

*From God to Us:
How We Got Our Bible*
by
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Chapter 1

The Character of the Bible

The Bible is a unique book. It is one of the oldest books in the world, and yet it is still the world's best seller. It is a product of the ancient Eastern world, but it has molded the modern Western world. Tyrants have burned the Bible, and believers revere it. It is the most quoted, the most published, the most translated, and the most influential book in the history of mankind.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BIBLE

The word *Bible* (Book) came into English by way of French from the Latin *biblia* and the Greek *biblos*. It was originally the name given to the outer coat of a papyrus reed in the eleventh century B.C. By the second century A.D., Christians were using the word to describe their sacred writings.

THE TWO TESTAMENTS OF THE BIBLE

The bible has two major parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament was written and preserved by the Jewish community for a millennium or more before the time of Christ. The New Testament was composed by disciples of Christ during the first century A.D.

The word *testament*, which is better translated "covenant," is taken from the Hebrew and Greek words designating a compact or agreement between two parties. In the case of the Bible, then, we have the old contract between God and His people, the Jews, and the new compact between God and Christians.

Christian scholars have stressed the unity between these two Testaments of the Bible in terms of the person of Jesus Christ who claimed to be its unifying theme.¹ St. Augustine

¹ See Norman L. Geisler, *Christ, the Theme of the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968).

said the New Testament is veiled in the Old Testament, and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New Testament. Or, as others have put it, "The New is in the Old concealed, and the Old is in the New revealed." Again, Christ is enfolded in the Old Testament but unfolded in the New. Believers before the time of Christ looked forward in expectation, whereas present-day believers see the realization of God's plan in the Christ.

THE SECTIONS OF THE BIBLE

The Christian Bible is commonly divided into eight sections, four in the Old Testament and four in the New.

The fourfold division of the Old Testament is based on a topical arrangement of books stemming from the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. This translation known as the Septuagint (LXX), was begun in the third century B.C. The Hebrew Bible does not follow this fourfold, topical classification of books. Instead, a threefold division is employed, possibly based on the official position of the author. Moses, the lawgiver, has his five books listed first; these are followed by the books of men who held the prophetic office. Finally, the third section contained books by men who were believed to have had a prophetic gift but who did not hold a prophetic office. Hence, the Hebrew Old Testament has the following structure:

SOURCE: This is the arrangement in modern Jewish editions of the Old Testament. Cf. *The Holy Scriptures, According to the Masoretic Text*; and Rudolf Kittel and Paul E. Kahle (eds.), *Biblia Hebraica*.

The basis for this threefold division of the Hebrew Scriptures is found in Jewish history. The earliest possible testimony to it is the prologue to the book of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus,

during the second century B.C. The Jewish Mishnah (Teaching), the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, and subsequent Jewish tradition have also continued this threefold categorization of their Scriptures. The New Testament makes one possible allusion to a threefold division of the Old Testament when Jesus said, "All things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms concerning me" (Lk 24:44).

Regardless of the fact that Judaism has maintained a threefold division to date, Jerome's Latin Vulgate and subsequent Christian Bibles have followed the more topical fourfold format of the Septuagint. Combining this division with the natural and widely accepted fourfold categorization of the New Testament, the Bible may be cast into the following overall Christocentric structure:

Although there is no divinely authoritative basis for viewing the Bible in an eightfold structure, the Christian insistence that the Scriptures be understood Christocentrically is firmly based on the teachings of Christ. Some five times in the New Testament, Jesus affirmed Himself to be the theme of Old Testament Scripture (Mt 5:17; Lk 24:27, 44; Jn 5:39; Heb 10:7). In view of these statements, it is natural to view the eightfold topical arrangement of Scripture in terms of its one theme--Christ.

CHAPTERS AND VERSES IN THE BIBLE

The earliest Bibles have no chapter and verse divisions. These were added for convenience in quoting the Scriptures. Stephen Langton, a professor at the University of Paris and later Archbishop of Canterbury, divided the Bible into chapters in 1227. Verses were added in 1551 and 1555 by Robert Stephanus, a Paris printer. Happily, Jewish scholars since that time have adopted the same chapter and verse divisions for the Old Testament.

THE INSPIRATION OF THE BIBLE

The most significant characteristic of the Bible is not its formal structure but its divine inspiration. The Bible's claim to be divinely inspired must not be misunderstood. It is not poetic inspiration but divine authority that is meant when we speak of the inspiration of

the Bible. The Bible is unique; it is literally "God-breathed." Now let us examine what this means.

INSPIRATION DEFINED

Although the word *inspiration* is used only once in the New Testament (2 Ti 3:16) and once in the Old Testament (Job 32:8), the process by which God communicates His authoritative message to man is described in many ways. An examination of the two great passages on inspiration in the New Testament will aid in understanding the meaning of biblical inspiration.

Biblical Descriptions of Inspiration

Paul wrote to Timothy, "All scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Ti 3:16). That is, the Old Testament Scriptures or writings are "God-breathed" (Gk. *theopneustos*) and, therefore, authoritative for the thought and life of the believer. A kindred passage in 1 Corinthians 2:13 stresses the same point. "And we impart this," wrote Paul, "in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit." Words taught by the Holy Spirit are divinely inspired words.

The second great passage in the New Testament on the inspiration of the Bible is 2 Peter 1:21. "No prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." In other words, the prophets were men whose messages did not originate with their own impulse but were "Spirit-moved." By revelation God spoke to the prophets in many ways (Heb 1:1): angels, visions, dreams, voices, and miracles. Inspiration is the way God spoke *through* the prophets to others. The fact that the prophets searched their own writings to see "what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory" (1 Pe 1:11), is a further indication that their words were not ultimately self-initiated.

Combining the classical passages on inspiration, we find that the Bible is inspired in the sense that Spirit-moved men wrote God-breathed words which are divinely authoritative for Christian faith and practice. Let us now analyze these three elements of inspiration more closely.

Theological Definition of Inspiration

The single time the New Testament uses the word *inspiration*, it is applied only to the writings and not to the writers. It is the Bible which is inspired and not the human

authors. Properly speaking, it is only the product which is inspired, not the persons. The writers spoke and undoubtedly wrote about many things, such as those in the mundane affairs of life, which were not divinely inspired. However, since the Holy Spirit did, as Peter said, move upon the men who produced the inspired writings, we may by extension refer to inspiration in a broader sense. This broader sense includes the total *process* by which Spirit-moved men uttered God-breathed and hence divinely authoritative words. It is this total process of inspiration which contains three essential elements: divine causality, prophetic agency, and written authority.

Divine Causality. God is the Prime Mover in the inspiration of the Bible. It is the divine which moved the human. God spoke to the prophets first and then through them to others. God revealed, and men of God recorded the truths of faith. That God is the ultimate source and original cause of biblical truth is the first and most fundamental factor in the doctrine of inspiration. Nevertheless, it is not the only factor.

Prophetic Agency. The prophets who wrote Scripture were not automatons. They were more than recording secretaries. They wrote with full intent and consciousness in the normal exercise of their own literary styles and vocabularies. The personalities of the prophets were not violated by a supernatural intrusion. The Bible which they wrote is the Word of God, but it is also the words of men. God used their personalities to convey His propositions. The prophets were the immediate cause of what was written, but God was the ultimate cause.

Written Authority. The final product of divine authority working through the prophetic agency is the written authority of the Bible. The Scriptures are "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness." The Bible is the last word on doctrinal and ethical matters. All theological and moral disputes must be brought to the bar of the written Word. The Scriptures derive their authority from God through His prophets. Nevertheless, it is the prophetic writings and not the writers as such which possess and retain the resultant divine authority. The prophets have died; the prophetic writings live on.

In brief, an adequate definition of inspiration must have three fundamental factors: God the Prime Mover, men of God as the instruments, and a divinely authoritative writing as the final result.

SOME IMPORTANT DISTINCTIONS

Inspiration Distinguished from Revelation and Illumination

Two related concepts which help to clarify by contrast what is meant by inspiration are revelation and illumination. The former deals with the *disclosure* of truth, the latter the

discovery of that truth. Revelation involves the *unveiling* of truth, illumination the *understanding*; but inspiration as such involves neither. Revelation concerns the origin and giving of truth; inspiration the reception and recording of it; illumination the subsequent apprehension and understanding of it. The inspiration which brings a written revelation to men is not in itself a guarantee that they will understand it. Illumination of the mind and heart is necessary. Revelation is an objective disclosure; illumination is the subjective understanding of it; inspiration is the means by which the revelation became an objective disclosure. Revelation is the fact of divine communication, inspiration is the means, and illumination is the gift of understanding that communication.

Inspiration of the Original, Not the Copies

The inspiration and consequent authority of the Bible does not automatically extend to every copy and translation of the Bible. Only the original manuscripts, known as autographs, were inspired. Mistakes and changes made in copy and translation cannot claim this original inspiration. Second Kings 8:26, for example, says that Ahaziah was twenty-two years old at his coronation, whereas 2 Chronicles 22:2 says he was forty-two years old. Both cannot be correct. Only the original and not the scribal error is authoritative. Other examples of this type can be found in present copies of the Scriptures (e.g., cf. 1 Ki 4:26 and 2 Ch 9:25). A translation or copy, then, is authoritative only to the extent that it accurately reproduces the autographs.

Exactly how accurately the Bible has been copied will be discussed later (chap. 15) under the science of textual criticism. For now it is sufficient to note that the great doctrinal and historical content of the Bible has been transmitted down through the centuries without substantial change or loss. Twentieth-century copies and translations of the Bible do not possess *original* inspiration but they have a *derived* inspiration insofar as they are faithful copies of the autographs. Technically speaking, only the autographs are inspired, but for all practical purposes the present-day English Bible, in that it is an accurate transmission of the original, is the inspired Word of God.

Since the autographs are not extant, some critics have objected to inerrant autographs which have never been seen. They ask how it can be held that the originals were errorless if they have never been seen. The answer is that inerrancy is not an empirically known fact but a belief based on the teaching of the Bible about its own inspiration, the highly accurate nature of the vast majority of transmitted Scripture, and the lack of any disconfirming evidence. The Bible claims to be an utterance of God who cannot make mistakes. And even though no infallible originals have ever been discovered, neither has anyone ever discovered a fallible autograph. What we do have are very accurately copied manuscripts which have been adequately translated into English. Hence, for all matters of doctrine and duty, today's Bible is an adequate representation of the authoritative Word of God.

Inspiration of the Teaching but not All the Contents of the Bible

It is also essential to note that only what the Bible *teaches* is inspired and without error; not everything the Bible *contains* is errorless. For example, the Scriptures contain the record of many evil and sinful acts but do not commend any of these. Instead, they condemn such evils. The Bible even records some of the lies of Satan (e.g., Gen 3:4). It is not thereby teaching that these lies are true. The only thing that inspiration guarantees here is that this is a true record of a lie Satan actually told.

Sometimes it is not perfectly clear whether the Bible contains merely a record of what someone else said or did, or whether it teaches that we ought to do it too. For instance, is the Bible teaching that everything Job's friends said is true? Are all the conclusions of the man "under the sun" in Ecclesiastes the teaching of God or merely a true record of such vain thoughts? Whatever the case, a student of the Bible is admonished not to take everything the Bible *says* at face value. He must seek what the Bible is *teaching* and not just everything about which the Bible is speaking. The Bible records many things which it does not recommend, such as the assertion "there is no God" (Ps 14:1). In each case what the Bible contains must be studied in order to determine what it commands. Only what the Bible teaches is inspired and not everything referred to in its contents.

In summation, the Bible is an unusual book. It is composed of two testaments which contain sixty-six books claiming divine inspiration. By inspiration is meant that the original manuscripts of the Bible were given by revelation of God and are thereby invested with absolute authority for Christian thought and life. This means that whatever is taught in the Bible is for the Christian the final court of appeal. The precise nature of biblical inspiration is the next topic for examination.

Geisler, Normal L., Nix, William E. *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1974.
Note: No change of any kind has been made to the text.