

The Case For The New Testament: Is The New Testament Really Inspired Scripture?

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Spacing has been edited to fit into the layout of this document.

*Spelling and punctuation have been amended in some sentences,
otherwise, the text has not been altered.*

This article began as an answer to a question from a student in my campus ministry Bible study group about the nature of the New Testament books and their status as inspired Scripture. It has morphed over the past week, through much study and research, into what will become a series of posts about the validity of the New Testament Scriptures. In this first part, I will answer the initial question that began it all: is the New Testament really inspired Scripture?

It is a question that most Christians have never considered, and maybe one that they ought to consider more. The question begins with the accepted premise that the Old Testament — the Hebrew Scriptures — are inspired by God, but should we give the same credibility to the writings of the New Testament?

Defining the Terms: What Is “Scripture”?

Today’s Christian might base their determination of what Scripture is based on whether it is in the Bible or not. If something is in the Bible, it is Scripture. If it is not in the Bible, it is not Scripture. Aside from the circular logic (i.e. begging-the-question fallacy), that really is not a very good test because it approaches the question from a 21st Century perspective.

In the 1st century, the “Bible” as we know it did not exist. And in reality, the Bible is not just a book. It is a collection of books. The 1st century Church had 39 scrolls that made up their sacred text. That was “Scripture” to a 1st century Christian. Any time you read the words, “according to the Scripture” or “the Scripture says” in the New Testament, they were referring to what we call the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Hebrew Scriptures would have been the most important thing in the life of a devout Jew in the 1st century. This emphasis on the importance of their Scripture can be found in the very foundational commandment in the Law of Moses:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your god with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. -Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Jesus alludes to the importance that the Jews placed on their Scripture, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me" (John 5:39).

Paul also recognized the Hebrew Scripture as the defining characteristic of the Jewish people:

What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God. -Romans 3:1-2

How humbling to know that the Creator of all things entrusted your people with His words. It is little wonder why the Jews hold the Hebrew Scriptures in such high regard. Paul wrote about his zeal for his Jewish heritage and the Hebrew Scriptures:

If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. -Philippians 3:5-6

Obviously, his passion was misguided, but there is no question that Paul had a devotion to the Hebrew way of life as well as the Hebrew Scriptures. It was also Paul who admonished Timothy by saying:

But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. -II Timothy 3:14-17

Peter, another devout Jew turned devout Christian also held the Hebrew Scriptures in extremely high regard:

[K]nowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. -II Peter 1:20-21

The value that these early Christians placed upon the Hebrew Scriptures cannot be overemphasized.

Calling the Witnesses: Did They Know They Were Writing Scripture?

Now that we have seen the high regard in which the New Testament writers held the Hebrew Scripture, the question rises as to whether they believed or knew that the words they were writing were equitable to "Scripture".

Jesus Knew They Would Write Scripture

The disciples might not have known ahead of time that they were going to be writing Scripture, but Jesus definitely knew. Jesus gave a prophetic testimony about the authority of the New Testament Scripture:

These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. but the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you. -John 14:25-26

But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning. -John 15:26-27

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. -John 16:12-13

Remember, Peter said that the Hebrew Scripture came as the Spirit moved on the prophets, and Jesus is foretelling His disciples that the Spirit would move on them and they would remember His words and prophesy about things to come.

Later, in this very same scene, Jesus prays for His disciples. In that prayer Jesus says, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word."

Look at the progression here: (1) Jesus tells them that He is leaving them in bodily form but will come to them as the Spirit and bring divine inspiration; (2) this divine inspiration would empower them to testify about Himself; (3) the divine inspiration would be a continuation of what He had taught them to that point and their words would be of equal authority to His own words; (4) then He prays and blesses their word and those that would hear/read it and believe on Him as a result. Wow! If that didn't just blow your mind and change your perspective about the New Testament, you might want to back up and read that again.

Thus Jesus affirmed that the words of the New Testament writers who wrote about Him were not just writing their words, but His words: THE Word of God. As such, we can look at what Jesus said about His words and likewise apply them to the rest of the New Testament: "He that rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him — the word

that I have spoken will judge him in the last day" (John 12:48); "The word that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63b); "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will by no means pass away" (Matthew 24:35).

In short, even before the New Testament writers ever penned a single word, Jesus confirmed that their words would be divinely inspired. The words of the New Testament writers are therefore the words of God, Himself, and that those words would outlast the universe. Thank God for those holy men of God that were willing to speak as the Spirit moved them so that we "may know the certainty of those things in which [we have been] instructed" (Luke 1:4) and come to a confident belief in Jesus Christ!

Paul Knew He Was Writing Scripture

In I Corinthians 14:37 Paul said, "If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord." Think about how confident Paul would have to be to make such an incredible claim. As a writer, I personally like to think that the things I write are important and valuable, but I would NEVER make the claim that any thing I have written could be considered a "commandment of the Lord". That's just crazy talk! Unless you know that God is truly speaking through you.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes:

For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of man, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe. -I Thessalonians 2:13

This illustrates not only that Paul and the other New Testament witnesses knew that they were sharing divinely inspired words, but also that the New Testament Church believers understood their words to be divinely inspired. This is a fulfillment of Jesus' prophetic prayer mentioned above. It would behoove modern-day readers of the Bible to also welcome the words of the New Testament as the Word of God as did the Thessalonians believers.

Peter Knew Paul Was Writing Scripture

Peter, the same guy that said "that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation" validated Paul's claim to inspiration when he classified Paul's writings as "Scripture":

[A]nd consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation — as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to

understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. -II Peter 3:25-26

Did you catch that?! Peter just equated all of Paul's epistles to "the rest of the Scriptures." That is a huge statement for a devout Jew to make. Peter just put Paul on the same level as Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah and the other writers of the Hebrew Scriptures. That is not just a throwaway statement that Peter is making there. That's quite the claim, and it very much confirms that these men knew that what they were writing was the divinely inspired Word of God.

Peter Knew He Was Writing Scripture

We have already heard Peter's position on the inspiration of Scripture. The broader context of that same passage shows us that Peter knew that what he and his fellow apostles were writing was Scripture:

For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. -II Peter 1:16-21

From this passage we can pull four truths regarding the New Testament writers and their writings: (1) Peter and the other New Testament writers were not repeating some concocted story; (2) they were 1st-hand eyewitnesses; (3) Peter equates the writings of the New Testament with the prophecy of the Old Testament; (4) Peter knew that the Spirit of God was moving on them and speaking through them just as the writers of the Old Testament.

Also, in the same chapter that he supports Paul's claim to divine inspiration, Peter also claimed that his writings were of equal authority to that of the Old Testament writers:

Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle, . . . that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior. -II Peter 3:1-2

Clearly Peter knew that his writings were Scripture. Church tradition tells us that Mark was a companion of Peter and that the Gospel of Mark is largely based on Peter's preaching. If this

is true, we can also ascribe Scriptural status to the Gospel of Mark based on what we know about Peter's claims of divine inspiration.

Paul Knew That Luke Was Writing Scripture

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul writes:

Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer is worthy of his wages." -I Timothy 5:17-18

The first passage that Paul references is from the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 25:4). The second passage is from the Gospel of Luke (10:7) and is found nowhere else in the Bible. Thus the writings of Luke are categorized by Paul as "Scripture". Not only does Paul consider Luke's writings as Scripture, but he is giving them equal authority to the writings of Moses! This is incredibly interesting because Luke is not even a Jew, he's a Gentile! If a Gentile was writing Scripture that was on the same level as the writings of Moses, the other Gospel writers would no doubt also be considered writers of Scripture.

Also, because Luke wrote both the Gospel of Luke as well as the Acts of the Apostles, both of those New Testament books can be definitively considered Scripture.

John Knew He Was Writing Scripture

The book of Revelation present itself as a prophetic revelation much like the prophetic books of the Hebrew Scriptures. There is no doubt that John knew he was writing Scripture. John himself states:

For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. -Revelation 22:18-19

Those are some pretty strong words of caution from John. It is very apparent that he knew he was writing divinely inspired words of prophecy.

Matthew Knew That He Was Writing Scripture

Matthew, a Jew, wrote a gospel account that was directed toward a very Jewish audience. He opens with the genealogy of Jesus traced through his earthly father, Joseph all the way back to Abraham. This pattern is very reminiscent of Hebrew Scripture.

Matthew also points out numerous times that the events he was writing about were fulfillments of Hebrew Scripture. The phrases "...that it might be fulfilled..." and "...it is written..." occur numerous times throughout Matthew's gospel (1:22; 2:5, 15, 17, 23; 3:3; 4:4, 6, 7, 10, 14, etc...).

It is in Matthew that we find the sermon on the mount, where Jesus elevates the Law of the Old Testament Scriptures to a new level. In that same passage, Jesus states that He came to fulfil the Law and the Prophets. While Matthew doesn't come right out and say it as some of the other New Testament writers, it seems quite clear that he knew that what he was writing was more than just a historical account of events that he witnessed.

The Verdict

In our examination of the evidence, we have demonstrated that the following writers and their books can be considered divinely inspired Scripture:

Matthew – His Gospel

Luke – His Gospel as well as the book of Acts

John – A Gospel, three Epistles, and The Revelation

Paul – 13 Epistles (14 if he wrote Hebrews as some scholars believe)

Peter – Two Epistles, and Mark's Gospel which was based on Peter's preaching

This really only leaves two New Testament books/writers, James and Jude (possibly three, depending on the authorship of Hebrews), which do not claim or allude to their authority as divinely inspired Scripture.

The evidence points to the clear conclusion that the collection of writings we know as the New Testament were divinely inspired words written by men that were knowingly allowing God to speak through them. If we reject the New Testament and what it says about Jesus, sin, salvation and life in the here and in the hereafter, we do so at the peril of our eternal destiny.

Extract from "The Reliability of Scripture", article by John Hutton

Point 4 – **The Canon of the New Testament**

Now another question arises. Can we trust that the books included in the New Testament are really what God wants us to have?

Here is a quote about the Canon of the New Testament from an article on 'The Canon of the Bible' in The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: 'The formation of the New Testament canon was not a conciliar decision (that is not a decision made by a council). The earliest ecumenical council at Nicea, in AD 325, did not discuss the canon. The first undisputed decision of a council on the canon seems to be from Carthage in AD 397, which decreed that nothing should be read in the church under the name of divine Scriptures except the canonical writings. The twenty-seven books of the New Testament were then listed as the canonical writings. The council could list only those books that were generally regarded by the consensus of use as properly a canon. The formation of the New Testament canon must therefore be regarded as a process rather than an event, and a historical rather than a biblical matter. The coming of the Word of God in print is only slightly more capable of explication than the coming of the Word of God incarnate.'

I've asked a lot of questions and here is another one: Who do you think decided on the selected twenty-seven books – the church leaders at any time in history, or the Holy Spirit?

A comment on the above quote, which deserves passing on, is this: 'The writer makes an interesting point, which really contradicts the accusation of sceptics that the Church leaders foisted the books they wanted onto the gullible faithful.'

I was converted in the Salvation Army as a young teenager, and have never forgotten their first doctrine. It says: 'We believe that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were given by inspiration of God and that they only constitute the Divine rule of Christian faith and practice.'

If that is true, and I believe unreservedly that it is, then every word from Genesis 1:1 to the last word in Revelation is not only inspired, but must be of equal inspiration. When I realised what that doctrine was really saying, I was staggered. If some of it is not God's word, which parts are, and which parts are not? Are the parts I like the inspired parts, or are the parts my church teaches as

unquestionable the inspired parts? If it is not all of equal inspiration, which parts are, and which parts are not? Can we trust some of it but not others? If the Bible is not all true and all of equal inspiration, what are we going to do? Why study the Bible at all? I know what I would do if I doubted that the Bible was absolutely reliable – I'd throw it in the bin. What would you do?

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extract from "The Inspiration of Scripture", article by David Tavender ...

The Canon

Over the centuries, questions have arisen over the validity of some books of the Bible. It is my contention that today's Bible of 66 books, sometimes referred to as the "Protestant Bible", is what God intended us to have. The entire New Testament canon has been discussed and reaffirmed many times since the 4th century A.D., when its 27 books were finally accepted as authoritative, true and inspired. It has remained the same ever since, mainly because those who compiled the canon agreed that the New Testament we now have was penned by people who had reliable accounts from eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1-4). Also they saw that it is compatible with the Old Testament, and that it shows consistency with events that took place simultaneously in the secular world. Likewise, the make-up of the Old Testament is frequently endorsed by the New Testament, and especially by the Lord Jesus who quoted and made reference to it regularly. Significantly, He never quoted from the many apocryphal books, such as 1 & 2 Maccabees, Judith, and others. Such apocryphal books may be helpful to us, but they are not God-breathed and should not be considered as part of the Word of God or to hold the same authority as the 66 books of the Bible.

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