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# 1

## THE CHARACTER *of* THE BIBLE

**THE BIBLE IS A UNIQUE BOOK.** It is one of the oldest books in the world, and yet it is still the world's bestseller. It is a product of the ancient Eastern world, but it has molded the modern Western world. Tyrants have burned the Bible, and believers revere it. It is the most quoted, the most published, the most translated, and the most influential book in the history of humankind.

Just what is it that constitutes this unusual character of the Bible? How did the Bible originate? When and how did the Bible take on its present form? What is meant by the "inspiration" of the Bible? These are the questions that occupy our interest in this introductory chapter.

### **THE STRUCTURE OF THE BIBLE**

The word *Bible* (Book) came into English by way of French from the Latin *biblia* and the Greek *biblos*. It was originally the name given to the outer coat of a papyrus reed in the eleventh century BCE. By the second century CE, Christians were using the word to describe their sacred writings.

### **THE TWO TESTAMENTS OF THE BIBLE**

The Bible has two major parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament was written and preserved by the Jewish community for a millennium or more before the time of Christ. The New Testament was composed by disciples of Christ during the first century CE.

The word *testament*, which is better translated “covenant,” is taken from the Hebrew and Greek words designating a compact or agreement between two parties. In the case of the Bible, then, we have the old contract between God and His people, the Jews, and the new compact between God and Christians.

Christian scholars have stressed the unity between these two Testaments of the Bible in terms of the person of Jesus Christ who claimed to be its central theme.<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine said the New Testament is veiled in the Old Testament, and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New Testament. Or, as others have put it, “The New is in the Old concealed, and the Old is in the New revealed.” Again, Christ is enfolded in the Old Testament but unfolded in the New. Believers before the time of Christ looked forward in expectation, whereas present-day believers see the realization of God’s plan in Christ.

### THE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The books of our English Old Testament Bible are divided into four sections: Law, History, Poetry, and Prophecy in the following way:

#### BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Law (Pentateuch) —5 books	Poetry—5 books	
1. Genesis 2. Exodus 3. Leviticus 4. Numbers 5. Deuteronomy	1. Job 2. Psalms 3. Proverbs 4. Ecclesiastes 5. Song of Solomon	
History—12 books	Prophecy—17 books	
1. Joshua 2. Judges 3. Ruth 4. 1 Samuel 5. 2 Samuel 6. 1 Kings 7. 2 Kings 8. 1 Chronicles 9. 2 Chronicles 10. Ezra 11. Nehemiah 12. Esther	<b>A. Major Prophets</b> 1. Isaiah 2. Jeremiah 3. Lamentations 4. Ezekiel 5. Daniel	<b>B. Minor Prophets</b> 1. Hosea 2. Joel 3. Amos 4. Obadiah 5. Jonah 6. Micah 7. Nahum 8. Habakkuk 9. Zephaniah 10. Haggai 11. Zechariah 12. Malachi

1. See Norman L. Geisler, *A Popular Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), chap. 2.

## THE BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament is also divided into four sections: Gospels, History, Epistles, and Prophecy.

### BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Gospels	History
1. Matthew 2. Mark 3. Luke 4. John	1. Acts of the Apostles
Epistles	
1. Romans 2. 1 Corinthians 3. 2 Corinthians 4. Galatians 5. Ephesians 6. Philippians 7. Colossians 8. 1 Thessalonians 9. 2 Thessalonians 10. 1 Timothy 11. 2 Timothy	12. Titus 13. Philemon 14. Hebrews 15. James 16. 1 Peter 17. 2 Peter 18. 1 John 19. 2 John 20. 3 John 21. Jude
Prophecy	
1. Revelation	

## THE SECTIONS OF THE BIBLE

The fourfold division of the Old Testament is based on a topical arrangement of books stemming from the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. This translation known as the Septuagint (LXX) was begun in the third century BCE. The Hebrew Bible does not follow this fourfold topical classification of books. Instead, a threefold division is employed, possibly based on the official position of the author. Moses, the lawgiver, has his five books listed first (Law, *Torah*); these are followed by the books of men who held the prophetic office (Prophets, *Nebhi'im*). Finally, many believe that the third section contained books by men who were believed to have had a prophetic gift but who did not hold a prophetic office (Writings, *Kethubhim*). Hence, the Hebrew Old Testament has the following structure:

## THE HEBREW OLD TESTAMENT ARRANGEMENT

The Law (Torah)	The Prophets (Nebhi'im)	The Writings (Kethubhim)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Genesis</li> <li>2. Exodus</li> <li>3. Leviticus</li> <li>4. Numbers</li> <li>5. Deuteronomy</li> </ol>	<p><b>A. Former Prophets</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Joshua</li> <li>2. Judges</li> <li>3. Samuel</li> <li>4. Kings</li> </ol> <p><b>B. Latter Prophets</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Isaiah</li> <li>2. Jeremiah</li> <li>3. Ezekiel</li> <li>4. The Twelve</li> </ol>	<p><b>A. Poetical Books</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Psalms</li> <li>2. Proverbs</li> <li>3. Job</li> </ol> <p><b>B. Five Rolls (Megilloth)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Song of Songs</li> <li>2. Ruth</li> <li>3. Lamentations</li> <li>4. Esther</li> <li>5. Ecclesiastes</li> </ol> <p><b>C. Historical Books</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Daniel</li> <li>2. Ezra-Nehemiah</li> <li>3. Chronicles</li> </ol>

SOURCE: This is the arrangement in modern Jewish editions of the Old Testament. See *TANAKH: A New Translation of THE HOLY SCRIPTURES According to the Traditional Hebrew Text*, NJV, NJPS (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962, 1985, 1999, 2001).

The earliest arrangement of the Jewish Bible was twofold: Law and Prophets. It is alluded to in Zechariah 7:12 and in Daniel 9:2, 6, 11, 13. It is used in the intertestamental period (2 Macc. 15:9), in the Qumran Community (Manual of Discipline 9.11), and repeatedly in the New Testament (cf. Matt. 5:17; Luke 16:31). Indeed, in Luke 24:27 the Law and Prophets are called “all the Scriptures.” It is generally agreed that the earliest possible testimony to it is the prologue to the Book of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus,<sup>2</sup> during the second century BCE, though it is not called “the Writings” but simply refers to “others books of our fathers” which may or may not even have been inspired books.

The reference to a third division began in the first century. Jewish historian Josephus called this section “four books [that] contain hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life” (*Against Apion*, 1.8). It was not until the subsequent Jewish Mishnah (*Baba Bathra*) in the fifth century CE that the current threefold division of the Jewish Old Testament with eleven books of the Writings was crystallized. Some see a hint of a threefold

2. The “Book of the All-Virtuous Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira” is also called the “Wisdom of Sirach” or simply “Sirach,” “Ecclesiasticus,” or “Siracides.”

division in Jesus saying that “everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). However, first of all, this is not likely since Luke had just referred to a two-fold division of Law and Prophets being “all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27). Second, he does not call it the Writings (which had eleven books). Finally, he probably singled out the Psalms here because of their messianic significance which he is stressing in this passage.

However, since the time of the Mishnah, Judaism has maintained a threefold division to date; Jerome’s Latin Vulgate and subsequent Christian Bibles have followed the more topical fourfold format of the Septuagint. Combining this division with the natural and widely accepted fourfold categorization of the New Testament, the Bible may be cast into the following overall Christocentric structure:

**STRUCTURE OF THE BIBLE**

<p><b>Old Testament</b></p>	<p>Law History Poetry Prophecy</p>	<p>Foundation for Christ Preparation for Christ Aspiration for Christ Expectation of Christ</p>
<p><b>New Testament</b></p>	<p>Gospels Acts Epistles Revelation</p>	<p>Manifestation of Christ Propagation of Christ Interpretation and Application of Christ Consummation in Christ</p>

Although there is no divinely authoritative basis for viewing the Bible in an eightfold structure, the Christian insistence that the Scriptures be understood Christocentrically is firmly based on the teachings of Christ. Some five times in the New Testament, Jesus affirmed Himself to be the theme of Old Testament Scripture (Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:39; Heb. 10:7). In view of these statements, it is natural to view the eightfold topical arrangement of Scripture in terms of its one theme—Christ.

**CHAPTERS AND VERSES IN THE BIBLE**

The earliest Bibles have no chapter and verse divisions (see discussion in chap. 12). These were added for convenience in quoting the Scriptures. Stephen Langton, a professor at the University of Paris and later Archbishop of Canterbury, is credited with dividing the Bible into chapters in 1227. Verses were added in 1551 and 1555 by Robert Stephanus, a Paris printer. Happily,

Jewish scholars since that time have adopted the same chapter and verse divisions for the Old Testament.

## **THE INSPIRATION OF THE BIBLE**

The most significant characteristic of the Bible is not its formal structure but its divine inspiration. The Bible's claim to be divinely inspired must not be misunderstood. It is not poetic inspiration but divine authority that is meant when we speak of the inspiration of the Bible. The Bible is unique; it is literally "God-breathed." Now let us examine what this means.

### **INSPIRATION DEFINED**

The word *inspiration* (Gk., *theopneustos*) is used only once in the New Testament (2 Tim. 3:16), and it refers to the Old Testament writings as being "breathed out" by God. Jesus used another phrase when He referred to the Old Testament as "every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). David said, "The Spirit of the Lord speaks by me; his word is on my tongue" (2 Sam. 23:2).

### **Biblical Descriptions of Inspiration**

Paul wrote to Timothy, "All scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16 RSV). That is, the Old Testament Scriptures or writings are "God-breathed" (Gk., *theopneustos*) and, therefore, authoritative for the doctrine and practice of the believer. A kindred passage in 1 Corinthians 2:13 (RSV) stresses the same point. "And we impart this," wrote Paul, "in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit." Words taught by the Holy Spirit are divinely inspired words.

The second great passage in the New Testament on the inspiration of the Bible is 2 Pet. 1:21 (RSV). "No prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." In other words, the prophets were men whose messages did not originate with their own impulse but were "Spirit-moved." By revelation God spoke to the prophets in many ways (Heb. 1:1): angels, visions, dreams, voices, and miracles. Inspiration is the way God spoke through the prophets to others. The fact that the prophets searched their own writings to see "what person or time the

Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories” (1 Pet. 1:11) is a further indication that their words were not ultimately self-initiated.

Combining the classical passages on inspiration, we find that the Bible is inspired in the sense that Spirit-moved men wrote God-breathed words that are divinely authoritative for Christian faith and practice. Let us now analyze these three elements of inspiration more closely.

### **Theological Definition of Inspiration**

Properly speaking, it is only the product that is inspired, not the persons. The single time the New Testament uses the word *inspiration*, it is applied only to the writings and not to the writers. It is the Bible that is inspired and not the human authors. The writers spoke and undoubtedly wrote about many things, such as those in the mundane affairs of life, which were not divinely inspired. However, since the Holy Spirit did, as Peter said, move upon the men who produced the inspired writings, we may by extension refer to inspiration in a broader sense. This broader sense includes the total process by which Spirit-moved men uttered God-breathed and hence divinely authoritative words. It is this total process of inspiration which contains three essential elements: divine causality, prophetic agency, and written authority.

***Divine Causality.*** God is the Prime Mover in the inspiration of the Bible. It is the divine which moved the human. God spoke to the prophets first and then through them to others. God revealed, and spokespersons of God recorded, the truths God revealed. Finally, the people of God recognized the prophetic message. That God is the ultimate source and original cause of biblical truth is the first and most fundamental factor in the doctrine of inspiration. Nevertheless, it is not the only factor.

***Prophetic Agency.*** The prophets who wrote Scripture were not automata. They were more than mere recording secretaries. They wrote with full intent and consciousness in the normal exercise of their own literary styles and vocabularies. The personalities of the prophets were not violated by a supernatural intrusion. The Bible which they wrote is the Word of God, but it is also the words of humans. God used their personalities to convey His propositions. The prophets and/or their amanuenses (cf. 1 Pet. 5:12) were the immediate cause of what was written, but God was the ultimate cause.



**Written Authority.** The final product of divine authority working through the prophetic agency is the written authority of the Bible. The Scriptures are “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). The Bible is the last word on doctrinal and ethical matters. All theological and moral disputes must be brought to the bar of the written Word. The Scriptures derive their authority from God through His prophets. Thus, it is the prophetic writings and not the writers as such which possess and retain the resultant divine authority. The prophets have died; the prophetic writings live on.

In brief, an adequate definition of inspiration must have three fundamental factors: God the Prime Mover, men of God as the secondary causes, and a divinely authoritative writing as the final result.

## **SOME IMPORTANT DISTINCTIONS**

### **Inspiration Distinguished from Revelation and Illumination**

Two related concepts which help to clarify by contrast what is meant by the process of inspiration are revelation and illumination. The former deals with the disclosure of truth, the latter the discovery of that truth. Revelation involves the unveiling of truth, illumination the understanding; but inspiration as such involves neither. Revelation concerns the origin and giving of truth; inspiration the reception and recording of it; illumination the subsequent apprehension and understanding of it. The inspiration which brings a written revelation to men is not in itself a guarantee that they will understand it. Illumination of the mind and heart is necessary. Revelation is an objective disclosure; illumination is the subjective understanding of it; inspiration is the means by which the revelation became an objective disclosure. Revelation is the fact of divine communication, inspiration is the means, and illumination is the gift of understanding that communication.

### **Inspiration of the Original, Not the Copies**

The inspiration and consequent authority of the Bible does not automatically extend to every copy and translation of the Bible. Only the autographic texts themselves (or perfect copies of them) are inerrant (without error). Every other copy is inspired only insofar as it is an accurate reproduction of the original. Mistakes and changes made in copy and translation cannot

claim this original inspiration. Second Kings 8:26, for example, says that Ahaziah was twenty-two years old at his coronation, whereas 2 Chronicles 22:2 (RSV) says he was forty-two years old. Both cannot be correct. Only the original and not the scribal error is authoritative. Other examples of this type can be found in present copies of the Scriptures (e.g., cf. 1 Kings 4:26 and 2 Chron. 9:25). A translation or copy, then, is authoritative only to the extent that it accurately reproduces the original text.

As we shall see later, the original text has been copied more accurately than any book from the ancient world. The mistakes in the copies are minor and do not affect any major doctrine of Scripture. Exactly how accurately the Bible has been copied will be discussed later (chap. 15) under the science of textual criticism. For now it is sufficient to note that the great doctrinal and historical content of the Bible has been transmitted down through the centuries without substantial change or loss. So, subsequent or current copies and translations of the Bible do not possess original inspiration, but they have a derived inspiration insofar as they are faithful copies of the autographs. Technically speaking, only the autographic text is actually inspired, but for all practical purposes present-day English Bibles, in that they are accurate translations of the original, are the inspired Word of God.

Since the autographs do not exist, how we know that the original text was without error? The answer is found in two Bible teachings: (1) God cannot lie (Heb. 6:18; Titus 1:2), and (2) the Bible is the written Word of God (John 10:35). Therefore, the Bible is without error. Since inspiration means the Bible was “breathed-out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16) and God cannot breathe-out error, then it must be errorless. Since the Scriptures are “every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4), and no error can proceed out of Him who is truth itself, it follows that the original text—which was breathed out by God—is perfect (Ps. 19:7).

The Bible claims to be an utterance of God who cannot make mistakes. And even though no originals have ever been discovered, neither has anyone ever discovered a fallible autograph that could falsify the claim for infallible autographs. What we do have are very accurately copied manuscripts that have been adequately translated into English. Hence, for all matters of doctrine and duty, today’s Bible is an adequate representation of the authoritative Word of God.

But if we do not have the original texts of the Bible, then how can we

know what it says? The simple answer is that it can be reconstructed accurately from the copies we have. For example, suppose a teacher read a statement from a piece of paper and asked her class to copy it down. From these copies she could reconstruct the original because where they differed would reflect the different errors that different students made. But where they agreed, they would reflect what the original said. Although it is more complicated than this, the process is called the science of textual criticism and is discussed in more detail later (see chap. 14).

Actually, even a text with errors can convey 100 percent of the truth of the original. For example, if a person received the following message (with the error in it), he would still be sure of 100 percent of the original message:

Y#U HAVE WON 20 MILLION DOLLARS.

And if they received this message (with another error in it), they would be even more sure of the original (because of the confirmation that the # should have been an “O” in the first message):

Y#U HAVE WON 20 MILLION DOLLARS.  
YO# HAVE WON 20 MILLION DOLLARS.

Actually, the more errors like this, the more we would be sure of the original. For with every error, we get another confirmation of every other letter. And, as we will see, the Bible has fewer copyist errors than this illustration. Plus, in any event, even with the errors, 100 percent of the original message comes through.

### **Inspiration of the Teaching but Not All It Records**

It is also essential to note that only what the Bible teaches is inspired and without error; not everything the Bible records is errorless. For example, the Scriptures contain the record of many evil and sinful acts, but they do not commend any of these. Instead, they condemn such evils. The Bible even records some of the lies of Satan (e.g., Gen. 3:4). It is not thereby teaching that these lies are true. The only thing that inspiration guarantees here is that this is a true record of a lie Satan actually told. The Bible records many things which it does not recommend, such as the assertion “there is no

God” (Ps. 14:1).

In summation, the Bible is an unusual book. It is composed of two testaments which contain sixty-six books claiming divine inspiration. By inspiration is meant that the original texts of the Bible were given by revelation of God and are thereby invested with absolute authority for Christian thought and life. This means that whatever is taught in the Bible is for the Christian the final court of appeal. And although we don’t have the original manuscripts, we have accurate copies by which it can be reconstructed. So, even though technically only the original text was perfect and errorless, nonetheless, the Bible in our hands today is an accurate copy of it, and it conveys 100 percent of the essential truths of the original text.