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The Inspiration of the Bible

Frequently Asked Questions

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1. Is it true that the Bible is inspired by God?

Yes. To quote but one of the many scriptures confirming this (more below): "All scripture is given by inspiration" (2 Tim. 3:16).

2. Does inspiration really matter?

Absolutely. If the Bible is not inspired, then it would simply be a piece of literature among many others. Without inspiration you have no 'Word of God', you lose the foundation for everything. All other doctrines, whether about Christ's Person or work, whether about the church, the kingdom, or prophecy, can only be defended if the Biblical text is reliable – i.e. only if it comes directly from God.

3. What exactly does inspiration mean?

Literally, 'to inspire' means to breathe. The scriptures are 'God-breathed', i.e. come directly from Him. A very helpful description of this process is found in Acts 1:16: "...this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David". This is inspiration: God speaking by the mouth of a man chosen for that purpose.

4. Did the writer's personality play no part at all in the end results?

It did – very much so. John's style (simple but profound) is different from Paul's (logical and reasoning) and Paul's from Peter's. Paul had been the student of the famous scholar Gamaliel, Peter a fisherman. God used both to bring about the intended result. God also used Luke's competence in historical reporting – as well as David's experiences in causing his Psalms to be written.

5. Is the final result therefore human, and therefore imperfect?

Absolutely not. The outcome was exactly as God intended. Every word is given by Him (see below).

6. How can the word bear the marks of the writers and at the same time be the words of God?

Well, think of a sculptor. He may use different tools and instruments in the process of producing, say, a statue. You may even see the marks of the instruments on the final product. But these marks are there because the sculptor skillfully used the instruments to bring about the desired effect. So God choose and used the personalities and life circumstances of the various writers to bring about the intended result.

7. Did the Lord ever correct anything the Old Testament writers had written?

Absolutely not. The Lord frequently quoted from the Old Testament. Never did He attribute any possibility of error to the writer. His use of the scriptures shows that He regarded them as entirely authoritative (see, for instance: Matt. 4:4,7,10; Luke 4:21; Matt. 5:17; Matt. 21:16; John 17:12; Matt. 26:31,54).

8. Did the writers understand what they were writing?

No, not necessarily. The Old Testament prophets “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” (1 Pet. 1:10-

11). The New Testament writers, in general, will have understood what they wrote. Exceptions may be part of Revelation, where John will not have understood the full bearing of his visions.

9. Did God give the words, or merely the concepts?

The words. Paul states that the apostles taught in 'words' taught by the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:13). This has been a principle from the earliest days. God had said of the true Prophet: "I will put **My words** in His mouth" (Deut. 18:18-20). Moses says at the end of Deuteronomy: "These are **the words** of the covenant which the LORD commanded" (Deut. 29:1). Or, as David put it: "The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue" (2 Sam. 23:2). See also Ezra 7:11, Zechariah 7:12, even the Revelation 22:18-19 all refer to "the words" God had spoken.

The Lord stated that "till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matt. 5:18). His use of Old Testament Scriptures demonstrated absolute reliance on the wording (see, for instance, Matt. 22:31-32).

In Galatians 3:16 the Apostle Paul points out that the text in Genesis 22:18 says "seed" and not "seeds". He builds his argument on the fact that it is in the singular and not in the plural. This leaves no doubt that he relied on the verbal accuracy and inspiration of the Scriptures.

10. Why is verbal inspiration so essential?

Because the Bible (and language in general) consists of words. If you cannot rely on the words you cannot rely on anything. A judge must refer to the words of the law and the statutes. An executor must rely on the exact wording of the will. If words are not definitive, then the sentences and statements are meaningless.

11. Does inspiration relate to the whole Bible? Or only to the doctrinal parts?

The whole Bible. Some have wrongly translated 2 Timothy 3:16 as saying "All scripture that is inspired of God is profitable...". This is incorrect. The correct translation is: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable...".

In 1 Corinthians 2:13, Paul says: “These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches”. By saying ‘we’, he includes the other apostles.

Further, in 1 Timothy 5:18, we read: “for the Scripture says”. This expression is followed by two quotations, one from Deuteronomy and one from Luke. Hence both are referred to as part of ‘the Scripture’. Similarly, Peter speaks of Paul's writings ‘and the rest of the Scriptures’ (2 Pet. 3:16) – implying that Paul's writings are inspired.

12. Does the Bible claim to be God's Word?

Absolutely. The phrase “Thus says the Lord”, or similar, occurs nearly 700 times in the Pentateuch alone. You find it 400 times in the historical books, around 400 times in the Prophets: ca. 150 times in Isaiah alone! In Ezekiel you find expressions such as ‘the word of the Lord came to me, saying’, and similar, around 350 times. Finally, in the New Testament, the expression ‘it is written’ occurs around 80 times. No other books have a remotely similar claim to be the Word of God.

13. What exactly is inspired, the original writings, the manuscript copies, or our translations?

The original writings, i.e. the texts as they were written by Moses, David, Paul and the other writers.

14. But aren't the copied manuscripts full of mistakes?

The original writings were copied on manuscripts, in painstaking accuracy. This was assured through various techniques, such as counting the number of occurrences of each letter, etc.

Evidence for the accuracy of transmission abounds. Until 1947, the oldest known O.T. manuscripts were from around 1,000 AD. Bible critics claimed that these had to be very inaccurate because so many centuries had elapsed. The famous Qumran discovery, in 1947, proved them wrong (the critics, not the manuscripts). The caves in Qumran contained copies of all books of the Old Testament (except Esther) – from 100 till 200 years BC. A careful comparison showed that these manuscripts were virtually identical to the ones that had been known before (from 1000 AD).

It is true that there are differences between New Testament manuscripts, but: these are not essential to the Christian doctrine, and for no other book of similar age is a similar number of witnesses available (9 manuscripts of Caesar's Wars, 1 of Tacitus, but 5,500 of Bible parts).

15. But aren't the translations very imprecise?

Some of them, yes. Do not use modern paraphrase type translations. Try to use as precise a rendering of the original texts as possible.

16. So an English Bible is not the inspired Word of God then?

We should note that the Lord, and the New Testament writers, used a translation as well (the Septuagint, i.e. Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament), and they quoted from it, saying "it is written". Therefore, we can comfortably rely on a good translation and take it as God's word.

17. Did the Lord comment on whether the Old Testament was inspired, or not?

Yes, He did. Many times. He used the Old Testament as entirely authoritative (see question 7). He put the words of the Old Testament on the same level as His own words (compare Matt. 5:18 with Matt. 24:35). He referred to Adam and Eve, Cain, Noah, Moses, David, etc., each time presenting the Old Testament narratives as entirely authoritative. Finally, He presented Himself the object of 'all the Scriptures' (Luke 24:27).

18. How do we know the New Testament is inspired as well?

Various New Testament writers acknowledge each other's writings and place them on the same level as the O.T. Scriptures. See question 11.

19. How do we know that the right books were chosen to compose the Bible?

The inspired writings had such spiritual power that they commended themselves to spiritual men. They knew that they were handling holy inspired writings (many of which, after all, stated explicitly that they were God's word). Interestingly, the Lord referred to 'the Prophets', 'the Psalms' and 'the Scriptures' as known and recognized collections (e.g. Matt. 26:56), as did the New Testament writers (e.g. Luke 24:27).

20. But aren't there contradictions in the Bible?

The Bible puts man into the light of God. This is why the natural man hates this book – and has tried to find contradictions everywhere. However, 90% of these are due to either ignorance or bad intentions, or both. Then there are real difficulties, such as differences between Gospel reports. Here it is a matter of asking God to help us understand the divine design of the Scriptures. If we do, the difficulties will disappear and the beauty of inspiration is seen. In some extremely rare cases an error may have occurred: in 2 Kings 8:26 an age of 22 years is given, while in 2 Chronicles 22:2 the age given is 42 years – possibly the result of a copying error. But our faith does not depend on this detail.

21. What about the words spoken by evil people and recorded in the Bible?

The Bible contains words such as "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor. 15:32). Such verses are not the expression of the mind or truth of God, but they are true and inspired: they tell us that there are people who think and speak like this. Another example is the book of Ecclesiastes: much of it is not the revelation of divine truth, but it is inspired – and true in the sense that man 'under the sun' reasons in this way.

22. So, in summary then, what does the Bible say about itself?

The Bible states clearly that it is the word of God: it assumes verbal plenary inspiration and therefore infallibility. Let us thank God that He has been pleased to reveal Himself to man in such a reliable way. The Bible is the safest point in the

universe: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away" (Luke 21:33).

23. But can we rely on the Bible's own testimony about itself?

Yes. Any third party's testimony would be rather weak. If God has revealed Himself (as every Christian believes He has) in His word, then His word will speak about and for itself. Extra-biblical evidence would only detract from its inherent authority. The only place where we can learn whether the Bible is inspired, and what exactly this means, is: in the Bible! God's book speaks for itself.

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