

Inspiration of the Bible

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Reading the Bible has become a real passion for me and one of the great joys of life! I no longer perceive Bible reading as an obligation or requirement, but rather as an intense and meaningful experience with God. And, with each reading through the Bible I become more thoroughly convinced than ever of its Divine inspiration. The 66 books of the Bible, to my ears, are limitless in depth and collectively represent the most relevant, insightful, and life changing literature on the planet. In fact, there are very few books that I would desire to read twice, but my own experience with the Bible is that it gets better with each trip through as layer after layer of wonderful truth about God becomes increasingly beautiful and clear! Of course, one needs to read through the Bible for oneself (several times preferably) to discover whether or not this claim is really true.

One of the most effective means of prayer is to simply read the Bible and to discuss with God as you read. It changes the experience of reading the Bible into an intimate and life-changing conversation with God. Sometimes, this discussion can be painful, “God, I don’t understand why your words are so harsh in Ezekiel. Help me to understand.” But yet if we don’t ask these questions as we read, the answers that will ultimately convict our hearts as to the all-together loving and gentle nature of His character may never come.

Our understanding of the inspiration of the Bible is one of the more important topics in Christianity today. For example, many hold to the position that the Bible was essentially dictated by God. The argument is made that if there is any human element in the Bible which, by its very nature would be associated with error – since everything human is imperfect – that this would fundamentally destroy the Bible as an authority.

What I have experienced in discussing the Bible with individuals that hold to this position, is that there is a great reluctance to explore, discuss and attempt to give meaning to any apparent contradictions scripture. Because, after all, if the Bible was dictated by God then any mistake or contradiction may cause the entire document to collapse into insignificance and therefore to even discuss some of these issues is seen as heretical and “attacking the authority of Scripture”.

For example, when David decided to give the census, we are given two different descriptions:

“The LORD was angry at Israel again, and he made David think it would be a good idea to count the people in Israel and Judah.” (2 Samuel 24:1 - CEV).

“Satan wanted to bring trouble on the people of Israel, so he made David decide to take a census” (1 Chronicles 21:1 - GN).

Is this a contradiction? I believe that there is a beautiful resolution to this question, but if we are afraid to explore every path and every question that should come up as we read out of fear that if we discover one mistake then all is lost, we will never enter as deeply into the truth as God desires for us.

But if instead of viewing the Bible as a book that was dictated from God, we come to see that the Bible is designed to give us the clearest reflection of who God is and if we are reading every story and verse

to come closer to this knowledge of God, then the experience of reading the Bible opens up to an entirely new dimension. The Bible is essentially “God’s story” of how he has dealt with the very sad rebellion in his universe. It is the story of God’s incredible condescension to restore the love and trust of both angels and man. It is the story that reveals the character of God and we must read the Bible with that singular focus in mind.

“Inspired”?

So how did God inspire the Bible to reveal his character? Did God dictate these words to Paul?

“I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius. No one can say, then, that you were baptized as my disciples. (Oh yes, I also baptized Stephanas and his family; but I can’t remember whether I baptized anyone else.)” (1 Corinthians 1:14-16 – GN)

These are obviously Paul’s words and reflect Paul’s faulty memory, not God’s. God could have sharpened Paul’s memory so that this passage would be “perfect”, but how many people Paul baptized in the church of Corinth is unimportant to our understanding of God! And quite frankly, I am glad that God did not in any way control the mind of Paul by improving his memory on how many people he baptized! I like the forgetfulness of Paul revealed in this passage and the fact that God did not jump in to correct the matter.

And later we read that Paul would occasionally give his opinion on matters even when he did not have a clear command from God as to what advice he should give:

“Now, concerning what you wrote about unmarried people: I do not have a command from the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord’s mercy is worthy of trust....That is my opinion, and I think that I too have God’s Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 7:25, 40 – GN)

Now, I would value Paul’s opinion very highly, but statements like this once again reveal the human element involved in scripture.

Contrasts in Scripture

The view of scripture that holds every word as dictated from God therefore tends to place all of the words as having equal value and importance. For example, the song of Deborah describes the actions of the woman Jael when she killed Sisera by driving a tent peg through his head, concludes with these words, “So may all your enemies die like that, O LORD...” (Judges 5:31 – GN)

Some individuals would refer to a passage such as this to suggest that it is justifiable to desire for our enemies to be killed in like manner. If Deborah could wish for God’s enemies to be killed with a tent

peg then so can I!

But this is why we must have establish a hierarchy of truth and “inspiration” as we read the Bible. That sentence sounds scary, but Jesus gave us permission to have a hierarchy when he repeatedly said in His Sermon on the Mount, “You have heard it said....but now I tell you...” Since the life and death of God in human form, all truth should be seen through what was revealed by Jesus. “Christians” should hold to the life, words, actions, and death of God in human form as the pinnacle of truth – not the desire for vengeance on our enemies as reflected in the song of Deborah. All truth is held to this highest standard of Christ.

Here is the ideal Christ-like attitude that we should have toward our enemies:

“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. If anyone hits you on one cheek, let him hit the other one too; if someone takes your coat, let him have your shirt as well.” (Luke 6:27-29)

Christ is the ideal! Christ is the clear truth. The song of Deborah reflects the human element which is also reflected in so many of the Psalms. For example, does this sound like Christ?

“Break the teeth of these fierce lions, O God. May they disappear like water draining away; may they be crushed like weeds on a path. May they be like snails that dissolve into slime; may they be like a baby born dead that never sees the light. Before they know it, they are cut down like weeds; in his fierce anger God will blow them away while they are still living. The righteous will be glad when they see sinners punished; they will wade through the blood of the wicked.” (Psalms 58:6-10)

Is there ever a time to wish this on our enemies? Should the righteous really be glad when they see sinners punished? One again, we look to God as the ideal. How does God feel when sinners are punished?

“Tell them that as surely as I, the Sovereign LORD, am the living God, I do not enjoy seeing sinners die. I would rather see them stop sinning and live. Israel, stop the evil you are doing. Why do you want to die?” (Ezekiel 33:11 – GN)

Listen to the passion of God as He looks on His rebellious children:

“My people are hell-bent on leaving me. They pray to god Baal for help. He doesn’t lift a finger to help them. But how can I give up on you, Ephraim? How can I turn you loose, Israel? How can I leave you to be ruined like Admah, devastated like luckless Zeboim? I can’t bear to even think such thoughts. My insides churn in protest. (Hosea 10 – The Message)

We should rather be like God and our insides should “churn in protest” when even our worst enemy suffers ruin.

One view of inspiration can use the Bible to justify having these thoughts toward our enemies:

“Happy are those who pay you back for what you have done to us---who take your babies and smash them against a rock.” (Psalm 137:8,9 – GN)

Another view holds to Christ as the only ideal, and desires to have the attitude that Christ had toward those who tortured Him to death:

“Forgive them, Father! They don't know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34 – GN)

But God talks that way sometimes!

One of the issues that we will spend much time on in this study of all 66 books of the Bible is that God does at times use very harsh words. Jesus used some hard words.

In brief, I like this verse in Hosea as an explanation of this:

“The people of Israel are as stubborn as mules. How can I feed them like lambs in a meadow?” (Hosea 4:16 – GN)

Guess what? God loves stubborn mules, and he is willing to speak the language that only a stubborn mule can understand. God doesn't like to speak in this manner, but can't those of us who are parents understand? If your 3 children are playing outside and you see from a distance that there is a rattlesnake sitting right where they are playing what would you do? Well, suppose you said, “Children, this is very serious, come over to me right now”, but they ignore you? What if you raised your voice, but they are just annoyed and perceive that you are meddling in their play, and they don't listen. Would you say as a parent, “well, I warned them, but they wouldn't listen”?

No!

The only loving thing to do in that situation is to shout and even to threaten if necessary. And so, we see God speaking loudly just as any loving parent must do on occasion. But once children run to their parents (or to God) perhaps even out of fear, the first thing a loving parent might say is, “I only shouted like that because I love, now don't be afraid”? God is just like that as well! And so God, from His heart of love, has at times spoken to us hard-hearted mules using words that we can understand.

Is there value in all of Scripture?

So, if the angry words in the Bible do not reflect the ideal of Christ, is there no value then in reading the words of David, for example, when he would pray for the worst toward his enemies? No, No, No! This is the beauty of the Bible! If the Bible were only filled with the stories of perfect people who spoke perfect words it would not reach people like you and I who at times do hate our enemies. In fact, Jesus never struggled to overcome hatred toward others, He never struggled with what to do after breaking a promise, and He never struggled to overcome a proud and selfish heart and so many of the things that plague us.

So how does God reach those of us who have strayed so far from the ideal? The Bible reveals the lives and words of sinful humans who have struggled, failed and at times overcome, as a means of reaching us in our separation from God. It is God's way of reaching down to bring us out of our misery and to bring us to a new paradigm of thought and action.

For example, Psalms 139 is a good example of this. The first half of the Psalm is David acknowledging that God knows what he is thinking:

“LORD, you have examined me and you know me. You know everything I do; from far away you understand all my thoughts. You see me, whether I am working or resting; you know all my actions. Even before I speak, you already know what I will say. You are all around me on every side; you protect me with your power. Your knowledge of me is too deep; it is beyond my understanding. Where could I go to escape from you? Where could I get away from your presence? If I went up to heaven, you would be there; if I lay down in the world of the dead, you would be there... When my bones were being formed, carefully put together in my mother's womb, when I was growing there in secret, you knew that I was there--- you saw me before I was born. The days allotted to me had all been recorded in your book, before any of them ever began. O God, how difficult I find your thoughts; how many of them there are! If I counted them, they would be more than the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you.”

So, if God really knows what is on David's mind then why not open up with the truth? And so, here it comes – this is what David is thinking and he dares to share these angry thoughts with God as his prayer continues:

“O God, how I wish you would kill the wicked! How I wish violent people would leave me alone! They say wicked things about you; they speak evil things against your name. O LORD, how I hate those who hate you! How I despise those who rebel against you! I hate them with a total hatred; I regard them as my enemies.”

Whew! There it is, out in the open. “God, I hate them with a total hatred!” But notice what follows:

“Examine me, O God, and know my mind; test me, and discover my thoughts. Find out if there is any

evil in me and guide me in the everlasting way.” (Psalms 139:1-8, 15-24 – GN)

“Find out if there is any evil in me” – I think that this Psalm reflects David’s admission that there is evil within his heart, but how wonderful that he felt “safe” to share that hatred with God. God did not inspire David to hate his enemies, but he did inspire him to write down this prayer as a model to us. If I hate my enemy, realizing that this is not Christ-like, this passage gives me permission to be honest and to tell God that I hate my enemy. After all, He knows that this is how I feel anyway so why should I pray for the missionaries in Africa when I am on my knees if my real thoughts have been consumed with anger and hate? This passage gives me permission to be honest and open with God in prayer and not until we are honest with God in this way does healing, restoration and new patterns of thought begin to take place. This passage in scripture reaches me just where I am and helps to bring me closer to the ideal. It is absolutely inspired!

Jeremiah had the same struggle as David with hating his enemy:

“LORD, if I argued my case with you, you would prove to be right. Yet I must question you about matters of justice. Why are the wicked so prosperous? Why do dishonest people succeed? You plant them, and they take root; they grow and bear fruit. They always speak well of you, yet they do not really care about you. But, LORD, you know me; you see what I do and how I love you. Drag these evil people away like sheep to be butchered; guard them until it is time for them to be slaughtered. . . The LORD said, ‘Jeremiah, if you get tired racing against people, how can you race against horses? If you can’t even stand up in open country, how will you manage in the jungle by the Jordan?’”

(Jeremiah 12:1-3,5 – GN)

Notice God’s rebuke to Jeremiah’s attitude in this passage which The Message Bible puts this way: “So, Jeremiah, if you’re worn out in this footrace with men, what makes you think you can race against horses? And if you can’t keep your wits during times of calm, what’s going to happen when troubles break loose like the Jordan in flood?”

If God rebuked the words of the prophet in verses 1-3, do we still consider them to be “inspired”? But this interaction between Jeremiah and God gets even more intense:

“Then I said, ‘Lord, you understand. Remember me and help me. Let me have revenge on those who persecute me. Do not be so patient with them that they succeed in killing me. Remember that it is for your sake that I am insulted. You spoke to me, and I listened to every word. I belong to you, Lord God Almighty, and so your words filled my heart with joy and happiness. I did not spend my time with other people, laughing and having a good time. In obedience to your orders I stayed by myself and was filled with anger. Why do I keep on suffering? Why are my wounds incurable? Why won’t they heal? Do you intend to disappoint me like a stream that goes dry in the summer?’” (Jeremiah 15:15-18 – GN).

“To this the Lord replied, ‘If you return, I will take you back, and you will be my servant again. If instead of talking nonsense you proclaim a worthwhile message, you will be my prophet again. The people will come back to you, and you will not need to go to them. I will make you like a solid bronze wall as far as they are concerned. They will fight against you, but they will not defeat you. I will be with you to protect you and keep you safe. I will rescue you from the power of wicked and violent

people. I, the Lord, have spoken” (Jeremiah 15:19-21 – GN).

God just declared a portion of the words of his prophet Jeremiah – “holy man of God” – to be “nonsense” and not a “worthwhile message.” But yet again, I would say that this is a vitally important “inspired” passage of scripture. Like David, Jeremiah spoke to God with honesty and passion about his anger. And, it would appear that he accepted God’s loving and gentle correction as he so much of the time reflected the ideal of love toward his enemies. If the Bible only reflected the ideal and the perfect, it would be about 2 pages long and only filled with statements like this: “God is love.” “Love your enemies.”

But what makes the Bible so powerful and so “inspired” is that I can identify with Jeremiah and his anger, but yet I see in this passage a God who cares – a God who wants to lead me, just like Jeremiah, out of my own hatefulness and to become Christ-like.

Are there mistakes in the Bible?

The Bible has been miraculously preserved through the centuries as proved by the Dead Sea Scrolls. And, archeological and more recent historical evidence has proven many of the Old Testament details about various kings and cities to be true. And, when the Bible is held up to the most intense scrutiny, there are remarkably few mistakes. In fact, I have found that within most of the apparent contradictions in scripture there is very often a beautiful and deep meaning once the passage is understood properly and compared with the rest of the Bible.

Here are a few passages, just from the book of Matthew, in which it appears to me that there may be some minor errors. But again, this in no way – to my way of thinking – diminishes the value or label of “inspired” in any way!

For example, in the Matthew lineage of Jesus:

“David, Solomon (his mother was the woman who had been Uriah's wife), Rehoboam, Abijah, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jehoram,^{***} Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh, Amon, Josiah, and Jehoiachin and his brothers... So then, there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, and fourteen from David to the exile in Babylon, and fourteen from then to the birth of the Messiah.” (Matthew 1:2-7, 14 – GN)

^{***}Between Jehoram and Uzziah there are 3 descendants left out as the account in 1 Chronicles reveals: “This is the line of King Solomon's descendants from father to son: Solomon, Rehoboam, Abijah, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, *Ahaziah, *Joash, *Amaziah, Uzziah, Jotham...” (1 Chronicles 3:10-12 – GN)

So, in actuality there are not a neat and tidy 14, 14 and 14 generations leading up to the Messiah. Does this matter? Does this change our picture of the kind of Person God is? Not in the least!

And later, Matthew quotes Jesus as saying this:

“As a result, the punishment for the murder of all innocent people will fall on you, from the murder of innocent Abel to the murder of Zechariah son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the Temple and the altar.” (Matthew 23:35 – GN)

But Jesus was not referring to the Zechariah “son of Berechiah”, but rather Zechariah “son of Jehoiada”:

“Then the spirit of God took control of Zechariah son of Jehoiada the priest. He stood where the people could see him and called out, ‘The LORD God asks why you have disobeyed his commands and are bringing disaster on yourselves! You abandoned him, so he has abandoned you!’ King Joash joined in a conspiracy against Zechariah, and on the king’s orders the people stoned Zechariah in the Temple courtyard. (2 Chronicles 24:20-21 – GN)

Did Jesus make a mistake? Surely not!

Rather, back in that time there were not 10 Bibles in every home. There were rare scrolls available only in the synagogue and to the very wealthy. And so, as Matthew tried to recall the words of Jesus, he simply remembered the wrong father of Zechariah. But let’s give Matthew some slack and just admit that this is a non-issue. This minor mistake does not ruin the fact that the all-powerful God of the universe is the kind of Person that washed the dirty feet of His disciples the night before He died!

And a little later in the book of Matthew:

“Then what the prophet Jeremiah had said came true: ‘They took the thirty silver coins, the amount the people of Israel had agreed to pay for him, and used the money to buy the potter’s field, as the Lord had commanded me.’” (Matthew 27:9-10 – GN)

Once again, Matthew must have remembered this passage about the 30 coins and the potter’s field from his reading of the Old Testament, but this is from the book of Zechariah, not Jeremiah:

“The LORD told me, ‘Give it to the potter.’ So I took the 30 pieces of silver. Such a magnificent price was set by them! I gave the pieces of silver to the potter at the house of the LORD.” (Zechariah 11:13 – GN)

In fact, not to pick too much on Matthew, but his prophetic use of the Old Testament with reference to Jesus is “interesting”:

“Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and left during the night for Egypt, where he stayed until Herod died. This was done to make come true what the Lord had said through the prophet, ‘I called my Son out of Egypt.’” (Matthew 2:14-15 – GN)

When we go back to read about this son that was called out of Egypt, this is the description:

“The LORD says, ‘When Israel was a child, I loved him and called him out of Egypt as my son. But the more I called to him, the more he turned away from me. My people sacrificed to Baal; they burned incense to idols.’” (Hosea 11:1,2 – GN)

Perhaps this passage illustrates one of the major themes in the Bible — **the contrast between Jesus Christ and everyone else**. Israel was God’s beloved child who went astray. Christ, by contrast, was obedient unto death. As Christians, therefore, we are first and foremost followers of Christ, and should pattern our lives only after Christ, not after any other man or woman in the Bible. **The Bible reveals to us only one true and fully inspired Hero, and that is God.** For me personally, the Bible did not take on the —feel of a living book until every passage was read through the lens of God in human form, dying on the Cross, while forgiving His enemies.

Conclusion!

The purpose of the Bible is to reveal to us the beautiful character of God. In fact, reading the Bible with the question of God’s character in the forefront is a deep form of prayerful communication with God.

All 66 books point to Jesus Christ as the heart, center and gold standard of all that is truly inspired. We must continue to work through the difficult passages, but yet the all-important testimony of scripture still remains and can be proven from so many places: **Jesus Christ was God in human form!** God is exactly as Jesus revealed Him to be—kind, forgiving, humble, gracious, and long-suffering.

Additional comments on inspiration that I agree with

“There is not always perfect order or apparent unity in the Scriptures. The miracles of Christ are not given in exact order, but are given just as the circumstances occurred, which called for this divine revealing of the power of Christ. The truths of the Bible are as pearls hidden. They must be searched, dug out by painstaking effort. Those who take only a surface view of the Scriptures will, with their superficial knowledge, which they think is very deep, talk of the contradictions of the Bible, and question the authority of the Scriptures. But those whose hearts are in harmony with truth and duty will search the Scriptures with a heart prepared to receive divine impressions....The Bible is not given to us in grand superhuman language. Jesus, in order to reach man where he is, took humanity. The Bible must be given in the language of men. Everything that is human is imperfect. Different meanings are

expressed by the same word; there is not one word for each distinct idea. The Bible was given for practical purposes.” {1SM 20.2}

“The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers.” {1SM 21.1}

“It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man’s words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God.” -- Manuscript 24, 1886 (written in Europe in 1886). {1SM 21.2}