

THE INSPIRATION AND INERRANCY OF THE BIBLE

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Mohammed called Christians “the people of the Scripture” (Koran, 16:43; 21:7). In one sense he was right, since “what Christianity is” does depend on how Christians look at Scripture. If Christians believe that Scripture is the very word of God and infallible, Christianity will be the religion which hell itself cannot prevail against. But if Scripture is treated as only a collection of human writings, Christianity will be like a house built on sand, and sooner or later will collapse. This, then, is why it is important that a biblical view of the inspiration of the scriptures should be presented, so that genuine Christians may unquestionably know where they stand.

The word “inspiration” is derived from the Latin verb *inspiro* that means “to breathe on” or “to breathe into.” Theologically this identifies the Holy Spirit’s task, which is to make certain that the inspired one speaks or writes what God Himself would have spoken or written. Although inspiration is not a biblical term, it is often used to translate the Greek word *theopneustos*, which means “inbreathed of God” or “God-breathed.”

According to Webster, inspiration is “a supernatural influence which qualifies men to receive and communicate divine truth.” This definition is very concise, but rather superficial. Numerous questions are left unanswered. What kind of supernatural influence is in view? Is it Delphic or from the Holy Spirit? What kind of men? Are they soothsayers or “holy men of God?” How does one receive and communicate truth? Is this person in his right mind or is he in an ecstatic state? What does divine truth mean? Does it pertain to God or gods? Among the many definitions given for inspiration, Charles Hodge, the noted Princeton theologian, probably gave the most definitive one. He said, “. . . inspiration was an influence of the Holy Spirit on the minds of certain select men, which rendered them the organs of God for the infallible communication of his mind and will.”¹ The previous questions are all answered by this definition: the Holy Spirit is the one who influences; the influence was over select men only; and the purpose was to use the writer for infallible communication which is to reveal what the Author thinks and has in His mind.

Inspiration may be explained in two different senses. In the broad sense, inspiration may be applied to any cooperation of the Holy Spirit within the spiritual perception of men. But in the restrictive sense discussed here, it applies only to the writers and to their biblical writings. Although many would take either the writers or their writings as being inspired, the truth is that both are inspired. Jesus said, “A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit” (Matt. 7:18). If the writer was not inspired at the time of his writing, how can his writing be inspired? Human agents cannot produce heavenly things without heavenly inspiration.

Because Scripture teaches that both the writer and the biblical writings are inspired, it is worthwhile for us to examine both truths closely.

¹Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1893), Vol. I, p. 154.

A. The Writers Are Inspired.

The Apostle Peter said in his second epistle, “For no prophecy ever came by the will of man: But holy men spoke from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21). “Prophecy,” in the New Testament, is a combination of *pro* and *pheteia*. The prefix *pro* can mean “for, in place of” or “beforehand.” *Pheteia* is derived from the verb “to speak.” Thus by combining the prefix and noun, prophecy then refers to whatever the holy men spoke for God, or spoke in place of God, or spoke beforehand. In the passage above, the verb “came” and the participle “being moved” are both from the verb *phero*, which means “to carry” or “to bring.” The verb “came” is a first aorist passive which may be literally rendered “was carried,” while “being moved” is a present passive participle which may be translated “being carried.”

The meaning of “being carried” may be seen from the drifting of Paul’s ship in the Mediterranean Sea, since the verb, *phero*, is used twice in that passage (Acts 27:15,17). Having lost control over the ship, the people on board could only give way to the wind and allow themselves and their ship to be carried about by it. The verbs in these two verses are both imperfect passives which are translated as “let drive” and “were driven” respectively. In addition to these two verbs, a present passive participle of the same verb, prefixed by the preposition *dia*, is also used in Acts 27:27 where it is translated as “were driven up and down.” These verbs give a clear picture of the operation of the Holy Spirit within the minds of holy men. When holy men were speaking or writing, the Holy Spirit bore their minds along the avenues in which He wanted them to go and obtained the precise result He desired.

A similar instance occurred on the day of Pentecost at the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was rushing (*pheromenes*) all through the house, and everyone who was in it broke forth with other tongues. They spoke languages that were beyond their current knowledge and understanding. The participle “rushing” is from the same verb “to carry.” A. T. Robertson commented, “It was ‘an echoing sound as of a mighty wind borne violently’ (or rushing along the whirl of a tornado).”² No wonder the languages themselves were tremendously powerful and caused three thousand people’s hearts to be pricked and converted.

Another instance is found in the Old Testament. When Balaam was moved by the Holy Spirit, he spoke only what he was moved to speak (Num. 22:20; 23:12; 24:2). Of this historic occasion Josephus commented, “Thus did Balaam speak by inspiration, as not being in his own power, but moved to say what he did by the divine spirit.” Then he continued with what Balaam said:

O Balak, if thou rightly considered this whole matter, canst thou suppose that it is our power to be silent, or to say anything, when the Spirit of God seize upon us?—for he puts such words as he pleases in our mouths, and such discourses as we are not ourselves conscious of.³

²A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, n.d.), Vol. III, p. 111.

³William Whiston (trans.), *The Works of Flavius Josephus* (New York: Leavitt and Allen, 1854), p. 111.

In short, “being moved” is simply the description of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit within the spiritual perception of holy men. He simply took the biblical writers and carried them to the goal that He had chosen. B. B. Warfield said concerning the use of *phero*:

The term here used is a very specific one. It is not to be confounded with guiding, or directing, or controlling, or even leading in the full sense of that word. It goes beyond all such terms, in assigning the effect produced specifically to the active agent. What is “borne” is taken up by the “bearer,” and conveyed by the “bearer’s” power, not its own, to the “bearer’s” goal, not its own. The men who spoke from God are here declared, therefore, to have been taken up by the Holy Spirit and brought by His power to the goal of His choosing. The things which they spoke under this operation of the Spirit were therefore His things, not theirs.⁴

It does not mean, however, that the writers were beside themselves. They were always on their own, for “the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets” (1 Cor. 14:32). As long as they were obeying, inspiration belonged to them (Acts 5:32). Since the Holy Spirit was the one who carried the inspired authors to write whatever He willed, two common mistakes in reference to inspiration should now be corrected.

First, inspiration is not a product of copying. Many so-called scholars of modern times are copyists rather than writers. When they write, the more books they copy, the better the scholarship they think they have. They take it for granted that ancient writers did the same. However, those who have an adequate knowledge of ancient literature know that real scholars in ancient times were ashamed to copy from others. They emphasized creative thinking. They read books, studied facts, and examined materials much as modern scholars do; then they digested them, committed them to memory, and made them their own possession. When they wrote, they did not look at others’ books but wrote from their own mind. In regard to quotations, they were accustomed to quoting freely from memory and felt no obligation to mention their sources. They took it for granted that the reader would know the origin of their quotations, and that if a reader did not know the source, he could blame only himself for his ignorance. If Western Bible students understood these attitudes of ancient scholars, they would not dogmatically say Genesis 1 and 2 were copied by a compiler, neither would they be excited when they found a New Testament writer quoting freely from the Old Testament.

Critics often point to Luke’s introduction, “to write unto thee in order,” and think that Luke had all kinds of manuscripts all over his house—some on the floor, some on his operating table, and some even in his child’s crib. They imagine that while he was writing he would go to the table to copy a sentence or two, to the crib to copy another sentence, and then down to the floor to copy a paragraph. They overlook his previous clause, “having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first.” Luke had studied all available documents and understood all things perfectly before he sat down and wrote. While writing, he was carried by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and thus wrote in his own vocabulary and style whatever the Holy Spirit showed him.

⁴Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948), p. 137.

Second, inspiration has no obligation to include all the historical details or scientific data. The Holy Spirit, as editor, had the right to choose one portion or an item from the whole or to summarize or polish a fact, in order to meet the need of revealing His truth. Suppose a writer is penning an article on justification, and he wants to use the history of the Reformation to illustrate or to support his arguments. He has no obligation to mention all the historical data, nor is he obliged to record the events chronologically. He is quite free to use only those historical happenings that illustrate his points. He is not duty bound to elaborate on the historical events or to present them in order of occurrence, as if he were writing a history of the Reformation.

Just so, Genesis is a book of God's revelation, in fact the beginning of God's self-revelation to man. It is neither a strictly scientific report nor a complete historical record. The Holy Spirit had no imperative to put all the scientific and historical details into the book. Scientific materials and historical events are used in Genesis only to illustrate or to reveal God's love and justice to His creatures. Nevertheless, the materials employed in Genesis, even though simplified, summarized, or condensed to serve specific purposes, are never, never myths.

B. The Writings Are Inspired.

Paul says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable" (2 Tim. 3:16). Numerous views have been put forth about the first two words of this verse. As a matter of fact, the debate of whether *pas graphe* should be translated as "all Scripture" or "every Scripture" is no matter of importance, since "every Scripture" can mean "every passage of Scripture." The important question here is where should we put the copula "is" since it is absent in the Greek. Some have accurately suggested that "is" should be placed before the phrase "inspired by God" to read: "All Scripture (or every passage of Scripture) is inspired by God and profitable." Certainly, as A. T. Robertson said, "In this form there is a definite assertion of inspiration."⁵

To go on, the phrase "given by inspiration of God" in Greek is a single word that is a combination of *theos* (God), and *pneustos*, a derivation from the verb "to breathe." Hence it means "God-breathed." As this is the only occurrence of *theopneustos* in the New Testament, further study is necessary.

The interpretations of this word are manifold. L. Gaussen took it to be equal to God's Word uttered by His divine authority.⁶ B. B. Warfield interpreted it as "the symbol of His almighty power, the bearer of His creative Word."⁷ Hodge treated it as a synonym of *theophoros*, "bearing a God" or "possessed by a God."⁸ Strong referred to *theopneustos* as alluding to God's original inbreathing of life.⁹ All of these authors ascribe "God-breathed" to the biblical writers rather than to their writings. But the Scripture says here, "All Scripture is God-breathed," not the writers.

⁵Robertson, *op. cit.*, Vol. IV, p. 627.

⁶L. Gaussen, "Theopneustia" (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1888), p. 27.

⁷Warfield, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

⁸Hodge, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 158.

⁹Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1947), p. 197.

Since “God-breathed” occurs only once in the New Testament, it is necessary for us to find elucidation from preceding revelation. In the Old Testament there is a prominent passage that refers to God’s breathing which says, “The Lord God . . . breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Gen. 2:7). Here, Scripture tells us the function and the result of God’s breathing. Its function is to give life and the result is to make man a living soul so that he might have power to manage on his own. “God-breathed” bears the same meaning in reference to Scripture as it does to man. All Scripture is “God-breathed”; therefore, all Scripture has God’s life. Jesus said, “The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63). Again He said, “And I know His [God’s] commandment is life eternal” (John 12:50). Scripture is not dead literature. It has God’s life in it. Whenever the Holy Spirit opens the sluice, the water of life will pour forth, and the light and power of it will rebuke the sinner, animate the dead, strengthen the weak, refresh the fatigued, and edify the saints.

As a general principle, spiritual truth has two aspects: objective and subjective. “God-breathed” is no exception. To have God’s breath in Scripture is objective. To make Scripture profitable to believers is the subjective function of God’s breath. No matter how powerful Scripture is, without the subjective function of God’s breath within us, Scripture will never be profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, or for instruction in righteousness. In other words, the Holy Spirit has to operate within us in order that His objective truth will be made subjective to us. Believers have spiritual perception. When the Holy Spirit operates upon the truth within our spiritual perception, the life of God’s truth in Scripture and His life within us meet together and sound forth a heavenly Hallelujah!

One of the main differences today between orthodox Christians and the followers of Karl Barth is their emphasis regarding two aspects of spiritual truth. The followers of Barth treat God’s objective truth as only man’s word. Yet they believe that the Holy Spirit will operate on man’s word and transform it into God’s word. Like trying to make six out of two plus three, this is beyond the bounds of reason! There is a Chinese saying, “It is impossible for even a skillful woman to cook rice without rice.” Or we may say, “It is impossible for an American woman to bake bread without any flour.” If, as the Bartheans hold, the account which is not God’s word becomes God’s word by a transforming power, then it is magic rather than truth.

Many orthodox Christians, on the other hand, recognize the objective reality of the inspired Word, but they neglect the importance of the subjective operation of the Holy Spirit within themselves. They study the Scriptures and memorize the catechism. They learn the stories of the Bible and recite golden texts. Yet they do not realize that what they have learned intellectually is not necessarily grasped spiritually. They do not know that intellectuality and spirituality are two different categories. One may know all about Scripture and yet lead a very poor Christian life. On the other hand, a believer may be unable to read the Scriptures himself and can obtain spiritual edification only by listening to preaching and Christian testimonies, yet he may discern spiritual truths and lead an excellent Christian life. In short, to know the truth intellectually is one thing but to see the same spiritually is another. **Faith does not come from intellectual knowing but from spiritual seeing.**

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize again the fact that Biblical inspiration does not refer to the writers alone, but to the writings of Scripture as well. Inspiration does not necessitate copying, nor has inspiration the obligation to present all the historical details or scientific data. All Scripture is God-breathed. It has God's very life. Yet, without God's breath **on the reader**, Scripture will never be profitable to him for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness. On the one hand, "the opening of Thy words gives light" (Ps. 119:130); on the other, "Open my eyes that I may behold" (Ps. 119:18).

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