

Biblical Foundations for a Theology of Inspiration

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Preliminary Considerations

FROM ITS INCEPTION, Christianity was in possession of sacred books. The Christian Church emerging from among the people and, out of the religion of Israel, had kept the holy books of the Jews and claimed them as its own. The experience of the Church demanded a new interpretation of these ancient writings. In fact, the oldest documents of Christianity testify to a pristine interest in understanding both Jesus and his deeds together with the experiences of the emerging community of his believers as events revealing the meaning of the holy writings of the Jews. Yet the Church went beyond the mere use and interpretation of the Jewish Bible. Soon after it began to preach its message by word of mouth, the need surfaced of putting this message into written documents. Already in the lifetime of the first Christian generation, then more urgently at the end of the lifetime of the first disciples of Christ, the need of fixing the first Christian preaching in written form was perceived by local communities and church leaders. Thus a new set of writings came about, which, in a rather short period of time, began to obtain among Christians an authoritative status equal to or even higher than the one possessed in the Church by the holy books of old.

When dealing with biblical inspiration in the context of Catholic theology, one of our main tasks is to reconstruct the process by which a twofold Christian Bible was formed: books of the “Old Testament,” apparently “inherited” from the chosen people of Israel and a new collection of books, testifying to the “New Covenant” or “New Testament” established by Jesus, the promised Messiah. While studying this historical process, one must not lose sight of the fact that the Christian Church did not come

about as the product of literary activities nor did it see itself imprisoned by written words. On the one hand, the Christians interpreted the sacred books they had taken over from the Jews in a new light derived from their faith in Christ. On the other hand, the spreading of their faith in Christ was not achieved by the propagation of written documents, but first and foremost by oral preaching and personal witnessing. Consequently, the new literary output created by the early Christians was secondary to their faith life, expressed through both oral propagation of their beliefs to outsiders and through preaching and teaching within their own assemblies. However, as the first generation approached their death, we see conscious efforts on the part of the early Church aiming at fixing and solidifying in written documents all the various areas and topics of Christian beliefs.

Christians believed from the very beginning that God's Spirit, his word and creative presence, which had formed the history and faith of Judaism, was actively present in Christ and his Church. Christians saw themselves—both their faith and their communities—formed as the result of a new presence of God's Spirit. It was this Spirit who began acting in their midst with an unprecedented intensity and enabled them to discover in the ancient, sacred writings a new meaning. This meaning was both new in its actuality and yet authentic and thus "original," because divinely intended. Thus they found in Christ the culmination and fullness of all the riches that the Scriptures offered. This understanding, however, was based both on new facts—the deeds and teachings of Jesus—and new insights. And both novelties engendered controversy and resistance. A need for new authoritative literary documents soon emerged. One should say, *Christianity was born with books in one hand and was soon prompted to produce new books with the other*. Their self-perception made them cling to the books inherited from the Jews and present also new books of their own: books containing the preaching of the first Christian generation as God's own word, that is, Scriptures of a dignity comparable to those of the Jews. Yet the self-understanding of the Church as the *locus* and the instrument of the Spirit's presence and action in the world never allowed the Christian Church to become a "religion of books." They continued to proclaim and witness their faith *viva voce* and claimed to keep on experiencing God's presence and activity within their ranks and in their expanding institutional structures.

The main facts enunciated above outline the basic questions that a Catholic theology of inspiration must treat. What does it mean for Christians to believe in the Scriptures as the word of God? In what sense and on what basis can they be convinced that through the books taken over from Judaism God speaks to all people today? How do we answer these

same questions about the books of the New Testament? In what sense are these books distinguished, on the one hand, from the sacred books of other religions and, on the other hand, from other literary products of ancient Judaism or early Christianity, some of them possibly contemporary with the sacred Scriptures of one or the other of the two Testaments?

Furthermore, if in the books of the Scriptures Christian faith finds the word of God in a unique and special way, how does that belief translate into exegetical practice when using Scripture? How do we concretely honor the divine inspiration of these books? And how do we give account of all their human qualities, which include both strengths and limitations, culturally conditioned features, historically dated attitudes and pronouncements, imperfections perceived on a literary or doctrinal level? How does the investigation and interpretation of these documents clarify problems of Christian faith, promote private and common prayer life, and, according to the ultimate motivation of the religious quest, facilitate an encounter with God in a given context of a contemporary spiritual, intellectual, or emotional experience?

In the theological tradition of the Church, the problems outlined here are divided into two large categories. The first group consists of questions treating the origins of the sacred books as divinely inspired literary products (theology of inspiration) normative for the Church (canon and canonicity), the second group is about the principles and methodology of interpreting biblical texts (biblical hermeneutics). This division is helpful and even necessary, but the two groups of questions cannot be treated independently or separately. In fact, when examining the beliefs and practices of the Church with regard to the use of the Bible in the early Christian centuries (one may say the first thirteen centuries), we can see a close interdependence between theories of inspiration and hermeneutical practices. It is quite striking to see that Christian theologians and exegetes made statements about the inspired character of sacred texts or the inspiration of their authors most frequently or almost always for the sake of introducing and qualifying statements about their interpretation. Principles of inspiration have been explained or argued for usually in the context and for the sake of exegesis. Ancient Christianity formed and specified its belief about inspired authors and texts for the sake of supporting or evidencing the principles that governed the use of Scripture in a theological discourse. On the other hand, the role of scriptural arguments in a theological debate has usually stimulated reflection and research about the normative status of the sacred text, the nature of its inspired character, and the presuppositions that such beliefs imply with regard to God's action upon the human authors who produced these texts.

In other words, much of the material of our theological tradition concerning inspiration is the product of “regressive analysis,” trying to give account, in retrospect, of the necessary and sufficient conditions that govern the exegetical process. Meanwhile it remains clear that, once the principles of inspiration and canonicity had been clarified, theologians had to proceed in a deductive fashion and apply all consequences to the various uses of the sacred texts.

All this, of course, should not come as a surprise. In the Christian experience, beliefs in the normative role of Scripture as God’s biblical word always preceded detailed reflection about the mode and way in which the inspired books came about as a product of human and divine causality. Therefore, in the history of theology, it is natural to expect any theory or doctrine about inspiration to have been preceded by some kind of exegetical practice. Usually concrete methods of biblical hermeneutics (and possibly the difficulties that they engendered) were at work in determining both the point of departure and the direction in which to move in investigating faith in the Bible as God’s word. Yet, within a doctrinal system, it is always assumed that from our concept of inspiration we should determine our rules of hermeneutics and not the other way around. In any case exegesis must become consistent with the ideas we form about the inspired word.

Of course, the questions listed above would suffice to fill several volumes. But they help us retain the perspective of a synthesis, which may need to be eventually composed in order to reconstruct the theology of inspiration according to the needs of the Church today. In this paper, however, I shall limit myself to three interrelated theses, with the aim of determining how the texts of the New Testament establish the foundation for a theology of inspiration.

First, I shall demonstrate that at its very origins Christianity came about as an exegetical enterprise, as it announced its single central topic: the teaching and person of Jesus Christ, “according to the Scriptures.” Second, I will show how the first Christian generations, while executing their exegetical program, were led to create a body of writings that itself became sacred Scriptures as it enshrined in written texts the oral preaching of Jesus and his disciples. Third, I will give a brief overview of biblical inspiration as it is expressed, for the first time as an integral part of the Christian faith, in the New Testament.

Part I: “According to the Scriptures . . .”: The Old Testament in the Apostolic Church

1. At its first emergence, the Christian faith—the faith of the primitive Church—appeared to be already in close connection with “Scrip-

tures,” the Holy Scriptures of Israel. The oldest extant document about the belief in the resurrection of Jesus, 1 Corinthians from the years A.D. 55–56., explicitly states such a connection: “First of all I have given over to you what has been given over to me, that Christ died for our sins *according to the Scriptures*, was buried and rose from the dead *according to the Scriptures*” (1 Cor 15:3–4, emphasis added). It is not an easy task to determine what specific scriptural text or texts the apostle has here in mind—maybe Isaiah 53 or Isaiah 43 or Hosea 6:2. But there is no doubt that Paul sees the Scriptures fulfilled in the peak events of Jesus’ life.

Moreover, in this text Paul does not speak only of some scriptural “anticipation” of the main facts of Jesus’ life-mission. Christian preaching and catechesis presupposed, in general, the faith of the people of Israel, reflected in their sacred writings, and regarded these writings as authentic sources for God’s word. The Acts of the Apostles makes it clear that the Christian mission usually began everywhere by an address to the local Jewish community. Even Paul, who claimed that his special vocation was to be the missionary of the Gentiles, began his activities (according to Acts) in each city by preaching in the Jewish synagogues, and from there he recruited his first followers. When approaching Jews, Paul argued on behalf of the gospel always on the basis of the Scriptures. At the end of Acts, the description of Paul’s activities in Rome well characterizes this fact: “With convincing arguments he began to explain to them the Kingdom of God, and from morning to evening, he tried to gain them for Jesus with arguments taken from *Moses and the Prophets*”¹ (Acts 28:23; emphasis added). Either by looking at Peter’s speech of Pentecost (Acts 2:14–36) or Paul’s preaching in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:15–41) or Philip’s dialogue with the Ethiopian courtier (Acts 8:26–38), we come to the conclusion that for Christian preaching the point of departure is consistently some text from the Old Testament. It is on this basis that the missionaries try to prove that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. How convincing this argumentation appears before modern-day historical-critical exegesis may be set aside at this point; after all, in the first century A.D., the whole cultural-religious context and the perspective of dealing with history were quite different. For our purpose here, it is sufficient to see that the first Christian missionaries

¹ “Moses and the Prophets” is a technical expression, equivalent to “the Law and the Prophets” meaning the totality of sacred Scriptures. The triple reference, “Law—Prophets—Writings,” from which the current Jewish word for “Bible” (TANAKH) was derived is, probably, of more recent origin.

presupposed the authority of the Old Testament, started from the Scriptures, and based their arguments on them.

But the testimony of the sources goes much further. In the practice of the apostolic Church, the Scriptures did not only serve as tools by which Christian truth was demonstrated. The relationship was mutual. The acceptance of Christ in faith provided also a key for understanding the Scriptures. According to St. Luke, the risen Lord explains to his apostles that through his passion and resurrection “everything written about me in the Law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled.”² And with this “he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Lk 24:44–45). This conviction, that one fully understands the Old Testament Scriptures in Christ, is expressed in the ancient Church quite often by reference to the symbol of the scroll in the Book of Revelation: the scroll that the Lamb takes into its own possession by breaking its seven seals (Rev 5:1–7). In fact, according to the earliest sources, the Church of the Apostles considers itself a fully entitled proprietor of the Scriptures of old, understanding and announcing their meaning. Thus faith in Christ is not only built upon the Scriptures, but also introduces the believer into the full and authentic understanding of the Old Testament.

2. The conviction by which the primitive Church considered the Scriptures of the Old Testament as its own has its roots in the thinking of Jesus himself. In his ministry in Israel, the point of departure for all his considerations was typically some biblical text. In the synagogues, following Jewish custom, he read and explained selected biblical readings. We can spot this in each of the four gospels. When introducing himself in the synagogue of Nazareth, his words are based on Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me. He anointed me to bring good tidings to the poor” (Is 61:2). He rolled up the Scripture text and sat down. In the synagogue, all eyes were fixed on him. He began to speak: “Today this text came to fulfillment at your hearing” (Lk 4:18–21). But one must not stop here and think that Luke just made this up in order to match the end of his gospel (Lk 24:44–45, quoted above). Matthew’s use of a chain of quotations from Isaiah in 11:4–6 has also a clear programmatic purpose. As we see there, a delegation from John the Baptist approaches Jesus to clarify his identity. The reply, using

² Here again we find Law and Prophets as a bipartite formula for all Scriptures. The Psalms are mentioned separately either because of the frequency of their use, or as an incipient form of the tripartite formula, so that “Psalms” stands for “writings” (the sapiential books).

mostly Isaiah 61:2, not only serves the purpose of describing in what sense and way Jesus is the Messiah, but, at the same time, it is like a “catalogue of messianic deeds” giving sense to each and every episode of the beginning of Jesus’ first ministry in Galilee, as described by Matthew 4:16–9:38. In a more sketchy but similar way, Mark’s gospel introduces Jesus and his “good news” by a double reference to “Law and Prophets” when in his opening lines he quotes Exodus 23:20 and Isaiah 40:3 as characterizing the “beginning of the gospel.”

While St. Luke, the author of the third gospel and of Acts, is one of the New Testament authors who notes most clearly the connection between faith in Christ and the biblical texts of the Old Testament, in different modes and with diverse emphasis, the rest of the evangelists express similar thoughts. In Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount is filled with references to the Mosaic legislation. Jesus as Legislator is of higher rank than Moses as this recurring phrase tells us: “You heard it said to those of old . . . , now I tell you” (Mt 5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43). He gives new legislation, but at the same time, he came for nothing else than to “bring to completion” or “to a fullness of perfection” the Law and the Prophets (5:17). In St. John, the testimony of the Scriptures is a most crucial issue. Jesus’ enemies argue from the Scriptures: “How can the Messiah come from Galilee? Do not the Scriptures say that the Messiah will be born from the family of David and the city of Bethlehem where David came from?” (Jn 7:41–42). Those who reject Jesus are said to be rejecting Moses just as well, for the acceptance of the books of Moses would result in accepting Jesus also: “Your accuser will be Moses in whom you have put your hope. If you believed in Moses, you might believe me, just as well, for he wrote about me” (Jn 5:45–46). St. Mark’s gospel may appear to contain relatively few explicit statements about the value of the Scriptures, mostly because, in general, it contains more narratives than didactic passages. But this gospel, too, shows clearly that Jesus repeatedly refers to the Scriptures (cf. Mk 2:25, 4:12, 7:6–11), and he teaches in the synagogues frequently (1:21, 3:1, 6:2). His messianic identity is suggested and outlined, in typically Markan style, by means of scriptural references (12:10–11, 12:36–37).

The relationship between Jesus and the Old Testament is illustrated in a particular way in the parable about the wicked vine-dressers, which is found in all three synoptic gospels (Mt 21:33–46; Mk 12:1–12; and Lk 20:9–19). The comparison of Israel to a vineyard comes originally from Isaiah. The vineyard owner sends his servants one by one (one prophet after the other) to the vinedressers.

Finally, he sends his own son whom they kill. The parable communicates in the form of a story that the coming of Jesus is in succession to a long row of divine missions that dispatched the prophets of the Old Testament. Jesus stands at the end and constitutes the peak of this series of prophetic sendings. While standing in continuity with the sending of the servants, the son is of higher rank than any of them: thus does his mission proportionately transcend theirs.

3. It is a commonplace to state that the Church “inherited” the Old Testament Scriptures from Judaism. Yet making this statement we say at once too much and too little. Too much because at the time the Church began to use it, the Bible of the Old Testament did not even exist in the form of an exactly defined collection of books.³ Only after the first Jewish War, about A.D. 90, was a final list of the holy books for Judaism defined. One must rather say that the Christians took over and began to use all those texts, which at a later time Judaism included in its canon of holy books. Christians, however, began to quote authoritatively from books that, at the time of Christian origins, Judaism had not yet formed a final consensus of, and which, later on, Judaism did not include in the Hebrew Bible. Consequently, the Old Testament of the Catholic Christian Bible contains several more books than the Hebrew Bible. Thus, some products of Jewish religious literature became part of the canonical books of the Christians, while “Judaism” (the Jewish groups that survived beyond the destruction of the second Temple) ultimately decided not to include them in its canon. Historically, the fact remains that the nascent Church did not take over a ready-made canon of the Old Testament, but chose to form its own canon by selecting from among the sacred books of the Jews that had been in use during the first century.⁴

On the other hand, speaking of “inheriting” the Old Testament from Judaism affirms too little. For the faith that Christians have in the inspiration and canonicity of Old Testament books coincides only partially with what Jewish communities would believe about the

³ Moreover, this “Bible,” such as it was, was not even a collection of Hebrew texts, but texts in Greek translation.

⁴ Much confusion about this issue comes from the fact that the scriptural canon of the Pharisees was reasonably well defined at the beginning of the first century, but Judaism became identical with Pharisaism only after the two Jewish wars, which made other factions disappear. Cf. D. Barthélemy, “L’état de la Bible juive depuis le début de notre ère jusque la deuxième révolte contre Rome (131–135),” in *Le Canon de l’Ancien Testament*, ed. J.-D. Kaestli and D. Weilmöller (Geneva: Labor et Fides: 1984), 9–45.

books that they commonly view, with Christians, as “Scripture.” The most important theological concepts and expressions about the Bible held in common among Jews and Christians are the following: God’s word addressed mankind through chosen individuals (Moses, David, the patriarch, the prophets, or others); the biblical text represents the “word of God” that the Spirit of God has moved the authors of these texts to speak or write. These concepts and expressions found their way into the New Testament, as well. Nevertheless the early Church came to some radically new concepts about the biblical texts as it formed different ideas about the meaning of salvation history. For Christians, belief in the Scriptures became an integral part of their faith in Christ. Members of the early Church who had a Jewish background initially retained their Jewish ideas about the Bible and imported them into Christianity. But as they became convinced of the truth of Christ’s messianic identity and his divinity, they began to read the Hebrew Bible with a new outlook and gave it a new interpretation. For Gentile Christians the process was slightly different. They would first learn about Jesus, and in a reversed order of logic they regarded the biblical books of the Old Testament as Jesus’ “pre-history,” and therefore sacred.

All in all, the Christian use and interpretation of Scripture by the early Church is not a mere imitation of a practice preexistent in Judaism but a new theological program based on the apostolic faith in Christ. The Jewish holy books functioned and were interpreted as documents of a Christ-centered salvation history with its full and true meaning becoming apparent only in the light of the Church’s faith in Christ. Christians were taught to read the Scriptures in the context of their faith. They debated and defended it but remained convinced that their understanding of these writings was superior to what those saw in them who had no faith in Christ. As early as A.D. 56–58, Paul makes a comprehensive statement about this in Romans 15:4 when he writes that “all that has been written” (in a technical sense he means all Scriptures) has been written “for us” (that is, for the Christian Church). Thus, he expresses the claim of the first Christian generation that the Scriptures belong to them: Their Christological interpretation fulfills their ultimate purpose and makes their comprehension possible.

Part II: “I Am Writing to You . . .”: The Formation of the New Testament

1. The faith of Christ was first spread not by the written word but by missionaries who preached *viva voce*. Narratives including the deeds and sayings of Jesus, as well as the memory of his teachings, were

preserved and popularized by live proclamation and oral tradition. To the extent we know, the first products of Christian literature did not deal with the life of Christ or the reproduction of his sayings, but with exhortations and the theological, moral, or pastoral comments of the missionaries. According to the quasi-unanimity of contemporary scholars, none of the canonical gospels was composed before A.D. 60. The gospel of Mark is most frequently dated to the beginning of the Jewish War or, at most, shortly before. Even those who claim the literary priority of Matthew's gospel would rarely date it earlier than the A.D. 60s, and often only circa A.D. 70. Books of the New Testament to which an earlier date could be assigned are few. These, like the letters of St. Paul, were written for practical reasons, not for the purpose of producing a new set of "holy books." To the extent that we can reconstruct the dates and events of Christian origins, one can say with a high level of certainty that almost all twenty-seven books of the New Testament were written in the last fifty years of the first century and, possibly, a few of them even later, probably in the following two decades. The production, collection, and preservation of these writings played a very important role in the process by which the first generation of Christians transmitted its faith, theological thinking, and moral standards to later generations.

Although the earliest pieces of the New Testament books were written in the years A.D. 50–60 (1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Romans, and 1 and 2 Corinthians are dated to this period with practical unanimity of scholars), their collection, preservation, and expanded use (beyond the original addressees)—a process that led to their "canonization"—had only started in the last years of the first century and had come to conclusion in around hundred years.⁵ Such activity was aiming at solidifying and formalizing the legacy of the first apostolic generation for following Christian centuries.

A particular feature of this process was the production of "pseudepigraphical" works, books attached to more ancient writings of apostolic origin. In the formation of the New Testament canon, pseudepigraphy meant the creation of additional written documents under the names of the major figures of the apostolic era, mostly epistles attributed to Paul or Peter, but also James and Jude.

Today's biblical scholarship offers a wide variety of opinions on the subject. There is, however, a sufficiently broad consensus on a few

⁵ The first canonical list of the New Testament, preserved in the "Muratorian Fragment" is to be dated (in spite of some recent challenges) to about A.D. 200.

main issues. On one side, the pastoral letters (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus) and 2 Peter are usually regarded as written by disciples of the apostles with an “attributed authorship” to the apostolic master. Speaking of “pseudepigraphy” is ultimately misleading, because such an expression assumes that these works were falsely attributed to the apostles and that the literary authors aimed at misleading or deceiving their readers. A good case can be made for the position that the authors of these documents intended to put into written form authentic apostolic traditions. As a result, the claim to authenticity could be verified by an extended concept of authorship

The attachment of titles to the gospels (“according to Matthew,” “according to Mark,” “according to Luke,” and “according to John”) is an issue often discussed in recent decades. Some scholars assume that all four gospels were originally anonymous works, but quite soon after, around the turn of the century, the plurality of gospels in use made it necessary to distinguish among gospels by naming them after fictitious authors, usually prominent apostolic personalities who were popular in a given local church. Theories on this matter usually lend support to doubts about the correctness of these attributions. But they all break down over the fact that, from the perspective of the early second century, the names “Mark” and “Luke” would be ill-chosen, as these persons have never been considered to be eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry. And there are other problems. Most important, the concept of “authorship” in antiquity does not agree with what we mean by it today. Authorship may mean the designation of the authority that covers the content of a book and does not necessarily refer to the literary author who wrote it. Just as the concept of a ghostwriter continues to exist in modern times, in antiquity commissioning the writing of a book was quite common (cf. 1 Pet 5:12).

Neither pseudepigraphy nor the identification of authorship, witnessed to by Church writers and early manuscripts, should be judged in a global way. The question of authorship comes with many nuances, and each case must be judged individually. Where there is the high degree of probability for “Mark” and “Luke” to be, in fact, the authors of the respective gospels, there is solid tradition for some substantial connection between the authority of the apostolic figure “Matthew” and the first gospel. But there remains a very elusive issue with regard to the identity of the author, or rather, authors, of the Johannine writings and—quite far toward the other end of the spectrum—almost total obscurity about the authorship of the letter to the Hebrews.

What is, nonetheless, quite unique in the history of the New Testament canon is the restraint that accompanied pseudepigraphy and the remarkable results of the process by which new works have been produced under old names. While the authenticity of 1 Peter is under debate (we should not treat that question here), it is quite clear that 2 Peter, written after Peter's death, was not only written with clear indications of rating 1 Peter as authentically Petrine, but also with an effort of discrediting any other attempt of producing further pseudepigraphical works under the name of Peter. Similarly, an appendix attached to the gospel of John (that is, chapter 21), makes it impossible to produce any further document attributed to the author of the fourth gospel. This appendix even declares futile any further proliferation of gospel literature. Furthermore, it is clear that the letter of James aims at building links between Paul, especially Romans, and the Jewish-Christian heritage enshrined in the gospel of Matthew and, thus, has a balancing role between these traditions, rather than an innovative one. Even if contemporary exegesis of the pastoral letters tends to see emphasis on increasing institutionalization in these three documents, one cannot deny that what the Pastorals ultimately accomplish is an effective closure of the Pauline corpus. After 2 Timothy, further Pauline pseudepigraphy becomes virtually impossible. From the fact that the Pastorals are presented as the last Pauline letters, we must conclude that this pseudepigraphy seeks to preserve, and obtain closure for, a body of normative documents, rather than to promote further production of such writings.

2. Each of the four gospels demonstrably carries in its title and content conscious attachment to the apostolic preaching. Each is linked to a name that, in the context of the canon, is connected with a major apostolic figure of the first proclamation of the Christian faith.

I am aware that contemporary gospel exegesis would challenge this statement with weighty objections. We can list the most important ones as follows.

- The term "apostle" (as applied to the Twelve) is missing from John.
- In the original text of Mark, there are no resurrection appearances.
- In Matthew, there is only one appearance of the risen Christ.
- From among the Twelve Apostles, only Peter left behind some historical individuality. Besides him, the person whom the sources mention as a main leader is James, "the brother of the Lord," who

was not an apostle, while Paul never saw the earthly Jesus. Thus, the persons who in reality had important leadership roles in the early Church are Peter, James, John, and Paul, and of these only Peter is named as a major figure in the gospels. To make matters worse, some will say, Mark and Luke did not see Jesus, the authorship of John is based on tenuous grounds, and the identity of the converted tax collector with Matthew is fictitious.

However, a careful evaluation of the perspective in which each canonical gospel presents its material can show that for each composition the organic ties of its content with the first apostolic preaching as well as guarantees coming from linkage to eyewitnesses are of capital importance.

In the gospel of Matthew, the close of the book explains most explicitly the linkage of its content with the apostolic preaching. In the final scene, when appearing to the eleven, Jesus declares the beginning of his messianic reign (“all power has been given to me in heaven and earth”) and entrusts to their care his whole teaching and all the precepts he has given them. Their task is to turn all nations into disciples of Jesus and promulgate the divine commands—a new legislation—that he has provided for them (Mt 28:16–20). What this scene really tells the reader is that the content of the book has been, by the will of the risen Christ, the material of continued preaching destined to all peoples of all times. This preaching, which is to be begun by the eleven, has preceded the composition of the book and continues concurrently with the use of Matthew’s gospel. The book is secondary to the preaching, and yet it obtains its importance and authority from that empowerment given to the eleven as Christ sends them out into the whole wide world. The last sentence of the book is of extraordinary importance: “Behold I am with you until the consummation of the world.” The reigning Christ, when commissioning the eleven, guarantees his abiding presence with them until their task is completed. Here the book points beyond itself and declares the ongoing presence of the enthroned Messiah with his messengers, assuring also in this way authenticity, normative authority, and never-ending trustworthiness to the preaching that begins under his command. The self-understanding of Matthew’s gospel is clearly part of a larger context that is the self-understanding of the Matthean church, not only holding in possession the historical memory of Jesus’ deeds and teaching but having the effective presence of Jesus himself, as the ultimate guarantee of truth and

authority. This consciousness of authenticity cannot be assailed by inspecting the material exactness of the book's content in terms of human record-keeping. The author is fully aware that the guarantee of truth is the actual presence of the risen Christ in the Church. If we consider this awareness, we see right away that enumerating several more episodic encounters between the disciples and the risen Christ is of no consequence for the Matthean author. The book aptly concludes by declaring the ongoing presence of Christ to his disciples as the solid basis for all ecclesial activities, including the creation of an authentic record of Jesus' deeds and teaching.

In Mark's gospel, a different self-understanding of the Church and of the author comes to expression. Most important is the title of the work: "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). The Greek word *euangelion* is a key Christian term used for designating the Christian message. From the opening of Paul's letter to the Romans (1:1–4), a document dated with certainty (A.D. 56–58), we know that this word was closely associated with the self-understanding of the first Christian missionaries. Paul himself declares that he has been "segregated for the *euangelion*," that is, his whole life has been put into its service by divine election and call (cf. also Rom 1:16; Gal 1:11–12; 1 Cor 9:16–18). But it is also quite important to see that this understanding of the rapport between "apostleship" and *euangelion* is not a Pauline specialty, nor is it derived from an idiosyncratic Pauline self-concept. Paul's words explaining the content of the *euangelion* in Romans 1:1–4 have been widely recognized as reporting significant pre-Pauline formulas. Both the style and the vocabulary reveal that he is drawing from previous tradition. This is, of course, quite understandable since he is addressing a Christian community that he has never visited before. Romans is the only Pauline letter written to a non-Pauline Church community; we can naturally expect that he begins speaking to them in the language and idiom widely used by the earliest Christian missionaries. Moreover, Paul makes it quite clear that, in his self-understanding as an apostle, he compares himself with the chief eyewitnesses of Jesus' earthly life (1 Cor 9:1–5; cf. Gal 2:9). Paradoxically, *even his claim of a direct call and personal vision of the risen Christ* (Gal 1:1, 1:15–16) *is patterned upon what constitutes the authority of the original Twelve*: their personal call and firsthand experience of the resurrection (cf. 1 Cor 15:5–9). Thus, there can be no doubt that when Mark gives his composition the title of *euangelion*, he ties it not only to the apostolic preaching but to the apostles who spread the Christian

message with special qualifications and authority. This title also ties his book to the witnesses of the resurrection, so that the fact that the original ending of Mark contains no stories of encounters of the apostles with the risen Christ is of little importance. The Roman community had possessed by then, for about a decade, Paul's epistle written to them and, in all probability, a copy of 1 Corinthians in which a traditional list of Resurrection appearances is found (1 Cor 15:1–8, esp. v. 3). In general, at the time the gospels were written, the experience of the risen Christ was recognized as a presupposition for both Christian faith and Christian preaching and belongs topically to the conclusion of the documents describing the Lord's deeds and doctrine. What characterizes Mark's concept of apostolic preaching is, quite interestingly, an effort to anchor it in the actual participation of the Twelve, in Jesus' own preaching of the gospel. Repeatedly (cf. 3:14–15, 6:7–13, 30–32) he pictures how already in Jesus' lifetime the Twelve are being sent to do what Jesus does, in his name and with his power.⁶ If we look at all these elements of Mark's gospel, there is certainly enough evidence for concluding that the book is consciously exhibiting ties with the "apostolic twelve" and cannot be understood without the claim of continuity between the activities of Jesus and the ongoing work by his chosen disciples.

Such an awareness of connection between "gospel writing" and apostolic preaching is most acute in Luke's gospel. The main reason seems to be the simple fact that Luke alone wrote a two-volume composition, describing Christian origins not only by a narration of Jesus' "deeds and words" (Acts 1:1), but reporting in a volume of equal length the history of the apostolic preaching, mostly the activities of Peter and Paul. In any case, the preface of the gospel (Lk 1:1–4) presents carefully and concisely the ties Luke sees between his role and that of the "eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" who spread the Christian message by preaching. He speaks of the role of tradition, the task of collecting information from eyewitness sources, going back to the origins, obtaining completeness of information,

⁶ In this regard, the compact sentence introducing the selection of the Twelve is quite remarkable: "[H]e chose Twelve so that they might be with him and that he might send them to preach and that they might have power of expelling demons" (3:14–15). This statement levels off considerably the differences in the role of the Twelve before and after the Resurrection. It is surprisingly close to what is read in Matthew's last verses: The preaching, the power, and the "being with Jesus" constitute practically the same concept of apostleship but with the difference of making these functions appear as rooted in their original election not an empowerment following the Resurrection.

providing an ordered narration with accuracy. We see here for the first time the self-concept of a historian and a writer, combined with that of a believer and servant of the Church community, who aims at providing “solidity to the words” of preaching by using the methods of ancient historiography. Dealing with his task as a qualified “professional,” *Luke is the first to realize that he can achieve his goal of laying solid foundations for the preaching of the Church only if his work encompasses both the history of Jesus and the history of the early Church as two consecutive phases of one single divine intervention in human history.* What appears at the end of Matthew only as a rather vague projection—the sending-off of the disciples into the totality of space and time—takes concrete shape in Luke’s work. His book’s structure exhibits in geographic terms the expansion of the Christian movement. The beginnings in Galilee lead to the peak events of crucifixion and Resurrection in Jerusalem; then the beginnings of the Jerusalem church lead through numerous meandering developments, to a final transfer of the gospel to the Gentiles, symbolized by the arrival of Paul in Rome—Paul, who, in spite of being a prisoner destined for martyrdom (the farewell of Paul in Acts 20:32–38 leaves no doubt), announces the message and teaching “about the Lord Jesus Christ with full confidence and unhindered.” (Acts 28:31)

The author of John’s gospel also expresses much awareness of purpose and motivation, and, specifically, of his work’s relationship to the preaching and teaching functions of the Church. There is much to be said about the close relationship between the prologue of the gospel and the first Johannine letter, especially its first chapter. The central topic of both texts is the Eternal Word who appears in the realm of flesh and thus becomes the object of sense experience: what we have seen, heard and touched by hand. The “we” in both texts (1 Jn 1:1–3 and Jn 1:14) is an “apostolic” we, with reference to a special group as privileged eyewitnesses with a task of witnessing. By their testimony, these witnesses extend their communion (*koinonia*) with the Word of God to all men who are willing to receive their preaching with faith. The Johannine writings, and especially the gospel, have the task of helping to extend this communion of life with God achieved through the Incarnate Son. Such insistence on the function of writing in service of this communion is typical of the Johannine works in which the Greek verb *graphein* has its highest occurrence among all books of the New Testament. “This I *write* to you so that you do not sin” (1 Jn 2:1; emphasis added); “I *write* to you, children. . . . I *write* to you, fathers. . . . I *write* to you, young men . . .” (1 Jn 2:12–14; emphasis added; “I

write” is repeated here six times). The so-called first ending of the gospel of John, which is the literary conclusion of the whole work (chapter 21 being structurally an “appendix”), functions as a written testimony to the author’s faith in Christ, aiming to help the reader reach the same life-giving faith: “These have been written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and by this faith you might have life” (Jn 20:30–31). This conclusion has a striking resemblance to Mark 1:1 speaking of the gospel “of the Messiah, the Son of God.” Nonetheless, John’s gospel makes it very clear that it contains only an “anthology” of the Jesus tradition: “Jesus performed many more signs in the sight of his disciples which are not written in this book” (Jn 20:30). The written work originated in preaching but the writings make no claim of completeness in comparison with the reality to which they give witness.

3. Dependence on apostolic preaching is of capital importance not only for the gospels, but also for the rest of the books of the New Testament. Those letters of Paul whose authenticity is in no doubt (Rom, 1 Cor, Gal, Phil, 1 Thes, Phlm) obviously became part of the New Testament canon because of their Pauline origin. But Colossians and Ephesians are also depositories of Pauline teaching, even if their actual literary form does not come from Paul himself. The strong Pauline tradition in Asia Minor, which survived beyond the lifetime of the apostle and led to its blossoming Church life, is attested in many independent ways. Paul’s three years of continued teaching in Ephesus, the capital of the province of Asia Minor, are recorded in Acts, and there is no basis for questioning the reliability of this information. The letters of both Ignatius of Antioch addressed to the churches of the region around the year 115, as well as the extant texts of St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, the leading Church figure of the region shortly after, explicitly mention and quote Paul and refer to his letters. Consequently, the collection of the Pauline letters must have been made in Asia Minor at a rather early point.

The most significant witness to the process by which the Pauline corpus was formed is the brief private letter to Philemon: It is the only authentic private letter (addressed to an individual on account of an individual affair) that survived in the collection, and this fact leaves little doubt that people in possession of this private letter have played an important role in the gathering of Paul’s letters.

2 Peter, which is most reasonably dated around A.D. 125, not only testifies to the existence of a Pauline collection of letters, but also

manifests that, at a very early phase, controversies arose about the correct interpretation of Paul's letter. This "hermeneutical controversy" seems to explain sufficiently, at least in basic outline, why Paul's disciples continued the literary process of enshrining the teaching of the apostle (as well as its earliest understanding) in the same literary form that comes from Paul: the letter. Moreover, the preceding seems to explain why the "Pastorals," three pseudepigraphic letters addressed to Timothy and Titus, were constructed to include the most important elements about Pauline Church order and why, in this way the main ideas about tradition were conveniently attached to Paul's literary figure and the written teaching. It was in these Pastoral letters that Paul obtained the title of "the Apostle," a title that he has retained throughout the rest of the Church's history in both the East and the West. Of course the rest of the books of the New Testament are also attached, in various ways and often for reasons that we cannot fully identify with certainty, to different "apostolic figures." The first epistle of Peter, which claims to be of Roman origin and is addressed to the churches of Asia Minor, might well be authentically Petrine, in the sense in which its conclusion seems to claim it: It is a letter written in Peter's name by a disciple, Silas or Silvanus, whose name we know from other sources. Accordingly it contains doctrine sanctioned by Peter and could have been written in his lifetime. 2 Peter completes 1 Peter, testifies to the authenticity of its teaching, and, at the same time, coordinates the theological and literary legacy of the two apostles in a manner that is balanced and should have appeared satisfactory to the Pauline communities. Thus, given the image cast of Peter in 2 Peter, both Peter and Paul are portrayed as recipients of supernatural revelation, both are preachers and authors of letters, originators of doctrinal traditions, and, finally, holy martyrs of blessed memory. The two letters of Peter with the Pauline corpus form the bulk of the apostolic letters of the New Testament.

Clearly, as was mentioned above, the Letter of James aims at solving problems of interpreting Pauline theology for those steeped in the theological tradition of the Matthean gospel, and the author knows about the legitimacy of Jewish-Christian tradition in the Church. James, the "brother of the Lord," might not have been one of the Twelve, yet his figure is numbered among the original apostles already in Paul's lifetime (Gal 2:9; 1 Cor 15), so that a letter attributed to him was legitimately seen by the early Church as "an apostolic writing." The letter of Jude is a special case. It seems to be one of the authoritative sources of 2 Peter. By both its attribution to

“Jude, the brother of James,” an original disciple, and its relationship to 2 Peter as a major source, it was easily seen as invested, according to the categories of the early Church, with apostolic authority. The Johannine letters obtained their canonical status by their connection to the fourth gospel and the self-identification of the “presbyter” (3 Jn 1:1), who is the author of both the second and the third letters, with the Apostle John. This identification was debated in one form or another for a long time. Yet the Church settled for the authority of the writings whose pertinence to the tradition of the fourth gospel remains unchallenged, without ever forcing on the faithful a dogmatic decision about the identification of the author as John, the son of Zebedee. In a similar way, the authority of the Book of Revelation is due to a number of factors. Its apocalyptic style, its claim of being revealed by heavenly angels to a visionary who calls himself John, and its demand to be considered as an inspired book (cf. Rev 1:3, 19; 22:8, 18–19) are quite significant. But ultimately it found acceptance into the canon as a book pertaining to the apostolic heritage of the Church. The identification of the seer with the Apostle John goes back to Justin Martyr and Papias. This conviction has pervaded the ecclesial “public opinion” for most of the history of the Church. On the other hand, its belonging to “Johannine writings” is a critically verifiable proposition even if as a piece of literature it is of a different genre, style, and quite possibly by a different literary redactor—maybe also by another author—than John’s gospel or the three Johannine letters. The statements of Church teaching demanding the admission of these books into the New Testament canon are of a theological, and not a literary or historical-critical nature. The apostolicity of a book entails its authenticity, by which it represents original or foundational teaching for the Church. But the term does not prejudice the exact historical process by which such books found their literary form and shape. In the case of the Book of Revelation, the Church has provided the survival of a block of New Testament prophecy and apocalyptic thought, asserting its derivation from and conformity with the original presentation of the Christian message. It can be demonstrated that all controversies concerning the canonicity of the Book of Revelation have been attached to problems of its interpretation and that the objection against its apostolic authority made in the early Church was the consequence of a millenarian interpretation of some parts of the book rather than of objections raised on historical or critical grounds against the Johannine authorship of the book.

We see, thus far, that the concept of apostolicity is what German theology calls with predilection a *theologoumenon*, a theological construct whose conceptual ingredients are theological but that is, at the same time, superimposed on some rudimentary facts of historical tradition. The theological content alone cannot be asserted without signifying *in some sense* also historical connotations, but the exact way in which the historical meaning of apostolic origin can be verified for one book or another is not defined with authority. For the magisterium of the Church it has always been sufficient that the apostolicity of all canonical books be verifiable in some *analogous sense* of the word.

4. In a full and technical sense of the term, we cannot speak about the “Scripture of the New Testament” as something existing in the second century, at least not before Irenaeus (for example, around A.D. 150) and certainly not in the consciousness of contemporary Christians. Not only did the propagation of these books take a certain amount of time—more time than in our days—but also the historical and sociological process that brought about the New Testament did not come to its conclusion until the end of the second century. This process had several phases.

At first, the role and importance of oral tradition did not cease but maintained its vigor concurrent with the production of written texts for at least another generation. The quotations of Jesus’ sayings in Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Justin Martyr are oftentimes pieced together from memory, and the variants are due to the multiplicity of forms of oral traditions. At the same time, there is still a great deal of activity by which the apostolic tradition obtains further written form: gospels, “acts” of different apostolic figures, apocalyptic books, letters by individual or several apostles are written time and again. However, it must be said right away that as far as literary forms are concerned an overwhelming part of this continued literature, with pretension of authenticity and normative character, is patterned according to the earlier compositions that became part of the canon. But the motivation and purpose for producing such new works is evidently multiple and ever-increasing: devotion; satisfaction of curiosity; support for doctrinal needs; innovations; new trends; ecclesial groups, some remaining in communion with mainstream Christianity and some receding into isolation or appearing isolated in the eyes of the rest; aberrant practices—all these dilemmas demand the production of further “sacred writings.” Most important are those

attempts that try to establish harmony between the fundamental tenets of the Christian tradition and the different streams of philosophical and religious movements of late Hellenistic society.

While this activity was growing and bearing fruit with an ever-increasing fecundity, the problem of authenticity became more and more acute. By what method can authentic and non-authentic traditions be distinguished? True and pseudo-apostolic writings need to be sifted out and separated: What are the criteria? There were all sorts of efforts, rooted in more or less good faith, to enshrine one's own tradition in literary documents endowed with apostolic authority by their titles or by fictitious settings. From the *Didache* or "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles" to the *Epistula apostolorum*, we see a copious number of documents trying to solidify liturgical and ecclesial legislation or custom in fixed literary forms. By the end of the second century, the question pervades all parts of the Church: Which documents contain truly and especially, with independent authority and normativity, the teaching inherited from the first Christian generation and, ultimately, through the apostles, from Christ himself?

By the nature of the matter, it is with the third or fourth Christian generation that canonicity—the authentic and normative character of allegedly apostolic writings—becomes a problem in the Church at large. On all fronts the Church had to engage in a battle to obtain its own self-concept and so to define what is authentically Christian, as opposed to what is distorted, transformed, and falsified. This process took place largely in terms of making decisions about literary documents: Certain writings were collected and approved for public reading in the churches, and, in addition, the core of this collection was declared authentically "apostolic" in the sense explained above.

In fact, we are talking about two organically connected phases. In both the Church has looked at its past and at itself. In the former, it tried to determine what it had received as original and normative material from the preaching and teaching of Christ's first missionaries. In the latter, it tried to identify those literary works in which this authentic teaching is fixed in such a way that the writings themselves are bearers of the divine word that constitutes the foundation of the Church: They are "holy Scripture" by being constitutive for the Church, in the sense of containing guaranteed divine truth upon which the faith life of the community can be built, questions can be decided, regulations may be based, and certainty about authentic tradition may be assured.

Part III: Theology of Inspiration in the New Testament

1. When the nascent Church began to use the Scriptures of Judaism, it also adopted a certain way of looking at them and speaking of them, both of these ways having their origin in the Old Testament. In other words, the Church's faith in the Christian Bible resumes and further develops the faith the Jews had in their Scriptures. The earliest Christian texts contain the same formulas of quotation and reference that can be found in contemporary Jewish documents: "for it is written," "as Scripture says." These formulas not only mean that the texts that follow are part of the Scriptures, but that what is being quoted exhibits a conclusive proof of divine authority to be accepted with faith and reverence. Such an attitude is found on almost every page of the New Testament and proves that the early Church taught without hesitation or ambiguity the divine authority of the Old Testament. Scripture is the word of God, and thus it "cannot lose its validity" (Jn 10:35). Such an attitude surrounds not only the Mosaic books, but also texts in which a prophet speaks as God's "mouth-piece" (cf. Acts 4:25). Even narrative texts of the Old Testament come to be quoted as "God's word." So, for example, in Matthew 19:4–5, a narrative passage from Genesis (2:24) is cited with the words, "He [the Creator] said." Here the biblical text is quoted in this way in spite of the fact that, formally, it is not a divine saying, but a statement of the human narrator speaking in his own name.

In another typical locution, New Testament authors refer to words or statements from the Old Testament as "by the Holy Spirit." So, for example, in Acts 4:25 the Apostle Peter quotes Psalm 2 in the following way: "You [God] have spoken in this way by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of David." Elsewhere, when Paul is quoting Isaiah, he says: "Rightly did the Holy Spirit speak when saying the following through Isaiah to our fathers" (Acts 28: 25). The epistle to the Hebrews repeatedly quotes Scripture as text spoken by the Spirit (3:7, 10:15). According to the gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus quotes the Psalms as what "the Holy Spirit said through David" (Mt 22:43 = Mk 12:36).

2. Two passages—2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21—are of special importance. These are not referring to some specific scriptural quotations but to "the Scriptures" in general. In 2 Timothy 3:16, Timothy is encouraged to remain faithful to the true teaching he received and to follow the Scriptures that he has known since childhood. The text expresses the conviction that the knowledge and understanding of the

Scriptures (= the Old Testament) lead to faith in Christ and a correct interpretation of that faith. It is in this context that the statement is made of verse 16: “all Scripture is divinely inspired and useful for teaching.” The Greek expression for “divinely inspired” is the composite word *theopneustos*, made up from the noun *theos* (God) and the verb *pneuein* (“to blow” or “to breathe”). Grammatically, it would be possible to attribute to it an active meaning: “every Scripture is breathing God.” However, such words made up with the noun *theos* and a participle derived from a noun would have usually a passive meaning: every Scripture “breathed by” or “inspired by God.” Thus the word refers to some divine activity of “breathing” (= God transmitting his spirit), with reference to the noun *pneuma*, which should mean here not some spirit but the Holy Spirit of God. Since, according to the text, every Scripture is the product of such activity by the divine Spirit, every Scripture is “useful” for teaching. Thus every Scripture can be successfully used to provide instruction in the Christian faith.

It is worth noticing that 2 Timothy 3:16 makes no reference to the human authors of the Scriptures, nor does it provide any indication about how God “inspires” them. It speaks of the scriptural *texts* as products of divine inspiration. Later theological terminology has called this “objective inspiration,” that is, the inspired character of the biblical text.

The context of 2 Peter 1:21 speaks in general terms about the prophetic texts of the Old Testament: “No scriptural prophecy comes from individual understanding. For no prophecy was ever issued from human decision, but under the influence of the Holy Spirit by God’s commission did holy men speak.” What the exact connotation of scriptural prophecy may be has been disputed. Does it refer only to a part of Scriptures, texts that are “prophecy” in a stricter sense, that is, the second part of the Hebrew Bible called “Prophets” or even only parts of these books, namely the passages that begin with the formula “thus says the Lord”? Much more probably, this expression refers to all texts of the Old Testament, considering them as “prophecy,” that is, texts to be interpreted about Christ. Such interpretation is much more in conformity with the Christocentric interpretation of the Old Testament, characteristic of 2 Peter (and also 1 Peter, to which this writing is linked in many ways). In any case, this verse does not speak so much about the scriptural texts as about their authors and, in general, the “holy men” of old. These were “moved by the Holy Spirit”—stood under his influence—when they expressed themselves in the Scriptures.

Thus this second passage, although referring to written biblical texts, paints the model of the biblical author as a prophetic person

who “speaks” through the text. But it is certainly not coincidence that references to the image of the holy man transmitting God’s word by speech and references to the authors of “the holy writings” are fully merged in this passage. For long centuries before, Jewish tradition attributed all scriptural books to the great teachers and leaders of the past as their authors. All five books of the Law have been attributed to Moses (including Deuteronomy, in which Moses’ death is described!), the Psalms in their totality to King David, the collection of all wisdom books to Solomon, and so on. But these attributions are no mere fictions or historical errors or pious exaggerations. They express a form of thought according to which God’s (biblical) word came first to his people by live teaching and was combined with acts of leadership and marvelous deeds, not merely through individuals “pushing a pen” or dictating. It was important to emphasize the meaning of the Pentateuch’s authority by referring a passage to Moses. When the Psalms are quoted as sayings of David, or the wisdom books are attributed to King Solomon, whose request for wisdom was a celebrated feature of Israelite history, an important connection is made between text and history. This “form of thought” might be seen as much too “global” or inexact or even “non-historical,” yet one must not forget that it was developed and left consciously intact in the service of a theological message. This form of thought obviously attributes the text to an author without care for historical precision. Nor does it explain how or why oral communication was committed to writing or what specific divine activity accompanied the work of the writer in distinction from what “the holy men” were orally expressing under the influence of the Spirit. In this perspective, “the divine word” comes in a global sense, as if distilled from divine action exercised upon salvific history, a history in which chosen men serve as intermediaries between God and his people. *God’s word is considered “prophetic” because mediated through chosen inspired persons.*

The faith of the early Church, therefore, took hold of the Old Testament in the context of two basic convictions: (a) the scriptural texts anticipate “in various and many ways” (cf. Heb 1:1) the arrival of Christ; and (b) the people who formed and composed them were “the holy men” of salvation history, standing under special influence of the Spirit.

We must realize that such an approach to Scripture in the early Church has determined the way in which the Bible was treated for most of Christian history. Twelve centuries after the biblical passages examined above were written, St. Thomas Aquinas still treated scrip-

tural inspiration in his *Summa* under the heading of Prophecy. In fact, until most recent times, all efforts of making clean-cut conceptual distinctions between “prophetic” and “biblical” inspiration remained elusive or, at least, very imperfect.

There is one more important feature that characterizes 2 Peter 1:21. The text reveals a line of reasoning that can be reconstructed as follows. Since Scripture is prophetic, because divinely inspired, it cannot be interpreted by personal interpretation, but rather by the apostolic teaching based on the revelation of Christ. This follows because prophecy is not a result of human effort but the fruit of inspiration by the Holy Spirit. *Just as the text was produced under divine influence, its understanding requires enlightenment by the same Spirit.* This principle was commonly held by the Church Fathers and medieval theologians and rightly became part of the Second Vatican Council’s *Dei verbum* (no. 12). Nonetheless, while speaking about “inspired” interpretation of the Scriptures, ancient authors use the concept of inspiration in a broader (and analogous) sense so that until the end of the Middle Ages the word “inspiration” never means specifically the activity of the Holy Spirit by which “Scripture” came about, but any influence by which one is divinely moved to act, especially to speak or write.

3. What has been discussed thus far shows that the first Christian generation was familiar with the basic issues of biblical inspiration. These may be summarized as follows:
 - a. Holy Scripture is of divine origin and of divine authority; it is God’s word, and it is the work of the Holy Spirit;
 - b. The human authors of the Bible stood under divine inspiration. They are ultimately linked with the great figures of salvation history through whom God communicated his thought and will to his people; and
 - c. The main topic of the Bible is the revelation of Christ; Scripture has been produced within the framework of an economy of salvation for which Christ is the center and the peak.

While the issues summarized here stand in focus in the ancient Church, the *written word as such* draws little attention in that context. No matter which part of the Pentateuch is being quoted, we find expressions such as “it is written in Moses” or “Moses said.” Similarly,

whatever comes from a prophetic book (for that matter, from any part of the Old Testament) is susceptible to quotation with the accompanying tag: "God said by the mouth of his prophet." Ancient Christian authors pay little attention to the process by which a teaching was first delivered orally, then became oral tradition, then a written text, and how at last the written work obtained its final redacted form. Of course, this process shapes the text and chisels the wording: Some elements fade into the background or disappear, new ones emerge or get emphasized and demand changes on the literary level. Only after a period of fluctuation does the text get its finalized form and become a sacred text to be transmitted without further allowance for change. At the end of the process, textual changes are only those occasioned by the mistakes of copyists or by the attempts of textual critics, old and new, to improve on the text, but only in an attempt of re-creating its most original form.

It is interesting to observe that the age that witnessed the consolidation of oral traditions into written documents paid little attention to explaining why and in what sense we may say that "Isaiah said" or "David declared" those words quoted in written documents. We must not think that in ancient times people were unaware of the essential differences between oral and written sources. But they are more interested in a theological scheme by which they may identify the written word available now with its original proclamation. For this reason they are willing to put into parentheses the chain of intermediary steps that brought the first divine communication from the live message to its written recording.

Moreover, it is also worth noticing that the two most important New Testament passages about inspiration, discussed above, both belong to pseudepigraphic apostolic letters (2 Pet and 2 Tim). The writers of these texts consciously use literary fiction to enshrine apostolic traditions in written documents.⁷ Their work is undertaken not for the purpose of promoting some new teaching, but in effort to close the canon of apostolic writings, or more correctly, to make the canon appear to be a closed entity. The Pastoral Letters speak of Pauline tradition as a deposit entrusted to Paul's disciples, and 2 Timothy, in particular, depicts the apostle as he states his imminent martyrdom: "the time

⁷ Both 2 Timothy and 2 Peter depict the two apostles as martyrs. While this is clearer in 2 Tim, it is present also in 2 Pet 1:15 referring to the apostle's *exodos*, a term that is found in reference to foreseen death in Lk 9:31, and also in Irenaeus (*Adv Haer* 3.1.1), who definitely knew 2 Peter. Cf. Denis Farkasfalvy, "Theology of Scripture in Saint Irenaeus," *Revue Bénédictine* 78 (1968): 319–33.

of my death [*analyseos*, meaning “dissolving”] is at hand” (2 Tim 4:6). Similarly, in 2 Peter the Apostle states that he is writing a reminder while “in this tent,” but, as the Lord Jesus Christ has revealed it to him, he will soon have to leave this life (2 Pet 1:13–14). Moreover, 2 Peter speaks of “all letters” written by “our beloved brother Paul according to the wisdom given to him” (2 Pet 3:15). These passages witness to a remarkably conscious agenda, intent on sealing the apostolic deposit of teaching in vessels which posterity must be able to recognize as inspired and, therefore, not to be tampered with.⁸

Conclusions

1. We must correct the current way in which we speak about the formation of the Christian Bible. The Church did not simply “take over” the Jewish Scriptures and add to them another set of writings.
2. Inspiration of Scripture means *subjectively* “prophets and apostles,” that is, the authors of the sacred books. But this expression is a technical one by which the early Church referred to those who first preached the Word of God. Only secondarily did the Word become Scripture, but in that process the “prophets and apostles” had a crucial role. The “human authors” meant first and foremost these prophetic and apostolic figures through which the written text is divinely guaranteed.
3. Inspiration means *objectively* the inspired character of the texts, their link with a spiritual—Spirit-given—meaning. The Spirit is Christ’s, the Gift coming from his risen body. Such meaning is to be found in the sacred text on account of the prophetic character of the Old Testament and on account of apostolicity in the New Testament. Inspiration cannot be explained unless we first study the role of “prophets and apostles” in the economy of salvation.
4. Both prophecy and apostolicity are verified analogously in the origin of the texts of the two Testaments, according to the way the charisms of prophets and apostles are linked to Christ, that radical incarnation of the Word, from which all other mediations of the Logos through the flesh receive their value and authenticity. N V

⁸ By referring to the imminent death of the apostles, 2 Tim and 2 Pet effectively provide that no letter of a later make could be recognized as authentic.