

Compatibilism and the Inspiration of Scripture

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The verbal plenary view of biblical inspiration holds that all the words of Scripture are supernaturally inspired by God such that they are fully the words of human authors and fully the words of God himself. In this article, I argue that the verbal plenary view of inspiration requires a compatibilistic view of human freedom. In other words, for the verbal plenary view of inspiration to be true, human freedom must be compatible with God determining human choices and actions. In what follows, first, I explain verbal plenary inspiration (VPI) and provide motivation for affirming it. Second, I discuss the differing views on the relationship between human freedom and determinism, namely, compatibilism and incompatibilism. Third, I test VPI against three incompatibilist models of divine providence—Responsivism, Open Theism, and Molinism—in order to show that incompatibilism is inconsistent with VPI. I conclude by showing that compatibilism is a necessary component to VPI.

VERBAL PLENARY INSPIRATION (VPI)

Of all the views of biblical inspiration, VPI is the view best supported by Scripture itself. The verbal plenary view of biblical inspiration claims that all of the words of Scripture are fully the words of God and fully the words of men. In this section, I explain VPI and provide motivations for affirming it. My goal in this essay is not ultimately to argue for VPI but rather to argue

that VPI requires compatibilism. VPI is best understood in comparison to its nearest competitors: the mechanical dictation view and the dynamic view of inspiration.

Mechanical Dictation

To the right of VPI is the mechanical dictation view of biblical inspiration. The mechanical dictation view of Scripture claims that Scripture is the product of God directly giving the biblical authors the words to write. “According to the mechanical view of inspiration God dictated what the *auctores secundarii* wrote, so that the latter were mere amanuenses, mere channels through which the words of the Holy Spirit flowed. It implies that their own mental life was in a state of repose, and did not in any way contribute to the contents or form of their writings, and that even the style of Scripture is that of the Holy Spirit.”¹ Certainly, there are times when God told people what to write. For example, Moses is told to “Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel” (Exod 34:29). And John is told to “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true,” (Rev 21:5). Moreover, the Old Testament (OT) often repeats the phrase, “Thus says the LORD,” (e.g., Exod 4:22; Isa 10:24). But these occurrences do not account for the vast majority of Scripture. Nor do they account for the differences in authorial writing style even though they have the appearance of dictation.

The mechanical dictation view suffers from several weaknesses. First, it cannot easily account for the differences of syntax and style across the canon. The dictation view claims that the Holy Spirit dictated all the books of the Bible, but the difference in writing between Romans and James, for example, is striking—even more so between books like Psalms and Acts! One would expect that if the Holy Spirit dictated Scripture, then the Bible would have a uniform syntax and style; but it does not. Second, if all Scripture were mere dictation, the existence of multiple Gospels would be unintuitive. We believe the Bible has four Gospels because the four human authors had diverse perspectives on the life of Jesus, and the authors’ own experiences and research contributed to the uniqueness of each Gospel—likewise with the other books of the Bible that concern the same events. But the mechanical dictation view excludes the unique human contribution. Third, the Bible explicitly claims to be the words of men. Almost every letter of the New Testament (NT) starts

with a greeting that includes the author and recipients (e.g., Gal 1:1; 1 Pet 1:1). Jesus and the NT authors recognize Moses, David, and the prophets as the writers of the OT (e.g., Matt 8:4; Luke 24:44; Acts 4:25; 2 Cor 3:15). Paul recognizes that his own writing is divinely inspired when he argues, “If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord,” (1 Cor 14:37). And Peter confirms that God gave Paul wisdom (i.e., revelation), rather than dictated words and sentences, for the writing of Scripture:

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. (2 Pet 3:15-16)

In sum, the mechanical dictation view of inspiration affirms that Scripture is the word of God, but it fails to affirm that Scripture is also the word of men—a fact taught implicitly and explicitly by Scripture itself.

Dynamic Inspiration

To the left of VPI is the dynamic view of biblical inspiration. The dynamic view claims that the words of Scripture themselves are not directly inspired by God; rather, God inspired the biblical authors through the Holy Spirit. These men were given special insight into the things of God, and what they wrote became Scripture. Thus, the authors were inspired directly and the text indirectly. Michael Bird explains, “The Spirit of God directed writers’ thoughts and concepts while allowing their respective personality, style, and disposition to come into play with the choice of words and expressions.”² He explains further, “human authors are directly inspired and their words as the product of that process are inspired in a derivative sense. God provides the concepts, the Spirit initiates and superintends the concursive operation of divine influence and human cognition, resulting in composition dually authored by God and human authors.”³

The dynamic view of inspiration is insufficient for the opposite reason as the mechanical dictation view; it makes Scripture the words of men but not the words of God.⁴ The *locus classicus* of the doctrine of inspiration does not

even mention the contribution of human authors: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work,” (2 Tim 3:16-17).⁵ The Bible is also clear that “no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit,” (2 Pet 1:20-21). This text from 2 Peter seems to reject the dynamic view of inspiration. The prophets and apostles certainly witnessed revelatory events, were given revelatory visions, and received revelatory teaching, but their own reporting of these events, visions, and teachings could not be considered prophecy if they were left to their own interpretations of them. Rather, it was necessary that they be “carried along by the Holy Spirit.” For example, Mary Magdalene, and many others, witnessed a supernatural, revelatory event: Jesus’ death and resurrection; but her report of that event would be merely her interpretation unless her very words were breathed out by the Spirit. Otherwise, her report would be just a product of her will. So it is with all Scripture. It is not enough for a biblical author to receive revelation—even revelation infused directly into the author’s mind—because, unless the written words themselves are God’s words, they are merely human interpretations.

Verbal Plenary Inspiration

VPI avoids the weaknesses of the mechanical dictation and dynamic views of biblical inspiration. Charles Hodge affirms VPI when he defines inspiration as “an influence of the Holy Spirit on the minds of certain select men, which rendered them the organs of God for the infallible communication of his mind and will. They were in such a sense the organs of God, that what they said God said.”⁶ Hodge elaborates on three points of his definition. “First. Inspiration is a supernatural influence. It is thus distinguished, on the one hand, from the providential agency of God, which is everywhere and always in operation; and on the other hand, from the gracious operations of the Spirit on the hearts of his people.”⁷ Thus, inspiration belongs to the class of effects “which are produced by [God’s] immediate efficiency without the intervention of [second] causes.”⁸ Inspiration is neither mere providence nor mere wisdom, illumination, or sanctification. Inspiration is supernatural and miraculous.

Second, Hodge explains the difference between revelation and inspiration in both their object and effect. “The object of revelation is the communication of knowledge. The object or design of inspiration is to secure infallibility in teaching ... The effect of revelation was to render the recipient wiser. The effect of inspiration was to preserve him from error in teaching.”⁹ As I have shown, the dynamic view renders inspiration equivalent to revelation, but we ought to understand inspiration to be something more than mere revelation.

Third, Hodge explains what it means for the biblical authors to be the “organs” (i.e., the instruments) of God: “[W]hen God uses any of his creatures as instruments, He uses them according to their nature.”¹⁰ He continues,

The sacred writers were not machines. Their self-consciousness was not suspended; nor were their intellectual powers superseded. Holy men spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. It was men, not machines; not unconscious instruments, but living, thinking, willing minds, whom the Spirit used as his organs. Moreover, as inspiration did not involve the suspension or suppression of the human faculties, so neither did it interfere with the free exercise of the distinctive mental characteristics of the individual.¹¹

The mechanical dictation view uses men as machines, as unconscious instruments, but VPI teaches that the words of Scripture are fully divine in such a way that does no violence to their being fully the words of men who think and will freely.

Thus, VPI claims that the Bible has the following characteristics. First, every word of Scripture is the immediate word of God—not a derived or indirect word, not an interpretation by the will of man. Second, every word of Scripture is the word of some particular man. The words of Scripture are truly human—neither by dictation nor by overriding human nature or freedom. Third, inspiration is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit which infallibly secures its divine intention and authority. B. B. Warfield summarizes,

It is beyond question, therefore, that the New Testament writers, when they declare the Scriptures to be the product of the Divine breath, and explain this as meaning that the writers of these Scriptures wrote them only as borne by the Holy Spirit in such a fashion that they spoke, not out of themselves, but “from God,” are thinking of this operation of the Spirit only as the final act of God in

the production of the Scriptures, superinduced upon a long series of processes, providential, gracious, miraculous, by which the matter of Scripture had been prepared for writing, and the men for writing it, and the writing of it had been actually brought to pass. It is this final act in the production of Scripture which is technically called “inspiration”; and inspiration is thus brought before us as, in the minds of the writers of the New Testament, that particular operation of God in the production of Scripture which takes effect at the very point of the writing of Scripture . . . with the effect of giving the resultant Scripture a specifically supernatural character, and constituting a Divine, as well as human, book.¹²

I have not, here, given a full defense of VPI; rather, I have provided reasons for affirming VPI over mechanical dictation and the dynamic view of inspiration. In the following sections, I argue that VPI requires a compatibilist understanding of free agency.

VIEWS OF HUMAN FREEDOM

Our understanding of human freedom and moral responsibility affects the coherency of our view of biblical inspiration. In order to show that VPI requires a compatibilistic view of human freedom and moral responsibility, I must, first, introduce the main categories and ideas in the contemporary free will debate. The two main positions in the debate are compatibilism and incompatibilism, both of which concern the notion of determinism.¹³

Determinism is the idea that every event is necessitated by prior and sufficient conditions. The three main varieties of determinism are physical (sometimes called “nomological”), theological, and psychological. *Physical determinism* claims that every event is necessitated by the state of the world in the past plus the laws of nature. Thus, everything that ever happens is determined by the immutable laws of nature and whatever happened before the event. Imagine the history of the world as a line of upright dominoes with each moment tipping the successive domino. Once the first domino was tipped, the rest of the dominoes were determined to fall in their appropriate order and time. *Theological determinism*, however, claims that all events are determined by God. Thus, everything that ever happens was determined by God’s will. Rather than dominoes, imagine a composer who wrote a musical score and then conducts an orchestra to play the music perfectly as written.

Psychological determinism, unlike physical and theological determinisms, has only to do with human choices and actions—not with every event of world history. Psychological determinism claims that everything a person does is caused by his mental states. Every choice is determined by a person's prior beliefs and desires. For example, a person who believes berries are fatally poisonous and apples are tasty and healthy would never choose to eat berries rather than apples when given the choice. In this way, the person is determined to choose apples.

Determinism may also be divided into soft and hard categories. Soft determinism is the view that (some form of) determinism is true and compatible with freedom and moral responsibility. Hard determinism is the view that determinism is true and incompatible with freedom and moral responsibility. Soft determinism is often synonymous with compatibilism, but hard determinism, as I show below, represents only one branch of incompatibilism.

Compatibilism is the position that human freedom and moral responsibility are *compatible* with determinism.¹⁴ Although Christian compatibilists affirm theological determinism and often psychological determinism, they typically reject physical determinism for reasons beyond the scope of this article. Christian compatibilists believe that God's determining of human choices does not undermine the agency, liberty, or moral worth of those choices.¹⁵

Incompatibilism is the position that human freedom and moral responsibility are *incompatible* with determinism. Incompatibilism may also be divided into two main categories. Those incompatibilists who affirm that people have free will are libertarians. Libertarianism holds that determinism is incompatible with freedom and moral responsibility, human beings do make free and morally responsible choices, and, thus, determinism is false. Libertarians reject physical, theological, and psychological determinism. But there are also incompatibilists who affirm determinism; these incompatibilists are hard determinists. Hard determinists believe that at least some form of determinism is true, and, therefore, people are neither free nor morally responsible for their actions. Although there are many Christian traditions that may be described as libertarian, Christian hard determinists are exceedingly rare, if they exist.¹⁶

The primary disagreement between compatibilists and incompatibilists

is over how to understand free agency. On the necessary conditions for free agency, libertarians are divided into two categories. *Sourcehood libertarians* argue that for an agent's choice or act to be free, the choice or act must originate in the agent. In other words, the ultimate source of the choice or act is found in the agent. For this reason, determinism would undermine freedom. If the ultimate source of an agent's action is found in the divine will or in the state of the world plus the laws of nature, then the agent is not the ultimate source of the action. *Leeway libertarians* agree that freedom requires the agent to be the ultimate source of his actions but argue further that free choices or actions require the categorical ability to do otherwise. Thus, leeway libertarians hold to a categorical reading of the principle of alternative possibilities (PAP) which states that an agent is free with respect to some choice or action only if the agent could have chosen or acted differently. For example, if a child is presented with a choice between vanilla and chocolate ice cream, the child is free only if he really could choose vanilla or chocolate given the state of the world in the past (including his beliefs and desires), the laws of nature, and even God's will and decree. According to leeway libertarianism, if the child chose vanilla freely, theoretically, we could go back in time to the moment of choice, and the child might choose chocolate instead, even though all of the conditions are identical.

Compatibilists believe that agents are indeed the source of their actions and that agents have the conditional ability to do otherwise, but they reject both *ultimate* sourcehood and the *categorical* reading of PAP. Christian compatibilists believe that the ultimate source (or primary cause) of their choices and actions is found in God's will, but the local source (or secondary cause) of their choices and actions is in themselves. These two sources (or causes) are not in competition—as though the divine and human wills are in a struggle for dominance or control—but, rather, God accomplishes his will through the free agency of his creatures. In other words, free agents willingly do what God wills them to do. Compatibilists also believe that free acts are ones that the agent could have done otherwise—but not in the categorical sense. Rather, compatibilists believe that the agent could have done otherwise *conditionally*; that is, if something had been different (e.g., the state of the world, the laws of nature, or God's will), then the agent could have done otherwise. For example, the child who chose vanilla over chocolate ice cream could have chosen chocolate if he had a stronger desire

or appreciation for chocolate at the moment of choice. He could have chosen chocolate if he wanted, but he did not want chocolate, so he did not choose chocolate. We can go back in time to the moment of choice, but he will always choose vanilla at that moment unless something about the world (including his own beliefs and desires) or God's will were different.

VERBAL PLENARY INSPIRATION AND INCOMPATIBILIST THEOLOGIES

One's view of biblical inspiration depends, in part, on one's view of the relationship between divine and human agency which is inseparable from the matter of freedom and moral responsibility. Inspiration involves God's activity not merely in the world but in particular human persons. Inspiration involves God's providence and his revelatory and supernatural activity. Indeed, inspiration involves a special act of the Holy Spirit. Warfield notes, "The production of the Scriptures is, in point of fact, a long process, in the course of which numerous and very varied Divine activities are involved, providential, gracious, miraculous, all of which must be taken into account in any attempt to explain the relation of God to the production of Scripture."¹⁷ Whether one holds to a compatibilist or incompatibilist system of theology will greatly influence one's doctrine of inspiration. In this section, I consider three incompatibilist systems of theology—Responsivism, Open Theism, and Molinism—in order to show how they fail to cohere with VPI.¹⁸

Note bene: I am less concerned with what the representatives of Responsivism, Open Theism, and Molinism *actually* say about inspiration than with what is coherent with their systems. Few, if any, Open Theists actually hold to VPI; and Responsivists and Molinists are both mixed on the issue. Thus, there is no single view of inspiration held by all Responsivists, all Open Theists, or all Molinists. By showing that VPI is impossible on Responsivist, Open Theist, and Molinist models of providence due to their insistence on libertarianism, I will have shown that incompatibilism is inconsistent with VPI (though some incompatibilists may affirm VPI inconsistently).

Responsivism

Responsivism (sometimes called the "simple foreknowledge" view or "classical freewill theism") is an incompatibilist system of theology. Responsivism teaches that God made man in his own image, and that image entails the

ability to exercise libertarian freedom. God has complete power and knowledge, and his knowledge extends even to the future acts of free creatures. Roger E. Olson explains, "God simply knows the future because it will happen; his knowing future free decisions and actions of creatures does not determine them. Rather that they will happen determines God's knowing them because God has decided to open himself up to being affected by the world. But, according to classical free will theists (as opposed to process theologians and open theists). God does not learn anything."¹⁹ Although God has exhaustive knowledge of the future, he does not causally determine everything. Olson affirms that, according to Responsivism, "everything that happens down to the least vibration of an atom is allowed by God but not necessarily caused or controlled by God. God concurs with every decision and action creatures make and do, but he does not cause all of it or control all of it."²⁰

Responsivism and VPI

Responsivists cannot affirm VPI consistently in their theological system. VPI requires that the words of Scripture are fully the words of man and fully the words of God. But, according to Responsivism, human beings have libertarian freedom, and God does not control or cause all of their actions. Thus, the question arises: How could God ensure that the human authors wrote exactly what he wanted them to write? In this section, I consider several ways a Responsivist could attempt to answer this question. I conclude that Responsivism must embrace a compatibilistic reading of VPI or else devolve into mechanical dictation or dynamic inspiration.

First, a Responsivist could argue that God indeed *could not* ensure that the human authors wrote exactly what he wanted them to write. The Responsivist's commitment to libertarianism simply prohibits that kind of strict control. From here, the Responsivist has two directions he could go. On the one hand, the Responsivist could still say the Bible is *in fact* exactly how God intended it to be, verbatim, despite the fact that God could not ensure this outcome. It is just a happy coincidence (in addition to providence, revelation, wisdom, etc.) that the authors got every word right. But this answer is extremely implausible; considering the number of possible combinations of words, the odds are astronomically against this coincidence. On the other hand, the Responsivist could concede that the Bible is not verbatim what

God intended. Thus, the Responsivist would have to reject VPI in favor of dynamic inspiration.

Second, a Responsivist could argue that the inspiration of Scripture was a special circumstance in which God actually did cause the human authors to write the Bible exactly how he wanted. Thus, God was the ultimate source of the authors' writing, and the authors could not do otherwise than write the words they wrote. But, because libertarianism requires ultimate sourcehood and (for leeway libertarianism) alternative possibilities, the human authors of Scripture were neither free nor morally responsible when they wrote Scripture. Consequently, this option devolves into mechanical dictation. Because the authors were not free, they were mere machines—unconscious, unwilling automatons.

Third, a Responsivist could argue, again, that the inspiration of Scripture was a special circumstance in which God actually did cause the human authors to write exactly what he wanted. But, unlike the second option, the Responsivist could argue that the authors' freedom and personality were not overridden or violated. In other words, the Responsivist could argue that human freedom and responsibility are compatible with God determining human actions; that is, compatibilism is true in the case of inspiration. But if compatibilism is true in the case of inspiration, it is true *simpliciter*. Compatibilism is the belief that freedom and responsibility are compatible with determinism—not the belief that every event is determined. Thus, the Responsivist would have to reject the sourcehood and leeway conditions for free will and concede the truth of compatibilism.

Open Theism

Open Theism is an incompatibilist system of theology that denies exhaustive divine foreknowledge. Open Theists believe that “love is the most important quality we attribute to God, and love is more than care and commitment; it involves being sensitive and responsive as well.”²¹ For God to be love (or loving), according to Open Theists, he must really interact with and be affected by free creatures. “Not only does [God] influence [creatures], but they also exert an influence on him. As a result, the course of history is not the product of divine action alone. God's will is not the explanation for everything that happens; human decisions and actions make an important contribution too. Thus history is the combined result of what God and his

creatures decide to do.”²²

Contrary to Responsivists, Open Theists contend that exhaustive divine foreknowledge undermines libertarian freedom. Clark Pinnock, for example, argues that “if choices are real and freedom is significant, future decisions cannot be exhaustively foreknown. This is because the future is not determinate but shaped in part by human choices. The future is not fixed like the past, which can be known completely. The future does not yet exist and therefore cannot be infallibly anticipated, even by God.”²³ In other words, if human beings have true freedom, then their choices cannot be predetermined or foreknown. Only when the choices of free creatures occur can they be known.

Open Theists still believe that God is all-powerful and all-knowing. God is certainly able to make a world in which his will determines all things, but he chose not to exercise that kind of control for the sake of having reciprocal relationships with his creatures. And God does, in fact, know all things that are logically possible to know. The future choices of free creatures are not possibly knowable until they occur. So, even though God does not know with certainty what free creatures will do, his omniscience is not undermined. Implicit to this notion of God's knowledge is the rejection of divine timelessness or, at least, the notion that God becomes temporal with the creation of the world in order to have genuine personal relationships with his creatures.

Open Theism and VPI

VPI is inconsistent with the core tenet of Open Theism, namely, that human beings must have freedom in the libertarian sense in order to have a reciprocal loving relationship with God. VPI requires that each word of Scripture be both human and divine. But the same question arises as with Responsivism: How could God ensure that the human authors wrote exactly what he wanted them to write? Open Theists' possible answers are materially no different than the possible answers of the Responsivists. In this section, I briefly rehearse the options.

First, an Open Theist could say that God *could not* ensure that the words of Scripture are fully his words. Either the words are indeed what God intended but coincidentally, or the words are not what God intended. The idea of the Bible being coincidentally God's word is extremely implausible. Therefore, the Open Theist must resort to a dynamic view of inspiration.²⁴ The ideas are God's, but the words are men's.

Second, an Open Theist could argue that God caused the biblical authors to write what they wrote. But, if an Open Theist is reluctant to discard libertarianism, he must say that God overrode the authors' freedom, in which case, biblical inspiration amounts to mechanical dictation.

Third, an Open Theist could say that God caused the biblical authors to write what they wrote, but he did it in such a way that did not violate their freedom. But this answer is simply the affirmation of compatibilism—which is untenable for Open Theists.

Molinism

Molinism affirms both libertarianism and a meticulous view of providence. According to Molinism, God knows what creatures would do freely (in the libertarian sense) in any given circumstance, so, by meticulously controlling the circumstances, God is able to actualize a world in which he accomplishes his plan perfectly without violating the freedom of his creatures.²⁵ Unlike Open Theists, Molinists affirm that God knows the future exhaustively. And unlike Responsivists, Molinists claim that all things happen according to God's will. Because of Molinism's complexity, I shall offer a disproportionate amount of space to its explanation and evaluation.

Molinism depends on the concept of divine middle knowledge. Traditionally, two kinds of knowledge are attributed to God: natural knowledge and free knowledge. God's natural knowledge is knowledge of his own nature, and, thus, it includes all that is necessary and independent of his will. By his natural knowledge, God knows all necessary truths such as the truths of logic and mathematics. And by his natural knowledge, he also knows all that is possible. What is possible is determined by God's own power; and God knows his own power. Hence, God's natural knowledge includes his knowledge of all possible worlds, that is, entire world histories that God could create.

God's free knowledge is knowledge of his will, and thus, it includes all that is contingent and dependent on his will. By his free knowledge, God knows what he wills with respect to creation. Thus, God knows all that is actual (past, present, and future) by his free knowledge.

Molinism posits a third kind of knowledge in God: middle knowledge. God's middle knowledge lies between his natural knowledge and free knowledge, and it includes all that is contingent but independent of his will. In

particular, by his middle knowledge, God knows counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, that is, God knows what creatures would do freely (in the libertarian sense) in any particular circumstance. For example, God knows what I would be doing now if my computer failed to start when I sat down to write. Because God knows what creatures would do freely in any given circumstance, by controlling the circumstances, he can direct creatures meticulously without infringing on their freedom.

Thus, there are four logical moments in God. First, God knows all the possible worlds by his natural knowledge. Second, by his middle knowledge, God knows all the feasible worlds, that is, he knows the subset of all the possible worlds that realize his purposes in creation. Third, God wills to create one of those feasible worlds. Fourth, God knows the actual world by his free knowledge.

Molinism and VPI

Unlike with Responsivism and Open Theism, Molinism can ensure that the words of the Bible are the words God intends. For this reason, Molinism is superior to non-meticulous models of providence. The problem with Molinism, however, is that it cannot affirm that the Bible is a special and supernatural work of God. The Molinist must either reject the supernatural of inspiration in favor of a dynamic view, or he must concede compatibilism. In this section, I demonstrate how a Molinist cannot affirm VPI.

According to Molinism, God can ensure that the words of Scripture are the very words God intends for Scripture.²⁶ God knows all possible and feasible worlds, and he knows which conditions and circumstances will bring about which free creaturely acts. So, God chooses and actualizes the world in which the biblical authors freely write exactly what God wants written. "By weakly actualizing the composition of the books of the Bible, God can bring it about that biblical inspiration is in the fullest sense confluent."²⁷ The question arises, however: How is the Bible special and supernatural? Every book ever written will have been brought about ultimately by the same Molinist picture of providence. How is God's superintendence of Scripture different from other books? In what follows, I consider two ways in which the Molinist may attempt to answer this question.

First, the Molinist might stress that, in addition to divine providence, the biblical authors were under the influence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit

worked supernaturally in the writers in order to ensure the verbal intent of God.²⁸ The problem with this answer is that, if the writers had libertarian freedom, then there are possible worlds in which the Spirit had the same supernatural influence on the writers and yet the writers freely chose to write something other than what God intended. And if there are possible worlds in which the Spirit worked but the writers failed to communicate God's word perfectly, then the Spirit's work was not efficacious; it did not render the outcome certain. Thus, it seems that the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in the biblical authors amounts only to revelation, not inspiration.

The Molinist might respond that there are *no* possible worlds in which the Spirit works and the writers fail to communicate God's word perfectly. After all, the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, according to Molinism, indicate that there are definite answers (independent of God's will) to what free creatures would do in certain circumstances. But if it is true that in every possible world in which the Spirit does a special work in the biblical writers, they communicate God's word perfectly, then they do so coincidentally, compatibilistically, or by dictation. In other words, if the Spirit's influence is necessarily conjoined with the success of the communication of God's word as God intends, then the success is due to a coincidence; otherwise, the Spirit's work is efficacious in either a compatibilist sense or by dictation. But the notion that all the words of Scripture are exactly how God intends, *coincidentally*, whenever the Spirit influences the human authors—not just in the actual world but in *every possible* world—is absurd. Thus, the Molinist must concede either compatibilism or a mechanical dictation view of inspiration.

The Molinist might rejoin by arguing that the biblical authors communicate God's word perfectly only in those possible worlds that include the Spirit's influence and certain *additional* conditions. In other words, there are some worlds in which the Spirit works and the writers fail to communicate God's word perfectly, but there are other worlds in which the combination of the Spirit's influence and other circumstances brings about the perfect expression of God's word. But this response does not absolve the problem because the Spirit's influence becomes less than efficacious. If Paul, for example, were influenced by the Holy Spirit to write Scripture, and yet, he did otherwise (either by not writing or by writing something contrary to God's intent), then the Spirit's work would have resulted merely in a kind of revelation in

Paul's mind rather than an inspired text. And if it is possible that the Spirit's work would fail to render an inspired text, then the Spirit's work cannot be deemed effective. Thus, in this case, the Molinist must affirm a dynamic view of inspiration because the Spirit himself cannot produce an inspired text.²⁹

Second, the Molinist could argue that the Bible is special because God claims it as his authoritative word. In other words, God brings about a world in which the biblical authors write the Bible as he intended, and God deems it his word.³⁰ This response has two aspects: God's attitude and God's attestation. With respect to God's attestation of the Bible, the Molinist could argue that the Bible is God's word because God says so. But a further question arises: Where does God say so? If, on the one hand, the Molinist argues God says so in the Bible itself, then he has not shown how the Bible is different than other books that claim divine authorship.³¹ God brought about the Bible in the same way as these other books. At most, the Molinist could say that the Bible was brought about with the help of divine revelation in the minds of the authors, but, as I have shown above, the Molinist cannot appeal to an efficacious work of God such that the text itself is supernaturally inspired. If, on the other hand, the Molinist argues God says so by the Spirit in the hearts of believers or in the Church, then he has not shown the supernatural of the biblical text itself but only, perhaps, a supernatural response to the text.

With respect to God's attitude, the Molinist could argue that the Bible is special because of God's attitude toward it. God thinks the Bible, and no other, is his word, and thus it is so.³² Although God's attitude toward Scripture does seem to make it unique among other books, it does not make it a supernatural work of God.

VERBAL PLENARY INSPIRATION AND COMPATIBILISM

I have shown that incompatibilist systems of theology cannot affirm VPI consistently. Responsivism and Open Theism cannot ensure that the words of Scripture are God's words, and Molinism cannot show how the Bible is supernatural. In this section, I explain how compatibilism is required for VPI.

Recall that VPI is the view that all the words of Scripture are supernaturally inspired by God such that they are fully the words of human authors and fully the words of God himself. Thus, a fitting view of human freedom must

be consistent not only with a robust model of providence which secures that the right men live at the right time under the right circumstances (not to mention God's providence in the unfolding of redemptive history) but with God acting effectively through those men to produce Scripture such that it is truly God's own word. Libertarianism cannot account for VPI because it cannot affirm that God is the ultimate source of the very words of Scripture and that the human authors could not have done otherwise while simultaneously affirming that the human authors were free agents. Compatibilism, however, can affirm the free agency of the human authors despite the fact that they were not the ultimate source of their actions and they could not have done otherwise. Compatibilism, remember, is the view that human freedom and moral responsibility are compatible with determinism. And the only way to make sense of VPI is to understand the Spirit's inspiration as a prior and sufficient cause or condition for its effect. In other words, inspiration is an instance of theological determining.

As I have shown, although Molinism affirms a meticulous model of providence, without compatibilism, it cannot account for the supernature of Scripture. Consider Warfield's thoughts:

Nothing is needed beyond mere providence to secure such books—provided only that it does not lie in the Divine purpose that these books should possess qualities which rise above the powers of men to produce, even under the most complete Divine guidance. For providence is guidance; and guidance can bring one only so far as his own power can carry him. If heights are to be scaled above man's native power to achieve, then something more than guidance, however effective is necessary. This is the reason for the superinduction, at the end of the long process of the production of Scripture, of the additional Divine operation which we call technically "inspiration." By it, the Spirit of God, flowing confluent in with the providentially and graciously determined work of men, spontaneously producing under the Divine directions the writings appointed to them, gives the product a Divine quality unattainable by human powers alone. Thus these books become not merely the word of godly men, but the immediate word of God Himself, speaking directly as such to the minds and hearts of every reader.³³

Providence is not enough; revelation is not enough; though both are needed.³⁴ Without a supernatural work of the Spirit such that the Bible is a confluence

of God and man, rising above the natural powers of man, the Bible cannot be the immediate word of God. And this confluence could happen only if compatibilism is true. If compatibilism is true, then Moses, David, John, and Paul could write the words they wanted to write based on their own experiences, wisdom, reasoning, instruction, and revelations—likely through careful deliberation over word choice and possibly with revisions before the final script was finished—while at the same time being determined by God.

One might object that theological determinism and compatibilism flatten the distinction between inspiration and providence. The objector might ask how the Bible is special and supernatural if all books are brought about by divine causation and free human agency. In response, first, I have not argued for any particular model of providence (e.g., Calvinism), nor have I argued for theological determinism (the notion that *all* events are determined by God). Rather, I have argued that VPI involves some degree of theological determining and thus requires compatibilism. Therefore, from what I have actually argued, God could bring about other books in a non-causal way. But, because I do indeed believe God's will determines all things, I shall offer two more responses, each of which correspond to the similar objection against the Molinist view. In short, the Bible is special because of the inspiration of the Spirit and because God says so.

Second, even though other books are brought about by divine causation, they are not the result of the Spirit's supernatural influence. Divine inspiration is considered supernatural because it goes beyond what human reason can achieve, and because it grants the text divine qualities. The human authors may have understood much of what they were writing, but they could not have known the fullness, the richness, and the depth of God's word through them. After two thousand years of church history, we are still discovering the remarkable complexity, wisdom, and profundity of the Bible. On a dynamic view of inspiration, the writers were given revelation, and then they communicated the message in their own words. But the dynamic view implies that the writers fully comprehended what was revealed. Thus, there could be no further divinely intended connection between, say, the Gospel of Mark and the OT than what Mark himself understood. No other book is like the Bible in this respect. Indeed, no other book *could* be like the Bible because without the Spirit's influence, a person cannot freely produce a book with meaning of infinite significance.

Furthermore, the Spirit grants the Bible divine qualities. Because the Scripture is breathed out by God, it is the immediate word of God, having the very authority, veracity, and sufficiency of God himself. For this reason, the Bible is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). Because of VPI, the Bible is a means of grace. In the Bible, God communicates to humanity in his own voice.

Third, the Bible is different than other books because God thinks and says so. God says so in the Bible itself and in the hearts of believers. Although all books are brought about by God’s providence construed broadly, only Scripture was inspired by God. The Spirit acted through the biblical writers in such a way that when we read Scripture, we hear God speaking. God confirms his word by his word (2 Tim 3:16). Rather than weakly actualizing the text of Scripture (as per Molinism), VPI requires that God actively and effectively speaks through the biblical writers. Moreover, God attests to his word externally as well. The Spirit himself bears witness to us that the Bible is God’s word (1 Cor 2:1-16).³⁵ God’s external attestation is not a property of the text but a work of the Spirit in his people to recognize the work of the Spirit in the text.

God thinks the Bible is his word because he wills and knows it to be true. God knows the Bible is his word because he knows his will. God’s will is determinative; it is prior to and sufficient for its effect. What God wills is always accomplished. And necessarily, what God wills is true; and what is true, God knows. God willed what the human authors would write through the efficacious inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Thus, from this soft theological determinist position, to say that God thinks the Bible is his word is to say that God *makes* the Bible as his word.

CONCLUSION

The verbal plenary view of biblical inspiration holds that all the words of Scripture are supernaturally inspired by God such that they are fully the words of human authors and fully the words of God himself. I have argued that the verbal plenary view of inspiration requires a compatibilism. I began by comparing VPI to its nearest competitors: mechanical dictation and

dynamic inspiration. Then I introduced the major terms and categories in the contemporary free will debate. After that, I demonstrated that Responsivism, Open Theism, and Molinism cannot consistently affirm VPI on account of their affirmation of libertarianism. Finally, I showed how compatibilism is required for VPI.

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- ¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (New Edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 151. Michael F. Bird writes, “Dictation theory ... is that God dictated to authors exactly what he wanted them to say. God supernaturally speaks into the mind of a Jeremiah or a John, who in turn write word-for-word what they hear. Human authors on this model become little more than passive receptacles of the divine voice that were used to convey divine words,” in *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 710.
 - ² Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 712.
 - ³ *Ibid.*, 719.
 - ⁴ Clark H. Pinnock and Barry L. Callen are right to note that “Were we to think of God dictating the Bible, we would certainly fall into the docetic error of denying its true humanity; if we put all the emphasis on the literary freedom of human authorship, we might end up denying inspiration entirely, except in a nominal sense,” in *The Scripture Principle: Reclaiming the Full Authority of the Bible* (3rd ed.; Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2009), 130.
 - ⁵ Bird argues that “if we take 2 Peter 1:20-21 at face value, God inspires persons, not pages, by the direct agency of the Spirit. Verbal inspiration can too quickly jump from God to Scripture and bypass the all-important human subject in inscripturating God’s Word. Scripture is indeed “God-breathed” as 2 Timothy 3:16 claims, yet this should be taken to refer to the Spirit’s movement in the mind of the human authors to spirate from them a divinely driven and humanly given written text” (*Evangelical Theology*, 714). Taking 2 Peter 1:20-21 at “face value” rather than 2 Tim 3:16-17 seems arbitrary and inconsistent. The dynamic view suffers by failing to account for the Spirit’s work in both author *and* text.
 - ⁶ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2020), 154.
 - ⁷ *Ibid.*
 - ⁸ *Ibid.*
 - ⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.
 - ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.
 - ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 157.
 - ¹² B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1948), 160.
 - ¹³ The contemporary philosophical literature on the free will debate is immense. For an introduction, see Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); see also Kevin Timpe, *Free Will: Sourcehood and its Alternatives* (2nd ed.; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).
 - ¹⁴ Compatibilists may be further divided into soft and hard varieties. Soft compatibilism maintains that people have freedom and moral responsibility whether or not determinism is true. Hard compatibilism, however, maintains that freedom and moral responsibility *require* determinism. That is, without determinism, human freedom and moral responsibility are impossible.
 - ¹⁵ Theologians often use the concept of psychological determinism to undergird a strong view of original sin and total depravity as well as a strong view of regeneration and final states.
 - ¹⁶ Semi-compatibilists believe that determinism undermines freedom but not moral responsibility. For this reason, some semi-compatibilists may also consider themselves hard determinists.
 - ¹⁷ Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 156.
 - ¹⁸ I have not included Thomism in this list, even though many of its adherents consider themselves to be incompatibilists. Thomism teaches that God has exhaustive foreknowledge, and everything happens according to his will. Moreover, Thomism claims that God is the primary cause of all things, and yet, his causation does not undermine secondary (creaturely) causes. Human beings have free will, and

their actions are contingent, not necessary. And, although interpreters believe Thomas rejected physical determinism, they disagree whether Thomas Aquinas taught (and whether contemporary Thomism is) a form of theological determinism. For example, Michael J. Murray and Michael Rea write, “The view that we are calling Calvinism here could also reasonably bear the label Thomism or perhaps even Augustinianism. The view has been attributed to, among others, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and John Calvin; and there is no question that it has been endorsed by Jonathan Edwards and a host of followers of both Aquinas and Calvin. Proponents of this view maintain ... both that all contingent matters of fact are completely determined by the will of God and that human freedom is compatible with determinism” (*An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008], 61). But W. Matthews Grant argues for a Thomist account of providence which maintains divine universal causation without theological determinism in *Free Will and God’s Universal Causality: The Dual Sources Account* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020). The matter is likely settled by determining whether Thomas believed (or Thomists believe) the divine will to be both sufficient for and prior to its effects.

- 19 Roger E. Olson, “The Classical Free Will Model of God,” in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: 4 Views* (ed. Bruce A. Ware; Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 156.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 171.
- 21 Richard Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (ed. Clark Pinnock, et al; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 15.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 15-16.
- 23 Clark H. Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (ed. Clark Pinnock, et al; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 123.
- 24 Pinnock and Barry L. Callen can be cited as examples; they write, “Biblical inspiration should be seen as a dynamic work of God. In it, God does not decide every word that is used, one by one, but works in the writers in such a way that they make full use of their own skills and vocabulary while giving expression to the divinely inspired message being communicated to them and through them,” in *The Scripture Principle*, 135.
- 25 For a detailed account of Molinism, see Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); see also William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000).
- 26 This statement may be stronger than Molinism allows. It may be the case that the words God really wanted to use as Scripture belonged only to infeasible worlds—possible worlds in which his ultimate ends were not accomplished. Thus, it may be the case that the only worlds in which God could bring about his preferred words in Scripture are worlds without libertarian freedom. If so, God cannot ensure that the words of Scripture are the very words God intends for Scripture. This statement is also ambiguous between a *de dicto* and a *de re* reading. The *de dicto* reading of the statement means that whatever the human authors might have written, God would be sure to intend those words as Scripture. On this reading, the words of Scripture could have been different than they are in the actual world. The *de re* reading of the statement means that the words of Scripture as they actually are in *this* world—God could ensure that these words would constitute the Bible in the world he would create. The *de dicto* reading is easier to defend because it seems God could deem Scripture as his word *ex post facto* of his knowing what the authors would write; but this reading seems to be a modified version of the dynamic view of inspiration. I follow the *de re* reading throughout this article.
- 27 William Lane Craig, “Inspiration and the Freewill Defense Revisited,” in *The Evangelical Quarterly* 73.4 (2001), 336. By “weakly actualizing,” he means bringing about in a non-causal way. See Alvin Plantinga’s discussion of “weak” versus “strong” actualization in *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 172-73.
- 28 Craig writes, “Moreover, we must never forget that the circumstances known to God include, not exclude, all those movements of the Holy Spirit in an author’s heart to which God knew the writer would respond in appropriate ways,” in “Inspiration and the Freewill Defense Revisited,” 337.
- 29 Indeed, a general weakness for Molinism is demonstrating the work of God in the human will. God may be able to influence the human intellect, but the will is inviolable. For this reason, Molinism is as weak on biblical inspiration as it is on regeneration.
- 30 In response to the question of how the Bible is different than, say, the books of Christopher Hitchens, Craig writes, “The essential difference lies not in the mode of God’s action. Remember that inspiration is a property of the written text, not the mode of its production ... Rather the essential difference lies in God’s attitude toward what is written. In the one case, God wills to communicate via the author His message to us. He intends that the letter to the Romans be His Word to us. Romans is therefore a case

of appropriated or delegated speech, much as a boss makes a letter composed by his secretary his own by affixing his signature to it. By contrast, God merely allows Hitchens to write what he does without endorsing its truth or adopting it as His own. God lets Hitchens put forth his falsehoods because in His providence Hitchens’ books have their part to play in God’s overall plan for human history. But God does not see Hitchens’ books as His Word to us, to be trusted and obeyed. Therein lies the essential difference between the Bible and every other literary product of free human activity. (“A Molinist Perspective on Biblical Inspiration,” *Reasonable Faith with William Lane Craig*, www.reasonablefaith.org, May 9, 2011).

- 31 This line of argument is not intended to undermine the Scripture’s self-attestation as a ground for its authority. Rather, the point is that Molinists cannot appeal to the Bible’s self-attestation to prove that it was brought about by a special and supernatural work of God because their model of providence, I argue, prohibits it.
- 32 As a clarification: “to think” is ambiguous between “to know” and “to will.” Thus, God thinks the Bible is his word either because he knows it to be true independently of his will, or he knows it to be true because he willed it to be true. Because the Bible belongs to creation as a contingent entity (Molinists would certainly say that there are possible worlds in which the Bible, as it is in the actual world, does not exist), God’s knowledge of it must belong to his free knowledge. Therefore, the Bible is God’s word because he wills it so.
- 33 Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 157-158.
- 34 Craig argues that in addition to a Molinist view of providence and the influence of the Holy Spirit, “Revelation will be needed in some cases for truths not accessible through natural reason,” in “Inspiration and the Freewill Defense Revisited,” 337.
- 35 See R. C. Sproul, “The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 335-354.