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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

# John Owen's Doctrine of Scripture in Historical Perspective

by Donald K. Mckim

*This essay, transmitted to us by Dr. Peter Toon, is the work of a pupil of Dr. Jack B. Rogers (now of Fuller Theological Seminary), to whose study of Scripture in the Westminster Confession he repeatedly appeals. Whatever the shift towards scholasticism owes to the example of Beza, Owen could profitably have learned from Beza some lessons in textual criticism which would have saved him from perpetrating some of his less convincing arguments.*

“THAT some profound transformation of Calvin’s ideas, despite the ubiquity of the *Institutio* took place in the generation after his death is incontrovertible.”<sup>1</sup> This statement by the translator of Calvin’s *Institutes*, F. L. Battles, points to the tendency of Protestant theology in the seventeenth century to become “scholasticized.” This occurred when Lutheran and Reformed dogmatists, building on the foundation laid by their predecessors, spelled out much more clearly and in more detail the “particulars” of many of their doctrines. However, as has been noted by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “certain features call for notice which pose the question whether their full and careful codification of doctrine has not involved certain shifts of emphasis, slight in themselves but serious in their historical consequences.”<sup>2</sup> This observation is especially apt in regard to the doctrine of Scripture. In the seventeenth century these shifts had the effect of rigidification on the doctrine and paved the way for the fierce reactions of the Enlightenment period and later theological liberalism.

“Protestant Scholasticism” is a slippery term to define. Brian Armstrong says that it “is more a spirit, an attitude of life, than a list of beliefs. For this reason it practically defies precise definition.”<sup>3</sup> However he has identified four tendencies which serve as a helpful

<sup>1</sup> Ford L. Battles, rev. of Brian Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1969), *Theology Today*, XXVII, No. 4 (January, 1971), p. 479.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “The Church Doctrine of Inspiration,” *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids, 1969), pp. 213-14.

<sup>3</sup> Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1969), p. 32.

basis for identifying the trends in seventeenth-century Protestant theology. These are:

1. The theological approach which asserts religious truth on the basis of deductive ratiocination from given assumptions or principles, thus producing a logically coherent and defensible system of belief. Generally this takes the form of syllogistic reasoning. It is an orientation, it seems, invariably based upon an Aristotelian philosophical commitment and so relates to medieval scholasticism.
2. The term will refer to the employment of reason in religious matters, so that reason assumes at least equal standing with faith in theology, thus jettisoning some of the authority of revelation.
3. It will comprehend the sentiment that the scriptural record contains a unified, rationally comprehensible account and thus may be formed into a definitive statement which may be used as a measuring stick to determine one's orthodoxy.
4. It will comprehend a pronounced interest in metaphysical matters, in abstract, speculative thought, particularly with reference to the doctrine of God.<sup>4</sup>

It seems that these tendencies began through Theodore Beza, writing immediately after Calvin's death.<sup>5</sup> Through his writings and others, Armstrong notes that "by the dawn of the seventeenth century the resultant scholasticism reigned in all the leading Reformed academies outside France."<sup>6</sup> These tendencies continued to develop so that "the farther one advances toward and into the seventeenth century the more scholastic becomes the theology he encounters whether he studies theology in Protestant Germany, Scotland, the Netherlands, or France."<sup>7</sup>

While this process progressed through the seventeenth century on the European continent, things did not move quite so quickly in English theology. Events in science and philosophy which had greatly affected Continental theological thought in the early part of the century, do not emerge as significant influences in England until after mid-century.<sup>8</sup>

An interesting example of this deals particularly with the influence of Ramist logic. This system developed by Petrus Ramus was a protest against Aristotelianism. On the Continent, theologians resisted this attempted breakdown. Beza even refused Ramus a

<sup>4</sup> Armstrong, pp. 32-3.

<sup>5</sup> See Armstrong, p. 38. E. Bizer argues that in Beza "reason and Aristotelian logic were elevated to a position equal to that of faith in theological epistemology." See Armstrong, p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> Armstrong, p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> Armstrong, pp. 131-32.

<sup>8</sup> See Jack B. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession* (Grand Rapids, 1967), p. 111 ff. This work serves as the only available study of the Westminster Confession of Faith seen against its historical and philosophical background. The document's doctrine of Scripture had never before been evaluated in this light. Rogers' work is of importance also because of its extensive use of original source material.

teaching position in the Genevan Academy because of his anti-Aristotelian position.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, some of the Westminster Divines (working before 1650) were influenced by Ramist logic and shared with Ramus an opposition to Aristotle.<sup>10</sup> This shows the difference in the theological climates of England and the Continent in the early part of the seventeenth century when, as has been pointed out above, the Continent became increasingly "scholasticized."<sup>11</sup>

This factor of dissimilarity between England and the Continent is especially significant in regard to the doctrine of Scripture. It means that the rigidification which took place in later Continental orthodoxy, was retarded in its growth in England. To realize this it is necessary to understand both that "early seventeenth-century English theology was decisively different from seventeenth-century Reformed theology on the Continent," and that "the theology of the English Puritans of the early seventeenth century cannot be equated with English theology after the mid-seventeenth century."<sup>12</sup> Because of this "time lag," the Westminster Divines (concluding their Confession by 1646) had continued the Augustinian-Calvinist tradition of the sixteenth-century Confessions and the English Reformation. They were not yet confronted or threatened by the "new philosophy" of Descartes, or the "Locke-Newton concept of the universe." But after the mid-century mark, these and other factors did become of significant issue to English theology and led eventually to the English Deism of the eighteenth century.<sup>13</sup> So, the Westminster Divines dealt with Scripture in a way different from that of later orthodoxy with its tendencies toward restrictiveness and rigidification. Thus these tendencies as they occur in England, must come from a time later than that of the Westminster Confession.

Rogers quotes A. F. Mitchell as suggesting:

There are hints that a more restrictive and less Reformation interpretation of the Westminster Confession began almost immediately after the Westminster Assembly by those not satisfied with the degree of dogmatic strictness exercised by the Westminster Divines. John Owen, the great English Independent and younger contemporary of the Westminster Divines, is credited with such an interpretation on the English scene.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Armstrong, p. 38. Cf. Rogers, p. 88 note 234.

<sup>10</sup> Rogers, p. 237.

<sup>11</sup> See above, note 7.

<sup>12</sup> Rogers, p. 116.

<sup>13</sup> See Rogers, p. 114.

<sup>14</sup> See Rogers, p. 449. The Mitchell citation is from *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines (November 1644 to March 1649) From Transcripts of the Originals Procured by a Committee of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland*, eds. Alexander F. Mitchell and J. Struthers. London, 1874. Mitchell was the leading nineteenth-century authority on the Westminster Confession of Faith.

To follow this hypothesis, it is necessary to examine John Owen's writings on the subject of Scripture.

In analysing the trends toward scholasticism, Bromiley has outlined five significant trends. These "trends" are of special value because they deal specifically with the development of the doctrine of Scripture. Consideration will be given to seeing how Owen represents or does not represent these tendencies toward scholasticization.

From the works of Owen, three treatises emerge in which he considers the "doctrine of the Scripture concerning the Scripture."<sup>15</sup> These are: "Of the Divine Original of the Scriptures," "A Vindication of the Purity and Integrity of the Hebrew and Greek Texts of the Old and New Testament," and a Latin work (not previously translated) entitled "Pro Sacris Scripturis Exercitationes Adversus Fanaticos"—a work directed against the Quakers. These three dissertations "seem to have been printed in 1658, though published . . . in 1659."<sup>16</sup>

Of special importance also in seeing Owen's views on Scripture, are his works "The Reason of Faith" and "Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God." These writings are from Book VI, parts 1 and 2, of his large *Discourse on the Holy Spirit*. They were published in London in 1677 and 1678. In these five works Owen's concerns and opinions regarding Scripture can be examined.

Using Bromiley's analysis of the significant trends in post-Reformation Orthodoxy, it will be observed that John Owen shows both an adherence to the emphases of the Westminster Divines and also tendencies in the direction of the shift toward rigidification of the doctrine of Scripture.

One of Bromiley's trends is the practice of seventeenth-century dogmatists to make inerrancy the basis of inspiration. Heinrich Heppe recognised this in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. He points out that for the Reformers and Calvin

the authority of Holy Scripture rested purely on the fact that it reports upon real acts of God in revelation . . . The authority of Holy Scripture then rests not upon the form of its recording, but upon its content, i.e. upon the reality of the revealed facts attested in writing. But as early as the

<sup>15</sup> John Owen, "The Epistle Dedicatory," in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (London, 1968 reprint), XVI, p. 293. Hereafter cited as "Owen".

<sup>16</sup> "Prefatory Note" to "Pro Sacris Scripturis Exercitationes Adversus Fanaticos" in *The Works of John Owen, D.D.*, ed. William Goold (Edinburgh, 1862), XVII. This treatise has recently been translated (1970) for the author by Mrs. Ann F. Castro, New Wilmington, Pennsylvania. Mrs. Castro holds the M.A. degree in classics from the University of Indiana. Hereafter cited as "Pro Sacris".

end of the sixteenth century the conception of inspiration had changed; it was now completely severed from the idea of revelation. Scripture was therefore now regarded as inspired, purely because it was dictated to the Biblical authors by God.<sup>17</sup>

Scripture, then, as "dictated by God," says Voetius, comes to the historical writers so that "all the dogmas, decrees, words, deeds, good or bad, which are contained in the Bible, are believed to have [been] received . . . from the mouth and by the direct revelation of God, and to have shewn them to us without any error."<sup>18</sup> Scripture is without error because it comes from God.

John Owen does not go that far. For him, Scripture is the Word of God and "God has declared in the sacred Scriptures all things and everything, of whatever sort, which are necessary for our salvation or which are pleasing and acceptable to him in his worship."<sup>19</sup> Further, this Scripture is true "and every part of it was given by divine inspiration."<sup>20</sup> It was given to writers who "witness that *what* they wrote was received by *inspiration from God*."<sup>21</sup> But it derives its authority, not from the *way* in which it has come to us, but rather because of *Who it is* that is speaking in it. "By its spiritual light, which it derives from its author alone, it infallibly shows itself to be the Word of God."<sup>22</sup> The Divine Origin of the Scriptures is the "sole foundation of its authority."<sup>23</sup> Owen does not proceed further to speculate as to whether there are any "mistakes" or "errors" in Scripture. He does defend the "Perfection of Holy Scripture" against the Quakers,<sup>24</sup> but this "perfection" is "their completeness as regards their proper purpose"<sup>25</sup> which is "to instruct us in knowledge of God and our duty to this end, that we may pursue eternal life to the glory of God."<sup>26</sup> In this regard, Owen follows the Westminster Divines who in turn simply follow Calvin and the Reformed Confessions: "Inspiration is not defined as to its mode, but only affirmed in its result—the Word of God written which is the rule of faith and life. The question of inerrancy is never raised."<sup>27</sup> Owen's focus like that of Calvin and Westminster is on the saving purpose of Scripture.

A second of Bromiley's observations is that Protestant scholas-

<sup>17</sup> Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson (London, 1950), pp. 16-7.

<sup>18</sup> In Heppe, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Owen, "Pro Sacris", Exercise III, Section 25.

<sup>20</sup> Owen, IV, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Owen, IV, p. 32. Italics are Owen's.

<sup>22</sup> Owen, "Pro Sacris," Ex. I, Sect. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 297.

<sup>24</sup> Owen, "Pro Sacris," Ex. III.

<sup>25</sup> Owen, "Pro Sacris," Ex. III, sect. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Owen, "Pro Sacris," Ex. III, sect. 28.

<sup>27</sup> Rogers, p. 450.

ticism tended "to subordinate the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, still forcefully maintained, to the external and internal criteria of the authenticity and authority of the Bible."<sup>28</sup> In Protestant thought the Word and the Spirit are always held inseparably together as the way God communicates with men. An overemphasis on one or the other is to be avoided. In the seventeenth century, the Westminster Divines faced this problem with the Roman and Anglo-Catholics on one side emphasizing the "rational" authority of human reason, and the Sectaries on the other side emphasizing the subjective "revelation of the Spirit." "The Westminster Divines tried to return a balanced answer to their opponents on both sides."<sup>29</sup>

In Continental dogmatics, however, as Heppe has noted, there tended to be a subordination of the role of the Holy Spirit "in favour of a false autonomy of Holy Scripture."<sup>30</sup> In many cases this centred around the extent of validity of external rational arguments for Scriptural authority.

This problem is recognized by Owen. It is noted that many writers of the Church of England were driven to a

greater rationalism by the tone of the fanatical excesses they sought to rebuke. Thus, if Owen therefore, affirmed the necessity of the Spirit for the due credence of revelation, he might be confounded with the "professors of the inward light." If on the other hand, he affirmed the competency of the external arguments of revelation to produce a conviction of its divine authority, it might be insinuated or fancied that he was overlooking the work of the Spirit as the source of faith.<sup>31</sup>

In his work "The Reason of Faith," Owen affirms: "There are sundry cogent arguments, which are taken from *external considerations* of Scripture, that evince it on rational grounds to be from God."<sup>32</sup> But yet these arguments (called "moral certainty") are "all human and fallible."<sup>33</sup> To say that

they contain the formal reason of that assent which is required of us unto the Scripture as the word of God, that our faith is the effect and product of them, which it rests upon and is resolved into, is both contrary to the Scripture, destructive of the nature of divine faith, and exclusive of the work of the Holy Ghost in this whole matter.<sup>34</sup>

This position is neatly summarized when Owen writes about assent to the Scriptures being by the natural faculties of our minds:

On this supposition, the whole *work of believing* would be a work of *reason*. "Be it so," say some; "nor is it meet it should be otherwise conceived." But if so, then the object of it must be things so evident in themselves and

<sup>28</sup> Bromiley, p. 213.

<sup>29</sup> Rogers, p. 430.

<sup>30</sup> Heppe, p. 26.

<sup>31</sup> In "Prefatory Note," by editor in Owen, IV, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Owen, IV, p. 20. Italics by Owen.

<sup>33</sup> Owen, IV, p. 50.

<sup>34</sup> Owen, IV, p. 47.

their own nature as that the mind is, as it were, compelled by that evidence unto an assent, and cannot do otherwise. If there be such a light and evidence in the things themselves, with respect unto our reason, in the right use and exercise of it, then is the mind thereby necessitated unto its assent: which both overthrows the nature of faith, substituting an assent upon natural evidence in the room thereof, and is absolutely exclusive of the necessity or use of any work of the Holy Ghost in our believing, which sober Christians will scarcely comply withal.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, in this case Owen does not subordinate the witness of the Holy Spirit to rational arguments for the authority of Scripture. He was "committed to neither extreme."<sup>36</sup>

So, with regard to inspiration and the witness of the Holy Spirit, Owen seems to follow Reformation thought and that of the Westminster Divines. Attention must now be turned to three of Bromiley's theses in which Owen appears to contribute to the shift toward rigidification of the doctrine of Scripture.

A third of Bromiley's criteria for the shift of emphasis toward scholasticism is the tendency to "subject genuinely scriptural material to alien Aristotelian or Cartesian principles and modes of presentation."<sup>37</sup> In Owen's treatise on "The Divine Original of the Scripture," he wishes to show "that the whole authority of the Scripture in itself depends solely on its divine original."<sup>38</sup> In order to do this he presents three ways in which the divine origin, and thus the Divine authority are proved:

- 1st, By one general induction. (His works of creation and providence.)
- 2nd, By testimonies. (By the innate light of nature which God has indelibly implanted in the minds of men.)
- 3rd, By arguments, expressing the ways and means of its revelation itself.<sup>39</sup>

Also, two supplementary arguments to confirm the Divine authority of Scripture are: "The nature of the doctrine itself contained in the Scripture"; and the second, "from the management of the whole design therein [harmony]: the first is innate, the other of a more external and rational consideration."<sup>40</sup>

Here it is clear that Owen's argument proceeds from man's own reason and natural knowledge, to the perception of the Scriptures as God's Word. God's works have "that expression of God upon them,"<sup>41</sup> so that any "rational creature" can be convinced by them. "By being *what* they are, they declare *whose* they are."<sup>42</sup> They do

<sup>35</sup> Owen, IV, p. 54. cf. IV, p. 148. Italics by Owen.

<sup>36</sup> In "Prefatory Note," by editor in Owen, IV, p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> Bromiley, p. 214.

<sup>38</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 309.

<sup>39</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 337.

<sup>40</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 310.

<sup>41</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 311.

<sup>42</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 311. Italics are Owen's.

"no service unto truth, who amongst innumerable other bold denials, have insisted on this also—that there is no *natural knowledge* of God, arising from the innate principles of reason, and the works of God proposing themselves to the consideration thereof."<sup>43</sup> Thus, says Owen:

"those common notions and general presumptions" of Him and His authority, that are inlaid in the natures of rational creatures by the hand of God, [are inlaid] to this end, that they might make a revelation of Him as to the purposes mentioned, [and] are able to plead their own divine original, without the least contribution of strength or assistance from without.<sup>44</sup>

He argues that man himself, through his reason, can see God's works and "without any other testimony from himself, or any else—under the naked consideration and contemplation of what they are" can know they are God's.<sup>45</sup> When man finds these same truths revealed in Scripture, he is assured that the Scriptures are indeed God's Word, and not "deceivable pretenses."<sup>46</sup>

In this methodology Owen exhibits the influence of his training in Aristotelian logic,<sup>47</sup> and a Cartesian emphasis on man's ability to know eternal truth, basing his case for the Divine authority of Scripture upon the "innate principles of reason."<sup>48</sup> Thus, Owen exemplifies the shift occurring in the seventeenth century, by his mode of presentation and methodology.

A fourth tendency toward rigidification of the doctrine of Scripture is seen in the "overwhelming of the human author by the divine."<sup>49</sup> This factor is also present in Owen's comments about the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures. In writing about the prophets he says:

God was so with them, and by the Holy Ghost so spake in them—as to their receiving of the Word from him, and their delivering of it unto others by speaking or writing—as that they were not themselves enabled, by any habitual light, knowledge or conviction of truth, to declare his mind and will, but only acted as they were immediately moved by him. Their tongue in what they said, or their hand in what they wrote, was *'et sofer*, no more at their own disposal than the pen is in the hand of an expert writer.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 311. Italics are Owen's.

<sup>44</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 311.

<sup>45</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 312.

<sup>46</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 310.

<sup>47</sup> *The Correspondence of John Owen* (1616-1683), ed. Peter Toon (Cambridge, 1970), p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 311.

<sup>49</sup> Bromiley, p. 213.

<sup>50</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 298. [Hebrew script has been transliterated. ED.]

He writes of the same thing again in the same treatise:

They studied the writings and prophecies of one another. (Dan. ix. 2) Thus they attained a saving, useful, habitual knowledge of the truths delivered by themselves and others, by the illumination of the Holy Ghost, through the study of the Word, even as we. (Ps. cxix. 104) But as to the receiving of the Word from God, as God spake in them, they obtained nothing by study or meditation, by inquiry or reading. (Amos vii. 15) Whether we consider the *matter* or manner of what they received and delivered, or their receiving and delivering of it, they were but an instrument of music, giving a sound according to the hand, intention, and skill of him that strikes it.<sup>51</sup>

In Owen's view, men acted as passive instruments for the recording of God's Word.

The fifth of Bromiley's trends is the tendency "to press to an unnecessary extreme" the doctrine of verbal inspiration in insisting "that even the Hebrew vowel points must be regarded as inspired."<sup>52</sup> For Owen, men recorded *God's* words and even the smallest grammatical details of the Scriptures were under God's direct inspiration.

In writing of this in his treatise "Of the Integrity and Purity of the Hebrew and Greek Text of the Scripture," he speaks about the "infallible and divinely inspired" original copies.<sup>53</sup> Of these, Owen believes that "every iota and tittle of it [was] the word of the great God."<sup>54</sup> There is, in his words, "no change or alteration to the least iota or syllable" by the Biblical writers.<sup>55</sup> In "The Divine Original of the Scriptures," he states: "Nor is it enough to satisfy us, that the doctrines mentioned are preserved entire; every tittle and iota in the Word of God must come under our care and consideration, as being, as such, from God."<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps the clearest summary of the above-mentioned emphases tending toward rigidification in Owen's work can be seen in this paragraph in "The Divine Original of the Scriptures":

When the word was thus brought to them, it was not left to their understandings, wisdoms, minds, memories, to order, dispose, and give it out; but they were borne, acted, [actuated—ed.] carried out by the Holy Ghost, to speak, deliver, and write all that, and nothing but that to every tittle—that was so brought to them. They invented not words themselves, suited to the things they had learned, but only expressed the words that they received. Though their mind and understanding were used in the choice of words (whence arise all the differences—that is, in their manner of expression—for they did use *dibre hefes* "words of will," or choice,) yet they were so guided, that their words were not their own, but immediately

<sup>51</sup> Owen, XVI, pp. 298-99. Italics are Owen's.

<sup>52</sup> Bromiley, p. 213.

<sup>53</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 355.

<sup>54</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 355.

<sup>55</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 350.

<sup>56</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 303.

supplied to them. And so they gave out *ketub yosher*, the "writing of uprightness," and *dibre 'emet*, the "words of truth" itself. (Eccles. xii. 10) Not only the *doctrine* they taught was the word of truth—truth itself, (John xvii. 17,)—but the *words* whereby they taught it were words of truth from God himself. Thus, allowing the contribution of passive instruments for the reception and representation of words—which answer the mind and tongue of the prophets, in the coming of the voice of God to them—every apex of the written Word is equally divine, and as immediately from God as the voice wherewith, or whereby, he spake to or in the prophets; and is, therefore, accompanied with the same authority in itself, and unto us.<sup>57</sup>

What conclusions may be reached concerning John Owen and his doctrine of Scripture?

First, Mitchell's (via Rogers) hypothesis is indeed partially true, that Owen did lead toward a "more restrictive position" on Scripture than did the Westminster Divines. In regard to methodology, human authorship, and extent of inspiration, Owen exhibits more of a "scholastic" than a Reformation position. But on the other hand, Owen did not make inerrancy the basis of inspiration nor did he advance thoroughgoing rationalistic arguments which made Scriptural authority virtually autonomous of the Holy Spirit. Thus, using Bromiley's five emphases as criteria, Owen's views would represent a transitional position between that of the Reformers and the Westminster Divines on the one hand and the more rigidly scholastic Continental contemporaries of Owen on the other.

In this discussion of Scripture it is important to see where Owen's emphases lie and to see why men believe the Scriptures. An important help in this regard is his Latin treatise "Pro Sacris Scripturis" directed against the Quakers, which has been recently translated expressly for this study of Owen and the doctrine of Scripture.

In it, Owen emphasizes that Scripture is the Word of God where God speaks to men.<sup>58</sup> It is written in words "commanded and arranged through the Holy Spirit," all writing being inspired by God.<sup>59</sup> But now that Scripture is written, it is "the sacred Scripture, or written word of God, not inasmuch as it is written but although it is written."<sup>60</sup> So it is that Owen does not "contend this declaration of the will of God which we have in the Scriptures is his word because it was written, but we do contend that the word of God is now written by his command."<sup>61</sup> God's voice speaks; the medium

<sup>57</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 305. Italics are Owen's. [Hebrew script has been transliterated. ED.]

<sup>58</sup> Owen, "Pro Sacris", Ex. I, sect. 27.

<sup>59</sup> Owen, "Pro Sacris," Ex. I, sect. 29.

<sup>60</sup> Owen, "Pro Sacris," Ex. I, sect. 24.

<sup>61</sup> Owen, "Pro Sacris," Ex. I, sect. 25.

is secondary: "The subject is not lost, although the writing is added."<sup>62</sup> So the Scriptures serve to point beyond themselves to the Word of God which

is near us, in our mouths and hearts, not in respect to the written letters, but the divine truth contained in it, in which respect it is most often called the Word of God as was shown earlier. Therefore the Scripture is in our hearts not in as much as it is written in a formal sense but in as much as it contains and shows forth divine truth. The word lives in us therefore, in an effective and eminent sense, not a formal one.<sup>63</sup>

And the goal of Scripture is "faith."<sup>64</sup>

In this polemic, directed against the subjectivity of the Friends, it might be expected that Owen would push strongly for the formal, objective Word—the text of Scripture—being authoritatively proved by external arguments and testimonies. However he does not do this. Instead, he turns toward the purpose or goal of the Written Word which is "our direction in the knowledge of God and showing obedience to him so that at last by doing his will we may attain eternal life and enjoyment of him."<sup>65</sup> Thus Owen makes plain that Scripture is the way in which God speaks to man for salvation and directs primary attention toward this *saving purpose* of Scripture.

What motivates men to believe the Scripture? In his "The Reason of Faith," Owen states that "no man can believe the Scriptures to be the word of God, with faith divine, supernatural, and infallible, but upon its own internal divine evidence and efficacy"—thus the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>66</sup> External arguments (moral certainty) are useful and "cogent," but are not in themselves sufficient to induce faith to "prove the Scriptures to be a divine revelation given of God and the doctrine contained in it to be a heavenly truth."<sup>67</sup> Their "singular use" is "for the strengthening of the faith of them that do believe, by relieving the mind against temptations and objections that will arise to the contrary."<sup>68</sup> This was also the view of the Westminster Divines.<sup>69</sup>

Assuming, then, Owen's continuity with the Reformation and the Westminster Divines in holding the tension between the divinely inspired Word and the necessity of the illumination of the Spirit, why then would he exhibit a more rigid position in regard to the actual text itself? It seems that in his talk of the inspiration of each "jot and tittle," he is more in line (in 1659) with the Helvetic

<sup>62</sup> Owen, "Pro Sacris," Ex. I, sect. 37.

<sup>63</sup> Owen, "Pro Sacris," Ex. I, sect. 39.

<sup>64</sup> Owen, "Pro Sacris," Ex. III, sect. 28. See also Rogers, p. 289.

<sup>65</sup> Owen, "Pro Sacris," Ex. III, sect. 24.

<sup>66</sup> Owen, IV, p. 21.

<sup>67</sup> Owen, IV, p. 47.

<sup>68</sup> Owen, IV, p. 47.

<sup>69</sup> See Rogers, pp. 318-19.

Consensus Formula of 1675, than with the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646).

One possible reason for this rigidification regarding the Biblical text is found in the polemical situation in which Owen was involved. Specifically this can be seen in his reaction to Brian Walton's Polyglott Bible which appeared in 1659. Owen's treatise "Of the Integrity and Purity of the Hebrew and Greek Text of the Scripture" contains his questionings on the subject which are related to the various readings of the Biblical text which Walton gives, and the antiquity of the Hebrew punctuation.

While declaring it to be a "useful work"<sup>70</sup> which he "much esteemed,"<sup>71</sup> Owen nevertheless apparently felt threatened by the various readings for they "seemed to refute the position he had taken, that the Scriptures had been providentially kept in their original integrity."<sup>72</sup> On the Hebrew punctuation, "Owen held the points to be part of Scripture, and as sacred and ancient as the other elements of the text."<sup>73</sup>

Walton attacked Owen in "The Considerator considered and the Biblia Polyglotta Vindicated" and "successfully defended his position, and did what he could to hold Owen up to the ridicule of the learned world."<sup>74</sup> This was possible mainly through Owen's ("and by universal admission . . . most theologians of his age"<sup>75</sup>) lack of the little knowledge then in existence of the Biblical manuscripts and the "infancy of the science of criticism."<sup>76</sup> Owen, seeing his position threatened was "forced" to "go farther" than he had previously gone on Scripture.<sup>77</sup> When engaged in controversy he took to its logical conclusion what he had held less strenuously before. Thus, with the introduction of the new element of Biblical criticism into the seventeenth-century polemical scene, Owen, displaying a "nervous sensitiveness",<sup>78</sup> fearing for the authority of the Word, perhaps felt forced into a corner and rigidified his doctrine in an attempt to meet this challenge.

<sup>70</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 351, 352.

<sup>71</sup> Owen, XVI, p. 348.

<sup>72</sup> See "Prefatory Note," by editor in Owen, XVI, p. 282. William Goold also notes: "His argument proceeds on the supposition that, by a continuous miracle, extending over ages, every point and letter of Scriptures have been indubitably preserved as they came from the inspired penmen. But it is a necessary condition of the argument, that what he alleges or assumes respecting the miraculous preservation of all the letters and words of Scripture should be true," Owen, IV, p. 214n.

<sup>73</sup> See "Prefatory Note," by editor in Owen, XVI, p. 346.

<sup>74</sup> "Life of Dr. Owen," by Andrew Thomson in Owen, I, lxxv. Cf. F. F. Bruce, *Tradition Old and New* (Exeter, 1970), ch. 9.

<sup>75</sup> Owen, IV, p. 213.

<sup>76</sup> William Orme, *Memoirs of the Life, Writings and Religious Connexions of John Owen, D.D.* (London, 1820), p. 269. See also Owen, IV, pp. 213-14.

John Owen, then, stands as a transitional figure. While standing solidly with the Reformation and the Westminster Divines on the Bible as the inspired Word, which leads men to faith and salvation to the glory of God and which is made effective by the Holy Spirit, he nevertheless goes beyond his predecessors yet not as far as his Continental contemporaries in "specifics" regarding the Biblical text itself. His methodology is more scholastic and in his anxiety to maintain a divinely inspired text, he overwhelms the human elements into "passive instruments" to record and transmit even every "jot and tittle" as God's Word. This approach was perhaps occasioned in him by the fears which he had as a result of a lack of a better understanding of the "Biblical criticism" which he encountered. The extent and further effects of this and other tendencies toward rigidification in Owen and other seventeenth-century theologians remain to be examined.

A lesson may be learned here from this great theologian. He was great because he was able to accept the "dynamic tension" of the Reformation emphasis on Word and Spirit. Any separation of these two leads to the danger of denying the mystery of Scripture. When rational arguments are substituted for reliance on the Holy Spirit to authenticate Scripture the mystery of the interdependence of Word and Spirit is lost. When that occurs, theology moves from faith to reason as the fundamental criterion of its work. When that occurs an essential emphasis of the Reformation is lost.

*Westminster College, New Wilmington, Pa.*

<sup>77</sup> Owen writes about his "A Vindication of the Purity and Integrity of the Hebrew and Greek Texts": "Had there not been, then, a necessity incumbent on me either utterly to desist from pursuing any thoughts of publishing the foregoing treatise [The Divine Original of the Scripture], or else of giving an account of some things contained in the Prolegomena and Appendix [of the Polyglott], I should, for many reasons, have abstained from this employment . . . But the main arguments afterward insisted on by me concerning the self-evidencing power and light of the Scripture, receiving, in my apprehension, a great weakening by the things I shall now speak unto, if owned and received as they are proposed unto us, I could not excuse myself from running the hazard of giving my thoughts upon them." Owen, XVI, p. 348.

<sup>78</sup> See "Prefatory Note," by editor in Owen, XVI, p. 346.