

They Spoke from God

A Survey of the Old Testament

*For prophecy never had its origin in the
will of man, but men spoke from God as they
were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*
2 Peter 1:21

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What Is the Old Testament?

Outline:

- In What Sense Is the Bible the Word of God?
- How Was the Word of God Given?
- What Does “Revelation” Mean?
- What Is Meant by the “Inspiration” of Scripture?
- How Should Inspiration Be Understood?
- What Value Did Jesus Place on the Old Testament?
- What Are the Characteristics of a Divinely Inspired Scripture?
- What Is Meant by Describing the Bible as “Canon”?
- What Is Hermeneutics and How Is It Used?

Terms:

autograph
canon
hermeneutics
inspiration
revelation
Septuagint (LXX)

The Old Testament is the first major part of a unique collection of writings called the Bible. The Bible has often been rightly acclaimed as a literary gem and prized for its contribution to the study of history. Many have pointed to its ability to elevate values within a culture. It can enrich personal and societal views of life and overall worldviews. Some have found comfort in its pages when they were pressed by the problems of everyday life. But these and a host of other claims for the importance of the Bible, even taken collectively, do not get to the heart of how valuable the Bible is. The Bible is prized *because* it is the Word of God to humanity. It reveals God and candidly describes humanity.

The English word “bible” comes from the Greek word *biblion*. This word was originally used in a general sense of any book. With the passage of time, however, “Bible” (capital “B”) became a term used by believers to identify the Holy Scriptures. It still has this meaning. Yet not all who claim that the Bible is the Word of God are in agreement as to what such a claim means. Two individuals may use identical words to state a position and yet have vastly differing interpretations of that position. It is necessary, therefore, to carefully define one’s claim, or confession of faith. The believer needs to ask, “What is Scripture?” Biblical understandings, personal convictions, and resulting commitments can come only after having first studied the nature of Scripture itself.

In What Sense Is the Bible the Word of God?

Every book of the Bible came through human agency; none of them was dropped from the sky. The first five books of the Bible are called the Books of Moses or the Pentateuch (Gk. *penta*, “five,” plus *teuch*, “work” or “book”; Heb. *Torah*). The prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel,

Daniel, and the twelve minor prophets are all identified by the name of their human authors. Each writer has a personal style, which includes vocabulary, sentence structure, and the tone the writer adopts toward his subject matter. Once this is recognized, two major questions must be addressed. The first is centered on human imperfections and asks, "How can fallible people write an infallible book?" The second asks, "Since humans are involved in writing the Bible, how then can it possibly be God's Word?"

Too often, unfortunately, people answer these questions without any regard to what the Bible says about itself. The Scripture is a definitive source for doctrine, including doctrine about God, humankind, salvation, and the Church. It is just as important that Scripture be consulted for the doctrine about itself. Scripture repeatedly and consistently testifies about its nature. It declares that, though written by ordinary people, its ultimate author is God.¹ This testimony of Scripture not only informs the mind but also produces in its readers a sense of wonder, about both God's person and his work.

The witness of the Bible to itself is not confined to explicit statements about inspiration, such as 2 Timothy 3:16 ("All Scripture is God-breathed"). It is also implied in how the Bible treats its various subjects: Rather than representing the perspective of a people, it consistently speaks on behalf of God. In a sense, then, all the Bible is a witness to itself.²

Here by Accident?

Christian philosophers use the term "open universe" to indicate God's continued activity in his creation. In such a universe, he works to bring his design to fulfillment in human redemption by his Spirit through his Word. Since he planned in creation to have a people called by his name, it follows that his plan will be executed. Because a great gulf exists between the Creator and fallen humanity, an authoritative word from him for sinful and sinning people is needed. Such a word speaks to a fundamental question of human existence: Are we here by accident or by divine design and purpose? Christians answer, "By divine design and purpose!"

¹See, for example, Ps. 19:7–11; Isa. 40:8; 2 Tim. 3:16; and B. B. Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1948), 173.

²See John Frame, "Scripture Speaks for Itself," in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. John W. Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1974), 180.

What Does the Bible Say About Itself?

The Old Testament teaches that God has communicated with humankind from the dawn of human history. After creating Adam and Eve, he spoke to them, both before and after the Fall (Gen. 1:28–30; 3:9–19). God chose Abram to be the father of a people that God would later commit himself to. God spoke to Abram and called him after the death of his father (Gen. 12:1–3). God later reconfirmed his covenant with Abram and encouraged, strengthened, and directed him,³ eventually changing his name to Abraham (Gen. 17:5). God spoke to Isaac, guiding him and confirming with him the covenant promises first made to his father, Abraham (Gen. 26:1–5). God spoke to Jacob, calling upon him to build an altar (Gen. 35:1). In this way God reconfirmed to him the covenant given to Abraham and confirmed to Isaac. The voice of God was so vivid and convincing that Jacob had his son Joseph vow not to bury him in Egypt. Instead, the Israelites were to carry his body up to the land promised them (Gen. 49:29–30; Heb. 11:22).

God spoke to Moses. Almost two-thirds of the Pentateuch, or Torah, is a direct record of what God said to Moses. He first heard the voice of God from the flaming bush when God commissioned him for service (Exod. 3 through 4). As Moses obeyed, God repeatedly spoke to him. Clear statements of God's words to Moses occur throughout the story of the exodus (Exod. 6:1 through

Even the genealogies, often considered unimportant to the casual reader, serve an important function: They itemize the persons who played a part in God's redemption of the world. Examples are the genealogy of Shem, leading to Abraham (Gen. 11:10–32); of Judah, leading to David (1 Chron. 2:3–15); and of Adam, leading to Jesus (Luke 3:23–38).

³Gen. 12:7; 13:14; 15:1–21; 17:1–21.

14:18).⁴ When the people wailed because there was no water, God instructed Moses to strike a particular rock (Exod. 17:5–6). Later, when the Amalekites came to war against Israel at Rephidim, God gave His people victory. Afterward He instructed Moses to write the account as a permanent record (Exod. 17:14). In preparation for Moses and the Israelites to receive the covenant at Sinai, as well as in the giving of the covenant itself, God spoke to Moses. Moses then wrote down God's revelation (Exod. 19 through 24). God gave him detailed instructions regarding the tabernacle (Exod. 25 through 31). Some of the most passionate verses in Exodus describe this intimate communion. Inside the sacred tent where Moses went for his meetings with God, God spoke to him "face to face" (Exod. 33:11; Num. 12:8). Moses also talked to the LORD (Exod. 33:12). In all these instances, it is obvious that God's communication is direct and clear. It often involves dialogue between him and human beings.

So far, only the first two books of the Pentateuch have been examined. Nevertheless, divine authorship has consistently been stated and restated. Applying the question of origins to the rest of the Old Testament produces similar results. The prophets are not identified so much by what they *foretell*. Their distinctive is that they *forthtell*, that is, that they tell forth, or orally publish, the word of God. The Hebrew words for "prophet" in the Old Testament help the reader to understand the role the prophet played in Israel's life. *Ro'eh* and *chozeh* mean "one who sees" and

⁴The chapter divisions of this passage of Exodus convey a remarkable recurring cadence, a kind of chorus, *The LORD said . . . The LORD said . . . The LORD said*. These words compose a refrain that is striking enough when one reads the first verse of each of the chapters cited, but even more compelling when one reads the entire section with an ear tuned to this language.

His Word—No Doubt

Think about it—God affirms Scripture as his Word on average almost one hundred times per book. Do you suppose he wants us to get the point?

nabi' means "one who calls."⁵ A recurring assertion by the prophets was that they were chosen and commissioned by God to speak for him. Over and over they make statements such as "the Lord has spoken" (Isa. 1:2).⁶ Henry C. Thiessen observes, "Statements like these occur more than 3,800 times in the Old Testament."⁷

How Was the Word of God Given?

The great word associated with God throughout Scripture is "holy." He is the Creator. When considering his creation, specifically human beings, one word that comes to mind is "creature."⁸ And what follows is an awareness of the great distance between creature and Creator. If this were not enough, the Fall (see chap. 3) has widened the gap. Humanity is now fallen and sinful. The Bible paints a dismal picture of an abyss between the righteous God and self-centered humanity. Fallen humanity is self-deceived and deceitful. Human beings are alienated, not only from God but also from themselves (Jer. 17:9; Rom. 1:18 through 3:20). It is also very clear that God has bridged that abyss.

⁵The derivation of *nabi'* remains a matter of debate among scholars. Robert Culver summarizes four views on the matter and concludes, "The essential idea in the word is that of authorized spokesman." See R. Laird Harris et al., eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:544–45. Another scholar has observed that *nabi'* is technically a passive participle and has suggested that it means "one called [by God]."

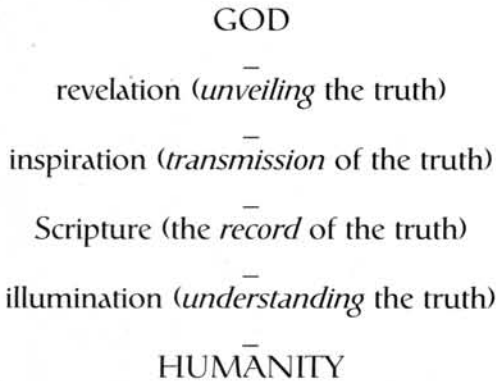
⁶For example, "the LORD said to me" (Isa. 8:1); "this is what the LORD says" (Isa. 43:1); "from the mouth of the LORD" (Jer. 23:16); "the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD" (Jer. 11:1), ". . . to Ezekiel" (Ezek. 1:3), ". . . to Hosea" (Hos. 1:1), ". . . to Joel" (Joel 1:1).

⁷Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, rev. Vernon D. Doerksen (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 68.

⁸See R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry Into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, 2d ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).

He has chosen to disclose himself to the sinner in gracious acts of redeeming love.

The elements in this process, which God uses to convey his truth to us, may be diagrammed thus:



Some elements, or categories, overlap. Revelation, for example, does not have to cease in order for inspiration to begin. Nonetheless, there is a logical and historical order to God's making himself known. Each category stands as a separate area of study.

What Does "Revelation" Mean?

The word "revelation" is often used in a popular sense to mean knowledge just acquired or insights freshly gained. *The New Webster's Dictionary* defines revelation as an "act of revealing; God's disclosure of himself to man."⁹ Further, the Scriptures speak of revelation as knowledge that was formerly hidden but which is now manifest, declared by God through his Word and Spirit (Rom. 16:26; 1 Cor. 2:10–13; Eph. 3:4–5). And keep in mind that God's revealing himself took place over a long period of time in many acts of disclosure.

A Demonstration of Love

The Christian has no difficulty at all in relating the love of God to the cross of Christ. Little wonder, for the cross is the supreme demonstration of divine love central to all of history. It is a dynamic and foundational love, which has always been evident in all God's dealings with his creation. Frederick Lehman (1869–1953) composed a magnificent song, "The Love of God," developing this third stanza from a portion of a poem written in 1096 by a German cantor, Rabbi Mayer:

(cont. on the next page)

⁹*New Webster's Dictionary and Roget's Thesaurus* (New York: Book Essentials, 1991), 233.

*A Demonstration of Love
(cont.)*

Could we with ink the
ocean fill and were
the skies of parchment
made,
Were every stalk on earth
a quill and every man
a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God
above would drain the
ocean dry,
Nor could the scroll con-
tain the whole though
stretched from sky to
sky.

This love, then, is itself
the spring of God's gra-
cious activity of revela-
tion. Apart from such a
revelation *by* God, the
knowledge *of* God is
impossible. The writer of
Hebrews reminds his
readers that those who
come to God *must*
believe not only in his
being but also in his self-
revelation (Heb. 11:6).

What Is General Revelation?

Theologians have long viewed God's disclosure of him-
self as occurring in two ways: "general" revelation and "spe-
cial" revelation. General revelation recognizes that God has
revealed himself generally, that is, in his creation. This may
be seen in nature, in history, and in the human conscience,
whether an individual's or a society's (Ps. 19:1–4; Rom.
1:20).

What Is Special Revelation?

Special revelation refers to God's disclosure of himself
specifically in and through Christ and Scripture. Scripture is
the means by which God, through the Holy Spirit, leads a
person to Christ.¹⁰ Theology derived from special revelation
is called "revealed" theology.

How Does Revelation Work?

David refers to general revelation when he says that the
heavens declare the glory of God and the earth shows his
handiwork (Ps. 19:1–4; 8:1–9). He then reflects on the per-
fection and soul-restoring ability of Scripture, God's special
revelation (Ps. 19:7–11). Paul shows that general revelation
does not stop with just confronting humankind with the
idea of the supernatural. Much more than that, it clearly
declares something about the character of God—his ever-
lasting power and divinity (Rom. 1:20).¹¹ Jesus declared the

¹⁰Isa. 61:1; Ezek. 36:27; John 14:21–26; 16:7b–14.

¹¹Although it is beyond the scope of this introduction to deal more fully with
the concept of general revelation, we cannot overemphasize its importance.
It is the rejection of the general revelation of God which renders the Gentile
world guilty before God (Rom. 1:18–20).

special revelation of God when he reminded the religious leaders of his day that the Scriptures pointed to him (John 5:39–47). To the questioning Philip he said that those who truly see him with discerning eyes also see the Father (John 14:9). Based on Scriptures such as these, believers may confidently say that the Bible is not merely a revelation *from* God. It is also a revelation *of* God and *by* God. It is revealed to and through the human instruments of his choosing.

What's So "Special" About Special Revelation?

The special revelation of God imparts understanding to human beings. It transcends the knowledge obtained through human reason alone. This revelation originates with God and includes both the data and its interpretation. But if revelation is spoken of as coming from God, then its nature must be defined. B. B. Warfield says, "God has intervened extraordinarily, in the course of the sinful world's development, for the salvation of men otherwise lost."¹²

It is of utmost importance to understand the difference between the terms "exhaustive" and "accurate" when dealing with the knowledge of God. The very idea of human beings possessing an exhaustive knowledge of God is sheer arrogance. What believers know about God, or of his countless acts of redeeming grace in human experience, they know because God has revealed himself. Not that anyone should claim to have an exhaustive knowledge of God! Instead, believers maintain that the revelation of God given in the Bible is accurate.

God chooses the content of what is revealed. He is infi-

Where Do Babies Come From?

What does a mother tell her child who asks where babies come from? If the child is told "The stork brings them," the response is obviously untrue, inaccurate. But suppose the mother judges her child not to be ready for a full lecture on human biology. She may say, "Babies grow in Mommy's tummy." This response, while having no degree of exhaustiveness scientifically, is true, accurate. Later questions from the child will draw out more details. Being finite, human beings will never attain exhaustive knowledge on any subject. If this is true of knowledge of everyday things, how much more is it true of knowledge of God!

¹²Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, 71.

nite. Humanity is not. There are things which belong to God alone. Yet those things that He does disclose are given so his will can be known and obeyed (Deut. 29:29).

Revelation includes both facts and their interpretation. For example, Joseph speaks to his brothers, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen. 50:20).¹³ So, for example, when God reveals himself, the revelation is not confined to listing attributes of his character. It also includes what those attributes mean in his relations with people.

Viewed in historical context, revelation means that God’s word does more than describe an event. It also provides understanding as the event is interpreted in the context of redemption. Leon Morris writes, “The history recorded in the Old Testament is real history, but it is recorded in terms of the outworking of the divine purpose... [and], rightly interpreted, tells us about God.”¹⁴

Revelation thus embraces both event and its interpretation: The event is made meaningful by its interpretation. I. Howard Marshall points out that “revelation for us takes place through interpreted events, and the interpretation must take place in words.”¹⁵

What Is Meant by the “Inspiration” of Scripture?

The doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture pervades the Bible. The classic passage cited for this doctrine is 2 Timothy

¹³Cf. Gen. 45:5–8; for other examples, see 2 Kings 18:11–12; Acts 2:12,16.

¹⁴Leon Morris, *I Believe in Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977), 43.

¹⁵I. Howard Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), 14.

3:16. The key Greek word used by Paul in this passage, *theopneustos*, occurs in the New Testament only here. It has generally been translated "given by inspiration of God" (KJV; "inspired by God" [NASB, RSV]). This is a compound word that literally means "God-breathed" (note NIV).¹⁶ In this verse it refers to the content of the Scripture in its entirety. It is faithfulness to the text of Scripture that leads believers to speak of the Bible as a God-breathed writing.

Even more important, inspiration is not inhaling but exhaling. That is, the word describes not so much the product of God's action as the activity itself. The words of Peter are particularly instructive here (2 Pet. 1:20–21). He shows that though Scripture came through human agency, it is nonetheless from God. Inspiration is the action of God by his Spirit through human writers. (As noted earlier, the vocabulary, syntax, and style of writing were theirs.) Yet in bringing forth the Scriptures through them, the Spirit guided.¹⁷ I agree with L. Gaussen's definition of inspiration: "the mysterious power put forth by the Spirit of God on the authors of Holy Writ . . . to guide them even in the

¹⁶See Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, 131–33, where he says, "The Greek term . . . speaks only of a 'spiring' or 'spiration.' . . . No term could have been chosen . . . which would have more emphatically asserted the Divine production of Scripture than that which is here employed."

¹⁷The Bible clearly rejects a wholly naturalist interpretation of its origin. A naturalist perspective undergirds both the classic liberal and more recent postmodern interpretation of Scripture. David Dockery has shown that the antisupernaturalist philosophy of the Enlightenment period "was foundational to much of the liberal theology that dominated nineteenth-century European and early twentieth-century American thought." *Christian Scripture* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 51. See also Bruce Demarest, "The Bible in the Enlightenment Era," in *Challenges to Inerrancy*, ed. Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984).

I, He, You— Biblical Writing Styles

Let's look at Luke's justification for his gospel (Luke 1:1–4), and Jude's statement about his epistle (Jude 3). Both are autobiographical and use the first person: "It seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you" (Luke 1:3); "I was very eager to write to you" (Jude 3). On the other hand, Exodus 24:1–2 is written in the third person: "Then he said to Moses, 'Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You are to worship at a distance, but Moses alone is to approach the LORD; the others must not come near. And the people may not come up with him.'" And the Ten Commandments (the Decalogue) are given in the second person (Exod. 20:2–17).

employment of the words they use, and thus to preserve them from all error."¹⁸

What Are Some Erroneous Views of Inspiration?

Not every view of inspiration meets the biblical criteria. The following are two of the most common errors in understanding this important doctrine.

THE DICTATION THEORY

Some pious believers hold to a "dictation" theory of inspiration. Not only do they agree that God spoke to the human authors, they assume that God commanded specific language to be recorded. There are places where this is true.¹⁹ However, a basic problem arises. The dictation theory does not refer to the extent of inspiration, but to its mode. But little is known about the nature of inspiration. God spoke "at many times and in various ways" (Heb. 1:1; see sidebar on writing styles). Moreover, when what is true in particular portions of Scripture is extended as a generalization to all Scripture, we can develop doctrine that does not represent the *whole* of biblical teaching.

David Dockery observes that many faithful believers wrongly ascribe to the dictation theory. Because of this, many often associate dictation with a plenary view of inspiration (the term "plenary" will be defined later). Dockery

¹⁸L. Gaussen, *Theopneustia: The Plenary Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1888), 108.

¹⁹For example, Exod. 20:1–17 tells us that God spoke the Ten Commandments to Moses. The tension between human and divine authorship, however, may be seen by comparing Exod. 34:1 and 34:27. In 34:1, God says he will write his words on the tablets, but in 34:27 he commands Moses to do it.

writes, "Adherents of the plenary view take great pains to disassociate themselves from the dictation theorists. It is right to judge the dictation theory as docetic and, therefore, less than orthodox."²⁰

CONCEPTUAL INSPIRATION

Opposite the dictation theory of inspiration is the theory of "conceptual," or "dynamic," inspiration. In this view, God inspired the ideas. The human writer set them forth in his own words. It attempts to link the ideas to God while leaving the human writer free to express them as he chooses.

Some contemporary approaches have expanded the view to include the community of faith in the composition of Scripture. This position suggests that the Bible arose out of traditions that confess what God has done for the community. Individuals or groups of individuals within that community took up the traditions and reformulated them to address specific situations. This theory limits inspiration to God's initiating impulse; the emphasis of inspiration falls not on the product—Scripture itself—but on the purpose and process of its production.²¹

One expression of this theory considers human writers of Scripture infallible when they wrote of faith and practice but not necessarily when they wrote of the humanities or

²⁰Dockery, *Christian Scripture*, 51. The term "docetic" refers to an ancient heresy that claimed that Christ only *seemed* to have a body; this heresy denied the incarnation (see the strong refutation in 2 John 7). The Bible is God's Word in human language, making it similar to the incarnation in this respect. Dockery uses "docetic" to express the danger of the dictation theory in ignoring this important human factor in its interpretation of Scripture.

²¹*Ibid.*, 54.

the sciences. This raises a question: Why is one sentence of Scripture accepted and not another? This theory offers no answer at this point. It fails to consider that *all* Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16).²²

How Should Inspiration Be Understood?

Each of the views described to this point falls far short of a biblical definition of inspiration.²³ Some, for example, blur the distinction between inspiration and one's subjective

The Dead Sea Scrolls and Your Bible

The standard printed text of the Old Testament is *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, ed. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph, based on Leningrad Codex B19^A, dating 1008 A.D. Although the autographs have long since perished, the discovery and publication of ancient biblical manuscripts over the past two centuries have confirmed that the text we now possess is remarkably accurate. Most recent of these discoveries are the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) found at Qumran near the Dead Sea, dating from the second century

B.C. to the first century A.D.

By comparison with ancient manuscripts, we know that our text is essentially identical to the Hebrew Bible used by Jesus. Let me illustrate by using Isaiah 21:8. The traditional Hebrew text (often called the Masoretic text) literally reads "A *lion* cried, 'On the watchtower I stand.'" The Isaiah Dead Sea Scroll (1QIsa^A) reads, "The *watcher* cried." In copying the text, a scribe obviously confused the letters *rw'h* ("watcher") and read them '*ryh* (lion), an easy mistake to make.

This verse marks the *most significant variant* to be gleaned from the Dead Sea Scrolls for the entire book of Isaiah (sixty-six chapters)! Even better, most scholars regard our modern text as a text that is generally *superior* to the Dead Sea Scrolls. Why? Although the DSS are chronologically much older and thus closer to the autographs, the Leningrad Codex (B19^A) was copied with such care that it has preserved older forms of many words than have the Qumran texts.

²²See Thiessen's refutation of this theory in *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 64.

²³Some of the finest contributors to the formulation of the doctrine of Scripture say very little—if anything—on the question of the mode of inspiration. They do this purposely because they believe that the Bible has very little to say on the subject. Peter says that the prophets spoke from God as they were borne along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:20–21). But to say exactly what form this took, or to limit it to any one form, is certainly to go far beyond the witness of Scripture itself, especially in the light of the opening verse of the book of Hebrews (" . . . at many times and in various ways").

response to the Word of God. For example, the “encounter” theories of religious existentialism understand that the person is responding to an event in his or her own experience. Such interpretations can lead to error.

The Autographs and Verbal Plenary Inspiration

Orthodox Christianity’s traditional view is that the inspiration of Scripture is both verbal and plenary. “Verbal” means that God has influenced each word of Scripture. Even though the style of each human author can be detected, God has controlled the wording. “Plenary” means that inspiration extends to the whole of Scripture. This claim is made for the words of the autographs, that is, the original biblical writings. It applies to versions and translations only insofar as these reflect the original texts.²⁴

How Should Differences in Ancient Texts Be Regarded?

Undeniably there are variant readings in the ancient texts used to make translations of the Bible. But this should in no way erode the believer’s confidence in Scripture. Many of the variations have no effect on interpretation. Moreover, studies in the field of textual criticism maintain the reliability of present Greek and Hebrew texts.²⁵ The essential accuracy of the message is not jeopardized.

Studying Scripture

Christians believe the Bible is the Word of God. This is not something to take for granted. To do so is to take God for granted. We *cannot* afford to be sloppy interpreters of Scripture. Every serious interpreter of Scripture should make an effort to recover the meaning of the Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic texts that underlie our present translations. The various unabridged concordances and computerized search engines for the Bible are very helpful in doing word searches in multiple versions and recovering original readings.

On the other hand, we work in a culture of English language. Most of us will find ourselves using an English Bible. There are a number of fine translations available. Here are some modern English language translations I have found useful:

(cont. on the next page)

²⁴See Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, 173.

²⁵See Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. Howard Clark Key (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), 553–54.

Studying Scripture (cont.)

For concordant studies: The New American Standard Bible (The Lockman Foundation)

For rapid reading: The New Living Translation (Tyndale)

For study: The New International Version (The International Bible Society)

For certain environments, the dignified phrasing of the King James Version may still be useful.

What Value Did Jesus Place on the Old Testament?

Jesus' use of the Old Testament is particularly instructive. It reflects his view that the very words of the Hebrew Scriptures were given by God. They were to be valued, studied, embraced, and internalized. He saw the whole of the Old Testament as God-given. He was as saturated in its content as he was skilled in its interpretation. And he said not "the smallest letter" of the Hebrew alphabet or "the least stroke of a pen" would pass away until it all was fulfilled (Matt. 5:18). Again and again Jesus appealed to a single word as he interpreted and applied a passage to his hearers. This is particularly noteworthy when he faced opposition. Questioned by the Pharisees about his true identity, he emphasized one word from Psalm 110:1 (Matt. 22:41–45). He based His reply to the Sadducees' denial of the resurrection on the time implied by one verb in Exodus (Exod. 3:6; Matt. 22:31–32). When a crowd in Jerusalem prepared to stone him, Jesus centered his defense on a single word from Psalm 82:6 (John 10:34). He countered Satan in the wilderness by appealing to Scripture, "It is written . . ." (Matt. 4:1–11). And it is hard to imagine a scene more charged with spiritual fervor than the one in the synagogue at Nazareth after Jesus' reading from Isaiah: He closed the book and announced, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

New Testament writers also bear witness to the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture. For example, they often introduce their quotations from the Old Testament by saying, "He [God] says" (Heb. 1:8), or "The Holy Spirit says" (Heb. 3:7; see 10:15), or "The Holy Spirit spoke . . . through Isaiah" (Acts 28:25), or "He . . . says in Hosea" (Rom. 9:25).

In writing to the churches of Galatia, Paul used one word from Genesis 13:15 to show that Christ is the true seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16).

What Are the Characteristics of a Divinely Inspired Scripture?

Many distinctives mark the pages of the Scripture and set it apart from other writings, even religious ones; for example, the beauty of its language, its essential unity, or the singleness of its message (redemption). These distinctives, and many more, can be gathered under three great hallmarks of the Bible: (1) its truthfulness, (2) its authority, and (3) its effectiveness.

1. How Is Scripture Truthful?

Christianity cannot be separated from its claims of truth. When Moses received the covenant, the Lord commanded him to prepare two stone tablets. He said, "I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke." After this he disclosed himself as "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Exod. 34:1,6). Both Moses and David refer to God as the "God of truth" (Deut. 32:4, KJV; Ps. 31:5). The judges who were appointed under Moses were to be men of truth (Exod. 18:21). David prays for continual preservation in the truth (Ps. 40:11), where clearly it is Scripture that he has in mind (40:8). In Psalm 119 the psalmist extols the Word of God calling it "the word of truth" (119:43) or simply "the truth" (119:142, KJV). The truth of God was to be acknowledged. Even Nebuchadnezzar was brought to recognize God's sovereignty, calling all God's works truth (Dan. 4:37, KJV).

The "Old" Testament for a New Day

Scripture is the Word of God; it speaks truth. And the Word of God "stands forever" (Isa. 40:8). It was what we call the Old Testament that Paul described to Timothy as "God-breathed" (i.e., inspired; 2 Tim. 3:16). It was the Bible used by Jesus and the Early Church. God has not changed. These Scriptures, rightly interpreted, are as applicable to us today as they were to the Early Church. The secret, though, as emphasized in this chapter, is proper interpretation.

Mixed Signals

It is always tragic whenever a gap occurs between what believers profess and how they live.

Francis Schaeffer often spoke of the Christian before the watching world. It must be that way. The world generally will be inclined to judge us not by our philosophical positions, nor by our theological articulations, but by the way we live. Although the problem is not new (cf. Rom. 2:24; 2 Pet. 2:2), think about the mixed signals that sometimes come from the Christian community in America today. How can such possibly be justified, given (1) that Scripture is truthful, authoritative, and effective; and (2) that the Holy Spirit both motivates and enables the believer to please God in all things?

Moreover, truth in the heart was a necessity for a citizen of Zion (Ps. 15:1–2).

This close association of revealed religion and truth, so evident in the Old Testament, is carried over into the New Testament. Jesus not only professed to *speak* the truth but to *be* the Truth (John 14:6). He taught that a complete and ongoing commitment to him was the basis of one's knowledge of the truth, and he spoke of freedom as its inevitable result (John 8:31–32).

After Jesus returned to the Father, the Holy Spirit would guide his disciples into all truth (John 16:13). The early Christians were obligated to the truth (2 Cor. 13:8). They were to acknowledge it (Titus 1:1; 2 Tim. 2:25). They were to be established in it (2 Pet. 1:12) and live it out daily (3 John 3). The context of 2 Timothy 3:16 contains a charge that Paul delivers to Timothy, his “son in the faith.” Paul’s message is set against the somber backdrop of deception by evil men and imposters. It addresses the sharp contrast between the truth of Scripture and the error of unbelief. Paul had urged Timothy to do his best to present himself to God as one approved, a workman who treated the Word of truth honestly and fully (2 Tim. 2:15). Timothy was to continue in the Holy Writings that he had known since childhood. Those writings would strengthen his spiritual life (2 Tim. 3:15) and equip him for ministry (vv. 16–17).

The Bible’s truthfulness, or inerrancy, its infallibility,²⁶ and its authority are all consequences of biblical inspiration.²⁷ “Inerrancy” means that the Bible is without error or

²⁶By standard dictionary definition, “inerrancy” and “infallibility” are synonyms. But in the interests of accuracy in theology, they are used differently.

²⁷These doctrines, while amply set forth in Holy Scripture, are results of inspiration. The Bible is not inspired because it is inerrant; it is inerrant

falsehood in all it affirms or teaches. "Infallibility" means that it is reliable, certain, absolutely trustworthy. It means that Scripture, as the standard for faith and practice, is both adequate and effective (Titus 2:11–12; 2 Peter 1:3).²⁸

Theology is possible because of God's revelation and the intellectual, volitional, and emotional abilities human beings have received from him. But God's revelation is not exhaustive: On the one hand, theology is limited to what God chose to reveal. On the other hand, his creatures are limited. So theology is limited by the finiteness of human understanding. Even devout theologians are handicapped by the incompleteness of their knowledge. A further hindrance is the corruption of the human heart. It is precisely because of this human condition that the understanding and definition of inerrancy must be biblical, to keep one on track. Doctrine is taught in Scripture both explicitly and implicitly. As noted earlier, the Bible repeatedly expresses the truthfulness of its message.²⁹ That truthfulness is implied throughout. Paul Feinberg says that inerrancy means "when all the facts are known, the Scriptures . . . will be shown to be wholly true in everything they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences."³⁰ The definition begins

because it is inspired. The One who knows all things, and who is all-powerful, so superintended the human writers of Scripture that they wrote without error or falsehood in all they said, and without any deceit in what they intended.

²⁸The purpose of Scripture is not to satisfy human curiosity but to bring people to Christ, and by teaching, reproof, correction, and training, to perfect them in the way of salvation (2 Tim. 3:15–17). And God guarantees that it will achieve its intended goal (Isa. 55:11).

²⁹Paul D. Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 294.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 294.

with a humble acknowledgment of human finiteness—all the data is simply not available. Moreover, the Fall has produced what Augustus Strong called “a moral and spiritual astigmatism.”³¹ As a result, people often misinterpret the data that they do have. This fact alone should cause the believer to shun the arrogance of judgments made without adequate bases in fact.

Technically, inerrancy, like inspiration, is limited to the autographs—the original words that were written. For this reason evangelicals have used the term to apply to copies and translations to the degree that they reflect the original writings. And there is precedent for this in Scripture itself. Greg Bahnsen cites examples of biblical writers who, fully aware of the differences between autograph and copies and translations,³² treated those copies and translations as authoritative.³³

Knowing the Bible means a great deal more than merely quoting it. True knowledge implies understanding. To achieve understanding of the Bible, it must be interpreted. The definition of inerrancy in this chapter promotes and

³¹Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1956), 1:34.

³²In evaluating the New Testament use of Old Testament versions, perhaps an analogy would be useful. The New Testament was written in Greek to a Greco-Roman world. Translations always miss something of the original. That's why Christians often consult several in trying to understand a passage in the English Bible: Each one will say things a bit differently and serve to emphasize another aspect of the original. In his writings, Paul often consults the Septuagint or the Targums (early Jewish Aramaic versions), depending on which makes his point better. For a detailed examination of the problem, see E. Earle Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1957).

³³Greg L. Bahnsen, “The Inerrancy of the Autographa,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 57–59.

encourages the activity of interpretation. This does not mean that the truthfulness of Scripture hangs on the human interpretation of it. It means, rather, that one receives the truth of what the Bible says only when it is properly interpreted. It means that what a person believes (or does not believe) about Scripture influences that person's interpretation of it.

Keep in mind that inerrancy has to do with all the teachings of Scripture. Those who do not accept biblical teaching as true must formulate some other objective criterion by which truthful assertions may be recognized. Such a criterion—whether philosophical, biblical, or theological—says Carl Henry, has never been laid out.³⁴

2. How Is Scripture Authoritative?

Scripture makes a strong claim for its own authority. Moses gave specific instructions for the care and security of the Torah (Deut. 31:24–26). The priests were to read it to the people (Deut. 31:11). Joshua was commanded to meditate on it day and night, “to do everything written in it” (Josh. 1:8). It was required reading for Israel's kings (Deut. 17:18–19). David charged his son Solomon, “Observe what the LORD your God requires: Walk in his ways, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and his requirements, as written in the law of Moses” (1 Kings 2:3). Some kings were praised for their obedience to Scripture,³⁵ but others were condemned because they disobeyed it.³⁶ The prophets

³⁴Carl Henry, “The Battle for the Bible,” in *Carl Henry at His Best* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1989).

³⁵See 1 Kings 15:5–11; 2 Kings 23:24–25; 2 Chron. 31:20–21; 34:2.

³⁶See 1 Sam. 15:11, 22–26; 1 Sam. 28:17–18.

Jesus and the Law

Again and again in segments of the gospels, such as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "You have heard . . . but I tell you" (see Matt. 5:21–22). This is frequently misinterpreted to mean that Jesus came as a new lawgiver, setting aside the law of Moses. In reality, just the opposite is true. He honored the law. What he took exception to was the religious leaders who got around the law (in effect, breaking it), by both their teachings and their lives. Jesus specifically says that he came to fulfill the law. He did this both in his teachings and in his life. In the final analysis, Jesus' endorsement of the Old Testament should settle all questions relating to its authority.

eloquently testified that their words constituted the authority of the LORD God.³⁷ By the time Jesus was born, the Old Testament was accepted in its entirety—Law, Prophets, and Writings—as the inspired and authoritative Word of God.³⁸

Christ came proclaiming himself as the fulfillment of the promises made to Israel in a book (Matt. 5:17). The disciples, in their sermons, interpreted the Old Testament as a record of redemptive history, linking it to Jesus. In this way they associated the authority of the Old Testament with the authority of Jesus.³⁹

HOW MAY AUTHORITY BE UNDERSTOOD?

Authority can be innate or derived. Only God's authority is innate. It is inherent in his being. He has the right and the capacity to do what he chooses, including the right to command belief and action. There is no one greater by whom he can swear, so he swears by himself (Gen. 22:16; Heb. 6:13–18).

Derived authority is authority that comes from a greater authority. It is clear, for example, that the centurion who asked Jesus to heal his sick servant was thinking of derived authority when he spoke, as a soldier, of both being under authority himself and then having authority over others (Matt. 8:9).⁴⁰ The chief priests and the elders asked Jesus who gave him the authority to do what he did (Matt. 21:23).

³⁷See Isa. 8:5; 31:4; Jer. 3:6; 13:1; Ezek. 21:1; 25:1; Hos. 4:6; 8:1,12; Amos 3:1; 7:1.

³⁸Edward J. Young, "The Authority of the Old Testament," in *The Infallible Word* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing House, 1946), 70–71.

³⁹John 5:39–40; Acts 17:2–3,11; Rom. 1:2–4; Heb. 1:1–3.

⁴⁰The centurion's authority had been bestowed on him by imperial Rome. He represented the full governing authority of the Roman Empire.

They too were thinking of derived authority.

Jesus was the Word of God in the flesh (John 1:14). Scripture is the Word of God in writing (John 10:34–35). Because of who Jesus is, his authority is innate. He also has authority derived from the Father by reason of his mission. So it is with the Scriptures. On the one hand, Scripture is its own genuine and valid authority because it is the Word of God. God himself addresses humanity. On the other hand, its authority is bestowed by God. Holy men spoke as they were propelled by the Spirit of God (2 Peter 1:21). H. D. McDonald uses the terms “real authority” and “conferred authority.” He writes, “Because the Bible points beyond itself to God, it has a conferred authority. Yet the Bible has a real authority in itself as the authentic embodiment of God’s self-disclosure.”⁴¹

3. How Is Scripture Effective?

All Scripture is permeated by the idea that the power of God’s word can produce the desired effect. God’s word will not return to him fruitless but will accomplish what he wants (Isa. 55:11). Jeremiah encouraged the prophets to speak the word faithfully and boldly. He knew that nothing could successfully withstand God’s word (Jer. 23:28–29). The writer of Hebrews describes the word of God as living and powerful; it discerns the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Heb. 4:12). Paul shows that Scripture is given to make one wise unto salvation through Jesus Christ. It teaches, reproves, corrects, and instructs in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:14–16).

⁴¹H. D. McDonald, “Bible, Authority of,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 139.

All authors are selective in what they write. Their intended purpose guides their choice of what to include and what to exclude. God's intention in giving Scripture determines what is given. The ultimate goal of Scripture is not simply to increase human knowledge, but to change lives. This does not mean, of course, that there is no appeal to the intellect. In fact, our experience of the Word is valid only as it is grasped by the mind and internalized in the heart (for example, see Rom. 10:9–10).⁴²

God's Word is both unique and dynamic. No dull book of records, it continues to live century after century to fulfill its purpose for being written. The Psalmist tells what Scripture is and what it does (Ps. 19:7–14). Taken altogether, the synonyms the Psalmist uses reflect the idea of instruction. These are given by the righteous Judge, bearing witness to who he is. They call for obedience. They are to the soul what food is to the body. They warn God's servants, restore the soul, and make spiritually wise those who are open to them.

What Is Meant by Describing the Bible as "Canon"?

Now about which books were accepted into the Old Testament and why: The first question deals with the canon⁴³ of Scripture. The second one deals with canonicity.

⁴²Acts 8:26–39 provides a classic study in the order in which the faculties of the human spirit are brought into play in the conversion experience. First comes an appeal to the intellect, "'Do you understand what you are reading?'" (8:30). This is followed by a confessed act of decision (8:36). Finally, the emotions of the Ethiopian are set before us: he goes on his way "rejoicing" (8:39).

⁴³For a very useful discussion of the canon and text of the Old Testament, see R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), 199–288.

The word “canon” comes from the Greek *kanon*, which in turn comes from the Hebrew *qaneh*, meaning “reed.”⁴⁴ Reeds were used to measure things and ultimately became accepted as a standard measuring instrument, like “yardstick” (originally Old English *geard*, meaning a small stick). In time the literal term became figurative, used as a standard for human thought and action (as did the English term: “Let the general good be our yardstick on every great issue”). “Canon” was—and is—a fitting term for the books of the Bible, either the thirty-nine of the Old Testament, the twenty-seven of the New Testament, or the sixty-six combined (the sense in which Protestants use the term).⁴⁵

Jesus recognized as canonical the same books that are in the Old Testament today. After his resurrection he appeared to a group of grieving disciples. He reminded them that the events of the previous hours had been in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about him. He told them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44).⁴⁶ Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix observe

⁴⁴The word translated “rod” in contemporary versions in Ezekiel’s temple vision is *qaneh*, lit. “reed” (Ezek. 40:3,5; cf. KJV). The man in Ezekiel’s vision used it to measure the temple.

⁴⁵The Roman Catholic canon of the Bible includes the Apocrypha, bringing the total number of books in that canon to eighty. Catholics also have a Canon of the Mass which involves a set form of liturgy, and Canon Law in which they present forms of discipline. For a thorough discussion of canon, see Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 260–88.

⁴⁶A question naturally arises about Christ’s use of “the Psalms” to designate the third division of the canon. One answer is that he used the part for the whole, but this is unlikely, given its inconsistency with the earlier designations “the Law of Moses” and “the Prophets.” It is much more likely that Christ referred to “the Psalms” because of their many predictions about him, best suiting them for the Christological purposes of his teaching on the occasion

that there is not enough data to form a complete history of the Old Testament canon.⁴⁷ Yet there are evidences that sketch an overall process: the gradual accumulation and collection of the books, prophetic continuity in the books themselves, and the completion of the (Old Testament) canon with the last of the prophets.⁴⁸

Collection of the Old Testament books began with Moses, who placed the "Book of the Law" in the tabernacle (Deut. 31:24–26). Joshua added to it (Josh. 24:26). Samuel wrote concerning the kingdom and laid the book up before the LORD (1 Sam. 10:25). Hilkiah found the Law in the temple (2 Kings 22:8). Daniel shows the prophets' understanding of the character of the Law of Moses: He laments that Israel's calamities are due to its rejection of that law (Dan. 9:10–11). These passages show how the writers of Scripture characteristically used earlier canonical writings. The links of prophetic continuity extend from Moses to Joshua. They continue through the prophets, forming an unbroken chain that is completed in Nehemiah.⁴⁹ Both Josephus, a Jewish apologist writing in the first century A.D., and the Talmud, a body of Jewish writings begun before the Christian era, indicate that prophetic succession ended in Nehemiah's day with the prophecies of his contemporary Malachi. The Talmud says that after the ministries of

Luke records. The NT quotes Psalms more than any other book in the Old Testament.

⁴⁷Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *From God to Us* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 76–80.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 80–85.

⁴⁹For example, Daniel (Dan. 9:2) is reflecting on the writings of Jeremiah when he receives his revelation of "seventy 'sevens'" (9:24). It is clear that Hosea knew of a written *torah* (see Hos. 4:6; 8:1; esp. 8:12).

Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the Holy Spirit left Israel.⁵⁰

Some scholars point to the Council of Jamnia (Jabneel; see Josh. 15:11), a center of biblical study where the Sanhedrin relocated after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. These scholars argue that the Old Testament canon was decided by a Jewish synod there. This is a misconception. Jamnia was not a formal council with authority for Judaism but simply a gathering of Jewish scholarship. Any discussion of canonicity was probably raised in an academic sense. E. J. Young cites H. H. Rowley: "We . . . know of no formal or binding decisions that were made, and it is probable that the discussions were informal, though nonetheless helping to crystallize and to fix more firmly the Jewish tradition."⁵¹

Why Are Some Books Canonical While Others Are Not?

There is but one criterion for a book's inclusion in the Bible. It is not a book's sacredness, or its sublime contents, or the majesty of its style. Nor is it by ecclesiastical endorsement, whether by creed or by formal pronouncement.⁵² The right to be in the canon of Scripture stems from the book itself: It must have canonicity to be included. Canonicity here refers to an inherent quality rather than the result of a formal action. That is, the informal recognition

⁵⁰Geisler and Nix, *From God to Us*, 85.

⁵¹H. H. Rowley, *The Growth of the Old Testament* (London, 1950), 170, as cited by Edward J. Young, "The Authority of the Old Testament," in *The Infallible Word* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing House, 1946), 73.

⁵²William G. Heidt, *Old and New Testament Reading Guide* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1970), 23–24.

of the Jewish community that certain Scriptures were inspired recognizes canonicity. It is this quality that lay behind their being included in the Jewish Canon.

It is that quality which the book has because it is divinely inspired. In other words, canonicity is determined by God; it is only discovered by humans. Thus, canonicity precedes canon. Various Jewish sects claimed that many writings were canonical.⁵³ This led to the development of certain criteria for recognizing canonicity. Jewish scholars of the second century looked first at the book's language: Was it Hebrew or Aramaic? If not, it was discarded. Then they looked at how the book was received by the community of faith. Had it been recognized historically as coming from God? If only a sect had claimed it, the book was discarded. It had to meet both conditions to be considered for canonicity. Even so, many sharp debates followed.

Looking back over the process, a number of factors seem to have been involved in the final selection. Geisler and Nix have identified "five basic criteria": Is the book (1) authoritative? (2) prophetic? (3) authentic? (4) dynamic? (5) "received or accepted by the people of God for whom it was originally written"?⁵⁴

Christians commonly believe that canonization did not come through an exclusive committee of patriarchs, or church fathers. Instead it gradually took place under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It involved an extended process that was both natural and dynamic; the inspired writings

⁵³Some of these writings were pseudepigraphic; that is, they claimed authorship by some great religious figure of the past or present. Examples may be seen in the Assumption (or Ascension) of Moses (first to second century A.D.) and the spurious letter sent to the believers in Thessalonica (2 Thess. 2:2).

⁵⁴Geisler and Nix, *From God to Us*, 67.

were collected throughout the Old Testament period, for more than a thousand years. When the books of the last writing prophets—Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi—were added, the Old Testament canon was complete.

The books as arranged in modern Jewish editions of the Old Testament reflect the following threefold division: Law (Torah), Prophets, and Writings. These divisions, found in Jewish lore, date back to the second century B.C. The Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy) deals with creation, human rebellion against God, and God's judgments on that rebellion. It describes God's grace in forming a covenant people through whom the Savior would come and shows God's dealings with them during forty years of pilgrimage through the desert.

The section called the Prophets included the Former Prophets (Joshua through 2 Kings) and the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets). The Former Prophets pick up the story, telling how God brought his people into a promised land, Canaan, and describe their triumphs and defeats. God used prophets to call the nation to obedience. Some of them (like Jeremiah) left a written record of their preaching. Jewish scholars call them the Latter Prophets. Others (like Nathan, 2 Sam. 12:1–15) did not, or their writings did not survive. Despite their idolatry, God spoke to his people of the Messiah, giving precise details of his birth, life, and atoning death (Isa. 52:13 through 53:12). The prophetic writings record God's triumph over every form of evil and give marvelous glimpses into the worship and ethical expectations of Israel. They summarize its grand story in the historical books.

The Writings, or Hagiographa, contain everything else: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and the Five Rolls (the books of

Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther, which were read on special occasions). The Writings also include the historical books (Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Daniel).

The following chart shows how the Jewish canon is divided into Torah, Prophets, and Writings.

The Torah	The Prophets	The Writings
	The Former Prophets	The Poetical Books
Genesis	Joshua	Psalms
Exodus	Judges	Proverbs
Leviticus	Samuel	Job
Numbers	Kings	
Deuteronomy		
	The Latter Prophets	The Five Rolls
	Isaiah	Song of Songs
	Jeremiah	Ruth
	Ezekiel	Lamentations
	The Twelve	Ecclesiastes
		Esther
		The Historical Books
		Daniel
		Ezra-Nehemiah
		Chronicles

Luke records Jesus referring to this threefold division (Luke 24:24), confirming that it was used in his time.

The Septuagint is an early translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek, done shortly before the time of Christ. Centuries later, Jerome produced a Latin translation, called the Vulgate. In doing this he followed the fourfold topical division of the Septuagint: Pentateuch, historical

books, poetical books, and prophetic books.⁵⁵ Bibles used by Protestants follow this same division.⁵⁶

Pentateuch (Torah)	Historical Books	Poetical Books	Prophetical Books
Genesis	Joshua	Job	The Major Prophets
Exodus	Judges	Psalms	Isaiah
Leviticus	Ruth	Proverbs	Jeremiah
Numbers	1 Samuel	Ecclesiastes	Ezekiel
Deuteronomy	2 Samuel	Song of Solomon	Daniel
	1 Kings		The Minor Prophets
	2 Kings		Hosea
	1 Chronicles		Joel
	2 Chronicles		Amos
	Ezra		Obadiah
	Nehemiah		Jonah
	Esther		Micah
			Nahum
			Habakkuk
			Zephaniah
			Haggai
			Zechariah
			Malachi

⁵⁵The writers of the OT employed the Hebrew and Aramaic languages. The books were written primarily in Hebrew. Aramaic was also in use throughout the period of the Old Testament. In the sixth century B.C. it was used as an international language throughout the Near East. Sections of Ezra (4:8 through 6:18; 7:12–26) and Daniel (2:4b through 7:28) and one verse in Jeremiah (10:11) are written in Aramaic. Both Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts were originally written without vowels. When they were translated into Greek and Latin, their increased size (due in part to vowels included in the words) necessitated the division of several of the books (Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles). This led to a rearrangement of the canon.

⁵⁶Even though Jerome adopted the Septuagintal fourfold division of the Old Testament, for the last six centuries Roman Catholics have taught a threefold division of the Old Testament: Historical, Sapiential (i.e., wisdom), and Prophetical. The Apocryphal books are distributed among each of these divisions. See Heidt, *Reading Guide*, 39.

Bible Study: Start Now!

Although formal study is helpful, one of Martin Luther's Reformation principles was that the Bible could be understood by the common person without the help of a priest or a pope. I came to the Lord while working in the forests in Idaho. Later, in New Jersey, working in heavy industry, I would sit at noon and devour a chapter of the Bible while I ate my lunch. Later, as I began to understand what my conversion meant, I began to witness to others and then to preach a bit in rescue missions. Could I have done it better? Of course. My point is, though, that we can study from the moment we open our Bibles and can witness to God's grace as soon as we are converted.

No matter how it is arranged, the most important thing about the Bible is not its structure but its nature: It is God's Word to us. When one recognizes that, it leads into a desire to know the Bible's message and to understand its meaning.

What Is Hermeneutics and How Is It Used?

Beginning students of the Bible may feel overwhelmed by the volume of material presented at the outset of their studies. The matter of their English Bible being a translation, for example, is raised. Questions about the reliability of the various translations may come to mind. Furthermore, between today's readers and the original manuscripts are thousands of years; this raises questions about the relevance of their ancient message. The cultures and conditions of the people who lived when the Bible was being written and the cultures and conditions found in modern industrialized nations are quite different. This, too, poses unique issues for an inquiring mind. How should the Bible be considered in order to understand its message and its meaning? This should take the student to the discipline of hermeneutics.

The word "hermeneutics" is derived from the Greek verb *hermeneuo*, "interpret." Put very simply, hermeneutics is the science and art of interpretation and can refer to interpreting any kind of communication, verbal or nonverbal, secular or religious. The content of this chapter focuses on a special branch of hermeneutics. Because it deals with the interpretation of the (written) Word of God, it is sometimes called "sacred" hermeneutics. And because it examines the biblical text, it is sometimes called "biblical" hermeneutics. It tries to determine an accurate reading of what the text says. It seeks to understand and articulate clearly what the text means.

What Are the Components of Biblical Hermeneutics?

A number of things are involved in biblical hermeneutics. They include the purpose for the Scripture, prerequisites for the interpreter, precommitments in coming to the text, certain basic principles in interpreting the text, and the recognition of personal issues which may color an understanding of the text.

Why Was the Bible Written?

A focus on God's purpose in giving his Word should always be maintained. Humanity faces a problem of enormous proportions: Sin separates from God. No human effort can resolve this predicament. Yet salvation is possible. God's Word brings a message of redemption to humankind. If this is forgotten, the Bible cannot be treated fairly, nor can it be interpreted accurately. Someone has said that theology that does not become biography is simply wishful thinking. The Bible intends its message to be translated into human lives, not simply intellectualized. God is glorified in redeeming people. He frees people from sin and draws them to himself. One's thinking is changed. And when thinking is changed, a life is changed (Rom. 12:2a). Human history is filled with stories of ordinary people who were transformed by the power of God's Word, from the apostle Paul in the first century to C. S. Lewis and right up to this very day.

How Important to the Task of Interpretation Is Personal Preparation?

Before principles of interpretation can be applied to the biblical text, certain prerequisites must be met. For example,

No Ordinary Book

Mark Twain is credited with saying, "It's not the things I don't understand in the Bible that bother me, it's the things I *do* understand!" The Holy Spirit acts through the Word of God to immediately engage the reader. It is no ordinary book that causes me to face my lostness. Yet my alarm is swept away by the benediction of grace so gloriously set forth in the very Word which had earlier pointed out my pitiful condition. As John Newton observed, "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved." Grace frees us to be all that God wants us to be—not just through reformation, but through transformation.

This Word's for You

I once told a class, "God loved you *so much* that he wrote the Book for you." A young man in that class was particularly stirred by my words. He later went on to become well known as an evangelist, ministering primarily in South America. He tells me that he constantly asks his hearers to repeat after him, "God loved me *so much* that he wrote the book for me."

I love reading the great expositions of Scripture. I value good commentaries, being moved often by the spiritual insights they provide. But there is nothing quite like the joy of personal discovery, as the Spirit opens my mind to the truths of Scripture. These discoveries are not reserved for a spiritual elite. They belong to all believers. They can, and should, be yours. Begin the process of discovery today, and you will be surprised by joy as the Spirit of God opens up to you vista after vista of revealed truth.

the Holy Spirit guided the writers of Scripture. It follows, then, that one must be indwelt by the Spirit in order to interpret Scripture (John 16:13). Moreover, it must be recognized that the Bible is the Word of God in written form. Then the believer may have this confidence: The Spirit of God will lead him by the Word of God to know the mind of God and to have fellowship with God.

Everyone comes to the Scripture with preconceived ideas, assumptions. Believers must be careful about their assumptions. A person can read assumptions into the biblical text even though they are not supported by it, and may even run counter to it. On the other hand, certain assumptions are appropriate to study of the biblical text. For example, believers may properly expect that if they use the text reverently this will lead to understanding it. They may assume they will not meet a smorgasbord of meanings; each passage will have one meaning (though it may have many applications). They may assume that the meaning of a text can be discovered by reference to its context. They will not need to guess about its message and meaning. It is possible, even for the beginning student, to come into an ever-expanding understanding of the Bible's message and meaning.

Are There Rules of Interpretation That Can Be Used Immediately?

A process of interpretation takes place whenever one receives any communication. There are some basic principles that should govern the interpretation of Scripture. They can be put to use immediately! The heart of biblical interpretation can be stated very simply: To understand the text properly, the Bible must be interpreted in a way that respects its intentions. This means it must be interpreted lit-

erally, grammatically, historically, and according to its genre (the category of literature it falls into, for example, poetry, parable, letter). And what does this mean?

LITERALLY

To interpret a text literally is to take it at face value, asking, What is the message the author intended to convey? This applies equally to figurative and nonfigurative language. That is, to take Scripture literally does not mean to believe God actually has feathers, even though Psalm 91:4 says, "He will cover you with his feathers." The psalmist is using figurative, poetic language, likening God to a protective bird. And figurative language uses words deliberately out of their ordinary sense, employing literary devices, such as metaphor, personification, allegory, and the like, to give strength and fresh expression to their message. Literal interpretation will also involve some knowledge of the meaning of idioms used in Scripture. Idioms are modes of expression specific to a given language. That is, they usually defy word-for-word translation into another language. For example, there is no "apple" in your eye. But the pupil of the eye, besides being precious to sight, was anciently thought of as spherical.² Thus developed an idiomatic phrase in English, "apple of one's eye," for greatly valuing something.

GRAMMATICALLY

The Bible is to be interpreted grammatically. The reader must pay careful attention to each word in its own context. This involves activities such as identifying the part of speech (is it a verb? a noun? an adjective? a participle?). Note its declension or its conjugation, how it fits into its context syntactically, etc. When working with a translation, you should

The Indestructible Book

"Keep my commands and you will live; guard my teachings as the apple of your eye" (Prov. 7:2). "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). In summing up this chapter, I want to leave with you this truth: I have found that the uniqueness of Scripture is beyond doubt. My confidence in Scripture is this: It will endure simply because it is the Book of God. The indestructibility of the Book of God is as sure as the immutability of the God of the Book.

do everything possible to recover the original words of the text and their meaning.⁵⁷

HISTORICALLY

Third, Scripture originated in a historical context. Thus it can be understood only in the light of the history of its time. History takes place in time, with people living in a given place, with a specific manner of life. So to interpret the Bible historically is to include geographical and cultural considerations. But it means more than that. I contend that the interpreter needs a theology of history like the biblical writers had. This implies a conviction that God is at work in human affairs and that he sovereignly controls human destiny.

GENRE

Fourth, the Bible must be interpreted according to the type, or genre, of literature its text falls into. Drama cannot be interpreted in the same way as narrative; a proverb cannot be interpreted in the same way as apocalyptic writing. To ignore or misclassify genre is to distort the meaning of the text. For example, when an interpreter expects the language of scientific precision in a poem, the interpreter errs, not the author of the poem. The language of everyday speech is phenomenological—it describes things by how they are perceived. We still speak of the setting sun even though we know it is the Earth that is in motion.⁵⁸

⁵⁷You may wish to consult works such as Lawrence O. Richards, *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991) or *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (see n. 5), or any of the many Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias published in recent years.

⁵⁸A person who uses the language of science at the office goes home and communicates to his family in everyday terms: "The sun came up as I left for

PERSONAL ISSUES

Fifth, *personal issues* can color one's understanding of the text. It should be the goal of every student of Scripture to be as objective as possible. This presents a greater difficulty than might be imagined. People today are preoccupied with themselves. So they tend to isolate a single text to prove a pet doctrine and so forget that a doctrine is biblical only when it embraces *all* that Scripture has to say about it. Some people use Scripture to help them feel good. Some others attend a "Bible study" where a text of Scripture is read, followed by the opinions of each of the participants, supposedly to find its "meaning." Human opinions and experience must be judged by the light of Scripture, not the other way around.

The Old Testament is the Word of the living and true God. It speaks with the authority of God. It speaks of creation and of the Fall, with its awful legacy. But it also points to the Savior. It proclaims God's acts of redeeming grace in human history. Dwight L. Moody said, "Sin will keep you from this book. This book will keep you from sin." The prophet Isaiah declared, "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

work." "The sun went down as I pulled into the driveway." He may be angered at the suggestion that his terminology is misleading or inaccurate. In the same way, when the Bible describes the world in terms reflecting our ordinary senses such as sight, its description is true, and thus can be trusted.

Study Questions

1. Explain how the Bible is the Word of God and how that makes it valuable.
2. What is meant by revelation? What is general revelation? special revelation?
3. What is revealed theology?
4. What is inspiration?
5. Distinguish verbal plenary inspiration from dictation and conceptual inspiration.
6. What is meant by inerrancy? infallibility? authority?
7. What is meant by canon? canonicity? divisions of the canon?
8. What is genre? hermeneutics?
9. Identify the major biblical languages.

For Further Reading

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