

Autographs, Amanuenses and Restricted Inspiration

By Greg L. Bahnsen

In 1969 we published a paper on “The Inspiration of Autographs” in which Professor George I. Mavrodes of the University of Michigan subjected some popular ideas and expressions to critical scrutiny. The subject is now taken up by Mr. Bahnsen, who operates with a wider definition of “autograph” than Professor Mavrodes employed. Mr. Bahnsen’s article, by his own account, attempts “to explicate a legitimate sense for the definite existential referent of Paul’s statement in II Timothy 3:16 and maintain the canon of scripture at the same time”. He is a graduate of Westmont College, Santa Barbara, California, and of Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia; and the author of a forthcoming work entitled Theonomy in Christian Ethics, in which he offers an exegetico-theological examination of Matt. 5:17 f.

In an article published in *The Evangelical Quarterly* during 1969 (Vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 19-29) Dr. George Mavrodes maintains that the restriction of inspiration to the autographs of the Biblical texts engenders a series of perplexing internal problems leading us, primarily, to query what the requires sense of “autograph” might be in taking such a stand.

Although it is appropriate for the common notion that inspiration happens only to men like apostles and prophets, the overly literal sense of “autograph” as being the manuscript physically written down by the sacred writer leads to a dilemma in respect to the findings of Biblical scholarship to the effect that an amanuensis was at times used to transcribe the message dictated by the author. The resultant inference, therefore, of this sense of autograph would necessarily be that some Biblical books are not inspired (since they had no “autographs”)!

Another suggested sense of “autograph” is that of the first written copy of the biblical book, whether penned by the author or his amanuensis. This guarantees that every book has an autograph, but the unavoidable quandary that flows from this sense is that it requires us to recognize as inspired some men who might not have even been believers. In this case it is hard to escape the conviction that this second alternative restricts inspiration in an arbitrary fashion – why could inspiration not just as well happen to the second copyist (and so on down to the nth copyist who makes the copy we have today)? In the absence of Biblical teaching how is the restriction of inspiration to the first amanuensis (rather than to, say, the third copyist) to be justified?

Dr. Mavrodes’ intention to adhere to the guiding principle that “no doctrine should entail a proposition whose truth cannot be established by the teaching of scripture” is commendable, but this formulation of *sola scriptura* should be revised so as not to jettison “the good and necessary consequential deductions”

from Scripture (cf. Westminster Confession I, iv) – such things as the obvious presuppositions of Scripture that are not explicitly stated (e.g., the human mind can understand, though not exhaustively, the revelation from God, etc.) and appropriate inductive inferences derived from cautious study. An unwarranted restriction upon our curtailing of Scriptural authority (cf. II Timothy 3:17). In order, then, to guard and preserve those things which are deduced by good and necessary consequence from Scripture the principle of *sola scriptura* might be better formulated: no doctrine should entail a proposition that contradicts the teaching of Scripture, and no teaching of Scripture should be handled so as to deduce a proposition conflicting with other Scriptural teaching.

According to Dr. Mavrodes, therefore, the challenge to those who wish to maintain that inspiration is to be restricted to the autographs of the Biblical books is a challenge to be guided by the principle of *sola scriptura* and still explicate a definition of “autograph” which does not eliminate the inspiration of some Biblical books, deny the use of secretaries in producing these autographical manuscripts, necessitate inspiration of the (perhaps unbelieving) amanuenses, or arbitrarily restrict inspiration to these manuscripts.

According to II Timothy 3:16, “every scripture (or, every individual scriptural passage) is God-breathed.” *Theopneustos* is specifically a direct predicate of the written Scriptures (not of the process by which Scripture comes into being, as the impression created by the King James Version might indicate) which affirms the quality of divinity in them. Now when Paul asserts that all scripture is God-breathed we may assume that, since this assertion must be accounted as true, being found in authoritative Scripture, he has not committed the fallacy of existential assumption. When Paul writes that “all scripture is God-breathed” he is asserting in part that “there are God-breathed manuscripts.” After further consideration it should be clear also that the statement “there are God-breathed manuscripts” should be taken to mean that there are manuscripts the very *words* of which are God-breathed. That is, the precise referent of “God-breathed” is *the words* of certain manuscripts. Actually it should be said that the words in their given syntactical relations are designated as “God-breathed” so as not to give the impression that we are simply referring to a “sacred vocabulary list.” So the word-groups (this phrase will be used throughout to denote the text of a piece of literature in the strict sense of words in their given relations) of particular manuscripts, as opposed to the particular parchment and ink, are predicated as “God-breathed.” It would be confused to speak of “this parchment” or “this ink” as inspired or God-breathed, for how can a parchment sheet and volume of ink be exhaled by God? The metaphor “God-breathed” is simply inappropriate for these objects, unless it be taken as a way of saying “God-created,” in which case we might envisage a scroll falling from the sky (given a three-decker universe) or the original tables of the Decalogue. But in the context of II Timothy 3:16 Paul is not speaking of God specially and directly creating a piece of parchment. That which is to be accounted as exhaled by God is the word-group which is inscripturated. These word-groups are the utterances of no other than very God as they are found inscribed on certain manuscripts – this is the import of Paul’s assertion.

Only the *exact* word-groups constituting the referent of Paul’s statement can qualify as “God-breathed.” Paul’s referent is a definite body of written word groups that are accounted as canonical Scripture. If this set of written word-groups is represented as “W,O,R,D,S” (where each letter represents a constituent part of a larger literary whole: word in a sentence, sentence in a paragraph, paragraph in a book, book in the canon), then in effect Paul is saying that “W,O,R,D,S” is God-breathed. If there is *any change* in that group of written passages the resultant group cannot be identified with the original set, “W,O,R,D,Z” is simply not equivalent to or identical with “W,O,R,D,S.” That which is considered inspired scripture can legitimately be taken as such only in so far as it is identical with the referent of Paul’s statement. Similarities may more or less approximate, but only an identical word-group qualifies to have the same predicate unreservedly applied to it.

Obviously every individual printed word-group has a first writing (the possibility of having a “tie” for first temporarily speaking poses no problem as Dr. Mavrodes acknowledges). That a particular text was

written at all assumes that it was originally done so. The inspired word-groups were given in writing; thus they are denominated "scripture" (writing). Hence there was an original manuscript for each of these word-groups. The word-groups found on the original manuscript would automatically be the authoritative standard and criterion of the identity of that word-group. Since Paul says that every scripture (referring to a particular set of written word-groups) is God-breathed, we automatically afford the original manuscript of Paul's referent a privileged position. Of necessity there is (was) at least one original written word-group to which Paul could have been referring. Minimally speaking, that one is inspired. Therefore, the word-groups on certain manuscripts are inspired, and there was at least one written first copy of any such manuscript.

Since it is not the particular piece of parchment that is to be taken as God-breathed (excluding any fetishism), the word-group that is to be considered and responded to as divine utterance could appear on any number of parchments. If manuscript No. 1 reading "W,O,R,D,S" is inspired, so is manuscript No. 2 reading "W,O,R,D,S." But now a practical consideration confronts us. We have no assurance (least of all from Scripture) that every copy of any manuscript will be a perfect transcription of its original. Humans are a fallible sort; we may not presume, therefore, that any attempt at duplicating the word-group of a manuscript will result in the production of an identical replica. After the fact, however, if the copy is indeed identical, then its word-group shares the same literary attributes as its prototype, even that of inspiration (if it is applicable). Inspiration applies to a particular word-group *anywhere* that word-group is in fact found. Inspiration absolutely applies to the first copies of Scripture, and only perhaps to later copies. The position we must assume is this: a manuscript is accounted as being God-breathed in literary quality if and only if either (1) it is the original manuscript of a word-group the author of which, being carried along by the Holy spirit, spoke from God (II Peter 1:21) or (2) it is a manuscript whose written word-group is identical to that of the word-group written on the finished original in the first alternative.

Scriptural authority stands behind our assurance of at least one inspired original manuscript but makes no reference to copies in this regard. In the absence of the actual autographs of Scripture we can make no *posteriori* judgment respecting copies manuscripts; so we must *for practical considerations* restrict inspiration to the autographs. This is a restriction in view of circumstance, not an *a priori* absolute (which only Scripture could supply). Therefore, inspiration may be applied legitimately only to the autographs of Scripture. Lacking evidence that could confirm the meticulous transcription of any copy (since the autographs are not in our possession) we must recognize that we can apply "inspiration" with warrant only to the autographs. So the restricting of inspiration to the autographs of Scripture does not depend on any arbitrary restriction; this is not an absolute, but rather a practical restriction to warranted application.

The problem that naturally arises at this juncture is that of supplying the required sense of "autograph" requested by Dr. Mavrodes. It is one thing to demonstrate that inspiration can legitimately be restricted to the first copy or finished original of the Biblical books, but the question which ensues is whether each one of these first copies is an "autograph" properly speaking. An adequate definition of "autograph" for any secular or scriptural word-group might be: the first completed, personal or approved transcription of a unique word-group composed by its author. Any autograph will be that manuscript which is the finished original of its unique word-group, where the word-group was composed by an author and transcribed either by the author himself or done with his approval. Approval can be of two different kinds; the author can approve of his transcriber's work by proof-reading it or by simply from the outset trusting the secretary to do a good job. If the author presents the finished manuscript for public exposure, he is rendered responsible for it as it appears (implicit approval has been given to any released manuscript whether proofed by having it orally read back, by reading it over, or even if it is not proof-read at all).

In the offered sense of "autograph," "author" is taken to be the one (or possible cooperative group of individuals) who is the source of a literary work that can be regarded as relatively original and who is its "author" in virtue of supervising the composition of the word-group and its original writing down. An "author" can "compose" by creative thought or by compiling materials (as with a history text) or (weaker) by

supplying original thoughts or research to be written up or arranged by some one else (e.g. Kafka's *The Trial*); an author can "supervise" the printing by handwriting (e.g., poems of Robert Frost), by composing at a typewriter (e.g., stereotype of newspaper columnist) or dictating his thoughts to a secretary (as with Milton's *Paradise Lost*).

A man is considered the author of a particular unique word-group if he *purposively* transcribed that word-group (personally or approvingly) and *he considered it to be unique*. The author must consider his work to be original, and the composition-transcription process cannot be accidental. This unpacking of the notion of authorship provides for a manuscript being "*more unique*" than the author realizes – *via* mistakes he might unconsciously make in personal transcription or neglect to detect in approving the manuscript. If an author detects some mistakes in his manuscript after it has been completely written down, he certainly can rewrite his composition in better form, but this does not prevent the recognition of an autograph for both copy No. 1 and No. 2 (since they have non-identical word-groups) – e.g. we might discover the autograph of what has come to be known as William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but we might also some day run across a manuscript which, after appropriate textual criticism and validation, might be recognized as the autograph of "proto-Hamlet" (Shakespeare's first attempt at this play).

Further, if a copyist *does not consider* his transcribed manuscript to constitute a unique word-group, then he is *not* its author. If he should later come across an inadvertent mistake in his copying of the original manuscript, he would then consider his manuscript to be an originally written unique word-group, but it remains that he neither purposively transcribed it as such (he did not intentionally create the variant reading) nor mentally fashioned (composed) the uniqueness-constituting mistake (although this is not to be construed as a denial that his brain directed his muscles to move in such a manner as to record what comes to be acknowledged as an error).

A manuscript cannot be genuinely *authored* by accident or without conscious intent on the part of the writer. Take an extreme example: if a man were drugged or hypnotized and made to scrawl out a text by his manipulators we would say that the ideas contained therein are those of a persons who manipulated him and not his own. Further, if a man falls asleep at his desk with pen in hand and due to biological twitches he scribbles marks on a sheet of paper, and if those scribblings just happen to constitute a written word-group, we would say that the message had no author since no one thought up its content and subsequently recorded it. Again, imagine that a man walking down a sidewalk unintentionally kicks a stone which then flies against a basement window, and in the said basement a sleeping dog is startled and runs in impulsive flight into a bench on which are being kept inked moveable type keys which subsequently fall to the floor but in striking a discarded piece of paper there just happen (amazingly!) to print a full coherent paragraph; now in this situation we would never consent to saying that this paragraph has an author.

Hence not every manuscript will have a true author; yet every manuscript can be said to have at least an indirect or implied author lying behind it: if the manuscript is in fact a good copy the author of the original is *this* manuscript's author as well; if the manuscript is an intentional variant, then the "copyist" is its author; and if the manuscript is a variant reading by inaccurate copying, the author of the original autograph which was corrupted through transcriptional mistakes is the indirect author of the manuscript under consideration.

The sense of autograph that has herein been specified, with the sense of authorship implicit in it, accounts for any general manuscript that we label as autographic, whether it was intended for publication or not (as, for example, a posthumously discovered poem of Emily Dickenson), whether finished or not, whether personally transcribed or not. All manuscripts have finished originals by definition, but not all manuscripts will have an autograph (e.g. when they do not have a real author as defined above).

In summation, the required sense of “autograph” when it is being applied to Scriptures is “the first-completed, personal or approved transcription of this word-group composed by the sacred writer who purposively supervised the composition and first printing of this scriptural passage which he considers to be a relatively original word-group and its primary recording.” One qualification that the Christian believer would want to recognize here is that, since Scripture has two “authors” (ultimately God and secondarily the human authors He used) and although God did not by-pass the cognitive functions or operations of His writers’ minds, the human author of a scriptural autograph need not have thought up the message or worked it out on his own (as might be suggested by the above discussion).

The question that now arises is whether the books of Scripture all had autographs, that is: did the books of Scripture have a first copy, did they have a conscious author, and were they personally approvedly transcribed? The answer to the first of these three issues has already been established in the affirmative. And it should be clear that an alternative answer to the second question would advance us towards an answer to the third; for if the scriptural manuscripts had conscious authors and were definitely written down, then it must follow that they received a transcription under the supervision of their authors (though, whether done by them personally or whether approved remains to be answered).

Do we have any reason to suppose that all the first copies of the manuscripts considered scriptural were consciously composed or authored? Perhaps so. Scripture teaches or implies in the case of most of these books who the author of the book was; in these cases the canonical book, if Scripture is pre-supposed to be true, does have an author who in some manner is considered responsible for the origin and conscious approval of its text (word-group). In the case of books not having an author definitely specified or implied, it must still be assumed that there was some genuine author who is responsible for the written manuscript which comes to be known as “the book of x.” This is so since in speaking of the manner by which Scripture comes into being Peter states that “men spoke from God being carried along by the Holy Spirit” (II Peter 1:21).^{1[1]}

The process by which Scripture was written (consultation of any lexicon and the context will establish that “prophets, prophecy” can and does stand for the Scripture as a whole here) is said to be: men spoke *from* God. To say that book x was authored by a man who *spoke from God* does not seem compatible with saying that book x was unconsciously or accidentally composed. As has been noted above, when a copyist makes an unnoticed error in copying a manuscript he does not thereby become the “author” of a new word-group, for he could not be held accountable for the ideas or content of this text. In order for a particular text to qualify as being “authored,” or for a man to be accounted as the author of a word-group there must be conscious intent on the part of the author. A new word-group, “W,O,R,L,D,S,” which is accidentally created by an unnoticed erroneous copying of “W,O,R,D,S”, does not have a genuine “author.” Also, for a man to “speak from God” (even in writing) he must be conscious of doing so. God can *use* certain words to accomplish His ends in a reader when those words were not intended by their author to be taken thus (e.g., a man may be moved to repentance by reading a book which has nothing to do with repentance, or a man can be given the facts of the gospel enabling him to believe even when derived from an author who is communicating those facts in a mocking and unbelieving context). Yet in this case the man is in a sense

^{1[1]} The question under consideration is not settled by verse 20 preceding, where Peter states that prophecy was not brought by the will of man, unless this be taken to mean that God dealt with the bodies of recalcitrant men in a puppeteering fashion. Since this alternative is not a viable option in our theological context, verse 20 would better be seen as affirming that prophecy is not the result of man’s intellectual devising or the sort of thing a man of depraved nature wills to utter on his own.

“passive” as far as actually being an ambassador or spokesman for God is concerned; *he* did not speak for God, but *God used* his words in their subjective reception to speak for Himself (by means of or through the writer). If a man is to be characterized as himself actively speaking *from* God, he must be understood to be conscious of that fact.

Hence every book in the canon of Scripture has a manuscript on which it is based and which was written in finished form at some time by an author who was conscious of composing this word-group as a message *from* God – which manuscript, whatever manner of authoring was used, can as a finished product be considered as and responded to as a divine utterance (God-breathed).

Now in holding that there actually were finished manuscripts of original word-groups that were consciously authored by men speaking from God and that these manuscripts were inspired, is it necessary to say that any amanuensis who might have been used was “inspired”?^{2[2]} According to II Peter 1:21, the author was carried along by the Holy Spirit in such a way that he spoke from God. Now if the author used an amanuensis, do we need to hold that the amanuensis was also “carried along by the Holy Spirit”? We want to hold that the finished work is an inerrant transcription of a “divinely uttered” message, so must the amanuensis have been specially influenced by the Holy Spirit? The answer to these questions is No. Yet in demonstrating this fact another difficulty that must be recognized is that of not confusing the “idea of being carried along by the Holy Spirit” with the “idea of being foreordained by God in what is done.”

Strictly speaking, inerrant recording is a quality of a manuscript, and “inspired” is a quality of a word-group (message). If scribe *x* was used in the manufacture of a manuscript which is God-breathed, hence inerrant, then he did not make mistakes in transcription (he flawlessly recorded the message of the author). If author *y* was used in the manufacture of a manuscript which is God-breathed, hence accounted as “authored by God Himself,” then his expressed thoughts are God’s expressed thoughts. Whatever happens with an amanuensis and an author is foreordained, and God did in one set of cases at least (those respecting the autographs of scripture) foreordain that respective authors express His messages and scribes inerrantly transcribe them. This seems to be all we need to say and all that scriptures warrants us to say.

The foreordination of God does not render men automatons, and everything that happens is foreordained (Eph. 1:11; Isa. 14: 24, 27; 46:9-11; 55:11; Dan. 4:35; Ps. 115:3; Ps. 135:6; *et al.*), even scribal mistakes and perfect transcriptions, even the respective influences of the Holy spirit. The influence of the Holy spirit upon the lives of men does not render them automatons either. Yet being foreordained is not equivalent to being carried along by the Holy Spirit, or else we would consider *all* men to be carried along by the Holy Spirit in their activities (whether they have anything to do with Scripture or God at all), in which case a man is carried along by the Holy spirit even in blaspheming against that Holy Spirit! The “influence” of foreordination must be recognized to be of a completely different *kind* or class of “influence” from being carried along by the Holy Spirit. So a man can receive the common influence of the Holy Spirit (“common grace”) keeping him from the depth of sin he could fall into, a man can receive the regenerating and sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit, or a man can receive the complete influence of the Holy Spirit (being carried along so as to speak from God); but *all* these influences are foreordained of God.

^{2[2]} Since Scripture applies “God-breathed” (inspired) only to the *finished product*, perhaps we could avoid confusion by using Peter’s phrase, “carried along by the Holy Spirit,” when speaking of the *writers* of Scripture.

Now a man can make a perfect copy of something without being under the complete influence of the Holy Spirit, can he not? Both regenerate and unregenerate men can do good work; unbelievers and common Christians do things in a perfect fashion in many contexts (including transcribing) without the special influence of the Holy Spirit bearing them along in so doing. To deny this is to fail to see that sin is an ethical matter; becoming sinful did not render man an ignoramus, insane, incompetent in every way, or impotent in controlling his bodily movements. The carrying along of the Holy Spirit kept the scriptural writers from their normal sinfulness and allowed them to represent God to men perfectly in their messages. It is not necessary to hold that the Holy Spirit must have kept an amanuensis from his normal sinfulness in perfectly transcribing an inspired word-group, but only that the scribe did *in fact* transcribe inerrantly (according to the providential government of the sovereign God who maintains the same relation to *every* fact). It is no more necessary to maintain that the original amanuensis for a scriptural manuscript was carried along by the Holy Spirit in what he did than it is to hold that the 279th copyist who copies perfectly is carried along by the Holy Spirit. If in fact the amanuensis did transcribe perfectly, or if the 279th copyist did copy inerrantly, both were foreordained to do so; if the amanuensis transcribed perfectly and the second copyist made mistakes (creating a variant), both were foreordained to do so. The only question then is: what can we assert with warrant to have been the case (i.e. for what assertions do we have evidence)?

Whatever happens is foreordained, but the *means* used by God to that end may not always be the same in all cases. When A stands for the author composing a secular work, B – the author speaks from God, C – the scribe records inerrantly, D – the scribe records errantly, E – the author is his own scribe, F – the author has a scribe, all the possible combinations (humanly speaking) are: EAC, EAD, EBC, EBD, FAC, FAD, FBD, FBC. That there *is* a set of inspired autographs (BC) assures (gives us warrant to claim) that God *did* in fact ordain EBC, or FBC, or *both*. Because there are inspired autographs we know that God foreordained that the author *qua* author and the scribe *qua* scribe be kept from error. In virtue of there being at least one inspired manuscript we can necessarily conclude that one amanuensis (whether it be the author himself or another) inerrantly recorded; in virtue of there being a Scripture we can necessarily conclude that one author was carried along by the Holy Spirit. The scribe's perfection is assured by the finished product (which is judged inerrant), and the author's perfection is assured in the Holy Spirit's work (and reflected in the finished product). Beyond this we cannot venture confidence – only this; God *might* have foreordained perfect transcriptions of inspired autographs and/or unrecorded messages of men speaking for Him by the Holy Spirit.

The fact that the Scriptures were consciously authored and that the finished manuscripts were inerrant transcriptions will allow us to conclude that, apart from any historical evidence as to whether the autograph of any Biblical book was transcribed by its author or dictated to an amanuensis, the manuscript was approved by the author. As noted above, the fact of conscious authoring implies either that the finished manuscript was personally transcribed or done by an amanuensis. And we may conclude that if an amanuensis was used, the author approved of his transcription in either of two ways laid out earlier: proof-reading or trusting the secretary to do a good job. Being fully aware that his activity of authoring was directed by God who intended to have the scriptures written, the author could trust that God would govern the transcribing of his (His) word-group so that it would be inerrantly done. The notion of approval is implicit in the author's awareness that God was working through him (and perhaps an amanuensis) to produce inspired scripture. With respect to Scripture we need not even insist that the author actually proof-read the finished manuscript; knowing that God was "authoring" the manuscript through him, the human author could trust the amanuensis to do a good job (being governed, "proofed," by the Author's providence).

Since we have, in the preceding discussion, demonstrated a legitimate sense of restricting inspiration and that every Biblical book has an autograph, we can conclude that there is a justified sense in which we can maintain the traditional position that inspiration must be restricted to the autographs of the Biblical books that does not engender the internal difficulties mentioned by Dr. Mavrodes.

The required sense of “autograph” specified herein *does* provide practical aid in determining which word-groups best represent the actual autograph, for the autograph is (among other things) the *original* text of the Biblical book. And textual critical methods are available for use in determining to some degree of accuracy the original text. And it is certainly legitimate for us to maintain that form for all generations. To be a Christian *requires* the possession of God’s words as a basis for faith and direction in life (cf. Matt. 7:21; Mark 8:35; Luke 8:21; John 8:47; 10:27f.; 12:47f.; 14:15, 21, 23, 26; 15:10, 13-15; 17:8, 17; I John 2:3; 3:22; 5:2; II John 6; Rev. 12:17; 14-12; I Tim. 6:3ff.), and men in all generations are *responsible* to be Christians. If we realize that God is sovereign, the inevitable conclusion that results from accepting these two premises is that the Words of God *are* preserved (in dependable form) by God for all generations (compare Matt. 24:35 and I Peter 1:25).
