

Inspiration, Authority, and Reliability of the Bible¹ by Michael Morrison

The inspiration of Scripture

Affirmation: We accept the Bible as the inspired Word of God. The writers were inspired, moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21), and the writings are inspired, as if breathed or spoken by God (2 Timothy 3:16). The Bible is therefore useful as a guide to salvation through faith in Christ, and sufficient for doctrine, correction, moral and ethical instruction (2 Timothy 3:15-17).

The New Testament affirms the inspiration of the Old Testament, including its function of pointing to Jesus Christ (Luke 24:44; John 5:46; Acts 10:43). Jesus used the Old Testament as thoroughly reliable words of God (Matthew 5:18; Mark 12:35; John 10:35). The sayings of Jesus are accepted as of divine authority (Matthew 24:35; Mark 8:38; John 6:63), and the letters of Paul are also considered Scripture (2 Peter 3:15-16). The early church quoted the New Testament in the same manner as the Old, treating all these writings as God-given words.¹

Biblical authors were inspired, and the writings are inspired, but the Bible does not give many details about **how** God worked with humans to produce these documents. Numerous passages claim to be quotes directly from God (e.g., Exodus 20:1-17); others claim to be the result of ordinary research (Luke 1:1-4); some appear to be private letters (Philemon). Regardless of the method of inspiration, all these writings are considered canonical Scripture – an authoritative message from God to humans. The Bible reveals truths about God and about what God does so that we may know God and have a relationship with God.

But grammatical irregularities and stylistic differences indicate that God did not dictate every word. Rather, God allowed the divine message to be given in the phraseology of the human authors. Just as Jesus was God in human form, the Bible is God's word in human words.

Since the Bible is written with human words and grammar, people are able to understand much of the message. But they do not necessarily understand that the message is *true*, because spiritual truths are understood only with divine help (1 Corinthians 2:6-16). The objective Word of God becomes an effective Word of God only when the Holy Spirit enables a person to understand spiritual truths contained in it.² The effectiveness is not in the grammatical details – it is in the message being conveyed and the God-given willingness to submit to it.

Further details concerning the reliability of Scripture will be discussed below.

¹ *Inspiration, Authority, and Reliability of the Bible*, Michael Morrison, <https://learn.gcs.edu/mod/page/view.php?id=4246>

The authority of Scripture

Affirmation: God has all authority, and we accept the Bible as the primary authority by which God communicates to us what God wants us to believe and to do. The New Testament clarifies and sometimes supersedes the Old Testament guidance on faith and life.³ The primary purpose of the Bible is its message about salvation, and that is its primary sphere of authority. It is a sufficient guide that tells us how we are given eternal life with God and how we should respond. Those who believe the biblical revelation about God's grace and Jesus Christ enjoy the salvation he has given; unbelievers do not ([John 3:18](#); [14:6](#); [Acts 4:12](#); [1 John 5:11-12](#)). This message of salvation is essential.

The Bible gives commands and principles regarding the way we ought to live. Faith in Christ as Lord and Savior transforms our lives and minds, with the result that our lives are brought progressively into greater submission to the will of God. Biblical instructions give us authoritative guidance on the will of God concerning how we should live and think and interact with one another.

The Bible is an authoritative revelation of truths about God, and we want to worship our Creator with as much understanding as possible. Moreover, we want to obey God's commands, not only to honor God but also because we believe that our all-wise and perfectly loving Creator has given us the best possible commands and guidance for life. Therefore, we want to understand the written message of God as best we can. But this is not always easy.

Humans are limited beings, and our minds are corrupted by sin, so even at our best we know only in part ([1 Corinthians 13:12](#)). Thus we find that the authority of God in the Bible is not only mediated by human language but also by our ability to understand its truths. Our understanding is fallible, and the Bible is the standard by which our misunderstandings are corrected. God is able to give us sufficient understanding of biblical truths for us to have a saving relationship with God.⁴

Biblical interpretation is complicated by the fact that the Bible is written in many literary styles. Some passages are didactic, prescriptive, and concrete; others are narrative, imaginative and poetic. To communicate one spiritual truth, figures of speech may be used that may obscure other equally important truths revealed in other passages. Some commands are historically conditioned and others are timeless. To help us understand and submit to the authority of biblical principles, we humbly seek the guidance of the Author and study the Scriptures. We use reason to understand each biblical passage and point, and to discern what teachings are normative for us today.

Our ability to understand and to reason is shaped in part by our personal experiences and the traditions that have shaped our presuppositions. Reason, tradition, and experience should be subservient to Scripture; they should not contradict biblical authority.

Nevertheless, because of different traditions and experiences, equally sincere people come to different conclusions about what the Bible teaches. Therefore we confidently teach our understanding of the Bible and simultaneously respect those who submit to biblical authority in different ways.

The reliability of Scripture

Affirmation: The Scriptures are a trustworthy guide for our relationships with God and with other humans. They give truth about faith, worship, salvation, morals and ethics (2 Timothy 3:15-16). But biblical commands cannot be applied simplistically, because some are superseded and some apply only in limited situations. We seek the illumination of the Holy Spirit and ask God to guide our reasoning and our use of tradition and experience so we might understand how to apply biblical principles.

The further we go from the stated purposes of the Bible, the less the Bible says about the subject and the less likely we are to have a complete statement about the subject. Statements about history and science are of special interest.

Historians find the Bible to be an accurate record of many ancient events, more reliable than other ancient writings. But its standard of accuracy is not as precise as the expectations of modern science and history, as can be discerned from parallel accounts in Scripture. The same event can be attributed to Satan or to God (2 Samuel 24:1; 1 Chronicles 21:1), to Jesus in vision or to Ananias (Acts 22:14-15; 26:16-18). Paul's companions stood and heard, but they also fell down and did not hear (Acts 9:7; 22:7, 9). Even one of the most conservative statements about Scripture admits that the Bible contains grammatical irregularities, exaggerations, imprecise descriptions, inexact quotations, variant selections, observations based on limited viewpoint, and loose quotes of the Old Testament.⁶ When Scripture talks about the sun rising (Matthew 5:45), for example, its purpose is not to make a statement about astrophysics. When it calls a mustard seed the smallest seed (Matthew 13:31-32), it is not making a botanical claim. Genealogical lists may be incomplete (Matthew 1:8; 2 Chronicles 22-24), the length of kings' reigns may be misinterpreted due to co-regencies,⁷ narrated events may be out of sequence (Matthew 4:18-22; 8:14; Luke 4:38-5:11), predicted events may not be fulfilled in every detail (Acts 21:11, 32-33; 27:10, 22), etc. Such irregularities encourage us to focus on the broad picture and the overall meaning, not tangential details.⁸

Most alleged discrepancies in the Bible are easily resolved, but these parallel accounts show that we must be cautious about taking biblical statements at face value. Even if we do not have a parallel account, it is hazardous to assume that unnamed intermediaries, for example, were not involved. Some biblical statements are true, but imprecise and incomplete, and therefore not a basis for a modern history. They may be used only with caution. Although biblical comments about salvation require the historical truth of certain events, such as the resurrection of Jesus, our faith does not require that we accept every biblical comment as historically or scientifically precise.⁵

The truthfulness of the Bible should be evaluated according to its own “usage and purpose.”

⁹ Yet its purpose rarely includes details of history and science,¹⁰ and its demonstrable flexibility in word usage makes it unwise for us to insist on one meaning of a word when other meanings are possible. God inspired the ambiguities as well as the clear statements. Some things we need to know, and others we do not. God is not primarily concerned with whether we understand astrophysics, botany, and chronology. We err if we try to use his inspired book for purposes it was not designed for.

Christians come to different conclusions about the reliability of the Bible. Many insist that the Bible is more reliable in history and science than this position paper describes. We respect that view, for it is close to our own, but we do not think it theologically or biblically required. Other Christians insist that the Bible is less reliable than described herein. We respect their faith in Christ, but we repeat our belief, in summary, that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, authoritative and reliable in matters of faith, worship, morals, and ethics. We encourage all Christians to focus on these central and stated purposes of the Scriptures we have in common.

Endnotes

1 The testimony of the Bible to itself is summarized in I. Howard Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982, pages 19-30.

2 Revelation is both propositional and personal. See Marshall, pages 12-15.

3 Some parts of the Bible are more authoritative than others (e.g., circumcision and holy kisses) and do not function as a word of God in the same way other verses do. "The Bible... presents a progressive revelation, parts of which are now superseded in the light of what followed" (Marshall, page 58). The Old Testament must be used on the basis of general principles, which suggests a similar approach for the New Testament.

4 William Hordern presents a neo-orthodox position in "The Nature of Revelation," in Millard Erickson, editor, *Readings in Christian Theology, Volume 1: The Living God*, 1973, pages 180-182. I will not argue against the details of Hordern's view, but will say that any attempt to know God or Christ without reliance on scriptural propositions is subjective. "In subjectivism each man is his own authority, and if each man is his own authority there is neither truth nor authority" (Bernard Ramm, "The Pattern of Religious Authority," in Erickson, *Readings*, page 260).

5 I am not addressing the question whether all historical and scientific statements are true. I do not yet see a resolution for several passages.

One may wish to suspend judgment, which is a perfectly legitimate thing to do.... The Bible does contain what may be regarded as error and contradictions by modern standards but which are not in fact contrary to its own standards and purpose. (Marshall, 89, 71)

"Inerrancy" can never be demonstrated with a cogency which entitles it to rank as the foundation of a belief in inspiration. It must remain to those who hold it a doctrine of faith; a deduction from what they deem to be implied..." (James Orr, "Revelation and Inspiration," in Millard Erickson, editor, *Readings in Christian Theology, Volume 1: The Living God*, 1973, page 245)

6 International Conference on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI). "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," Article XIII. Printed in Norman L. Geisler, editor. *Inerrancy*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979, page 496.

The analogy of Jesus, the Word made flesh, may offer a parallel. We accept his statements about God and salvation as completely true, and his life as perfectly sinless, but this does not mean that he never made a measurement mistake in his carpentry work. Likewise, the Bible may contain grammatical and other irregularities.

7 Dewey Beegle, "Inerrancy and the Phenomena of Scripture," in Millard Erickson, editor, *Readings in Christian Theology, Volume 1*, pages 297-299, citing Edwin Thiele.

8 "One practical purpose for allowing the differences in parallel passages may be to give us a subtle clue that those are the kinds of things not worth quarrelling over!" (Alden Thompson, *Inspiration*, Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1991, page 70). Free citations of the Old Testament suggest that meaning is more important than individual words, but a problem arises when the New Testament gives a different meaning to an Old Testament passage.

9 ICBI, Article XIII. The qualifications in Article XIII make it difficult to accept some of the other articles, such as XI and XII, which say that Scripture never misleads us in matters of history and science. Galileo would disagree! "Having recognized that God's honour is not compromised by use of irregular grammar, etc., why is it so difficult to accept that his honour can be equally unaffected if he chooses to use equivalent irregularities in historical and scientific detail?" (James D.G. Dunn, "The Authority of Scripture According to Scripture," *Churchman* 96 (1982) 120.

10 "The Bible...nowhere claims to give instruction in (for instance) any of the natural sciences...and it would be an improper use of Scripture to treat it as making pronouncements on these matters" (J.I. Packer, "*Fundamentalism*" and the *Word of God*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958, page 96). Perhaps all biblical statements about the natural world are phenomenological and therefore the concept of inerrancy is irrelevant for them.



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