

HOW THE BIBLE BEGAN

There are two definitive passages in the New Testament on the subject of inspiration. One is 2 Timothy 3:16: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (NRSV).

The phrase is all one word in Greek, *theopneustos*—literally, “God-breathed” (NIV). Sacred Scripture was breathed out by God and into human minds by the Holy Spirit. The Bible is “the ‘Spirit-breathed’ expression of God’s Word” to us.¹

THEOPNEUSTOS



The second passage is 2 Peter 1:21: “Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Literally the second half of this verse reads, “But being borne along by the Holy Spirit, men spoke from God.” The Holy Spirit lifted human

writers of the Bible to a higher level of spiritual understanding. From this level they could receive divine truth and communicate it to believers. On the basis of these two passages and others, we can clearly see that “the idea of the ‘inspiredness’ of Scripture is a biblical truth.”²

James Arminius was a Dutch theologian (1560-1609). About the Bible, he wrote, “We now have the infallible word of God in no other place than in the Scriptures.”³ He goes on to make this helpful statement:

The primary cause of these books is God, in his Son, through the Holy Spirit. The instrumental causes are holy men of God, who, not at their own will and pleasure, but as they were actuated and inspired by the Holy Spirit wrote these books, whether the words were inspired into them, dictated to them, or administered by them under divine direction.⁴

The statement above points to three degrees of inspiration for different parts of the Bible:

- First there is *eternal truth*—which could not otherwise be known by human understanding—“inspired into,” that is, breathed out of God and into the hearts and minds of the writers.
- Secondly, some parts of the Scripture seem actually to have been *dictated*, as in the case of the law given to Moses at Sinai (Exodus 19-20).

- Other parts of the Bible were simply “administered to them under divine direction.” These would include the genealogical tables, as in the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles, and other historical documents that the authors were led by the Spirit to incorporate in their writings.

John Wesley said, in the preface to his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, of the sacred Scripture, “Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess.”⁵

WHO WAS HE?

John Wesley (1703-1791) was the founder of the Methodist movement. His writings have had a major influence on many Protestant denominations that exist today, including the Nazarene church.

John Wesley comments on 2 Timothy 3:16, “The Spirit of God not only once inspired those who wrote it [the Bible] but continually inspires, supernaturally assists, those who read it with earnest prayer.”⁶

“The Bible lives because the Holy Spirit of God empowers it with his presence. We read words on a page, but we hear the voice of God speaking to our hearts through his Spirit.”⁷

THINK ABOUT THIS...

- How does God speak to us through the words of the Bible?
- Think about a time when God spoke to you in a special way when you were reading the Bible.

“[The Scriptures were] given by plenary inspiration, embracing throughout the elements of superintendence, elevation and suggestion, in that manner and to that degree that the Bible becomes the infallible word of God, the authoritative Rule of Faith and Practice in the Church.”⁸

H. Orten Wiley

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Plenary inspiration means the entire Bible was inspired by God. The Bible contains what we need to know about God and salvation.

“Wesleyan-holiness evangelicals understand that God inspired prophets and apostles and others with thoughts that they were to write down, but he left to them, in their intelligent and redeemed freedom, the choices of words with which to write down the inspired thoughts.”⁹

J. Kenneth Grider

Has God ever inspired you to write or say something? If so, what impact did it have on you and others?

— A DIVINE-HUMAN BOOK

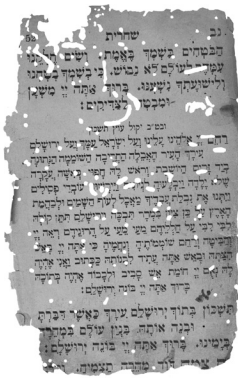
The Bible is a divine-human book, as Christ is the divine-human person (incarnation: Jesus was fully God and fully human). This is the key that unlocks the door to understanding the true nature of the Scriptures.

God could have sent his Son as an adult. Jesus didn't have to be born, the same way we are, as a baby. But God in his wisdom chose to do it that way. He sent his Son to be born of a woman. Jesus shared the personality characteristics of his mother, psychologically as well as physically. He not only bore physical resemblance to her but also was influenced by all the environmental factors of his home. He was the son of Mary as well as the Son of God.

So it is with the Bible. God could have sent down a book all inscribed with the complete revelation. He could have bound it in black leather, with gold edges, on silk-sewn paper. But he did not choose to do it that way. Instead, the light of divine revelation broke in on the souls of Moses, David, Paul, John, and many others. The result is a divinely inspired, humanly written revelation of God's truth for humanity.

THINK ABOUT THIS...

- How is the Bible a divine-human book?
- What was God's role in the writing of the Bible?
- How were people involved in the writing of the Bible?
- Why do you think God worked through people to write the Bible?



Scripture writers wrote on sheepskin, goatskin, papyrus, and parchment. They wrote the thoughts of God as they understood them with the help of the Holy Spirit.

As sunlight is conducted through a prism and is broken into various rays, so the light of God's truth, filtered through prisms of human personality, takes on varying slants

and interests. This appears in the language used—both vocabulary and style—and in the thought forms they use. Different approaches and diversity of emphasis also appear. The Holy Spirit uses these varying interests and emphases to bring the total of divine revelation in the Bible.

The Bible did have a human element; it came from the hands of the people who wrote it. Its ultimate source, however, was God. The Holy Spirit inspired the writers. This very inspiration gives the Bible its unique authority as the Word of God.

One person might imagine only a scribe sitting at a desk, pen in hand, writing the words of Scripture, and declare, “The Bible is a human book.”

Another person imagines the inspiring Spirit hovering overhead, and says, “The Bible is divine!”

What we need is to see the whole picture, not just part of it. The Bible is a divine-human book.

“I have thought, I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God: Just hovering over the great gulf; till a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing—the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: For this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be homo unius libri [a man of one book].”¹⁰

John Wesley

THINK ABOUT THIS...

- What do you think of the quote by John Wesley on the previous page?
- What does it mean to be a person of one book?

— THE PAGES APPEAR

The Law

Traditionally the first five books of our Bible are attributed to Moses. For the material recorded in Genesis, Moses would have had to depend on oral traditions (stories), handed down from generation to generation, and on the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As far as the Genesis account of the creation of the world and of human life is concerned, this would all have had to be given by divine revelation, for no person was there to see these events and tell about them.

When it came to the materials of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, Moses was the man most involved. No one could have written down the events and laws that transpired to form those books better than he.

However, Moses obviously did not write the last chapter of Deuteronomy, where we find an account of Moses's death



and burial, with the added statement, “But to this day no one knows where his grave is” (34:6). A further observation is made: “Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face” (verse 10). To say Moses himself wrote these words beforehand by divine inspiration—as some have claimed—is unrealistic.



THINK ABOUT THIS...

- What do you know about the stories in the first five books of the Bible?
- Have you ever wondered who wrote about creation and the other early stories of the Bible?
- Read Genesis 1 this week as a reminder of God’s work in creation.

— THE BOOKS MULTIPLY

JOSHUA is Moses’s successor, and the sixth book of our Old Testament is named for him. It records his great achievements in leading the Israelites across the Jordan River. They conquer the land of Canaan, and each tribe is assigned its territory. The book naturally divides at the middle into two parts. The first half (chapters 1—12) tells of

the conquest of Canaan. The second half (chapters 13—24) records the partition of the land.

The fact that Joshua's name is attached to the book does not mean he wrote it. In the last chapter we find the record of the death and burial of God's great warrior (24:29-30). Then comes the statement: "Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the LORD had done for Israel" (verse 31). It is clear, at least in its finished form, that the book of Joshua was written in a later generation. We do not know who wrote it.

History



JUDGES fills in the time from Joshua to Samuel. With no central government, the Israelites too often live in chaotic

confusion. The recurring sequence in Judges is disobedience, oppression, repentance, and deliverance. The so-called judges are, for the most part, sent by God to deliver the people from their oppressors.

RUTH gives a brief picture of life during the period of the judges (1:1). The purpose of the book of Ruth may be to fill in a key point in the ancestry of King David (4:17-22).

The two books of **SAMUEL** cover the period of the great prophet by the same name. They also cover the reigns of Saul and David, the first two kings of Israel—both of whom are anointed by Samuel. The narrative begins with the birth of Samuel (1 Samuel 1) and his call to prophetic ministry (chapter 3). Samuel devotes a long life to ruling Israel as a judge. Unfortunately, he fails to train his own children to follow in his footsteps (8:1-5), so the people ask for a king. In answer to their plea, God instructs Samuel to anoint Saul as the first king over Israel. Saul becomes stubborn and disobedient, and his life ends in disaster. His successor is David, the importance of whose reign is shown by the fact that the entire book of 2 Samuel is devoted to it.

The two books of **KINGS** describe the reign of Solomon over the united kingdom of Israel—which has been carved out by his father, David. They also cover the period of the divided monarchy. The northern kingdom of Israel is ruled by several dynasties, beginning with Jeroboam. It comes to an end in 722/21 B.C. with the capture of its capital city, Samaria, by the Assyrians, and the deportation of the people to Mesopotamia (2 Kings 17:6).

The southern kingdom of Judah is ruled by the dynasty of David. It comes to an end in 587/86 B.C. with the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. Except for the eighty years of Maccabean independence (142 to 63), there is no indepen-

dent nation of Israel from 587/86 B.C. to A.D. 1948, when the new state of Israel is set up.

The authors of Samuel and Kings cannot be determined. The fact that they bring the history of Israel down to the time of the exile suggests their composition came at that time. However, this does not mean the stories contained in them were written down only then. These books were likely the product of a growing collection of materials that came together over several centuries of the Israelite monarchy.

The two books of **CHRONICLES** cover a much wider period than the 1 and 2 Kings. In fact, the genealogical tables in the first nine chapters go back to Adam (1 Chronicles 1:1). The historical narrative begins with the death of Saul (chapter 10). The rest of 1 Chronicles is taken up with the reign of David. Second Chronicles describes the rule of Solomon and carries us down through the period of the divided kingdom. The last two verses (2 Chronicles 36:22-23) give the decree of Cyrus (538 B.C.) for the return of the captives to Judah. It is obvious the Chronicles were not written until after the Babylonian captivity. The opening chapters display the increased interest in genealogies characteristic of the post-exilic period. To be accepted, the returning captives must prove their Jewish ancestry.

EZRA begins at the point where 2 Chronicles ends—with the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1-4), followed soon (536 B.C.) by

the first return from Babylonian captivity under Zerubbabel (chapter 2). Ezra's main interest, described in chapters 3-6, is the rebuilding of the temple. Another group returns (458 B.C.) under Ezra himself (chapters 7—8). His primary concern is to restore the true worship of God (chapters 9—10).

The book of **NEHEMIAH** is written in the first person, as are parts of **Ezra** (chapters 8—9). Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem (around 444 B.C.) for the express purpose of rebuilding its walls, which still lie in ruins.

The book of **ESTHER** belongs to the Persian (post-exilic) period, in company with Ezra and Nehemiah. Its purpose is perhaps to explain the origin of the Jewish Feast of Purim (Esther 9:26). According to 9:20, Mordecai may be responsible for at least the first edition of this book.

Poetry & Wisdom

There is no way of knowing exactly when the book of **JOB** was written. Its setting is “in the land of Uz” (1:1), which probably means the great Syrian desert east and northeast of Palestine. The chapters in Job address the timeless, universal problem of human suffering. In literary form it is a majestic drama, discussing the lofty subject of God's dealings with people. As in the case of all devotional classics, its time of writing is unimportant.



The **PSALMS** are a hymnal for the Israelites. About half the 150 psalms are attributed to David. Most of the others are anonymous. Their dates probably stretch from the time of David to the exile.

The book of **PROVERBS** is stated (1:1; 10:1) as consisting largely of wise sayings written or collected by Solomon. Some two hundred years later, the scribes of Hezekiah reportedly copy chapters 25-29 (25:1). The last two chapters are attributed respectively to Agur and King Lemuel. It is obvious that Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings, gathered over a considerable period of time.

ECCLESIASTES (or, “The Preacher”) is credited to the “son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). Its main theme is sound-ed at once: “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless” (verse 2). Such is all life lived “under the sun” (verse 3), without reference to God above. “Meaningless,” or “vanity,” (KJV and NRSV) literally mean emptiness.

The **SONG OF SONGS** is sometimes called Canticles. It is also attributed to King Solomon (1:1), and it uses poetic de- vise to describe the joys of marital love. There is a difference of opinion among commentators as to whether the collection of writings in this book are to be taken as an allegory of the relationship between Christ and the church.

Major Prophets

The rest of the Old Testament consists of books of prophecy. The ministry of **ISAIAH** is dated from about 740 to 700

B.C. He prophesies in the southern kingdom of Judah and presumably writes near the close of this period. It should be noted that many scholars argue that a second Isaiah wrote chapters 40—66 during the Babylonian captivity. There is no manuscript evidence for this division.



HOSEA (750 to 736 B.C.) prophesies in the northern kingdom of Israel. He makes a dramatic plea to the Lord's wayward wife, Israel, to return to her rightful husband, leaving the false gods, but he pleads in vain.

AMOS may be the earliest of the writing prophets. He is perhaps to be dated around 760 B.C. He emphasizes social justice and preaches in northern Israel, especially at Bethel (only twelve miles north of Jerusalem).

The dates for the ministry of **MICAH** are the same as those for Isaiah (740 to 700 B.C.), and he too prophesies in the southern kingdom of Judah. In common with Amos, he strikes out vigorously against the oppression of the poor.

JOEL (dated in either the eighth or fourth century) vividly describes a terrifying plague of locusts. Then he makes a

twofold application to the coming punishment of Judah and to “the day of the Lord.”

Minor Prophets

OBADIAH may also belong to the eighth century, though many date him in the sixth century. This

little book of a single chapter has one theme: the destruction of Edom, to be followed by the restoration of Israel.

According to 2 Kings 14:25, the prophet **JONAH** ministers during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (787 to 747 B.C.). When God tells him to warn Nineveh of its impending doom, he tries to run away. When Nineveh repents, he complains. The book shows the folly of racial pride and also communicates God’s love for all humanity.

Four prophets minister during the seventh century: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Jeremiah. **NAHUM** is generally dated between 663 and 612 B.C. He predicts the destruction of Nineveh, which takes place in the latter year. Israel’s ancient foe, Assyria, is finally punished for its sins when the capital city falls.

HABAKKUK prophesies in the same seventh century, near its end (603 B.C.). He foretells the coming punishment of



Judah by the Babylonians. The third chapter of his book is a prayer poem, much like those found in the Psalms.

ZEPHANIAH (about 625 B.C.) blasts out against idolatry in Judah. He pronounces judgment on Judah and foreign nations but holds out hope for the salvation of a remnant.

JEREMIAH prophesies during the last forty years of the southern kingdom of Judah (626 to 587/86 B.C.). It is his sad task to warn the nation of its impending doom, and then he must watch as the warning goes unheeded. He is called “the weeping prophet” (see 9:1).

The **BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS**, a lament over the destruction of Jerusalem, is also attributed to Jeremiah.

EZEKIEL is the Lord’s prophet to the Jewish people in Babylonian captivity. Taken in an early deportation, he apparently ministers twenty-two years (593 to 571 B.C.). In common with Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel prophesies not only to the Judeans but also to foreign nations. (These are the three longest prophetic books.) He also describes a future ideal state of Israel.

DANIEL prophesies in Babylonia (606 to 536 B.C.). The first six chapters give the history of Daniel, with visions seen by others. The last six chapters describe the visions Daniel himself sees. The book of Daniel is the apocalypse of the Old

Testament, though there are apocalyptic elements in other books (for example, Ezekiel).

HAGGAI and **ZECHARIAH** both begin their ministry at the same time (520 B.C.). The former delivers four messages in that year, all with the same theme: Rebuild the temple. Zechariah is also interested in this, as we know from Ezra 6:14. His prophecies extend from 520 to 518 B.C. A notable feature of his book is the eight visions he sees (1:7-6:15). Like most of the other prophets, he emphasizes righteousness rather than ritualism.

MALACHI (around 450 B.C.) is the last book of the Old Testament. The name means “my messenger.” Looking across the four centuries ahead, he predicts the coming of the Messiah (3:1).

THINK ABOUT THIS...

- How many books of the Old Testament have you read?
- Which book of the Old Testament has meant the most to you? Why did this book have meaning to you?
- Take time this week to page through the Old Testament. As you do, write down anything that sticks out to you.

Some prophets undoubtedly wrote down their own words, while others used scribes (Jeremiah 36:4). It seems likely that, in some cases, disciples of the prophets put the books into their final forms. This could have occurred either during or after the lifetimes of the prophets.

— THE NEW TESTAMENT IS WRITTEN

Paul's Letters

On their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas plant several churches in the Roman province of Galatia (in modern Turkey). Later, Paul hears of Judaizers confusing his new Gentile converts by telling them they have to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses to be saved. Greatly disturbed, the apostle writes a strong letter to these churches, warning them against falling into the pit of legalistic Judaism. If **GALATIANS** was written around the time of the Council of Jerusalem (A.D. 48), described in the fifteenth chapter of Acts, it is probably the first book of the New Testament to be written. Many scholars would date it a few years later, though.

On his second missionary journey Paul establishes a good church in Thessalonica. When he arrives at Corinth, he writes **1 THESSALONIANS**, with its twin emphases on sanctification and the second coming. This was in A.D. 50. It has been commonly held that this is the first book of the New Testament. **2 THESSALONIANS** is written just a few months later (A.D. 51),

dealing with further problems these people had about the second coming.

Paul's Letters to Churches

On his third missionary journey, Paul spends three years at Ephesus. While there he writes **1 CORINTHIANS** (A.D. 54 or 55).

In it, he deals with three problems occurring in the church at Corinth (chapters 1—6) and six other problems about which they have previously written him (chapters 7—16), all of them practical concerns with crucial implications.

After he leaves Ephesus, Paul writes **2 CORINTHIANS** in Macedonia, probably at Philippi (A.D. 55). He is forced to defend both his ministry and his personal integrity in the face of cruel criticism from opponents in Corinth. The Corinthian church that gives Paul the most headaches and heartache over the course of his ministry.

Rather than a physical visit, Paul writes a letter to the **ROMANS** (A.D. 56). In it, he gives the fullest exposition yet written of the great doctrines of sin, justification, and sanctification. He wants to make sure this church—in the capital of the Roman Empire—is well established in the central truths of Christianity.



During Paul's two-year imprisonment at Rome (A.D. 59 to 61), he writes the four Prison Letters. **PHILEMON** is a short, personal note to a Christian slave owner about his runaway slave, Onesimus. **COLOSSIANS** is to the church that meets in Philemon's house. It deals with the nature and person of Christ, a crucial question of the times. **EPHESIANS** is probably a circular letter. The letter is first sent to the mother church at Ephesus and is intended also for the other congregations in the province of Asia. **PHILIPPIANS** is sent to the church in Macedonia that Paul planted on his second journey. It is a spontaneous outpouring of joy and thanksgiving.

Even in prison, Paul keeps in touch with his churches.

Paul's Letters to People

Paul probably writes **1 TIMOTHY** and **TITUS** around A.D. 62 to 64, soon after he is released from his first Roman imprisonment. Arrested again and placed in a dungeon, the apostle writes **2 TIMOTHY**, warning of the apostasy of the last days. These three are called the Pastoral Letters because they deal with pastoral problems.



General Letters

Seven letters of the New Testament fall into the category of the General Letters because they are not addressed to any particular church or individual. Unlike Paul's Letters, which

are named for their destinations, these are named after the writers.

JAMES is probably the earliest. Some, in fact, would date it as early as A.D. 45, making it the first book of the New Testament. It probably appeared in the early 60s, with **HEBREWS** appearing around the same time (middle 60s). Hebrews is not, however, classified as a General Letter because it is clearly addressed to specific Jewish Christians tempted to return to their old lives. This great letter reminds its recipients that Jesus provides better access to God than angels, Moses, or even the old, sacrifice-based system of Judaism.

1 PETER appears to have been written from Rome, and seeks to encourage the believers in times of persecution.

2 PETER, assuming Peter the apostle is the author, would have to have been written before A.D. 68, the year of Nero's death. Early church tradition strongly asserts that both Peter and Paul died under Nero. Second Peter speaks of the second coming of Christ.



The three letters by John, along with Revelation, will be reserved for later discussion. **JUDE** is much like the second chapter of 2 Peter.

The Synoptic Gospels and Acts

The four gospels are properly placed first in the New Testament. They give us the foundations of our faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They are not, however, the first books to have been written. In fact, John's gospel is one of the last. All the gospels were likely written sometime during the last half of the first century.

John Mark apparently wrote the gospel of **MARK** in Rome, either in the late 50s or in A.D. 65 to 70. **MATTHEW** appeared a little later, perhaps about A.D. 60, or, as some prefer, in the 70s. **LUKE** may be dated in the early 60s but has also been placed at about A.D. 80. **ACTS**, the sequel to Luke, then appeared around either A.D. 62 or 90.

Gospels and History

The Johannine Writings.

It is now generally believed that the gospel of **JOHN**, the three letters of **JOHN**, and **REVELATION** were all written in the last decade of the first century. We do not know whether the Gospel or the letters appeared first. The book of **REVELATION**, with its picture of the new heaven and the new earth, forms a perfect conclusion to the entire divine revelation contained in the Bible.



The gospel of John was written that readers might believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and, as a result of believing, might have life in him (20:31). The first letter of John was written to believers that they might know they have eternal life (5:13). The book of Revelation gives a vision of the glorified Christ in the middle of his church (chapter 1), messages to the seven churches of Asia (chapters 2—3), and a preview of the future (chapters 4—22).

Choose one of the books of the Bible mentioned in this chapter and take time to read through it this week. Write down anything that stands out to you.

