

The Meaning of “Inspiration” and How We Can Know the Bible is Inspired

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The Meaning of “Inspiration”

“Inspiration” in the biblical sense has both a process and a product element to it. The “process” aspect of inspiration refers to the method by which the Holy Spirit superintended upon certain men who were selected by God so that the content of their writings was free from error. The specific words they chose were the same words as would have been uttered by God directly even if He had not been communicating via an inspired author.

Yet even though inspiration applies to the very words, God did not turn the authors into mindless automatons or glorified dictation machines. It is true that there are instances (especially in the Old Testament) in which God told a prophet what to say and the prophet immediately repeated His message almost verbatim.¹ However, when it comes to the New Testament authors, God allowed their personal characteristics to shine through their writings. An author whose native language is Hebrew would write in Hebrew. If the LORD selected someone who was a talented logician, then that talent would be apparent in the scripture God inspired through him.

The “product” of inspiration refers to the writings which result from the process of inspiration. Thus, the letters of Paul are the product of inspiration which came about through the inner working of the Holy Spirit upon him, i.e., the process of inspiration.

How We Can Know the Bible is Inspired

As Christians, we can know the Bible is the inspired word of God through various avenues. First, the Bible itself claims that the prophets were verbally inspired. In Deuteronomy 18 Moses relayed several of God’s to the Jewish people, including telling them that God will raise up a future prophet to whom they must listen. He then proceeded, however, to give a direct

¹ See, e.g., Jer. 29:1-23.

quote from God, stating, “The LORD said to me: ‘... I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him.’”² Moses here made a clear claim that the instructions he passed on to the Hebrews originated directly from God Himself.

Second, Moses and the prophets presented not only verbal revelation but also written revelation from God. Jeremiah 29 records a letter written by the prophet to those who had been exiled from the Promised Land by Nebuchadnezzar. In introducing the text of the letter verse 4 says, “This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.”³ This passage provides a clear example in which the inspiration of God was claimed to extend not just to the verbal instructions of a prophet, but to a written document as well.

Third, the New Testament treats the Old Testament as inspired. After relaying the details of the birth of Christ, Matthew stated, “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet.”⁴ He then provided a quote from Isaiah 7:14. Thus, Matthew considered the writings of Isaiah to have come from “the Lord.”

Fourth, the New Testament writers explicitly stated the Old Testament was inspired by God. For example, in 2 Timothy 3:15 Paul told Timothy, “from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”⁵ Obviously, if he was referring to documents that existed when Timothy was still in his “infancy,”

² Deut. 18:17-18 (NIV).

³ Jer. 29:4 (NIV).

⁴ Matt. 1:22 (NIV).

⁵ 2 Tim. 3:15 (NIV).

he must have been referencing the books of the Old Testament. Paul considered them to be “Holy Scripture.” But in the very next verse Paul explained “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”⁶ Immediately after referring to the Old Testament writing as “Holy Scripture,” he went on to say that all such scripture comes from God. This was a clear statement from Paul that the books of the Old Testament were divinely inspired.

Finally, the New Testament writings also claim to be the result of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration. Jesus told His apostles they would be inspired by the Spirit.⁷ Several New Testament writings reaffirm Jesus’ teaching by claiming inspiration for themselves. In his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul said, “And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.”⁸ Paul equated the words he taught with “the word of God.” It was a clear declaration of inspiration.

The writings of scripture have certain qualities (truth, wisdom and authority) that would be expected from God’s inspired word. But when those qualities are combined with the five grounds cited above, we are left with a solid basis for accepting the inspiration of the entire Old and New Testament canon.

⁶ 2 Tim. 3:16 (NIV).

⁷ See, e.g., Jn 14:26 (NIV); “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

⁸ 1 Thess. 2:13 (NIV).