The Authority of Scripture in the Patristic Period

T. V. PHILIP*

Introduction

Adolf Harnack once observed that 'Christianity, unlike Islam, never was and never became the religion of a book in the strict sense of the term',[1] Nevertheless the Bible holds a very unique place in the Church. The Bible has been regarded in every age and in every part of the Church as possessing an authority which is divine; it is because of this unique place the Bible holds for the faith and practice of the Church that the question of the nature of Biblical authority needs to receive our careful attention. Questions such as: How did the books, first the Old Testament and then the New Testament come to be treated as possessing authority? How did the Church in each age understand the nature of the authority of the Bible? What were the principles and methods of biblical exegesis in each period and through what channels did these principles and methods come into existence? What part did the Bible play in determining thought and practices in the past? These need to be asked in considering our subject.

This paper is limited to the period of the Church Fathers, especially the period between the second and fifth centuries. This is not in any way a comprehensive treatment of the subject, but only a general survey. Only a few of the Fathers receive special consideration in this paper.

The primary source for our study is the writings of the Fathers. There are several studies made of the Fathers. Of the secondary sources, *The Cambridge History of the Bible, Vol. I, Tradition in the Early Church*, by R. P. C. Hanson; *Allegory and Event*, by Hanson; *Chrysostom* (A study in the History of Biblical interpretation) by F. H. Chase; *The Word of God According to St. Augustine* by A. D. R. Polman; and *The Church's use of the Bible*, D. E. Nineham (ed.) are found to be very helpful. In studying the subject one needs to examine the liturgical tradition of the early Church. But this investigation was not done in preparing this paper and this puts a very serious limitation on it.

Discussion of the subject is centred on three main topics: (1) *Inspiration:* Revelation and human freedom; (2) *Biblical exegesis:*

* Dr T. V. Philip is Professor of Church History at the United Theological College, Bangalore.

[1] *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity* (Harper and Brothers) p. 279.

Principles and methods of Biblical interpretation by the Fathers; (3) *Scripture and Tradition:* the source of knowledge. Though the subject of 'Inspiration' is much debated in the modern period, the Fathers did not give any serious consideration to it. The second and third century Fathers were more concerned with the problem of 'Interpretation' than of 'Inspiration'. From the third century onwards the relation between scripture and tradition came to occupy an important place in the thinking of the Church and today it has become a subject of study not only among biblical scholars but also in the Ecumenical Movement as a whole.

1. *Inspiration and the authority of the Bible*

The doctrine of 'Inspiration' did not receive any serious consideration by the Fathers, though it was their unmistakable conviction that the scriptures were divinely inspired and therefore authoritative. One of the chief reasons for this lack of a definition of the doctrine of inspiration in their writings was that already, both in Greek and Jewish circles, there were accepted ideas about the inspiration of the scriptures and the Christian Fathers were greatly influenced by these, especially by Jewish ideas. This did not mean that they did not have any particular conception of it. According to the Greek understanding, 'Inspiration was an ecstatic condition during which the natural powers of the individual who was inspired were suspended. It was an absolute possession by the spirit, which for the time held the individuality of the person entirely in abeyance'.[2] For the Jews the scriptures were authoritative, and divinely inspired. They had a profound respect for the scriptures as the infallible word of God. They regarded even the letters as holy and their copyists were in the habit of counting them, lest any of them should be lost in transcription. There was a saying among them that 'he who says Torah is not from God', or even if he says, 'The whole Torah is from God with the exception of this or that verse which not God but Moses spoke from his own mouth; that soul shall be rooted up'.[3] Philo combined Greek and Jewish ideas of inspiration. He even regarded the grammatical errors of the Septuagint as inspired and rich in capacity for allegorical interpretations.

The Fathers of the early Church were influenced mainly by Jewish ideas of inspiration. In the writings of the Fathers of the second century, a more extreme form of verbal inspiration is found. For instance, to Justin Martyr scripture is the word of God given by God through the word or the Spirit. The prophets of the Old Testament were indeed inspired but the words which they uttered were not their own. 'We must not suppose', he says, 'that the language proceeds from the men who are inspired, but from the divine word which moves them'.[4]

[2] J. F. Bethune Baker, *An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine*, p. 44.

[3] Quoted by R. M. Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, p. 71.

[4] *Apology*, 1.36.33.

Athenagoras (about 180 A.D.) speaks of inspiration as a process under which men are used by the Divine Spirit as mere instruments, playing upon them as a flute player blows a flute. Under inspiration, men are entranced and their natural powers suspended and they simply utter under the influence of the Divine Spirit. Thus in the second century there was a tendency to consider the inspiration of the writers of the scriptures as divine dictation and to consider the Bible as if it were a Koran. It left no room for the individuality of the writers and obscured the diversity and spontaneity of the writings. Such ideas of inspiration found their extreme expressions in the Montanist movement of this period. But from the end of the second century there was a gradual change in the idea of inspiration and much recognition was given to the quality and freedom of the human instrument. Theophilus, bishop of Antioch, wrote (about 190 A.D.) that the inspired writers were not mere mechanical organs but men who were fitted for their work by personal and moral excellence.[5] The same emphasis on the personal qualities of the writers is also found in Tertullian. 'From the very beginning God sent forth into the world men who by their justice and innocence were worthy to know God and make him known'.[6]

The author of the *Exhortation to the Greeks* speaks of inspiration as the coming of the divine power on man, acting on them as the bow acts on the instrument. But he insists on the moral qualities of the human agents. He says:

> Not naturally nor by human thought can men get to know such great and divine things, but by the gift which came down from above at that time upon the holy men, who had no need of skill or art of words, nor of any debating or contentious speech. They only needed to present themselves in purity to the influence of the divine spirit, so that the divine power by itself coming down from heaven, acting on those just men, as the bow acts on the instrument . . . might reveal to us the knowledge of divine and heavenly things.

The great Fathers of the next three centuries: Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine and others, believed in divine inspiration but rejected both the pagan and the Jewish understanding of the way inspiration worked.

For Origen of Alexandria the scriptures were written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and have a deeper meaning than that which appears upon the surface of the record. He did not consider inspiration as an automatic process but as the activity of the Logos and therefore a rational process. The character of the inspiration is to clarify rather than to cloud, to heighten man's awareness rather than to diminish it. The author's natural powers are entranced, enabling him to become the vehicle of spiritual truth. But he remains himself, and cooperates in the execution of God's purpose. It is by the will of God that the word comes to him and not by his own will.

[5] *ad Autolycum*, ii. 9.

[6] *Apology*, 18.

But the author has the freedom either to cooperate or to refuse to do so and thereby frustrate God's purpose.[7] Origen noted even discrepancies between different accounts or even factual error. But this did not worry him. As we shall see later he was more concerned with the spiritual truth that can be preserved. According to Origen these discrepancies and other human errors served one purpose. Commenting on this, M. F. Wiles observes that it served to ensure that glory would be ascribed to the right quarter. Wiles says, 'If the Bible were simply the finest book by ordinary accepted standards of judgement, then it would be in danger of receiving acclamation simply as a fine human achievement. But in fact, just as Paul "being unskilled in speaking" could claim that the success of his preaching was not due to his power of oratory but to the power of God's Spirit, so the scripture is another example of God entrusting his treasure to earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us'.

For Chrysostom, a representative of the Antiochene tradition, the Bible was the inspired word of God. God condescends to speak to men through men. But the human language, raised to so high a use, does not thereby lose its essential characteristics. It is not clouded or obscured. For Chrysostom, revelation was not only through men but it was also conditioned by the powers of those to whom it was given.

Like all others of his time, St Augustine[8] believed that the Bible was divinely inspired. To him 'the Holy Scriptures were the work of God's fingers, because they have been completed by the operation of the Holy Ghost, who worketh in the Holy authors'.[9] To him, the Scripture was the work of Christ Himself. He says, 'Christ, our Moderator, having spoken what He judged sufficient, first by the Prophets, then by his own lips, and afterwards by the Apostles, has besides produced the scripture, which is called canonical, which has paramount authority and to which we yield assent in all matters'.[10] On another occasion he says, 'These books are the work of the good, supreme and very God'. With regard to the nature of inspiration, he mentions two points. On the one hand he emphasizes the divine factor of the inspiration. He argues that when the disciples wrote what he declared and spoke to them, it almost meant that he himself wrote those books. When he discussed the problem posed in Matthew 27:9, where the prophecy of the potter's field is attributed to Jeremiah rather than Zachariah, he suggested that that was so attributed because it pleased God, in his hidden wisdom, thus to charge the evangelist.

> 'What necessity was there for Matthew to correct his text when he read over what he had written, and found that the one name had occurred to him instead of the other? Was it not rather the proper course for him to bow to the authority of the Holy Spirit, under whose guidance he certainly felt his mind to be placed in a more decided sense than is the case with us and

[7] *First Principles*, Bk. IV.

[8] For a study of Augustine's doctrine of Inspiration, see Polman, *The Word of God according to St Augustine.*

[9] *The City of God*, X, 1, 2.

[10] *Ibid.*, XI, 3.

consequently to leave untouched what he had thus written, in accordance with the Lord's counsel and appointment, with the interest to give us to understand that the prophets maintain so complete a harmony with each other in the matter of their utterances that it becomes nothing absurd to credit Jeremiah with a sentence originally spoken by Zachariah?"[11]

Thus for Augustine, the initiative for writing the book was entirely God's. The evangelists were ordained by him to write and the Holy Spirit inspired, suggested and moved their spirit.

Secondly, though he emphasized the divine factor in the inspiration of scripture, he never lost sight of the human factor. He wanted to maintain both attitudes at once. For him, the Bible was both the exclusive work of the Holy Spirit alone and at the same time the exclusive work of the Biblical writers.[12]

Further, Augustine believed that the entire scripture was God's work. In the scripture, even historical events are related by divine authority, and must therefore be believed absolutely.

Even though the Fathers held different views regarding the manner of inspiration or the extent of it, they were all unanimous in asserting that scripture is divinely inspired. It is the Word of God for the salvation of men. How did they understand the authority of the scriptures? *For them the authority of the scriptures did not lie in the inspiration as such; in the manner or extent of the inspiration or in the quality of the agent, but in the God who inspired. Scripture has a sacredness peculiar chiefly because it is the Word of God. God is Truth. Therefore Holy Scripture is holy, truthful and pure.*

For the Fathers, the ultimate authority rests in God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. It was this unconditional acceptance of God's authority in Christ which led the Fathers to accept the authority of the scriptures.

In what way and to what extent the Bible is related to the authority of God is evident in the way the Fathers interpreted scripture.

2. *Interpretation*

The second century was not a period of great Biblical exegesis. From the beginning of the third century onwards we find that almost all important Fathers were exegetes. The challenge of Marcion and the Gnostics, the encounter of the Gospel with Hellenistic culture, and the theological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries, compelled the Fathers to turn their attention to the Bible in order to defend the Christian faith, and to expound and communicate the Gospel to others.

The Old Testament was the scripture of the first Christians and they looked upon it as sacred and authoritative. The first Christians were not aware of any radical discontinuity between the past and the present. But the position of the Old Testament in the Church was

[11] *De Consensu*, 111. 30 (quoted by Polman, pp. 43-44).

[12] Polman, p. 51.

challenged in the second century by Marcion on the ground that the new wine should not be put into old bottles; the Christian gospel was wholly new and absolutely discontinuous with Judaism. According to him, Christ's teaching was not a reform within the Jewish tradition, but a protest against it. Both Irenaeus and Origen wrote a good deal in order to refute the charges of Marcion.

Marcion's criticism was important. His emphasis on the 'new' in Christ could not be ignored. The Fathers in their interpretation of the Old Testament showed both the continuity and discontinuity of the New with the Old. How did they do this? For them the history of Israel was continuous with that of the Church, but only in a special sense. The Old Testament remained for them a preparation and promise of the New. For them the Old Testament pointed forward to the event of Christ's coming. The early Church noticed in the Old Testament the signs of longing for the future: the Kingdom of God, the day of Yahweh, the new Covenant, a new temple and out-pouring of the Spirit, and saw in Jesus Christ the fulfilment of these promises. The Old Testament is to be understood in the light of the New, in the light of the great event of Jesus Christ. The law and the prophets were theologically significant because they pointed forward to One greater than Solomon. The exodus and the return from the exile are events which manifest God's judgement and mercy and so illuminate and prefigure the nature of the redemptive act of God in Christ. For some of the Fathers, the Old Testament was a type of that which happened in Christ: a shadow of the real. For some others it was a prophecy or oracle of that which was to happen. For others the relation of the Old Testament to the New was that of part to the whole. What was revealed partially was now brought into fulfilment. They developed different methods of interpretation according to the different way they looked at this relationship. Sometimes several methods were used by the same writer. At any rate the Old Testament is fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The events of Jesus Christ imprinted their meaning upon the Old Testament, which henceforth could never be understood without reference to Jesus Christ.

The Fathers made use of their existing exegetical methods. Typology as a method of exegesis tried to establish a historical connection between certain events or persons or things in the Old Testament and similar events, persons or things in the N.T.[18] Some of the important Fathers who used typology as an exegetical method were Justin Martyr, Melito of Sardis, Chrysostom and Augustine and others.

The Fathers used typology because they believed that, in the providential ordering of affairs by God, the events of the O.T. were carefully designed to foreshadow and prepare the way for those redemptive actions which were to mark the decisive turning-point in the history of the world. St Augustine expressed this belief when he said, 'In the Old Testament, the New lies hid; in the N.T. the meaning of the Old becomes clear'.

[18] G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woollcombe, *Essays on Typology*, p. 39.

While in typological method there was a search for linkages between events, persons or things within the historical framework of revelation, in allegory, there was a search for a secondary or hidden meaning of a narrative. Allegory as a method of exegesis was widely used by the Fathers. Barnabas, Justin, Clement and Origen were some of its users. For Origen, just as in man there is body, soul and spirit, so in scripture there is a three-fold meaning: the literal, the moral and the spiritual. In contrast to the Alexandrian school, the Antiochene school placed emphasis on the literal, grammatical and historical. Whatever method they used, the chief principle of interpretation in the Fathers was Christological. G. L. Prestige remarks:

> What the Fathers really did was to interpret the whole Bible by the New Testament and to interpret the New Testament by the Gospel.[14]

The Bible was authoritative because it witnessed to the revelation of God in Christ. The Old Testament was authoritative because it pointed to the coming Christ. The New Testament was authoritative because it witnessed to the Christ who has come. The authority of the Bible is not in itself, nor in the accuracy of the historical details, but in the faithfulness of its witness to Jesus Christ who is the ultimate authority. It was in accordance with this conviction that the Fathers adopted their method of interpretation. Their aim in handling scripture was not to produce a consistent system of doctrines or ethical codes, but rather to preach and to teach the central message of the Bible, namely the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The details of their treatment might be questioned today; but for them what mattered was the main direction of Biblical thought and witness. Their interest was to preach and to teach. Hence their method was flexible. This missionary concern led several of them, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, the Cappadocian Fathers, to interpret the Gospel in terms of Greek thought. Once they knew that they were faithful to the central message of the Bible, they were not bound by any particular method of interpretation.

3. *Scripture and Tradition*

As we have seen, the Fathers interpreted scripture by the Gospel. From where did they get this Gospel? R. P. C. Hanson suggests that in the interpretation of scripture the Fathers did preserve what might be called a framework of the message of the Bible. Where did they find this framework?[15] Is it from the Bible itself? The Fathers found this framework in the tradition of the Church. The faith of the Church was based on the apostolic witness. The tradition of the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ found expression in the teaching, preaching, liturgical life of the Church, and in some of the written documents. For the early Church, tradition was not a dead thing. The Church lived the tradition. It was this living tradition of apostolic

[14] G. L. Prestige, *Fathers and Heretics*, p. 44.

[15] *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 1, p. 250.

witness in the church which was the 'framework' for the interpretation of scripture.

This is well brought out by Nineham:

> 'The fact is that, although it sought confirmation of its dogmas in the Bible, the Church had not in the first instance found them there. It had received them first of all from its own living tradition dating back continuously to the apostles, and in reading the scriptures it was guided and kept on the right lines by that tradition'.[16]

Nineham goes on to say that the faith of the Church was handed down in the Church's rule of faith, its catechetical system, its day to day life and worship.

In the first half of the second century there was no sense of antithesis between scripture and tradition. Scripture possessed authority because it was tradition. But the gnostic crisis of the second century raised serious questions for the relation between scripture and tradition. According to Irenaeus, the true tradition was found in the Catholic church, where it was preserved by the succession of ministry. Thus there developed the idea that the Bible should be interpreted within the context of the church's life. Not only Irenaeus, but several other Fathers held to this view. R. P. C. Hanson observes, 'The most important feature of Augustine's biblical exegesis is its ecclesial quality. The Bible must be read and understood within the framework of the life and doctrine of the Christian Community and not interpreted by mere private judgement, however learned'. This tendency led to certain extreme conclusions in later periods, especially to the idea of episcopacy as the guardian and interpreter of faith.

But for most of the Fathers, when they spoke of the church they were not thinking of the ecclesiastical hierarchy but rather of the collective experience of the faithful in living the tradition in worship, Bible reading and proclamation. Tradition was not static but a living experience for them. Scripture, liturgy and proclamation cannot be divorced. Scripture is interpreted by the living experience of Christ in the Church, and Christian experience is tested by the canonical scriptures which is the testimony of the apostolic witness.

In fixing the canon and making it authoritative for the Church's life, what the Fathers did was to bring scripture and tradition into a dialectical relationship, in which the Bible and the life of the church were to interact, each correcting, deepening and fertilising the other. Here we see the understanding of the authority of the Bible in relation to the church and of the church in relation to the Bible. *The common source of their authority is Jesus Christ.*

[16] Nineham, *The Church's use of the Bible*, p. 54.