

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #81: IS THE BIBLE REALLY THE INSPIRED WORD OF GOD?

By John Temples

“The Bible is the inspired word of God.” You’ve heard that statement all your life (at least all your Christian life). Bible inspiration is Christianity 101. But what does that actually mean? Have you really satisfied yourself that that statement is unreservedly true? And how can I convince a friend or loved one that the Bible is inspired? In this article, we will analyze exactly what inspiration is and the implications of that for us.

In one sense, the Bible is just like any other book. It consists of words written on pages (or on digital media), just like any other book. It has a few specialized words, but mostly ordinary words that all people are familiar with. It is organized by verses or sentences, paragraphs, and chapters, just like many other books. In reading the Bible, you apply the same rules of grammar and interpretation you would use to understand any other book:

- In the Bible, a noun is a noun, a verb is a verb.
- Nouns have cases and verbs have tenses.
- Pronouns and prepositions behave the same as they do in other texts.

But there is one thing that sets the Bible apart from other books: INSPIRATION.

What is inspiration? Here are some definitions:

- "That miraculous power which the Holy Spirit exercised on Biblical speakers and writers, enabling them to speak and write without error." (Guy N Woods)
- "Inspiration means the original documents of the Bible were written by men who, though permitted the exercise of their own personalities and literary talents, yet wrote under the control and guidance of the Spirit of God, the result being in every word of the original documents a perfect and errorless recording of the exact message which God desired to give to man." (Frank Gaebelin)

Now, here are some statements about inspiration from the Bible itself:

- "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16). ("Inspiration" in this verse literally means "God-breathed.")
- 2 Samuel 23:2—"The Spirit of the Lord spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue."
- 2 Peter 1:21—"For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."
- 1 Corinthians 2:12-13—"Now we [apostles] have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things."

Consider some implications of these statements. It means that when I read the Bible, I am reading *a message from God*. I'm not just reading what some writer thought about God--I'm reading words directly from God. When contemplating inspiration, here is a good question to ask:

WHAT WOULD AN INSPIRED BOOK LOOK LIKE?

An inspired book, if it contained commands, would be authoritative. Obedience would be mandatory. I can read, say, a diet book and think, "That's an interesting diet"; but I would be under no obligation to adopt the diet. There are even books I could read that contain moral teachings and advice--advice for living--that I might acknowledge as right and good. There might be a sense of "I OUGHT." But with the Bible, it's a case of "I MUST!"

If I view the Bible as just an interesting collection of ancient wisdom, or a record of ancient man's search for God, then I would feel no sense of urgency or obligation to subscribe to its teachings. But if, as the Bible claims, it is inspired by God, then that changes everything. The Bible immediately fills a class by itself. It is an

authoritative message from the Creator and Judge of the universe that I must believe and obey or lose my soul.

An inspired book would contain no errors of fact. And I mean errors of fact in any area: science, history, geography, or history. It's significant that the Bible has never had to be updated or corrected to "fix" errors of fact, in spite of the fact that parts of it are thousands of years old.

An inspired book would contain no provable contradictions or inconsistencies. I say "provable" because the Bible does contain statements that SEEM to contradict one another. But every one of these apparent contradictions can be explained, and have been explained, by using the rules of grammar and logic and by properly identifying figurative language.

An inspired book, if it contained prophecies or predictions of future events, would have a fulfillment rate of 100%. And again, the Bible passes this test with flying colors. No other book does. Each year about the end of December, various newspaper writers, bloggers, and other adventuresome souls issue their "predictions for the new year." And each following year, they have to issue a report card on the accuracy of their predictions, usually earning a "failing grade." Not so the Bible!

An inspired book would be inspired not just in general sense or thought, but down to the level of individual words. This point is where we want to spend the remainder of our time in this article.

SOME MODERN THEORIES OF INSPIRATION--WHAT VARIOUS PEOPLE MEAN WHEN THEY SAY "YES, I BELIEVE THE BIBLE IS INSPIRED"

Some mean that the Bible is "inspired" in the sense of "brilliant or a product of extraordinary literary ability." We look at a painting such as the Mona Lisa and say it is "inspired." Or we read a moving poem or a powerful song and say the same. Similarly, when some people say the Bible is inspired, all they mean is that it was written by people who possessed remarkable insight. To these people, Jesus was just a really smart rabbi, "a guy ahead of his time," and the writers of the Bible

were exceedingly insightful. The problem with this theory of inspiration is that the Bible writers were NOT men of extraordinary ability. They were shepherds, fishermen, and tax collectors pressed into service to write eternal Scripture. The apostles were called “ignorant and unlearned men” (Acts 4:13, KJV).

Others say that the Bible is “partly” inspired. They mean, parts of it are the word of God (usually the moral teachings), but other parts are simply human productions. I had a discussion once with a Methodist minister about inspiration. I asked him directly if he believed the Bible is inspired in its entirety. After some hesitation, he replied, “I believe the Bible CONTAINS the word of God.” He went on to say that it is partly the words of God and partly the traditions or opinions of men. But if that is true, how do you know which part is which? How can you tell where the “opinion” ends and the “inspiration” begins?

Still others (most others, I would say) think that the Bible is inspired in general thought or concepts, but the actual words were chosen by the authors themselves. In other words, God gave the authors the general ideas but left them to express those ideas in their own words. My first thought would be, God must be extremely foolish to give fallible human beings the deepest concepts of eternity, and then leave those human beings to express them in his own words. And if this theory is true, where is the authority of Scripture? Why quote Scripture from the pulpit and say it must be obeyed, if it is no more than a writer’s idea of what God was trying to say?

THE ONLY THEORY OF INSPIRATION THAT MAKES ANY SENSE, AND MAKES THE BIBLE AUTHORITATIVE IN ANY SENSE, IS WORD-FOR-WORD INSPIRATION

Here are four proofs that the Bible is inspired down to word level in the original documents, not just in general thought:

The Bible writers consistently claimed word-for-word inspiration. Jeremiah used the expressed “the word of the Lord” over 50 times; Ezekiel some 60 times. David said, “The Spirit of the Lord spoke by me, and His WORD was on my tongue” (2 Samuel 23:2). Paul said that as an apostle, he spoke not by words which man’s

wisdom taught, but with words which the Holy Spirit taught (1 Corinthians 2:13). And remember, these claims are open to challenge; and in fact, they have been challenged. People have tried to discredit the Bible writers for a long time and have not succeeded.

A second proof is that the writers of Scripture were PROMISED word-for-word inspiration. Jesus told the apostles, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I SAID to you" (John 14:26). In His prayer before His death, the Lord said, "For I have given them the WORDS which You have given Me" (John 17:8). The apostles were actually forbidden to try to put the message of God into their own words in Luke 21:14-15--"Therefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist." In Matthew 10:19, Jesus told them, "But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak."

A third proof of word-for-word inspiration is that the Bible writers sometimes did not understand their own writings. Example: On the day of Pentecost, Peter announced to the Jews regarding salvation, "For the promise is to you and to your children [the Jews], and to all who are afar off [the Gentiles]" (Acts 2:39). However, Peter's Jewishness was so ingrained that he failed to realize or accept the significance of what he had just said about Gentiles. We know that to be the case, because some ten years later, it took a miracle to convince Peter to go and preach the gospel to a Gentile (Acts 10). The same apostle wrote in 1 Peter 1:10-11, "Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow." Here's a simplified rendering of this text from the NLT paraphrase: "This salvation was something even the prophets wanted to know more about when they prophesied about this gracious salvation prepared for you. They wondered what time or situation the Spirit of Christ within them was talking about when he told them in advance about Christ's suffering and his great glory afterward." Just think about it: when Isaiah wrote his

masterful treatise on the suffering of Christ in Isaiah 53, he had to sit down and read what he had just written and try to figure out what it meant! That is “un-get-around-able” proof of word-for-word inspiration.

*A fourth proof of word-for-word inspiration is that Bible writers sometimes made crucial doctrines dependent on one word in texts that were hundreds or thousands of years old. Galatians 3:16 is a prime example: “Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say ‘and to seeds’ (as of many) but as of one, ‘and to your Seed,’ who is Christ.” Abraham had many “seeds” (natural descendants), but Jesus came through one miraculously-conceived “Seed,” Isaac. On one occasion Jesus answered the Sadducees’ erroneous belief about the resurrection by quoting God’s words from the Old Testament. “Jesus answered and said to them, ‘You are mistaken [in denying the resurrection], not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven. But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living”’ (Matthew 22:29-32). Jesus pointed out that God did not say “I WAS the God of Abraham” (who was dead when the statement was made), but “I AM the God of Abraham”--indicating that Abraham was still alive in the spirit world. This is stunning: Jesus made the proof of a major doctrine (resurrection) *dependent on the tense of a verb in a 1,500-year-old document.**

CONCLUSION

*Bible inspiration means that the Bible is a message from God, delivered through men aided directly by the Holy Spirit, and is therefore disregarded and disobeyed at our peril.

*Not just the thoughts, but the very words of Scripture (in the original documents and in equivalent translations) are inspired.

*There are at least four proofs of word-for-word inspiration: (1) The Bible claims word-for-word inspiration, and that claim has been tested and assailed for 2,000

years without invalidating it. (2) The Bible writers were specifically promised the very words they were to write, not just the general thoughts. (3) The Bible authors sometimes did not believe or understand their own written words. (4) Bible writers sometimes made crucial doctrine dependent on one word. --John Temples