreted as an incomplete attempt at ‘obliteration’ of the individuality of the writer by the Spirit, but should be seen as an integral part of the revelation.

<sup>1</sup> First published in the *Testimony* Special Issue “Inspiration”, vol. 52, no. 619, July 1982, p. 213.

<sup>2</sup> *The Oracles of God* (The Christadelphian, 1966 edition), p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> *New Testament Documents* (The Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1968 edition), p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> H. Smalley, “Luke”, *The Christadelphian*, vol. 117, no. 1393, July 1980, p. 251.