



# A CLOSER LOOK

AT THINGS PERTAINING TO THE FAITH

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## THE NATURE OF SCRIPTURE

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What is it that sets the Bible apart from every book ever written? According to the apostle Paul it is the fact that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Timothy 3:16). But what does it mean to say the Bible is “inspired” and how can the Christian be sure that the claim to inspiration is true? These are two questions that certainly deserve our careful attention. Let’s begin by bringing some clarity to the meaning of inspiration.

### UNDERSTANDING INSPIRATION

There are two key words we need to consider from 2 Timothy 3:16: *Scripture* and *Inspiration*. *Scripture* is translated from the Greek word *graphé* and in its most general sense it simply refers to “writings” or to “that which is written.” However, in the New Testament, *Scripture* takes on a much more significant meaning. It refers not to mere writings but rather to “holy” writings.

Thus Paul speaks of the “Holy Scriptures” in Romans 1:2. When something is designated as *holy* it is set apart from what is common and given special significance because of its relationship to God. Thus, the

Bible is “set apart” from all other documents because its message finds its source in God and not in men. The term that Paul uses to more precisely describe that divine origin is *inspiration*.

Much misunderstanding has surrounded the meaning of inspiration due in part to difficulty in

translation. The Greek word is *theopneustos* which is a compound of *Theo* (God) and *Pneo* (breathe). It literally means “God-breathed.” But what is the idea behind the word? Bible scholars tell us that it is a metaphor for God speaking. Just as when we speak breath comes out of our mouths, so also when God speaks “breath” comes out of his “mouth.” Jesus describes this concept when He states that “man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). Thus, in describing the unique nature of the Scriptures, Paul affirms that they have God’s breath upon them, indicating that the words which are written are in fact *God’s words*.

But if the words of the Bible are God’s words how do we account for the clearly *human* dimension of Scripture? After all didn’t men like Moses, John and Paul write various books and letters in the Bible? Since men did in fact write the Bible how can we accurately say the Bible is God’s word? The Apostle Peter gives us the answer in 2 Peter 1:20,21, “No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” Peter wants his readers to know that the *origin* of the message of the Scriptures is not in man but in God. Prophecy (speaking for God) never came “by the will of man” but God chose holy men to speak and write his message and they did this as they were “moved by the Holy Spirit.” This influence by the Holy Spirit included teaching, bringing to remembrance, revealing and guiding “into all truth” (John 15:26, 16:11). The Bible is, therefore, the cooperative effort of both God and man. God worked *with* the

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authors of Scripture and by means of the Holy Spirit, guided them to proclaim and record messages that were and not “of men” but “of God.” This explains why Paul could say to those in Thessalonica, “when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God” (1 Thessalonians 2:13). So, even though the Scriptures have all the characteristics of human authorship they nevertheless convey God’s message as He wanted. The Bible doesn’t tell us exactly how this process worked but the miracles performed by the apostles and prophets certainly established that God was with them. We may say then that the Bible is the result of *Spirit-moved men* producing *God-breathed writings*.

### IS THE CLAIM TRUE?

That the authors of the Bible claimed divine guidance in the production of their documents cannot be honestly disputed. But is the claim true? While every faithful Christian would certainly affirm “yes,” let’s briefly consider a reason *why* we can be confident in the Bible’s inspiration.

Simply stated, the Christian’s confidence in the Bible’s inspiration is based upon the authority of Christ. That is to say, because Jesus endorsed the inspiration of the Old Testament, and promised guidance by the Holy Spirit to the authors of the New Testament, we can know, based upon His divine authority, that the Bible is the word of God. Let’s notice how this argument works.

We begin our case by establishing the historical reliability of the New Testament, particularly the Gospel accounts. This means that while we don’t assume their inspiration the gospel accounts nevertheless pass all the tests historians use to determine if a document accurately records events in history. But what do these historically reliable accounts of Jesus life tell us of Him? Most significantly, that He made claims to be the Son God (John 10:30-36), to speak with the authority of God (John 12:49), and that after being crucified He was resurrected from the dead vindicating

Himself and His claims (Romans 1:4). We may conclude, then, that Jesus’ claim to divine authority is true and that whatever He taught is true. But among the things that Jesus is recorded as endorsing is the inspiration and authority of Old Testament Scriptures (John 10:35; Luke 24:44). Furthermore, He also promised guidance by the Holy Spirit to those who would author the New Testament (John 16:11). Therefore, based upon Jesus’ authority, the Bible is inspired.

Although we begin with the New Testament simply as an historically reliable collection of documents we learn upon further investigation that these documents and those of the Old Testament come to us with the authority of God behind them. There obviously is much more that we could say to more finely tune and clarify this argument but it does demonstrate, in a most powerful way, that the case for belief in the Bible’s divine origin is both rational and convincing —We believe in the inspiration of the Scriptures because Jesus did!

### THE IMPLICATIONS OF INSPIRATION

Let us conclude by noticing the abiding significance of the Bible’s inspiration to the lives of men and women living today. Because the Bible is God’s word two crucial truths logically follow: (1) The Bible is free from all error, accurate in all it affirms, and *completely trustworthy*. (2) The Bible comes to us with the authority of God Himself, and it *must be obeyed*. This helps us to understand why the issue of inspiration is so important and why we must be diligent in our defense of it. For if the Bible is not from God then we need not believe what it says nor heed its commandments. Thus, for many, the most effective way to escape the Bible’s authority over their lives is to question or attack the doctrine of inspiration. Let us then be people, who like our Lord, hold to the full inspiration and authority of the Scriptures and stand unmoved upon the conviction that, “The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the LORD endures forever” (1 Peter 1:24-25).



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The last thing a responsible journalist wants to do is misquote someone. Lawsuits have been filed and won when a careless writer did damage to some celebrity for mischaracterizing something they said or did. We all see the importance of not misrepresenting someone by reflecting on the fact that we would not want to be misrepresented ourselves. If we take pains with the words of men, how much moreso ought we to be with the Word of God?

“The words of Jehovah are pure words As silver tried in a furnace on the earth, purified seven times” (Ps. 12:6). It functions as a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105). It was settled in heaven (Ps. 119:89; Matt. 16:19). Solomon urges us to buy it and sell it not (Prov. 23:23).

God’s word is indestructible. I’ve heard Johnny Ramsey illustrate this point often by quoting this poem by John Clifford:

I passed last Eve beside the blacksmith’s door  
And heard the anvil ring, the vesper’s chime  
And looking in I saw upon the floor  
Old hammers worn with beating years of  
time.  
“How many anvils have you had,” said I,  
“To wear and batter all these hammers so?”  
“Just one,” said he, and then with twinkling  
eye,  
“The anvil wears the hammer out, you  
know.”  
And so, thought I, the anvil of God’s Word,  
For ages skeptics’ blows have beat upon  
But though the noise of falling blows was  
heard  
The anvil is unchanged; the hammers gone!

### MISHANDLING THE WORD

But some mishandle it. The “ignorant and unstedfast” distort it to their own destruction (2 Pet. 3:16). Some have actually cut the Scriptures

up and set them on fire thinking they could destroy them (see Jere. 36:20-26).

The writers of Scripture warn time and again to handle God’s word with care. Being “living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12) the wise apostle Paul instructed young Timothy to handle it aright (2 Tim 2:15).

Some are motivated to mishandle the word because it strikes at the very heart of some cherished belief or because it offends their “sensibilities.”

Thomas Cahill, in his otherwise fascinating book, *The Gift of the Jews*, concludes by writing:

It is no longer possible to believe that every word of the Bible was inspired by God. Fundamentalists still do, but they can keep up such self-delusion only by scrupulously avoiding all forms of scientific inquiry. They must also maintain a tight reign on their own senses, for, even without access to modern biblical criticism, any reader might wonder at the patchwork nature of the scriptures, their conflicting norms and judgments, outright contradictions, and bald errors. But even without resorting to modern scientific methodology or noticing what an inconsistent palimpsest the Hebrew Bible can be, we must reject certain parts of the Bible as unworthy of a God we would be willing to believe in. We read, for instance, in the Book of Joshua that God commanded the Israelites to put all Canaanites, even children, to the sword; and in the Psalms the poet regularly urges God to effect the brutal destruction of all the poets’ enemies. Though the people who wrote such words may have believed they were inspired by God, we cannot (Cahill 1998, p. 243).

If a man is going to reject any portion of the

Bible as not worthy of God by what criterion or on what platform does he stand in judgment of it? If the Bible is the word of God, as Tom has affirmed in the first article, then is it not our duty to understand it without criticism? Norman Geisler said there is only one Book he reads to believe, all others he reads merely to consider.

### DIVINE WARNINGS

Scattered throughout the Bible are warnings against mishandling God's Word. Prior to the giving of the Law to Moses the Lord said:

And now, O Israel, hearken unto the statutes and unto the ordinances, which I teach you, to do them: that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which Jehovah, the God of your fathers, giveth you. Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish from it, that ye may keep the commandments of Jehovah your God which I command you (Deut 4:1, 2).

Proverbs 30:5, 6 reads:

Every word of God is tried: He is a shield unto them that take refuge in him. Add thou not unto his words, Lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar.

The Bible ends with these words:

I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto them, God shall add unto him the plagues which are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life, and out of the holy city, which are written in this book" (Rev. 22:18, 19).

### RIGHT ATTITUDE

The best safeguard against mishandling Scripture is a right attitude. We must humble ourselves

as "children" (Matt. 11:25, 26). It requires an "honest and good heart" to hear the Word as we ought (Luke 8:9-18). We must "hunger and thirst" after being right with God (Matt. 5:6). God should be found true even if it makes every man a liar (Rom. 3:4). James writes: "...putting away all filthiness and overflowing of wickedness, receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (Jas. 1:21).

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

When the apostles were brought before the council the high priest said, "We strictly charge you not to teach in this name: and behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us." Peter answered with the apostles, "We must obey God rather than men." He then testified concerning Jesus' death and exaltation (Acts 5:27-32).

The council had a mind to slay them, but a doctor of the law named Gamaliel, who was held in esteem by all the people, urged the council to let them go. He reasoned with them, "And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will be overthrown: but if it is of God, ye will not be able to overthrow them; lest haply ye be found even to be fighting against God" (Acts 5:38-40). The council agreed. They beat the apostles and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, then let them go.

The reader of Scripture today should handle the Bible with care lest he be found "fighting against God" and become like hammers worn out by the anvil.

Cahill, Thomas. 1998. *The Gift of the Jews*. Nan A. Talese



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## What is at stake in debates about Scripture is ultimately one's doctrine of God.

Kevin Vanhoozer. *A Pathway into the Holy Scriptures*, p. 145.