

# The Divine Inspiration of Scripture

By FR. WALTER M. ABBOTT

We, the people of the 20th Century, have inherited from the Jews and from all the Christians preceding us the tradition that the books of the Hebrew Bible are divinely inspired, which is to say that they have God as their author.

We Christians believe that the books of the New Testament also were authored by God.

Roman Catholics, many Eastern Orthodox, some Anglicans and some Lutherans have the same belief about seven other books and seven smaller compositions written before the time of the New Testament but not included in the Hebrew Bible. Those books, called "deuterocanonical" by Catholics and "apocrypha" by Protestants, are in the Greek version of the Scriptures called the Septuagint, meaning "seventy," from the tradition that the first part of it was done by seventy Jews

## Scripture in Life Of Church Today

in Alexandria more than two hundred years before the birth of Christ.

For both Jews and Christians this idea about the divine authorship of the Scriptures is a basic matter of faith. Christian theologians have long been used to calling it an "article" of faith.

Jews and Christians in general also have the traditional understanding that the books of the Scriptures were composed by human authors as well as by the divine author.

Beyond this point of agreement about the dual authorship of the Scriptures there are many different theories about just how the divine and human

authors worked together. The various theories about the process of inspiration — and theories is exactly what they are — are only as good as the arguments advanced for them.

Let us see if we can sort out some facts buried in the general and traditional agreement we have mentioned.

First of all, if the tradition is true, the Bible is unique in the world of literature, since it is the only book that has God as its author. We should perhaps say it is the only collection of books having God as author, since the Bible is actually a number of books and booklets which can be conveniently bound together in one volume.

Why did the Jews regard certain books, written at various times over a period of centuries, as divinely inspired? Father William G. Heidt, O.S.B., in his excellent booklet on the subject published for the Old

Testament Reading Guide series (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minn.), rightly says, "It is impossible to find historical evidence explaining precisely how and why the Hebrews of Old Testament times came to regard specific books as divinely inspired. The fact is that they did."

Josephus, a Jewish author of the first century in the Christian era, wrote in one of his books, "... it is natural to all Jews, immediately and from their very birth, to esteem these books (i.e., of the Hebrew Bible) to contain divine doctrines, and ... if occasion be, willingly to die for them."

For the Jews, therefore, the idea that God had given them their Scriptures was something they derived, one could almost say, from their mothers' milk.

St. Paul, writing to his disciple Timothy, said, "... you know that ever since you were a child you have known the Holy Scriptures (he means the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament), which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 5:15 in Today's English Version).

The Jews did not have a Pope or Ecumenical Council to make a solemn pronouncement about what they were to believe. They had the Scriptures themselves, which referred to God giving them a message in writing, on

the two stone tablets mentioned in Deuteronomy (10:3-5), which were kept in the ark of the covenant. They had the tradition that prophets were men who spoke for God and that some of the prophets' writings, or at least writings attributed to the prophets, were from God.

It said in the Scriptures that Moses wrote the book of the Covenant at the divine bidding (Exodus 24:4 ff.). The devout Jew believed it and handed on the belief to his children. It said in the books of the prophets that this or that oracle came from the Lord. The Jews believed it and treasured these books.

The New Testament presents Jesus citing the Hebrew Scriptures as the word of God. Look, for example, at the Gospel according to Matthew, 15:4-6, where Jesus is quoted as saying, "For God said, 'Honor your father and mother'..."

The New Testament presents St. Peter saying the Holy Spirit "spoke through David" (Acts 1:16, 4:25), and St. Paul says "the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophet Isaiah" (Acts 28:25).

In various places in the New Testament epistles arguments are based on Scripture as divine authority. Look, for example, at the Epistle to the Romans (3:2): "In the first place, God trusted his message to the Jews" (TEV).



Today people claim the right to discern their values. Confusions and disagreements about what really matters have become a part of our society. We've had draft card burners and dedicated soldiers. We have a people questing for a life worthy of mankind. (Photo by Bob Smith).

## NEW JOY!

By MONIKA HELLWIG

Mostly it is the people in our lives that give those lives shape and direction and purpose. Things like money and automobiles and home ownership and color TV's are not enough to live for. If you have very few of these things, you may be so busy trying to get them that you do not notice how little they help to make sense of life.

One thing is clear, however. Whenever you acquire any of these things, it does not really satisfy you. Once you have them, it seems so much less important than it was while you were trying to get them.

In the same way, abstract ideas are not enough to live for. Law and order, peace with justice, democracy, freedom, are all goals that we know are extremely important.

But people do not wake up in the morning singing, nor dance and whistle through the chores of the day just because they know they are striving after these ideals.

If faith were an abstract idea, it would not be enough to live for. But faith is a personal relationship — a response to a gift of life and love and meaning in life.

Probably the best analogy is one that happens to most of us several times in our lives. There is someone who means so much that it is worth every kind of effort to respond to his or her expectation and encouragement and companionship — a father or husband, a wife or daughter, a very close friend.

When any of us enjoys a re-



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lationship like that, sooner or later something happens — a misunderstanding, a long separation, a death. At the moment of crisis, one tends to realize how much this relationship had meant, and how much it was a gift, a pure gift.

Suddenly, life becomes a burden, everything is more difficult, people seem so unsympathetic and unhelpful, everything seems so frustrating.

But sometimes it happens that the person who made the difference unexpectedly comes back. He was lost but he returns, he was dying but he recovers.

The experience of the Apostles seems to have been like this. The world was a cruel tragedy, full of injustice, impersonal power structures, frustration and defeat. No matter how hard one might try to put things right, the effort was defeated before it was begun.

The Emmaus story reads just like this. The two disciples were going along talking together about all that had happened, downcast, depressed. There was the Roman occupation, the oppression of the poor, the meaninglessness of life.

But there had been Jesus of Nazareth "who proved he was a great prophet by the things he said and did"; their hope had been "that he would be the one to set Israel free" (Luke 24: 20-21). Now he had failed. The forces of evil were too strong. The Romans crucified

Him as a seditious rebel, and there was an end of it.

If Jesus, who had proved himself a great prophet, had failed, who could succeed? Why bother? Why hope? Why care?

As pure gift, breaking in on their despair, they received from Him the new meaning of life, the new joy. "Starting with Moses and going through all the prophets, he explained to them the passages throughout the scriptures that were about himself . . . and their eyes were opened and they recognized Him" (Luke 24: 27-31). Out of the blue — new joy. Life was not empty. Evil was not triumphant. Their efforts were not in vain.

Joy is contagious. They returned and told everyone. Actually, they had no need to speak; they were living at a new high pitch of conviction and purposefulness. You could catch the message from them without words.

It was clear that they had become men of faith, going through life with a vision, with confidence, with total trust.

We expend much effort teaching people the creed and the catechism and a lot of prayers, so that they will grow up in the faith. But this simply is not what faith is about. It is a new dimension of life — the experience of the Risen Christ, when you let it happen and vibrate in your life.

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## KNOW YOUR FAITH

By FATHER RICHARD P. McBRIEN

**Q.** Would it be fair to say that unlike the non-Catholic "the true Catholic surrenders a personal interpretation of the Bible (the principle of private judgment) for the authority of the Catholic magisterium?"

**A.** It would not be fair to the non-Catholic Christian certainly. The implication of such a view is that non-Catholic Christians are arbitrary and, therefore, irresponsible in their reading of God's Word. They simply pick out what suits them and proceed to live a partial, or even distorted, Christian life.

Anyone who has read Protestant theology and the work of Protestant biblical scholars will know how ludicrous and insulting that comment really is.

If non-Catholic interpretation of Sacred Scripture has been so "personal and arbitrary," then why is it that Catholic scholars, especially in the 1940s and 1950s had to spend much of their time simply catching up with the work already accomplished by the Protestants?

If all Protestant notions of God's Word are so poorly conceived, then why is it that the Second Vatican Council allowed itself to adopt a decidedly "Protestant" understanding of revelation in its own Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, wherein it teaches that revelation is communicated in and through history, that revelation is as much a matter of "events" as it is a matter of "words"?

And why should the council, in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, have praised those Protestants who "honor Sacred Scripture, taking it as a norm of belief and of action, and who show a true religious zeal." (n. 15)? And why should the council have said, in its Decree on Ecumenism (n. 15), that "a love, veneration, and near cult of the Sacred Scriptures lead our brethren to a constant and expert study of the sacred text?"

Furthermore, the comment gives the impression that once a person becomes a Catholic, he no longer has to worry about a correct understanding and interpretation of God's Word, that the college of bishops and the Pope will always be there to answer his every question. This is manifestly false, even on the basis of the most traditional theology.

The official magisterium, after all, has not expounded authoritatively on every text of Sacred Scripture, nor indeed on every major text of the Bible.

In the many areas of Scripture where the Church has made no interpretation, we are left in the same position as any other Christian. We strive by every possible means, both of study and of prayer, to discern the true meaning of the Gospel, but we are never certain that our understanding is absolutely correct.

Accordingly, we must always be prepared to revise our previous opinions and to allow our minds and hearts to be transformed again and again by the Holy Spirit.