

Inspiration and Authority of the Bible

by Jack P. Lewis

The doctrine of inspiration affirms that God through the instrumentality of men produced the Bible. While some material in the Bible can be checked by historical and scientific investigation, other elements in it, including its major affirmations that God exists, that Jesus is his Son, and that he has revealed himself either in history or in word, cannot be so checked. Interested in inspiration as a guarantee of the truths of the Bible on those subjects that cannot be discovered by the mind of man alone, we approach the question by letting the Bible speak for itself about its origin.

Belief in the inspiration of Scripture is premised first upon belief in the divine guidance of the prophets and of the apostles. The prophet's words were not his own; God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets (Deut. 18:18; Jer. 1:9; Luke 1:70; Acts 3:21). The phrase, "Thus says the Lord," is a predominant method of opening a prophetic address, occurring over two thousand times. The Lord opens the prophet's mouth (Ezek. 3:26f; Ex. 4:12; 2 Sam. 23:2; Jer. 1:9) . The whole question is best summarized in the Epistle of Peter: "We have the prophetic word made more sure . . . no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet. 1:19-21).

The God who spoke through the prophets has also spoken through his Son (Heb. 1:1f). Upon our Lord the Spirit descended at baptism; he claimed for himself the fulfillment of the statement of Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18); and he claimed, "the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me" (John 14:24) .

As a final stage in the process, the disciples of our Lord were assured that when they would be on trial the Holy Spirit would speak for them (Mk. 13:11). They also received the promise of the guidance of the Holy Spirit who would bring to their remembrance the things Jesus had said and would guide them into all truth (John 14:26; 16:7-13).

WHAT WAS WRITTEN BY THE APOSTLES AND PROPHETS IS JUST AS AUTHORITATIVE AS THE SPOKEN WORD

Belief in the inspiration of Scripture is further premised upon belief that Scripture is that oral message of the prophets, of our Lord, and of the Apostles in written form. The authority of the word written is the same as that of the word spoken. Moses is said to have written all the words of the Lord after having told them orally to the people at the time of the making of the covenant (Ex. 24:4) . Samuel wrote the duties and the rights of the kingship (1 Sam. 10:25). Jeremiah on two occasions was commanded to write all that which God had spoken to him over many years (Jer. 30:2; 36:2ff) .

The value attached to God's word written is to be seen throughout the New Testament (see John 10:34; 15:25; 1 Cor. 14:21) . Old Testament quotations are introduced as having been "spoken by the Lord through the prophet" (Matt. 1:22; 2:15). The very phrase, "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet" (Matt. 1:22), calls attention both to the divine source and to the human instrumentality.

The claim of divine guidance is also made for apostolic writing. Paul reminds the Corinthians, "If any man thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37). He taught the Thessalonians by letter as well as by word of mouth (2 Thess. 2:15) . The value attached to New Testament writings is further seen when "The laborer is worthy of his hire," a Gospel statement (Lk. 10:7) , is cited in the epistle to Timothy as Scripture alongside of an Old Testament statement, "You shall not muzzle the ox who treads out the grain" (Deut. 25:4; 1 Tim. 5:18).

Inspiration carried no implication that the writers were free from error in personal conduct. Moses, the greatest of the prophets, transgressed at the waters of Meribah and was not permitted to enter the promised land (Num. 20:7-13). David committed adultery and murder (2 Sam. 11) . Scripture does not claim that every statement made in it is within itself an inspired-or even a truthful statement. The statements of the Devil (Gen. 3:4); of Cain (Gen. 4:8ff.); of the man born blind (John 9:31f.); of Peter speaking to Jesus (Matt. 16:22); and of many other characters are not inspired statements and should not be taken as positions approved of God.

The process of inspiration directed men who natively wrote in Hebrew to use Hebrew and those who wrote in Greek to use Greek. Variations in individual styles and constructions can be seen. One writer may reflect more polish in style than another. He may use material used by another writer. He may have engaged in the process we would call research. The authors of the books of Chronicles and of Kings allude to numerous sources where additional materials can be found on the topics they were treating. Their work seems to be that of selection of correct material. Luke reveals that he is aware that other accounts of the life of Jesus have been written (Luke 1:3) .

Belief in inerrancy of Scripture is premised upon the logic that the God of truth can only speak truth. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth (John 16:12) . No Biblical figure in either the Old Testament or New Testament suggests the compatibility of inspiration with error or that some parts of Scripture are to be segregated from others as more or less trustworthy. Stress is always upon the reliability of the end product. "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:34) .

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The Bible, not an autonomous authority, receives its authority from its divine origin. It is unique in being a revelation of God as he executed a process in history which culminated in Jesus Christ. Among sacred books, it alone tells the salvation story. But it is also the word which God spoke through chosen men. From it, and it alone, we learn of his great acts in the past, of his will for the present, and of his plans for the future. Jesus is the Word of God (John 1:1ff.), but so also is Scripture his word out of which alone we learn of Jesus. When Jesus said, "Sanctify them in the truth, thy word is truth," it is obvious that he spoke of something other than himself. Scripture is God's means of communicating with men. It is the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17).

**THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE DOES NOT
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The Bible has not been given authority by the church; rather, the church is subject to God's authority as it is expressed in Scripture. While reason must be applied to Scripture in order to understand it, the Bible's authority is not solely dependent upon its commending itself to reason. Scripture says: "I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself, it is not in man that walks to direct his own steps" (Jer. 10:23). Neither is the authority of the Bible dependent upon its conforming to religious experience. Paul commands that Christian experience be subject to the command of God (1 Cor. 14:37). Furthermore, the authority of the Bible does not rest on non-Biblical traditions. A part of Jesus' clash with the Pharisees was over their having made void the Word of God for their tradition (Matt. 15:1ff.). The Bible is the authority to which church, reason, religious experience, and tradition must submit.

The best obtainable Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts of the Bible are the standard by which the reliability of all translations and interpretations must be measured. In the ultimate analysis every significant Biblical question is to be solved on the basis of what a writer meant by a Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic expression. This fact underscores the importance of Biblical students having a command of these languages. The authoritative Bible is one which is properly interpreted. Determining the plain and simple meaning of the text must be the principle aim of all Bible study. This meaning is learned in consideration of the thought and life of the times out of which the various books came. Literary forms must be recognized for what they are. Poetry should be interpreted as poetry. Metaphors should be recognized for the sort of truth metaphorical language conveys.

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Scripture is authoritative in matters for which it was intended -that is, in regulating one's obligation to God and to his neighbor. While it may allude incidentally to many other areas, it is not its purpose to be authoritative in them. One would not expect to find details of house building, cooking, flying an airplane, and dozens of other subjects in the Bible. Neither is the Bible "equally authoritative in all its parts" (a claim of one of the well-known creeds), although the Bible has the authority of truth in all its parts. Statements of uninspired men, though an accurate record of what they said, are not otherwise authoritative for anyone. Actions of sinful men are reported but should not be emulated. There are duties spoken of which are binding on men at a particular time and place but which are not of universal obligation. Alexander Campbell in his famous "Sermon on the Law" correctly challenged men to recognize the distinction between the Law and the Gospel.

The Biblical command and prohibition form the clearest type of authority, but are authoritative only for the purpose for which they were intended. Old Testament commands and prohibitions are presently binding only where they have been restated as authoritative in the New Testament. Jesus nailed the law to the cross (Col. 2:14) . The Biblical command which is specifically tied to the custom of a particular time is not perpetually binding. Greeting by the kiss and the veiling of women are examples of such commands. An approved example may be authoritative, but by no means are all actions of Jesus and the Apostles authoritative examples to be followed by the church today. There are those actions which belonged to the life of the times in which they lived, such as traveling on foot, manner of dress, and length of hair. On the other hand, while the observance of the Lord's Supper rests upon the Lord's command, the observance of it on the first day of the week rests upon the example of the church in Troas (Acts 20:7).

Of significance, but of less certain authority than the direct command or prohibition, is the analogy drawn from Biblical principles. Many of the lessons we draw from the parables are actually lessons on analogy. That drawn from the action of the Samaritan is that any man in need is to be helped. That drawn from the parable of the talents is that the Lord's steward must use his abilities in his own situation while he waits for the Lord's return.

A direct command, an approved example, or reason for drawing what is called "a necessary inference," cannot be found in the Bible for every action that modern life raises for the Christian. In matters of worship and service, the Christian asks, "Where does the Bible authorize

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the act or teaching?" He has respect for the silence of Scripture, realizing that he is not at liberty to introduce practices where Scripture has not authorized them. In ethical and social problems the answer must at times be given on the applicability of the other Biblical principles. One's deductions and inferences—while convincing for the deducer—are not authoritative for others and should be kept in the area of opinion not to be imposed on others.

Conclusion

The authority of the Bible is attested by its power to accomplish its purpose. It does not return void (Isa. 55:11), but in generation after generation accomplishes the fact of regeneration in the lives of men. The Gospel is God's power unto salvation; but all that we know about that power comes from the written records. We have no access except through the word. Through encouragement of the Scriptures, we have hope (Rom. 15:14).

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