# The Inspiration of the Bible

*What Jesus said of Scripture and the nature of apostolic teaching are two of the main issues in Rick Wade's examination of the inspiration of Scripture.*

A question we often encounter when talking with non-believers about Christ is, "Why should I believe the Bible?" Or a person might say, "You have your Bible; Muslims have their Koran; different religions have their own holy books. What makes yours special?" How would you answer such questions?



These questions fall under the purview of apologetics. They call for a defense. However, before giving a defense we need theological and biblical grounding. To defend the Bible, we have to know what it is.

In this article, then, we'll deal with the nature of Scripture. Are these writings simply the remembrances of two religious groups? Are they writings consisting of ideas conceived by Jews and early Christians as they sought to establish their religion? Or are they the words of God Himself, given to us for our benefit?

The latter position is the one held by the people of God throughout history. Christians have historically accepted both the Old and New Testaments as God's word written. But two movements of thought have undermined belief in inspiration. One was the higher critical movement that reduced Scripture to simply the recollections and ideas of a religious group. The more recent movement (although it really isn't organized enough to call it a "movement") is religious pluralism, which holds that all religions—or at least the major ones—are equally valid, meaning that none is more true than others. If

other religions are equally valid, then other holy books are also. Many Christian young people think this way.

Our evaluation of the Bible and other "holy books" is governed by the recognition that the Bible is the inspired word of God. If God's final word is found in what we call the Bible, then no other book can be God's word. To differ with what the Bible says is to differ with God.

What do we mean by *inspiration*? Following the work of the higher critics, many people—even within the church—have come to see the Bible as inspired in the same way that, say, an artist might be inspired. The artist sees the Grand Canyon and with her imagination now flooded with images and ideas hurries back to her canvas to paint a beautiful picture. A poet, upon viewing the devastation of war, proceeds to pen lines which stir the compassion of readers. Is that what we mean when we say the Bible is inspired?

We use the word *inspiration* because of 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness." *Inspired* is translated from the Greek word *theopnuestos* which literally means "God-breathed." Some have said the word could be translated "ex-spired" or "breathed out." *Inspiration*, then, in the biblical sense, isn't the stirring of the imagination of the writer, but rather is the means by which the writers accurately wrote what God wanted written.

This idea finds support in 2 Peter 1: 20-21: "But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."

What we need before proceeding is a working definition of inspiration. Theologian Carl F. H. Henry writes, "Inspiration

is a supernatural influence upon the divinely chosen prophets and apostles whereby the Spirit of God assures the truth and trustworthiness of their oral and written proclamation."{1} Furthermore, the writers were "divinely superintended by the Holy Spirit in the choice of words they used."{2} Although some things were dictated to the writers, most of the time the Spirit simply superintended the writing so that the writer, using his own words, wrote what the Spirit wanted.

## The Historical View of the Church

The first place to look in establishing any doctrine is, of course, the Bible. Before turning to Scripture to see what it claims for itself, however, it will be worthwhile to be sure this has been the view of the church throughout history. Because of the objections of liberal scholars, we might want to see whose position is in keeping with our predecessors in the faith.

Historically, the church has consistently held to the inspiration of Scripture, at least until the 19th century. One scholar has said that throughout the first eight centuries of the church, "Hardly is there a single point with regard to which there reigned . . . a greater or more cordial unanimity."{3} The great Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield said, "Christendom has always reposed upon the belief that the utterances of this book are properly oracles of God."{4} In the 16th century, the Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin were explicit in their recognition of the divine source and authority of Scripture.{5} B. B. Warfield, Charles Hodge, J. Gresham Machen, Carl F. H. Henry, J. I. Packer and other very reputable scholars and theologians over the last century and a half have argued forcefully for the inspiration of Scripture. And as Warfield notes, this belief underlies all the creeds of the church as well.{6}

## The Witness of the Old Testament

Let's turn now to the Bible itself, beginning with the Old Testament, to see whether its own claims match the beliefs of the church.

The clear intent of the Old Testament writers was to convey God's message. Consider first that God was said to *speak* to the people. "God says" (Deut. 5:27), "Thus says the Lord" (Exod. 4:22), "I have put my words in your mouth" (Jer. 1:9), "The word of the Lord came to him" (Gen. 15:4; 1 Kings 17:8). All these references to God speaking show that He is interested in communicating with us verbally. The Old Testament explicitly states 3,808 times that it is conveying the express words of God.{7}

Furthermore, God was so interested in people preserving and knowing His word that at times He told people to write down what He said. We read in Exodus 17:14: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Write this in a book as a memorial and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.'" (See also 24:3-7, 34:27; Jer. 30:2; 36:2.)

The clear testimony of Old Testament writings is that God spoke to people, and He instructed them to write down the things He said. These writings have been handed down to us.

Of course, we shouldn't think of all the Old Testament—or the New Testament either—as having been dictated to the writers. In fact, most of the Bible was not. What we want to establish here is that God is a communicating God, and He communicates verbally. The idea that God is somehow unable or unwilling to communicate propositionally to man—which is what a number of scholars of this century continue to hold—is foreign to the Old Testament. God spoke, and the people heard and understood.

We should now shift to the New Testament to see what it says about inspiration. Let's begin with the testimony of Jesus.

## The Witness of Jesus

Did Jesus believe in the doctrine of inspiration?

It is clear that Jesus acknowledged the Old Testament writings as being divine in nature. Consider John 10:34-36: “Jesus answered them, ‘Is it not written in your Law, “I have said you are gods”? If he called them “gods” to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken—what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world?’” Jesus believed it was *God’s* word that came to the prophets of old, and He referred to it as Scripture that could not be broken. In Matt. 5:17-19, He affirmed the Law as being fixed and above the whims of men.

Jesus drew on the teachings of the Old Testament in His encounter with Satan (Matt. 4:1-11). His responses, “Man shall not live on bread alone” (Deut. 8:3), “You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only” (Deut. 6:13), and “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test” (Deut. 6:16) are all drawn from Deuteronomy. Each statement was prefaced by “It is written” or “It is said.” Jesus said that he only spoke what the Father wanted Him to (John 12:49). By quoting these passages as authoritative over Satan, He was, in effect, saying these were God’s words. He also honored the words of Moses (Mark 7:10), Isaiah (Mark 7:6), David (Mark 12:36), and Daniel (Matt. 24:15) as authoritative, as carrying the weight of God’s words.{8} Jesus even referred to an Old Testament writing as God’s word when this wasn’t explicitly attributed to God in the Old Testament itself (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:4,5).

In our consideration of the position of Jesus on the nature of Scripture, we also need to look at His view of the New Testament. But one might ask, “It hadn’t been written yet, how could Jesus be cited in support of the inspiration of the New Testament?

To get a clear picture of this we need to realize what Jesus

was doing with His apostles. His small group of twelve was being trained to carry on the witness and work of Jesus after He was gone. They were given a place of special importance in the furthering of His work (Mark 3:14-15). Thus, He taught them with clarity while often teaching the crowds in parables (Mark 4:34). He sent them as the Father had sent Him (John 20:21) so they would be witnesses of "all these things" (Luke 24:48). Both the Spirit and the apostles would be witnesses for Christ (John 15:26ff; cf. Acts 5:32). He promised to send the Spirit to help them when He left. They would be empowered to bear witness (Acts. 1:4,5,8). The Spirit would give them the right things to say when brought to trial (Matt. 10:19ff). He would remind them of what Jesus had said (John 14:26) and would give them new knowledge (John 16:12ff). As John Wenham said, "The last two promises . . . do not of course refer specifically or exclusively to the inspiration of a New Testament Canon, but they provide in principle all that is required for the formation of such a Canon, should that be God's purpose."{9}

Thus, Jesus didn't identify a specific body of literature as the New Testament or state specifically that one would be written. However, He prepared the apostles as His special agents to hand down the truths He taught, and He promised assistance in doing this. Given God's work in establishing the Old Testament and Jesus' references to the written word in His own teaching, it is entirely reasonable that He had plans for His apostles to put in writing the message of good news He brought.

## The Witness of the Apostles

Finally, we need to see what the apostles tell us about the nature of Scripture. To understand their position, we'll need to not only see what they *said* about Scripture, but also understand what it meant to be an apostle.

The office of apostle grew out of Jewish jurisprudence wherein a *sjaliach* ("one who is sent out") could appear in the name of another with the authority of that other person. It was said that "the *sjaliach* for a person is as this person himself."{10} As Christ's representatives the apostles ( *apostle* also means "sent out") carried forth the teaching they had received. "This apostolic preaching is the foundation of the Church, to which the Church is bound" (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:20).{11} The apostles had been authorized by Jesus as special ambassadors to teach what he had taught them (cf. John 20:21). Their message was authoritative when spoken; when written it would be authoritative as well.

As the apostles were *witnesses* of the gospel they also were bearers of *tradition*. This isn't "tradition" in the contemporary sense by which we mean that which comes from man and may be changed. *Tradition* in the Hebrew understanding meant "what has been handed down with authority."{12} This is what Paul referred to when he praised the Corinthians for holding to the traditions they had been taught and exhorted the Thessalonians to do the same (1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 2:15). Contrast this with the tradition of men which drew criticism from Jesus (Mark 7:8).

Paul attributed what he taught directly to Christ (2 Cor. 13:3). He identified his gospel with the preaching of Jesus (Rom. 16:25). And he said his words were taught by the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:13). What he wrote to the Corinthians was "the Lord's commandment" (1 Cor. 14:37). Furthermore, Paul, and John as well, considered their writings important enough to call for people to read them (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; John 20:31; Rev. 1:3). Peter put the apostolic message on par with the writings of the Old Testament prophets (2 Pet. 3:2).

What was the nature of Scripture according to the apostles? Many if not most Christians are familiar with 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness."

This is the verse most often cited in support of the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. Paul was speaking primarily of the Old Testament in this passage. The idea of God "breathing out" or speaking wasn't new to Paul, however, because he knew the Old Testament well, and there he could read that "the 'mouth' of God was regarded as the source from which the Divine message came."{13}Isaiah 45:23 says, "I have sworn by Myself, The word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness and will not turn back" (see also 55:11). Paul also would have known that Jesus quoted Deuteronomy when He replied to the tempter, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4; cf. Deut. 8:3).

Peter also taught that the Scriptures were, in effect, the speech of God. In 2 Peter 1: 20-21, he noted that prophecy was made by "men moved by the Holy Spirit [who] spoke from God." It didn't originate in men.

One further note. The Greek word *graphe* in the New Testament only refers to sacred Scriptures. This is the word used in 1 Timothy 5:18 and 2 Peter 3:16 to refer to the writings of the apostles.

The apostles thus were the ambassadors of Christ who spoke in His stead and delivered the message which was the standard for belief and practice. They had both their own recollections of what they witnessed and heard and the empowerment of the Spirit. The message they preached was the one they wrote down. The New Testament, like the Old, claims very clearly to be the inspired word of God.

## Making a Defense

We now come to a very important part in our discussion of the inspiration of Scripture. It's one thing to establish the biblical teaching on the nature of the Bible itself. It's

quite another to give a defense to critics.

As I noted earlier, we frequently hear questions such as “Many religions have their own holy books. Why should we believe the Bible is special?”

When this objection comes from someone who holds to religious pluralism, before answering the question about the Bible we will have to question him on the reasonableness of pluralism itself. No amount of evidences or arguments for the Bible will make a bit of difference if the person believes that there is no right or wrong when it comes to religion.{14}

It’s easy for apologists to come to rely primarily on their arguments when responding to critics, which is something even Paul wouldn’t do (1 Cor. 2:3-5). What we learn from Scripture is the power of Scripture itself. “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword,” Hebrews says (4:12). Isaiah 55:11 says that God’s word will accomplish his will. In Acts 2:37 we see the results of the proclamation of the word of God in changed people.

So, where am I going with this? I wonder how many people who object to our insistence that our “holy book” is the only true word of God have ever read any of it! Before we launch into a lengthy apologetic for Scripture, it might be good to get them to read it and let the Spirit open their minds to see its truth (1 Cor. 2:6-16).

Am I tossing out the entire apologetics enterprise and saying, “Look, just read the Bible and don’t ask so many questions”? No. I’m simply trying to move the conversation to more fruitful ground. Once the person learns what the Bible says, he can ask specific questions about its content, or we can ask him what about it makes him think it might *not* be God’s word.

The Bible clearly claims to be the authoritative word of God, and as such it makes demands on us. So, at least the *tone* of Scripture is what we might expect of a book with God as its

source. But does it give evidence that it *must* have God as its source? And does its self-witness find confirmation in our experience?

Regarding the necessity of having God as its source, we can consider prophecy. Who else but God could know what would happen hundreds of years in the future? What mere human could get 300 prophecies correct about one person (Jesus)?{15}

The Bible's insight into human nature and the solutions it provides to our fallen condition are also evidence of its divine source. In addition, the Bible's honesty about the weaknesses of even its heroes is evidence that it isn't just a human book. By contrast, we tend to build ourselves up in our own writing.

As further evidence that the Bible is God's word, we can note its survival and influence throughout the last two millennia despite repeated attempts to destroy it.

What Scripture proclaims about itself finds confirmation in our experience. For example, the practical changes it brings in individuals and societies are evidence that it is true.

One more note. We have the testimony of Jesus about Scripture whose resurrection is evidence that He knew what He was talking about!

In sum, the testimony of Scripture to its own nature finds confirmation in many areas.{16} Even with all this evidence, however, we aren't going to be able to prove the inspiration of the Bible to anyone who either isn't interested enough to give it serious thought or to the critic who only wants to argue. But we can share its message, make attempts at gentle persuasion and answer questions as we wait for the Spirit to open the person's mind and heart.

**Notes**

1. Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority,* vol. 4, *The God Who Speaks and Shows* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1979), 129.
2. Class notes, *Introduction to Theology*, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, May 4, 1987. See also Warfield cited in Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority,* 4:141.
3. L. Gaussen, *The Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1949), 145. See the entire section, pp. 145-152.
4. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948), 107.
5. Warfield, 108-09.
6. Ibid., 110-11.
7. René Pache, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 81.
8.John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 24.
9. Wenham, 113.
10. Edward J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 21.
11.Ibid.
12. Herman Ridderbos, "The Canon of the New Testament," in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry ;(Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 192, 193.
13.Ibid., 193.
14. For help in dealing with relativism and religious pluralism, see these other Probe articles: Don Closson, How Do You Spell Truth? and Rick Rood, Do All Roads Lead to God? The Christian Attitude Toward Non-Christian Religions.
15. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, rev. ed. (San Bernardino, Ca.: Here's Life Publishers, ;1979), 144.
16. See Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), esp. chaps. 8 and 9.

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