

The Inspiration, Inerrancy, and Authority of the Bible

by Ron Rhodes

What Is Inspiration?

Biblical inspiration may be defined as God's superintending of the human authors so that, using their own individual personalities (and even their writing styles), they composed and recorded without error His revelation to man in the words of the original autographs. Inspiration means that "the Holy Spirit of God superintended the human writers in the production of Scripture so that what they wrote was precisely what God wanted written."

When you break the doctrine of inspiration down to its essential elements, there are seven key factors:

- Divine origin and causality;
- Human agency;
- Written verbally (in words);
- Plenary (all of Scripture is inspired, not just parts of it);
- Only the "Autographs" (the original documents penned by the biblical authors) are inspired;
- Because Scripture is inspired, it is inerrant; and
- Because Scripture is inspired and inerrant, it alone has final authority.

The word inspiration literally means "God-breathed" in the Greek. And because Scripture is breathed out by God, it is true and inerrant. Consider the following syllogism:

- Major Premise:
God is true (Romans 3:4).
- Minor Premise:
God breathed out the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16).
- Conclusion:
Therefore, the Scriptures are true (John 17:17).

As illustrated above, the inerrancy of Scripture can be inferred by premises that are themselves taught by Scripture.

We read in Scripture that truth is an attribute of God (Jeremiah 10:10; John 1:14; 14:6; 17:3), and that God speaks truthfully - that is, He does not lie (Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29; Titus 1:2; Romans 3:3-4). We also are told that Scripture is "breathed out" by God (2 Timothy 3:16). The Word of God, then, is true (John 17:14,17; cf. Psalm 119:142; 151; 160; Revelation 21:5; 22:6).

The Holy Spirit is the Agent of Inspiration

Second Peter 1:21 tells us that "prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." The word moved in this verse literally means to be "borne along" or "carried along." Even though human beings were used in the process of writing down God's Word, they were all literally "borne along" by the Holy Spirit.

The human wills of the authors were not the originators or the carriers of God's message....God did not permit the will of sinful man to divert, misdirect, or erroneously record His message.

God moved and the prophet mouthed these truths; God revealed and man recorded His word. Interestingly, the Greek word for "moved" in 2 Peter 1:21 is the same word found in Acts 27:15-17.

The experienced sailors could not navigate the ship because the wind was so strong. The ship was being driven, directed, and carried about by the wind. This is similar to the Spirit's driving, directing, and carrying the human authors of the Bible as He wished. The word is a strong one, indicating the Spirit's complete superintendence of the human authors. Yet, just as the sailors were active on the ship (though the wind, not the sailors, controlled the ship's movement), so the human authors were active in writing as the Spirit directed.

Inspiration in the Old Testament

The Old Testament recognizes that it is the Holy Spirit who speaks through its writers (2 Samuel 23:2-3). Indeed, many Old Testament passages quoted in the New Testament are said to have the Holy Spirit as their author, even though a human prophet actually spoke the words in the Old Testament (see Mark 12:36; Acts 1:16; 28:25; Hebrews 3:7; 10:15-16).

Old Testament Designation/New Testament Designation

- The psalmist said (Psalm 95:7)/The Holy Spirit said (Hebrews 3:7)
- The psalmist said (Psalm 45:6)/God said (Hebrews 1:8)
- The psalmist said (Psalm 102:25,27)/God said (Hebrews 1:10-12)
- Isaiah said (Isaiah 7:14)/The Lord spoke by the prophet (Matthew 1:22-23)
- Hosea said (Hosea 11:1)/The Lord spoke by the prophet (Matthew 2:1).
- Eliphaz's words (Job 5:13)/God's Word (1 Corinthians 3:19)

MORE EXAMPLES:

•Acts 1:16 is a highly significant verse in this regard, for we read: "Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before concerning Judas, which was guide to them that took Jesus" (emphasis added).

•Likewise, we read in Acts 4:24-25: "And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things?" (emphasis added).

•And again, we read in Acts 28:25: "When they agreed not among themselves, they departed, after that Paul had spoken one word, Well spake the Holy Ghost by Esaias the prophet unto our fathers" (emphasis added).

God's Words in the Mouths of the Prophets

In 2 Samuel 23:2 we read the following words from the mouth of David: "The Spirit of the lord spake by me, and his word was in my tongue." Here is a clear reference to a human being used as a mouthpiece for the spirit of God.

Similarly, we read in Isaiah 59:21, "As for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the lord; My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth..." (emphasis added). Though God used human beings in the process of communicating His words, it is clear that the Holy Spirit was in charge of the process so that no human error or opinion entered into the picture. Turning to Jeremiah 1:9 we read, "Then the lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth." Again, we see that God is in control of the process of communicating His word to man.

Speaking of the Old Testament prophets in general, we read in Zechariah 7:12, "Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words which the lord of hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets: therefore came a great wrath from the lord of hosts" (emphasis added).

Inspiration in the New Testament

Jesus promised His followers that it would be the work of the Holy Spirit to provide an accurate recounting of the events of His life (John 14:26). And because of this, you and I can trust the Bible as the Word of God. The Holy Spirit superintended the process from beginning to end. Let's look at more details of this doctrine in the New Testament.

The New Testament Books Are "Scripture"

2 Timothy 3:16

Second Timothy 3:16 tells us, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."

When Paul said that "all Scripture" is inspired, did he have in mind just the Old Testament (which is a common New Testament usage of the word "Scripture"), or did he have a larger grouping in mind (a grouping that included some New Testament books)? This is a very important question. We think the later is the case for at least two important reasons.

The apostle Paul had already described a specific New Testament book as "Scripture" in his first letter to Timothy (see 1 Timothy 5:18 where the Gospel of Luke is called Scripture). It therefore makes sense that when Paul used the term "Scripture" in his second letter to Timothy, he was thinking not just of Old Testament books but also of New Testament books that had been written up to that time.

The apostle Peter uses the same Greek word for "Scripture" to describe the writings of the apostle Paul (2 Peter 3:16).

Here is the important point: By the time 2 Timothy 3:16 was written, all of the New Testament books had already been written except for 2 Peter, Hebrews, Jude, and the apostle John's writings. In view of this, Paul was surely including these books in the phrase "all Scripture is inspired" in 2 Timothy 3:16. And since the remaining books were later acknowledged as belonging to the canon of Scripture, we may safely say that this verse says something about all 66 books of the Bible.

Now, the word "inspired" comes from a Greek word meaning "God-breathed."

The Greek form is passive. This means the Bible is the result of the "breath of God." If the form were active, then the verse would be saying that all the Bible breathes or exudes God. But here we are told that God breathed out something, namely, the Scripture. The origin of the Bible is thus seen to be God.

1 Timothy 5:18

In 1 Timothy 5:18, the apostle Paul joins an Old Testament reference and a New Testament reference and calls them both (collectively) Scripture (Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7).

It is not unusual that - in the context of first-century Judaism - an Old Testament passage was called "Scripture" in the New Testament. But it is highly significant that a New Testament book was called "Scripture" so soon after it was written.

We must emphasize that only three to six years had elapsed between the writing of the Gospel of Luke and the writing of 1 Timothy (Luke was written around A.D. 60; 1 Timothy was written around A.D. 63). Yet, despite this, Paul does not hesitate to place Luke on the same level as the Old Testament (the Book of Deuteronomy).

Jesus' View of the Bible

Divine Inspiration:

- Matthew 22:43

Indestructibility:

- Matthew 5:17-18

Infallibility:

- John 10:35

Final Authority:

- Matthew 4:4,7,10

Historicity:

- Matthew 12:40; 24:37

Scientific Accuracy:

- Matthew 19:2-5

Factual Inerrancy:

- John 17:17
- Matthew 22:29

Christ-Centered Unity:

- Luke 24:27
- John 5:39

Spiritual Clarity:

- Luke 24:25

Faith and Life Sufficiency:

- Luke 16:31

New Testament References Where the Writers Claim Divine Authority for their Writings

1 Corinthians 2:13

In 1 Corinthians 2:13 the apostle Paul said he spoke "not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual."

In this passage Paul (who wrote a huge portion of the New Testament) affirms that his words were authoritative because they were rooted not in fallible man but infallible God (the Holy Spirit). The words were taught by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit here is the Spirit of truth who was promised to the apostles to teach and guide them into all the truth (see John 16:13).

1 Corinthians 14:37

In this verse Paul says, "If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord." Paul's writings have divine authority because they are "commandments of the Lord," not the words of fallen man.

1 Thessalonians 2:13

In 1 Thessalonians 2:13 Paul says, "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe."

Again, the reason why Paul's words were authoritative is that they were rooted in God, not in man. God used Paul as His instrument to communicate His word to man. Regarding this, note the following summary formulated by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1961. It is significant that Paul, while holding to the view of a canon of God-breathed writings which constitute "the oracles of God," claims for his own teaching, either oral or written, equal status.

The word that he preached was not "the word of men" but "the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13).

That which he wrote was "the commandment of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37).

He that does not obey the writing of the apostle is to be disciplined (2 Thess. 3:14).

If any man preach or teach any other gospel than that which Paul proclaimed, he is to be accursed (Gal. 1:8-9).

When Paul speaks as an apostle of Jesus Christ to the churches it is "Christ that speaketh" in him (2 Cor. 13:3).

Paul did not learn his gospel at the feet of men but rather received it "through revelations of Jesus Christ," Gal. 1:12, some of which were "exceeding great" (2 Cor. 12:7).

Fulfilled Prophecy: A Proof of Divine Inspiration

From the Book of Genesis to the Book of Malachi, the Old Testament abounds with anticipations of the coming Messiah. Numerous predictions - fulfilled to the "crossing of the t" and the "dotting of the i" in the New Testament - relate to His birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and glory. These fulfilled prophecies constitute a powerful apologetic for the inspiration of Scripture.

The New Testament writers often pointed to how Christ was the specific fulfillment of a messianic prophecy in the Old Testament. Below is a sampling of these prophecies.

Messianic Prophecies Fulfilled By Jesus Christ

Seed of woman:

- Genesis 3:15

Virgin Birth:

- Isaiah 7:14

Birthplace: Bethlehem:

- Micah 5:2

Forerunner: John:

- Malachi 3:1

Ministry of miracles:

- Isaiah 35:5-6

Sold for 30 shekels:

- Zechariah 11:12

Hands and feet pierced:

- Psalm 22:16

Crucified with thieves:

- Isaiah 53:12

No bones broken:

- Psalm 22:17

Suffered thirst on cross:

- Psalm 69:21

Resurrection:

- Psalm 16:10; 22:22

It is only logical to conclude that if these prophecies were written many hundreds of years before they were fulfilled - and if they could never have been foreseen, and depended upon factors outside human control for their fulfillment - and if all of these prophecies were, in fact, precisely fulfilled - then clearly the Scriptures are divine in origin and not man-made.

Archaeological Support for the Bible

The Bible's accuracy and reliability has been proved and verified over and over again by archeological finds produced by both believing and nonbelieving scholars and scientists. This includes verification for numerous customs, places, names, and events mentioned in the Bible.

Nelson Glueck, a specialist in ancient literature, said: "It can be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference."

Bible scholar Donald J. Wiseman said, "The geography of Bible lands and visible remains of antiquity were gradually recorded until today more than 25,000 sites within this region and dating to Old Testament times, in their broadest sense, have been located...." (25,000 sites!)

Well-known Bible scholar William F. Albright said: "Discovery after discovery has established the accuracy of innumerable details, and has brought increased recognition of the value of the Bible as a source of history." Archeological studies have been a true friend to the Christian Bible.

Non-Christian Sources that Corroborate Christ

Besides Christian witnesses in the early centuries of Christianity, there were also non-Christian sources living close to the time of Christ that corroborate Christ as a historical figure.

For example, Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (born A.D. 37) made reference to "Jesus, the so-called Christ."

Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus (born A.D. 52) wrote of "Christus," who was "put to death by Pontius Pilate."

Pliny the Younger (A.D. 112) spoke of the "troublesome sect of Christians."

Suetonius (A.D. 120) spoke of disturbances over "Chrestus" (Christ).

All in all, the "external evidence" for the reliability of the Bible is overwhelming.

The Divine Authority of the Bible

The authority of the Bible is a natural outgrowth of the Bible as inspired revelation from God. As Robert Lightner puts it, "When the questions of revelation and inspiration with regard to the Bible have been answered, the issue of authority will have been settled. In other words, how one views revelation and inspiration will determine how he views the Bible's authority..." Since the written revelation from God has been recorded under the Spirit's superintendence and is "the very breath of God," it is therefore authoritative - just as authoritative as the One who gave it. The authority of Scripture cannot be separated from the authority of God. Whatever the Bible affirms, God affirms. And what the Bible affirms (or denies), it affirms (or denies) with the very authority of God." Theologian Rene Pache agrees, noting that "if God entirely inspired Scripture (as we have seen that He did), then Scripture is vested with His authority."

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