

REVIEW ARTICLE

Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation

Donald G. Bloesch

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Reading this book caused me to look back over my own theological journey. In this extended review, I share some of its key elements. They may help others to think about the issues involved in our approach to Scripture as well as stimulating interest in the writings of Donald G. Bloesch.

I first became aware of his name when, as a divinity student in the mid-1970s, I read his book *The Evangelical Renaissance*. Bloesch's approach to Scripture differed from the view I had become acquainted with through reading E.J. Young's *Thy Word is Truth: Some Thoughts on the Biblical Doctrine of Inspiration*. Bloesch presented a perspective which aimed at being evangelical without being fundamentalist. This is the approach he now argues in much greater detail in this latest book. He distinguishes from both liberalism and fundamentalism.

In *The Evangelical Renaissance*, Bloesch listed a number of theologians who could be associated with this position, among them, G.C. Berkouwer. My reading of Berkouwer's *Holy Scripture* led me into a thorough-going study of Berkouwer's writings, later published under the title, *The Problem of Polarization: An Approach Based on the Writings of G.C. Berkouwer* (1992). This concern with the problem of polarization lies at the heart of Bloesch's *Holy Scripture*: 'This book is designed to build bridges between various parties in the church but also to show where bridge building would be a venture to futility'.

I was naturally inclined to make connections between Berkouwer's work and Bloesch's 1994 volume of the same title. Noting Bloesch's helpful combination of optimism and realism, I was reminded of Bloesch's statement in an earlier work, *The Ground of Certainty: Toward an Evangelical Theology of Revelation* (1971): 'The great theologians from Paul and Augustine to G.C. Berkouwer and Karl Barth... have been able to explain what the faith does not mean as well as what it means.' This commendation can also be applied to Bloesch himself. He is a theologian who will help the reader to discover fruitful pathways while avoiding spiritual cul-de-sacs.

In *The Crisis of Piety* (1968), Bloesch expressed his concern that there should be a healthy balance between devotion and doctrine, which is echoed in *Holy Scripture*, where he warns against 'reducing revelation to rational information' and 'misunderstanding revelation as an ecstatic experience devoid of cognitive content'. Seeking to maintain the proper

balance between faith's rational and experiential elements, he points out that while he does 'not wish to downplay or deny the propositional element in revelation', he seeks to emphasize that 'this element is in the service of the personal'.

While I was in the U.S.A. in 1978-9, we heard much about 'the battle for the Bible', revolving especially around Harold Lindsell's *The Battle for the Bible* (1976), and *Biblical Authority* (1977) edited by Jack Rogers. This debate lies in the background of Bloesch's *Holy Scripture*. He has listened to what various people have been saying over the course of the years. Now he makes his own significant and substantial contribution.

Following my year in the U.S.A., I had an article published in *Reformed Review* (1980), 'The Reformation Continues: A Study in Twentieth Century Reformed Theology' (comparing Berkouwer and Louis Berkhof), alongside one by Bloesch, 'The Sword of the Spirit: The Meaning of Inspiration'. The two impressively complemented each other. Bloesch's theme emerges on the first page of his 'preface' to *Holy Scripture*: '[the Bible's] worthiness as a theological guide and norm does not become clear until it is acclaimed as the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17), the divinely chosen instrument by which the powers of sin and death are overthrown in the lives of those who believe'.

A few years later, in 1987, following some heated debate in *Life and Work*, my small booklet entitled *The Bible* laid particular emphasis on the vital connection between the Holy Spirit and the Holy Scriptures, echoing Bloesch. In discussing the difficult and controversial subject of biblical inerrancy, both of us have referred to Berkouwer. Here, under 'The Question of Inerrancy', Bloesch cites Berkouwer: 'G.C. Berkouwer rightly asks "whether the reliability of Scripture is simply identical to that reliability of which we frequently speak concerning the record of various historical events. Frequently, terms such as 'exact', 'precise', and 'accurate' are used for it.... Such a modern concept of reliability clearly should not be used as a yardstick for Scripture"'.

Seeking to interpret the concepts of infallibility and inerrancy creatively, my booklet also quoted Berkouwer: 'The Holy Spirit in His witness to truth does not lead us into error but into pathways of truth (II Jn.4). The Spirit, with this special concern, has not failed and will not fail in the mystery of God-breathed Scripture.'

Like Berkouwer, Bloesch highlights the profound truth contained in the concepts of infallibility and inerrancy. Uncomfortable with the term 'inerrancy' because of its association with 'a rationalistic, empiricistic mentality that reduces truth to facticity', Bloesch insists that he 'wish[es] to retain what is intended by this word – the abiding truthfulness and normativeness of the biblical witness', a truthfulness which is grounded in 'the Spirit who speaks in and through this witness'. In *Holy Scripture*, Bloesch discusses a wide range of important issues, e.g. 'Scripture and the Church', 'The Hermeneutical Problem', 'Rudolf Bultmann: An Enduring Presence', 'The Bible and Myth'. I have highlighted his discussion of the

inerrancy debate, whose importance is emphasized by the fact that Bloesch returns to this issue in the concluding section of the book – ‘The Current Controversy’.

Donald Bloesch is not well known in the U.K. He is the author of over twenty other titles and this volume is the second in his comprehensive seven-volume systematic theology. The first is *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology. Holy Scripture* (published in the U.S.A. by InterVarsity Press) has Name, Subject and Scripture Indexes.

What does this important voice from the U.S.A. have to say to us in our situation? He is concerned about the growing polarization between liberals and Evangelicals – a matter which must surely concern us also. He seeks to be both conservative and progressive: ‘I believe in forging a new statement of orthodoxy that stands in continuity with the past but addresses issues and problems in the present’. Bloesch identifies the pitfalls we must take care to avoid: ‘We must be wary of a sectarianism that elevates peripherals into essentials, but we must also beware of falling into an eclecticism that draws on too many disparate sources of truth and does not adequately discriminate between truth and error’. I hope that the voice of Bloesch will be a significant one among our students and teachers of theology.

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