

# Jesus and the Inspiration of Scripture (Part 2)

by Gary R. Habermas

## CRITICAL SCHOLARSHIP AND INSPIRATION

Strangely enough, addressing another potential objection actually points us to what is probably an even stronger argument for the inspiration of Scripture than the path we have so far pursued. Some may ask how we know that all the Gospel references we have used here are the exact words of Jesus. Could it be that, whatever the Gospel authors thought, Jesus never held such a view, and thus He never taught it? Maybe these reports of what Jesus believed on this subject are simply inaccurate. Asked another way, how do we know that our entire argument is not simply a case of circular reasoning that assumes that Jesus really taught the inspiration of Scripture, as the Gospels report, without knowing that He did so?

Initially, we have assumed that there are good arguments for the reliability of Scripture. If this is indeed the case, and especially if some of the particular texts regarding Jesus' view of inspiration are well-attested on such grounds, then one response to this objection would be to argue that this provides a strong basis for the claim that Jesus at least really said what the Gospel texts report. Then, if God raised Jesus from the dead, we also need to remember that Jesus' teachings on this subject would still be confirmed. But apart from such an initial response, are there any other grounds for addressing this objection?

Intriguingly, even critical scholars generally acknowledge that Jesus believed that Scripture was God's Word. Why should they agree when these same scholars do not think that the text is inspired in the first place? In fact, they frequently even reject the reliability of Scripture. Since their responses definitely do not assume either the inspiration or the general reliability of the Gospel texts, to learn their reasons may actually provide additional grounds for accepting Jesus' belief in inspiration. For example, Rudolf Bultmann asserts concerning Jesus' view of the Old Testament, that "Its authority stands just as fast for him as for the scribes. . ." Bultmann points out that Jesus believed that God spoke and made known His will through the Old Testament writings, which were the believer's sources for faith and practice. It was Jesus' text for both answering questions and challenging the errors of those who opposed Him. Besides, that Jesus accepted the authority of Scripture "is proven by the course later taken by his Church." Interestingly, Bultmann lists texts like some of those mentioned above to support his position. **14**

More recently, Bart Ehrman provides some additional specifics regarding Jesus' view of Scripture. Not surprisingly, Jesus shared with fellow Jews many religious ideas and theological doctrines, including the belief that the Old Testament Law was the special revelation of God's will. Actually, the majority of Jesus' teachings are drawn from these sacred texts. They were the basis that grounded Jesus' religious contentions.**15**

Then Ehrman addresses how critical scholars ascertain that this actually was Jesus' teaching. Even though Ehrman's "point is not that each and every one of these accounts must be historically accurate exactly as it is reported" regarding the authority of Scripture, he still thinks we can arrive at Jesus' teachings on this subject. How is that possible?

Ehrman argues that Jesus' position can be obtained from the "multiple layers of our traditions, scattered throughout a range of independent traditions." Ehrman finds Jesus' key teachings on the Law in what critical scholars think are four of the major Gospel sources: Mark, Q, M, and John. So our knowledge that Jesus did hold this view of Scripture "is thoroughly rooted in our tradition. It is therefore to be trusted as historical."<sup>16</sup> This multiple testimony is strong evidence that Jesus held firmly to a high view concerning Scripture.

We may actually strengthen Ehrman's points here. According to critical scholars, perhaps the two most evidential of the independent Gospel traditions are Mark and the so-called Q material (Jesus' sayings found in Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark). In each of these, there is a wealth of citations which indicate that Jesus held to the inspiration of the Old Testament. Perhaps the more crucial comments are found in Mark,<sup>17</sup> while the so-called Q texts include numerous instances where Jesus clearly showed His trust of many Old Testament passages.<sup>18</sup>

So critical scholars like Bultmann and Ehrman frequently argue something like this: Jesus was clearly a Jew, so it is no surprise that he agreed with the common Jewish view regarding the nature and authority of the Old Testament as God's Word. That the early church continued this same view further confirms this idea. But the strongest argument is that, even though critics do not know for sure which specific Gospel statements Jesus really made and which ones he did not, it is still firmly established by the presence of many such comments across multiple, independent source traditions that he taught the authority of Scripture.

Why is this potentially the strongest argument indicating that Jesus taught the inspiration of Scripture? The conclusion rests on a minimal amount of well-attested data, and is therefore generally granted by critical scholars.<sup>19</sup> Further, it does not require a lengthy argument for the reliability of Scripture, or for these texts in particular. So, as an apologetic tool, using what the critics allow both builds on what are perhaps the best arguments, as well as requiring far less argumentation.

So critical scholars have produced some additional, powerful considerations for holding that Jesus did teach the authority and inspiration of Scripture. What makes this all the more intriguing is that these scholars are rarely committed to the doctrine of inspiration, and frequently even deny the general reliability of Scripture. Yet, they still think that there is a solid foundation to assert that Jesus believed these doctrines.

Although the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture is usually rejected by critical theologians in spite of Jesus' view, we now have some solid grounds on which to reassert it. Using both traditional and critical paths to determine that Jesus firmly taught inspiration, we may reassert our earlier assumption that if God raised Jesus from the dead, then the most likely reason was to confirm the truthfulness of Jesus' teachings.<sup>20</sup> If we are correct in this, then the inspiration of Scripture follows as a verified doctrine, affirmed by God Himself when He raised Jesus from the dead.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF INSPIRATION**

What remains are some practical comments concerning our topic in this article. What

follows from the recognition that Jesus taught the inspiration of Scripture, especially if His views have been confirmed by evidences such as His resurrection, miracles, and fulfillment of prophecy? What difference should it make for us today, especially in ministry situations, or when discussing Christianity with unbelievers, and so on?

We have argued that Jesus accepted the reliability, authority, and inspiration of the Old Testament. He affirmed the veracity of the very words of the text and even the letters themselves. He also taught that Scripture can keep us from doctrinal error. In short, He approved the Old Testament. Further, He provided a basis for the inspiration of the New Testament. He made a twofold promise to the disciples that He had chosen them as His personal witnesses and that, later, they would be inspired by the Holy Spirit Who would lead them into all truth. Jesus' followers claimed the promise of inspiration for themselves, and also recognized that the same promise had been extended to other authors, as well.

But the case for the inspiration of the Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, does not stop after an examination of Jesus' teaching on this subject. The chief foundation that establishes Jesus' teachings is His resurrection from the dead. This event provides God's confirmation of Jesus' teachings, since God would not raise from the dead a heretic or false teacher. Even though we could not pursue here this portion of the argument, we pointed out that there are some exceptionally strong arguments that can be made for this assumption. We also remarked that similar paths of argumentation are found in Scripture.

How can such truths be applied today? First, this conclusion should strengthen the faith and assurance of Christians. In spite of contemporary challenges to the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, the foundation can be established firmly. So how should we handle the challenges? As pointed out long ago by Benjamin B. Warfield, the evidence for inspiration is unrefuted, and claimed discrepancies in Scripture should only be viewed as difficulties to be addressed and answered.<sup>21</sup> In other words, since our foundation remains firmly established, based on the teachings and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, we can expect that there are answers to the proposed difficulties, even if we are not immediately aware of those answers.<sup>22</sup> Other religious doubts can also be addressed.<sup>23</sup>

Second, even as Jesus' testimony concerning Scripture combined with His resurrection can provide a firm foundation for our belief in the doctrine of inspiration, so the inspiration of Scripture in turn provides the necessary groundwork for Christian theology. The benefits of having such an underpinning are tremendous. Given a firm foundation, believers are free to build a Christian world view, being careful to base their ideas on the same footing laid by Jesus Himself.<sup>24</sup>

Third, Jesus frequently used the Scripture as the proof text from which He both substantiated His view, as well as refuted the improper views held by others. He relied on Scripture for what it was--the very Word of God. While it is true that Christians do not have the same Divine authority as the Son of God, and while we often overstep our authority here (unfortunately, even grossly so at times), this benefit is also extended to us. Based on Jesus' example, we can likewise build our position on the truth of Scripture, and

use it as our Guide for evaluating other positions. A key aspect here, as already emphasized, is that this approach allows us to show the truth of Christian theism to unbelievers, even when using critical methods.

Fourth, Scripture also supplies believers with an inspired Guide for the pursuit of growth and holiness. We can rest on our foundation and should take the prescribed biblical steps for growing closer to God. This includes practicing the Christian disciplines that are grounded in Scripture.<sup>25</sup> As C. S. Lewis reminds us, "one must train the habit of Faith. . . . Neither this belief nor any other will automatically remain alive in the mind. It must be fed."<sup>26</sup>

In short, the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture is anchored to the teaching of Jesus Christ, and grounded in His resurrection. Scripture, in turn, serves as the grounds for our assurance, provides our theological primer, along with a basis for speaking to others who may not share our beliefs, as well as being a guide for living the Christian life.

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**Gary R. Habermas** is Distinguished Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Theology at Liberty University. He has authored several books related to this articles' topic including *The Historical Jesus* and *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate* (with Antony Flew).

#### **Endnotes** (cont.)

**14** Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. by Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1951), vol. I, 15-18.

**15** Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 164-167.

**16** *Ibid.*, 165 (emphasis added).

**17** Of the many passages above from Mark, perhaps the major ones are 2:23-28; 7:5-13; 11:15-17; 12:10; 12:24-27; 12:36-37.

**18** Compare Matt. 3:7-10/Lk. 3:7-9; Matt. 4:1-11/Lk. 4:1-13; Matt. 10:15/Lk. 10:12; Matt. 12:38-42/Lk. 11:29-31; Matt. 23:32-36/Lk. 11:49-51; Matt. 23:37-39/Lk. 13:34-35; Matt. 11:10-15/Lk. 7:27-28 and Lk. 16:16; Matt. 24:37-39/Lk. 17:26-30.

**19** For the strength and usefulness of what I call "minimal facts" arguments, see Habermas, "Evidential Apologetics," 99-100, 186-190.

**20** We might also mention that Jesus' resurrection is not the only evidence that has been used to show that what Jesus taught about inspiration was true. It has been argued that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies, or that He performed miracles, with either or both providing an alternative means of showing that He was God's accredited Messenger. An example of an argument from prophecy is Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). An example of an argument from Jesus' miracles to the inspiration of Scripture is John H. Gerstner, *A Bible Inerrancy Primer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965).

**21** See Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948), 174.

**22** One suggestion would be for Christians to acquire some textbooks that do an excellent

job of exploring such challenges. A couple of examples are Norman L. Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (Wheaton: Victor, 1992) and Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

**23** On this last topic, see Os Guinness, *Doubt*, Third Ed. (Batavia: Lion Publishing, 1987); Gary R. Habermas, *Dealing with Doubt* (Chicago: Moody, 1990); Gary R. Habermas, *The Thomas Factor: Using Your Doubts to Draw Closer to God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999).

**24** See Gary R. Habermas, *The Resurrection: Heart of New Testament Doctrine*, Vol. I (Joplin: College Press, 2000) for some thoughts on making the resurrection the center of Christian theology, a spot it clearly occupies in the New Testament.

**25** See Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988); Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, Rev. Ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988); Gary R. Habermas, *The Resurrection: Heart of the Christian Life*, Vol. II (Joplin: College Press, 2000).

**26** C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Rev. Ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 124.