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Bahnsen on Inspiration

by Sidney Chapman

In April-June 1973 we published an article on "Autographs, Amanuenses and Restricted Inspiration" by Greg L. Bahnsen, an alumnus of Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia, which carried forward a discussion of "The Inspiration of Autographs" contributed by George I. Mavrodes of the University of Michigan to our issue of January-March, 1969. Now Mr. Chapman, who is on the faculty of Richland College, Dallas, Texas, carries the discussion still further forward.

IN an interesting and intriguing article, written largely in response to Professor George Mavrodes, Mr. Greg L. Bahnsen has argued the case for the inspiration of the autographs or identical copies of the autographs of Scripture.¹ A careful analysis of the first part of the article, which contains the aforementioned argument, reveals that Mr. Bahnsen's argument is defective in certain points. I analyze this part of Bahnsen's argument and then present an alternative interpretation of the passage on which he bases it.

In order to make Mr. Bahnsen's position as obvious as possible, let me state it and subsequently give my analysis of it. His argument is as follows:

- (1) All scripture is God-breathed . . . (II Timothy 3: 16).
- (2) There are God-breathed manuscripts.
- (3) There are manuscripts, the very words of which are God-breathed.
- (4) There are manuscripts of which the words in their syntactical relations are designated as God-breathed.
- (5) Only the *exact* word-groups constituting the referent of Paul's statement can qualify as God-breathed.
- (6) The referent (of Paul's statement) is a definite body of written word-groups that are accounted as canonical Scripture.
- (6a) If this set of written word-groups is represented as "W, O, R, D, S" (where each letter represents a constituent part of a larger literary whole: word in a sentence, sentence in a paragraph, paragraph in a book, book in a canon), then in effect Paul is saying that "W, O, R, D, S" is God-breathed.
- (6b) If there is *any change* in that group of written passages, the resultant group cannot be identified with the original set.
- (7) That which is considered inspired scripture can be legitimately taken as such only in so far as it is identical with the referent of Paul's statement (canonical scripture).
- (8) Every individual printed word-group had a first writing.
- (8a) That a particular text was written at all assumes that it was originally done so.
- (8b) The inspired word-groups were given in writing.
- (8c) There was an original manuscript for each of these word-groups.

¹ THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY, Vol. XLV, No. 2, April-June 1973, pp. 100 ff.

- (9) The word-groups found on the *original manuscript* would automatically be the authoritative standard and criterion of the identity of that word-group.
- (10) Since every scripture is God-breathed, we automatically afford the *original manuscript* of Paul's referent a privileged position.
- (11) Of necessity there is (was) at least one original written word-group to which Paul could have been referring.
- (12) That one (the original written word-group) is inspired.
- (13) Therefore, the word-groups on certain manuscripts are inspired and there was at least one written first copy of any such manuscript.
- (14) The word-group that is to be considered and responded to as divine utterance could appear on any number of parchments.
- (15) But, inspiration absolutely applies to the first copies of Scripture, and only perhaps to later copies.
- (16) A manuscript is accounted as being God-breathed in literary quality if and only if either (a) it is the original manuscript of a word-group . . . or (b) it is a manuscript whose written word-group is identical to that of the word-group written on the finished original in the first alternative.

In order to indicate the difference between Professor Bahnsen and myself consider my argument

- (1) All scripture is inspired . . . (II Timothy 3: 16).
- (2) The LXX is scripture.
- (3) Therefore, the LXX is inspired.

This is a valid argument and thus it is impossible that its premises are true and its conclusion is false. But are the premises true? Bahnsen has granted that (1) is true and I, and many others, claim that (2) is true. The most obvious way to confirm this claim would be to check articles pertaining to the LXX in encyclopedias and other authoritative sources. A cursory perusal of these sources indicates that my claim that (2) is true, is an accurate claim. But if (1) and (2) are both true, then (3) must also be true, if this is a valid argument form.

If one questions the validity of this argument form, then the form

- (1') All men are mortal
- (2') Socrates is a man
- (3') Therefore Socrates is mortal

must also be called into question. So the form of my original argument is valid, unless one wants to question the validity of this very basic argument form. However, it can be shown, under a truth-functional interpretation of this argument form, that no argument of this form can have true premises and a false conclusion. One concludes, then, that the form is valid.

Moreover, the conclusion of my argument (3) contradicts the conclusion of Bahnsen's argument (16). Thus, if the conclusion of my argument is true, then the conclusion to Bahnsen's argument is false and *vice versa*. And if my argument is sound, Bahnsen's argument may possibly be valid, but it would be unsound. In that case, the conclusion and at least one premise of his argument would be false.

I suspect that Mr. Bahnsen might reply that my argument does have a valid form but that it suffers from an equivocation of the word "Scripture". He has argued that "scripture" means the exact referent of Paul's statement, which he subsequently identifies with an original manuscript. And certainly the LXX is not "scripture" in this latter sense, and my argument would be guilty of an equivocation under this interpretation.

But is there any equivocation involved in my argument? I think not, but perhaps a comparison between Mr. Bahnsen's argument and my own will indicate an equivocation.

Mr. Bahnsen begins his argument with the premise, "All scripture is inspired . . ." And this is identical with my first premise. Later in his argument Mr. Bahnsen states

- (6) The referent (of Paul's statement) is a definite body of written word-groups that are accounted as canonical scripture.

On the basis of (6) I would infer that Mr. Bahnsen holds that the "scripture" of II Timothy 3: 16 is "canonical scripture". But if he does, certainly no equivocation arises in my original argument. For consider the following argument, which is only a variation of the first:

- (1'') All canonical scripture is inspired. . . .
 (2'') The LXX is canonical scripture.
 (3'') Therefore the LXX is inspired.

In case there is some historical debate about the canonicity of the LXX, one could substitute the name of any accepted translation, e.g. the King James Version or the Revised Standard Version, in the second premise and the conclusion still follows and also contradicts Mr. Bahnsen's ultimate conclusion (16). Thus, no equivocation has been shown and both the arguments which I have presented are valid and sound.

But Mr. Bahnsen could justifiably ask for consideration of his total argument before any final judgment is made about the acceptability of my argument. At one point Mr. Bahnsen concludes as follows:

- (12) (The original written word-group) is inspired.

With this conclusion the putative equivocation of my original argument is clearly shown.

- (1''') All Scripture (the original written word-group) is inspired
 (2''') The LXX is Scripture
 (3''') Therefore the LXX is inspired.

This argument *does* contain an *equivocation*. "Scripture" in (1''') is limited to original written word-groups and in (2''') it refers to that which is not an original written word-group. Thus if (1''') is accepted as a correct interpretation of II Timothy 3: 16, then my argument is

shown to be invalid because of an equivocation of the word "scripture."

But ought we to accept (1")? As evidence for it Mr. Bahnsen offers the following:

- (8c) There was an original manuscript for each of these word-groups.
- (9) The word-groups found on the *original manuscript* would automatically be the authoritative standard and criterion of the identity of that word-group.
- (10) Since every scripture is God-breathed, we automatically afford the *original manuscript* of Paul's referent a privileged position.
- (11) Of necessity there is (was) at least one original written word-group to which Paul could have been referring.
- (12) That one (the original written word-group) is inspired.

In a certain sense much of this material is unnecessary and irrelevant, for Mr. Bahnsen proposes to produce a criterion which will determine *what* is inspired. At least two classes of writings, i.e. "all scripture", and "canonical scripture", have already been called inspired by him. Now he adds nothing about the characteristics necessary to be included in either of these classes, but he seeks to limit the classes to one original written word-group since this is the authoritative standard and criterion of the identity of that word group.

Moreover, this argument is irrelevant unless it shows that "all scripture" and "referent of Paul's statement" are synonymous with "authoritative standard and criterion". Suppose I wrote of "all yardsticks" and you set out to determine the exact referent of my statement. If you argued that the "authoritative standard and criterion for the identity of yardsticks is found in the Bureau of Weights and Measures in Washington" you would have identified the criterion for determining one yardstick or one yard, but unless I had been speaking of *that* particular yardstick in Washington you would have failed to identify *the* referent of my statement. But that I was writing of *that* yardstick needs to be shown or argued for, and the existence of a criterion or authoritative standard for a yardstick is irrelevant for determining the yardsticks I was speaking about.

Or again, suppose I asked, "Do all yardsticks measure three feet?" and in response you answered, "The authoritative standard and criterion of the identity of any yardstick is a yardstick in the Bureau of Weights and Measures in Washington". Your statement would be true, but unrelated to the question or observation at hand.

Finally, (11) in conjunction with (12) contains the most obvious misuse of language in Mr. Bahnsen's argument. At the end of (11) he concludes ". . . Paul could have been referring". Note that this is stated in the subjunctive mood, the mood of conditionality, of supposition, of possibility. And from this premise he infers, "That one *is* inspired" [my italics] (12). To use Hume (possibly badly),

in an argument can one justifiably reason from "could" to "is?" If Mr. Bahnsen's argument is valid, then I could reason from

(1*) Paul *could* have been referring to the LXX

to

(2*) The LXX is inspired.

Again, I assume that Mr. Bahnsen would not want to accept this as valid. But if his argument is acceptable, then so is the one I have just given.

Two final comments before I give my brief interpretation of II Timothy 3: 16. Mr. Bahnsen's conclusion (16) would add to the words of Scripture and leave any who rely on translations of Scripture with no means of "teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness," unless they have access to an original manuscript or an identical copy of an original manuscript.

The conclusion to Mr. Bahnsen's argument (16) may also read: All and only original manuscripts or identical copies of original manuscripts are inspired. This is a much more exclusive statement than II Timothy 3: 16. Also (16) may be restated as: If anything is an original manuscript or an identical copy of an original then it is inspired *and* if anything is inspired then it is an original manuscript or an identical copy of an original manuscript. But II Timothy 3: 16 is equivalent to: "If anything is scripture then it is inspired" and only to that much of Mr. Bahnsen's conclusion. In other words Paul does not say "All *and only* Scripture is inspired", which in effect, is what Mr. Bahnsen concludes.

Another indication that Mr. Bahnsen's argument proves too much is that if his deduction is accepted then anyone who relies upon a translation has no means of "teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness". This is so because II Timothy 3: 16 in its *entirety* reads: "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness . . ." (RSV). If this verse is plugged into Bahnsen's interpretation it becomes:

If anything is an original manuscript or an identical copy of an original then it is "inspired and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness . . .", and if anything is "inspired and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness . . ." then it is an original manuscript or an identical copy of an original manuscript.

Since this expression is conjoined we may detach the second conjunct and note what we can deduce from it and another premise. Referring to the LXX, RSV, or King James Version, one could add as a second premise "This is not an original or an identical copy . . ." and thereby contradict the consequent of the second conjunct. From this it follows that the LXX, the RSV, or the King James

Version are neither inspired nor are they "profitable for teaching, reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness". And one can infer the same for every translation. And so I must ask the source of Mr. Bahnsen's teaching, reproof, correction and training. Given his conclusion (16) and apart from having access to the originals or identical copies of the originals, there is none. And if he has access to these latter sources I, for one, would like to know about it.

The word which is translated "scripture" in II Timothy 3: 16 is γραφή. That same word occurs in Romans 4: 3. In Romans 4: 3 Paul asks, "For what does the scripture say?" To answer this question: "The Apostle quotes verbatim from the LXX, only substituting δέ after ἐπίστευσε for καί before it, . . .", according to Liddon.² This is internal evidence that Paul considered the LXX scripture, for he does not scruple to quote it directly as scripture. Mr. Bahnsen's interpretation of II Timothy 3: 16 denies the status of scripture to the LXX unless it is an identical copy of an original manuscript. We know that the LXX is not an identical copy of an original, but Paul's extensive use of it is evidence that he regarded it as scripture, and inspired, even though Mr. Bahnsen may not.

Thus I return to my original argument.

- (1) All γραφή is inspired.
- (2) The LXX is γραφή (Romans 4: 3).
- (3) Therefore the LXX is inspired.

There is no equivocation in this argument, and it is both valid and sound. Mr. Bahnsen's conclusion (16) is therefore rejected as being false.

This argument shows, *if* it is both valid and sound, that any attempt to limit II Timothy 3: 16 to the autographs *only* will not succeed. Autographs may be included in the meaning of γραφή, but Paul does not limit its meaning to "autographs". Moreover, if the LXX is inspired, then it is also "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness . . .". To eliminate any legitimate source of teaching, correcting and training would be tragic for the church; to include any illegitimate source would be just as tragic. I do not propose to do either, but only to state my arguments as clearly as I can and to indicate the inferences one may draw from them.

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² H. P. Liddon, *Explanatory Analysis of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Zondervan Pub. House, 1961), p. 82.