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REVIEW

THE INSPIRATION AND INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE: WHAT THE EARLY CHURCH CAN TEACH US

Michael Graves (Grand Rapids, Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2014). 201 pp., paperback. ISBN 978-0-8028-6963-0, 24 USD.

While books of all kinds and from all angles on the interpretation of Scripture abound, books on the inspiration of Scripture are far and few between. The present monograph seeks to combine both themes and does so with reference to testimonies from the ancient church. Graves sets out with a brief survey of biblical references to inspirations, the approaches of ancient readers to sacred texts, and statements by the Church Fathers on the inspiration of Scripture in general terms (pp. 1–16).

Chapter two summarises arguments by the Church Fathers regarding the usefulness of Scripture (pp. 17–41). Following the apostolic lead of 2 Tim 3:16f, Scripture is seen as useful for instruction, as it is able to solve every question that might be raised. Every detail in Scripture is meaningful and must therefore not be neglected. The characters of the Bible serve as examples for the believing community. For the Fathers, Scripture constitutes the supreme authority for Christian belief and practice. Graves notes that

The concept of Scripture as “God -breathed” was as important to the Church Fathers as it is to Christians today. It is interesting to note, however, that early Christian interpreters did not invest as much energy as modern Christians have in working out a precise definition of the term “God-breathed” (*theopneustos*). Rather, for the Church Fathers the most important term in this passage is *ōphelimos*, which means “profitable” or “useful” (p. 17).

Chapter three traces the spiritual and supernatural dimension of Scripture (pp. 42–60, “If Scripture is the product of supernatural inspiration by the Spirit of God (2 Petr 1:21), then there must be a spiritual and supernatural nature to Scripture as a result”, p. 42). The Fathers insist that divine illumination is required for interpreting the Bible. The inspiration of Scripture allows for and perhaps even demands multiple senses. In addition, for the Fathers, following the lead of the New Testament, the Scriptures of Israel accurately predicted the future, especially about Jesus as God’s Messiah.

Chapter four focuses on the modes of expression in the Bible as the Fathers saw them (pp. 61–80). What was the impact of divine inspiration on the linguistic character of Scripture? There was a fair amount of consensus that at least some passages in Scripture speak in riddles and enigmas and that the etymology of words in Scripture must not be neglected. There were diverging views on whether God is directly and timelessly the speaker in Scripture and whether the Scriptures are of fine stylistic quality. Graves concludes that

most Christians recognized that the Bible in its widely authoritative Greek and Latin forms was not great literature by the cultural standards of the day. But in the end this did not matter, because it was the divine voice that most Christians expected to see in Scripture. Jesus was born in a humble stable, so why should the divine Scriptures not be humble, too? Only occasionally did certain Church Fathers place significant emphasis on the human element in Scripture, but when they did they were capable of making perceptive observations about the literal sense and literary quality of the text (p. 80).

Chapter five summarises the ancient church’s position on the relationship between the inspiration of Scripture and its historicity and factuality (pp. 81–105). The Fathers were convinced that the events narrated in the Bible actually happened. It does not contain any factual errors. In addition, for authors such as Tertullian and Lactantius, Scripture disagreed with pagan learning, because pagan learning was wrong and scriptural truth was right. For many other writers, Scripture was not in conflict with “pagan” learning. They were ready to grant some measure of

credibility to the pagan philosophical tradition (p. 93). Not translations, but the original text of Scripture was considered authoritative.

Chapter six describes the Church Fathers' claims about the truthfulness of Scripture in relation to its spiritual subject matter (pp. 106–131). For them, its teaching is internally consistent. Scripture does not deceive and its contents agree with a recognised external authority. The contents of Scripture are and must be worthy of God. Yes, there were problematic aspects in the biblical portrayal of God:

The God of the Old Testament does express a wide array of human emotions such as anger, regret, and compassion. He is also described as having human body parts, such as eyes, hands, and even a back (see Exod. 33:23). When ancient Jews and Christians read their Scriptures, they sometimes felt the need to explain how the human characteristics of God as described in the text fit with the true nature of the divinity. A key principle that guided their thinking on this topic was that anything genuinely taught about God in Scripture must be worthy of God (p. 124).

Graves emphasises that whatever other points of diversity can be found among the Church Fathers, they all looked to Scripture for true teaching on the Christian faith (p. 106).

In the concluding chapter (pp. 131–147), Graves first emphasises variety and difference in the ancient positions. He argues that belief in the inspiration of Scripture is not simply an “up” or “down” issue:

All early Christians discussed in this book could justly be described as having a ‘high’ view of biblical inspiration, but their beliefs varied as to the precise impact of inspiration on Scripture (p. 131).

He emphasises that the diversity in ancient Christian positions about inspiration as well as the gap between ancient and current perspectives render any claim to absolute continuity with the early church obsolete. Those claiming such continuity must also explain where they differ from the great authorities of the past:

It is highly problematic to claim to adhere to the ‘traditional’ view of inspiration, when in fact one is only adhering to a select portion of some ancient viewpoint (p. 132).

Other themes are continuity and meaningfulness (including analysis of the problems arising from the overriding modern emphasis on “literal” exegesis,

If Scripture is to speak credibly to contemporary Christians, the exposition of Scripture must move beyond simply recounting the *ad litteram* sense toward reasoned theological interpretation set forth with charity, p. 135),

the complexity of hermeneutics and issues of authority, and liberty in interpretation in faith and with responsibility (individual and communal interpretation of the Bible). A final section emphasises the benefits to the church of diverse interpretations of Scripture (pp. 143–147). Graves argues that

Although many early Christian beliefs about Inspiration cannot be brought into the modern world without at least some qualifications, certain key ideas related to spiritual perception, moral reasoning, profitability for the soul, and unity of purpose are essential for a fully Christian appreciation of Scripture today. This rich and complex manner of reading Scripture underscores the element of subjectivity involved in interpretation. In my view, this subjectivity means that scriptural authority should be construed as functioning ultimately between God and the individual Christian. This dovetails well with the reality of pluralism in the interpretation of Scripture, which is not a problem but a blessing for the church (p. 147).

In a masterful way, Graves combines the tasks of summing up the nature and content of the ancient evidence with an insightful and sensitive discussion of how it may enlighten current debates about inspiration (see also J. L. Thompson (2007), *Reading the Bible with the dead: What you can learn from the history of exegesis that you can't learn from exegesis alone*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans).

The remainder of the volume consists of notes (pp. 148–181), indexes of ancient authors, works and figures of modern authors, and of scriptural references.

One may have added a chapter examining the ancient sources on the origin of Scripture (collection of books, their dissemination, and the canon). Origen's critical statements on the deliberate presence of mistakes in Scripture in *De Principiis* IV could have received a more critical evaluation.

Despite these suggestions, Graves has provided a fine survey of the issues. The volume also serves as a reminder that some positions that are often blamed in today's discourse on ecclesial dogma (rather than historical evidence – as if the one would necessarily exclude the other), ecclesial approaches, or “fundamentalists” of all sorts, actually have a long tradition. In view of the current upsurge of interest in the patristic interpretation of the Bible, it remains to be seen whether and to what extent the position of the Fathers on the inspiration and interpretation of

Scripture can enlighten and stimulate current debate (Graves makes very useful suggestions at the end of each section and in the final chapter), rather than simply contribute to the recent focus on the reception history of the Bible in the wake of the cultural turn in the Humanities.

See also:

M. FIEDROWICZ,

2007. *Theologie der Kirchenväter: Grundlagen frühchristlicher Glaubensreflexion*. Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder.

A. HAUSER, D. F. WATSON (EDS.),

2003. *A history of biblical interpretation I: The ancient period*, Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Eerdmans.

F. YOUNG, A. LEWIS AYRES, A. LOUTH (EDS.),

2005. *The Cambridge history of early Christian literature*. Cambridge: CUP.

J. CARLETON PAGET, J. SCHAPER (EDS.),

2013. *The Bible: From the beginnings to 600*, The new Cambridge history of the Bible. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139033671>