

# **THE BIBLE: ITS INSPIRATION AND AUTHORITY**

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# INTRODUCTION

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IN ALL AGES THE WORD of God has been attacked by its critics, but the severity of the attack seems to have increased remarkably in recent years. The nature of the assault has however remained the same having two important aspects:

- (1) The inspiration of Scripture is challenged, and
- (2) Its authority is questioned.

The challenge both to its inspiration and authority is centuries old, but it is still very much with us. What is giving much concern, however, is the fact that in the past the challenge has mainly come from liberal theologians, but now many evangelical Christians are raising similar questions. This booklet has been written to encourage our confidence in the Word of God, to give re-assurance that the Bible is God's Word written, and we may hear Him speaking to us from it day by day through the Holy Spirit. Despite the criticisms which assail us from so many sources, we can still be assured that Holy Scripture is the Word of God.

Although many centuries have passed since the authors wrote the originals, and what was written by them has come down to our day by the processes of copying and translation, we need to know that what God has said has not been altered or corrupted to any significant extent. In His sovereignty, He has over-ruled the process of dissemination to ensure that all who may be privileged to read His Words may hear Him speaking, and can ac-

cept this with confidence. This short treatment of the subject is to re-state the view of Holy Scripture's inspiration and authority which is held by the churches of God. It attempts to deal with an extremely complex subject in terms which the ordinary reader may understand, believing that a clear appreciation of the truth is often obscured by the use of certain difficult technical terms.

"By faith we understand ..." (Hebrews 11:3), although used in another context, is the basis of all our understanding of God and of His Word, and the subjects of 'Inspiration' and 'Authority' are no exception. It is our understanding in the churches of God that it is vital to our individual life and witness, as well as to our corporate expression of 'The Faith', that we accept the full inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture. This may not be essential to come to a knowledge of the need for a Saviour and the forgiveness of sins which He alone can give; nevertheless we do believe that any question as to its inspiration dilutes the authority of the Word of God.

While the trumpets of Christendom are sounding an uncertain sound in this respect, we must strike the clear note of belief in its full inspiration and authority. We shall look at the mystery of its inspiration and the process by which it was originally given. We shall also consider the authority which Scripture has, but which is not always acknowledged, even by many Christians; and finally look at how it should be interpreted.

# CHAPTER 1: GOD HAS SPOKEN

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IT IS NOT POSSIBLE for us to know God apart from that which He has revealed to us about Himself. He is the Great Unsearchable; but He has nevertheless graciously revealed Himself to the human race in three ways.

From the beginning, mankind would be able to observe the Universe which God had created, and while it contained much which would be beyond human comprehension, yet it would have been evident to those early inhabitants of the earth that it was the work of a great and mighty Being of infinite power and wisdom. God, then and now, reveals Himself in the things which He has created:

"For the invisible things of Him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even His everlasting power and divinity" (Romans 1:20).

Early in the history of mankind, however, a much more personal revelation by God to men began, and it continued to be given down through the centuries. This was a direct and developing revelation of Himself, which came personally to certain individuals, and through them to others, which progressively revealed His Person, His purposes and His promises. In what is known as the Old Testament God spoke directly to such individuals as Adam, Cain, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, all of whom heard the voice of the Almighty. Later He spoke to Moses, and

through Moses to His people Israel, confirming to them His promises made to their fathers, and giving to them the laws of His Covenant.

Later in the history of Israel He spoke to them through His prophets in judgement and mercy, pleading with them often to repent of their disobedience, and to return to serve Him in the way He so much desired. These messages from God to His people, given in a variety of ways, and in different periods of time, were written down. They became the sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people and form the Old Testament, the first part of our Bible. Then there came the greatest revelation of all when God revealed Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son.

This is described by the writer of the Hebrew epistle:

"God having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by diverse portions and in diverse manners, hath at the end of these days spoken to us in His son." (Hebrews 1:1- 2)

God became a man and lived among men. By His life and words, He spoke to men the message of God's love. Men looked at Him and saw God the Father: they listened to Him and heard God speaking:

"He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9).

"The word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's who sent me" (John 14:24).

The record of His life and teaching was written down by writers under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Incidents in His public life, and His teaching discourses, were all faithfully recorded, and although the mystery of God in human form must forever be beyond human understanding, nevertheless there is an inspired record of the earthly days of the Son of God. The Son's revelation of the Father included the final statement of God's purposes in the Kingdom of God when after Christ's crucifixion, burial and resurrection:

“He shewed Himself alive after His passion by many proofs, appearing unto them by the space of forty days. and speaking the things concerning the Kingdom of God” (Acts 1: 3).

This teaching concerning the Kingdom of God was given to His faithful apostles who in their letters to the churches of God passed on the teaching to those called together of God in those churches. Those letters completed the sacred writings of the New Testament and the revelation of God was finally given. The Faith had been once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 3).

While the creation still speaks its glorious message "for the heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1), yet the personal revelation of the heart of God, and of His love for the human race, came firstly through the prophets of Israel, then by the Person of the Son of and finally through the Son to the Apostles. This revelation is what is contained in our Bibles; a treasure beyond calculation, the Word of God which liveth and abideth (for ever) (1 Peter 1:23).

## CHAPTER 2: THE MEANING OF INSPIRATION

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THE TERM 'INSPIRATION of Scripture' is one which is commonly used. It can be used both to describe the nature of Holy Scripture, and also the process by which it was given. The Word of God is by its very nature 'God Breathed', which describes the unique quality it possesses as God's written Word. The manner by which it came to us is also unique, being the process by which the Holy Spirit caused human authors to record what God wanted to say to men.

The word 'inspiration' is a translation of the Greek word 'theopneustos' (theos = God, and pneo = to breathe). It is found in 2 Timothy 3:16:

"Every scripture inspired of God" (RV).

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God" (AV).

"All scripture is God-breathed" {NIV}.

The word actually means 'breathed out'. The Scriptures are God's words spoken as it were by His own breath. In order to reveal Himself to men, and to tell them of His Son whom He was to send, God spoke in this remarkable way. His words describe His work in creation; record His over-ruling in the affairs of men and nations; reveal progressively His wonderful plan of salvation and provide all the spiritual counsel needed to walk with Him.



## God's Written Word

There is ample evidence in Scripture that the words of God were recorded, as in the Old Testament we read such words as:

"Moses wrote all the words of the Lord" (Exodus 24:4).

"Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the law of God" (Joshua 24:26).

These are but two examples of many similar expressions. The Old Testament is also replete with such expressions as:

"The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His word was upon my tongue" (2 Samuel 23:2).

"Moses ... heard the voice speaking unto him" (Numbers 7:89).

"The Word of the Lord that came unto Hosea" (Hosea 1:1).

The writers of the Old Testament understood that the words they were writing down were 'God breathed'. The writers of the New Testament regarded the words of the Old Testament to have been divinely inspired. The writers of the New Testament also claimed that they wrote the words of God:

"I received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you" (1 Corinthians 11:23).

"I wrote afore in few words ... as it hath now been revealed unto His Holy apostles and prophets" (Ephesians 3:3-5).

"What thou seest, write in a book" (Revelation 1:11).

They were also aware that they were continuing the programme of Divine revelation:

"Our beloved brother Paul also, ... wrote unto you ... as also in all his epistles ... which the ignorant and unsteadfast wrest, as they do also the other scriptures ..." (2 Peter 3:15-16).

We therefore accept that all scripture is God breathed; the Old and the New Testaments being parts of the same revelation.

### **'Plenary' Inspiration**

The adjective 'plenary' is used when speaking about the inspiration of Scripture to emphasize that the whole of Scripture has been inspired, and not just some parts of it as has often been inferred. If only parts of it were inspired, decisions would have to be made as to which parts were, and which were not, inspired. Opinions would vary, and consequently no part of Scripture could be accepted with confidence. Such a possibility is unacceptable since it would effectively destroy the authority of God's Word, in that no portion could be relied upon to be Divine revelation. We must accept by faith that all Scripture is inspired of God, and we in the churches of God affirm our view that this is so.

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16 AV).

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16 NIV).

### **Full Verbal Inspiration**

The term 'full verbal inspiration' is used to describe what is also necessary for us to believe, that not only is every part of Scripture inspired, but that the very words are as God gave them. Even the grammar of the original writings, the tenses of the verbs, and the numbers of the nouns, are exactly what God intended them to be. The following examples illustrate this accuracy:

(a) In Hebrews 12: 26-27 the reasoning of the passage depends upon the accuracy of the expression "yet once more".

(b) The Lord hinged His argument on the importance of the present tense of the verb "I am" in Matthew 22:32.

(c) The Apostle Paul showed that the singular 'seed' in Galatians 3:16 indicated that the seed was Christ.

(d) The careful use of the plural 'you' and the singular 'thee' and 'thou' in the Lord's statement to Peter in Luke 22:31-32.

(e) The use of the different Greek words 'phileo' and 'agapeo' in the Lord's discourse with Peter in John 21:15-17.

Such accuracy indicates that inspiration is not limited only to doctrinal issues or to scriptural principles. It is not just the thoughts and concepts which have been given by God, but every word can be relied upon to be meaningful in conveying revealed truth.

## CHAPTER 3: RESULTING FEATURES OF GOD'S WORD

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HAVING CONCENTRATED our attention on what is meant by God's word being 'inspired', let us now consider some of the results of that inspiration. Holy Scriptures are one thing. A unity, an organism. Although it can be regarded as a collection of writings of various kinds, historical, poetical, legal, prophetic and personal correspondence, it is nevertheless one single work with only one Author, God the Holy Spirit. The integrated nature of the various parts is not readily observed by the casual reader, but it becomes clear when examined diligently by the Holy Spirit's leading. It is not sufficient to say that the Bible contains the Word of God; the Bible is the Word of God.

### **The Nature of Holy Scripture**

Two terms are often used to describe the nature of Holy Scripture. These are: 'infallible' and 'inerrant'. 'Infallible' ascribes to Scripture the nature of its Author. God is infallible. that is. He is incapable of ever making a mistake, of being misleading, or of deceiving anyone. Scripture which comes from the infallible God must be itself infallible, never misleading or capable of deceiving.

'Inerrant' carries the meaning that Scripture is without error of any kind, being wholly and entirely true. The revelation which comes from God to man must be necessarily the truth. Both words are similar in their meaning. and together they assert that the Word of God is totally truthful and trustworthy because its

Author is essentially so. It is essential however to realise that, in expressing the truth, Scripture legitimately contains figures of speech, numerical approximations, free quotations, differing but not contradictory accounts of the same incident and the language of appearances: for example, the sun is said to rise or set because it appears to do so. The use of such literary forms does not detract from truth even though they may lack exact precision.

It is true therefore to assert that the original words of Holy Scripture are infallible and inerrant. In so far as these have been accurately transmitted those same qualities obtain. We believe that God in his sovereignty has watched over His Word throughout the centuries so that the Hebrew and Greek texts, which form the basis of many of our translations, have been remarkably preserved from significant loss or error.

## CHAPTER 4: THE PROCESS OF INSPIRATION

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THE ACTUAL METHOD, or process of inspiration must always remain a mystery. Like so many of the ways of God it is beyond our understanding. It is only by faith that we believe God has revealed Himself in this remarkable way. Inspiration must not be likened to, nor confused with, the kind of inspiration which is often used to describe the accomplishments of men and women of genius. The Word of God was not the product of any enhanced human experience or heightened consciousness. The men who wrote God's Word were not in a trance, nor were they in some exalted state of mind. God caused men to write down what He wanted to say, and in the process did not over-ride their personalities. They carried out their work with their normal abilities.

Nevertheless, these writers were not always aware of the full meaning of what they had written. The Apostle Peter refers to this:

“Concerning which salvation the prophets sought and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: searching what time or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did point unto, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glories that should follow them. To whom it was revealed, that not unto them-

selves, but unto you, did they minister these things” (1 Peter 1:10-12).

God the Holy Spirit allowed the personality and style of expression of each writer to be evident in what they wrote. These men were not automatons, nor was the method used like the automatic writing known to exist in spiritism and the occult, where a demon takes control of the human hand and the personality of the individual is submerged. Rather, they were sanctified vessels for the Lord to use, expressing themselves in the idiom of their day, and of their particular area, as for example the pastoral word pictures of the prophet Amos, a shepherd, or Paul's illustrations of the Roman world. In this way the Word came to people contemporary with the writers, expressed in language and terms which they could understand.



## CHAPTER 5: INSPIRATION ACCEPTED BY THE LORD

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WE REFERRED EARLIER to the unique revelation of God which was expressed in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is called "The Word of God":

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God" (John 1:1-2).

"And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us ..." (John 1:14).

He was truth incarnate, and claimed to have the authority of God the Father for all that He said:

"My teaching is not Mine, But His that sent Me" (John 7:16).

"... for I spake not from myself; but the Father which sent me, He hath given Me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak" (John 12:49).

While much of what He taught was new, He nevertheless accepted, and confirmed, the absolute authority of the Old Testament. He referred on many occasions to the Old Testament writings and accepted them as God's Word, having full authority for Himself and for the things which would take place in His life:

"... how that all things must needs be fulfilled, which are written in the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms, concerning Me" (Luke 24:44).

"For if ye believed Moses, ye would believe Me; for he wrote of Me" (John 5:46).

"Ye search the scriptures ... and these are they which bear witness of Me" (John 5:39).

During the events leading up to His crucifixion He said: "But all this is come to pass, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled" (Matthew 26:56). He demonstrated His acceptance of the historical accuracy of the Old Testament in the description of events, and of people:

- of the creation of Adam and Eve (Matthew 19:4);
- of Noah and the flood (Matthew 24:37-39);
- of Jonah and the great fish (Matthew 12:39-40);
- of Lot's wife (Luke 17:32).

The Lord skilfully used the Old Testament when countering Satan's temptations. Three times on that occasion he quoted from Deuteronomy, each time prefacing the reply with "It is written ..."; "It is written ...:" and "It is said ...:" thereby setting us the example of the accurate use of Scripture in our spiritual warfare. There is no recorded reply from Satan to the Lord's use of the Scriptures indicating perhaps that even the Adversary accepts the supreme authority of the Word of God.

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The Lord also spoke of the eternal and unchangeable nature of Scripture and of how it could never be broken:

"For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law, till all things be accomplished"  
(Matthew 5:18).

"... the scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35).

## CHAPTER 6: INSPIRATION ACCEPTED BY NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS

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IT IS IMPORTANT TO notice that there was also no doubt in the minds of the writers of the New Testament about the status, and the authority of the Old Testament. They clearly accepted it as the Word of God. The Apostle Paul, when referring to God's promises and blessings to Israel wrote: "But it is not as though the Word of God hath come to nought" (Romans 9:6).

He also accepted that the Law was God's commandment when, in the Epistle to the Galatians, he expounded its relationship to the day of grace. Nor had he any doubt about the authenticity of the historical record of the early chapters of Genesis with regard to the fall of man in Eden (Romans 5:12-21). Indeed his whole attitude to the Old Testament is clearly summed up when writing to the church of God at Rome: "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and through comfort of the scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

The writer of the Hebrew epistle quoted freely from the Old Testament and accepted as authentic the references to such persons as Abraham and Melchizedek, and all those men and women of faith mentioned in chapter 11. The Apostle Peter in his discourse recorded in Acts 2:17-21, 25-28, quoted freely from the prophets and the Psalms, as he also did in his first Epistle. When speaking about the living stones being built up a spiritual house

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of God he referred to both the prophecy of Isaiah and Psalm 118 which speaks of Christ as the Chief Corner Stone which the builders had rejected, but which was made the head of the corner:

"Behold, I lay in Zion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: And he that believeth on him shall not be put to shame. The stone which the builders rejected, the same was made the head of the corner" (1 Peter 2:6-7).

The Apostle James, when referring to the prophets, said that: "They (the prophets) spake in the name of the Lord" (James 5:10). He also referred to the person of Job and to his patience (James 5:1). The Apostle John is in no doubt as to the Old Testament scriptures; he calls them the Word of God:

"I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the Word of God abideth in you" (1 John 2:14).

"John ... was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 1:9).

Jude refers in his epistle to several of the apostasies which are mentioned in the Old Testament, naming such individuals as Cain, Balaam, Korah, Enoch and Adam; and exhorted his readers: "Remember ye the words which have been spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude v.17).

In addition to these, many other examples could be given to establish that extensive reference to Old Testament incidents individuals and quotations, together with the frequent exposition of the Old in relation to the New Testament, indicate an acceptance by the New Testament writers that the Old Testament was indeed the Word of God.

## CHAPTER 7: CONFIRMATION FROM FULFILLED PROPHECY

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THE FULFILMENT OF THE prophecies of the Old Testament is another convincing proof of the divine origin and inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. These prophetic utterances did not emanate from the men who wrote them but, as the Apostle Peter said: " ... no prophecy ever came by the will of man: but men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

Particularly impressive are the prophecies concerning the Messiah which were fulfilled during the Lord's life on earth, including the many statements from the Prophets and Psalms which came together at His death, burial and resurrection. Some of these were:

The seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15).

The virgin would conceive (Isaiah 7:14).

The Bethlehem birthplace (Micah 5:2).

The Light would arise in Galilee (Isaiah 9:1-2).

The thirty pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12).

The piercing of the hands and feet (Psalm 22:16).

The parting of His garments (Psalm 22:18).

These are but a few examples, and there are many others. Holy Scripture is replete with prophetic utterances which have been fulfilled, and it is remarkable that the fulfilment of these prophecies never contradicts what has been foretold, the fulfilment is always accurate, although not always complete. Some prophecies of the Old Testament have been partially fulfilled, and will have a final and total fulfilment later. The prophecy contained in Joel 2:28-32 is an example of such a prophecy only partially fulfilled. The Apostle Peter said that the events of the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given were a fulfilment of what Joel had foretold; but it is apparent that Joel was speaking also of a day which is yet to come.

The Lord when He was on earth added His own prophetic statements to those which the Old Testament writers had spoken. The discourses recorded in Matthew 24 and 25 dovetail so clearly with prophecies concerning Israel's future, notably those of Daniel and Zechariah. In fact He referred in particular to Daniel's prophecies in Matthew 24: 15, and also likened the days which would precede His second coming to those of the days of Noah (Matthew 24:37). In prophetic terms, the New Testament continues in the programme of Divine prediction begun by the Old Testament, culminating in the great unveiling, The Revelation given to the Apostle John.

In these remarkable ways, the writings of the Old Testament have been validated and amplified by those of the New Testament, providing positive and conclusive proof that the prophetic scenario is one marvelous revelation of the mind of God, and of His future purposes for Israel and for the nations of the world.



## CHAPTER 8: THE AUTHORITY OF THE WORD OF GOD

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IF THEN IT IS ACCEPTED that God's Word is by nature reliable and trustworthy in every detail, it is necessary for us to regard what it has to say to us as being authoritative. The degree of this authority has not always been agreed by all Christians, and unfortunately today is also being hotly debated by evangelical Christians who in the past generally accepted its full authority. If we agree, however, that the nature of the Word is as we have stated, then there should be no logical doubt about the authority of Holy Scripture being supreme.

This supremacy has however been challenged in every age. At the very beginning of the human race it was challenged and contradicted by Satan: "Yea, hath God said; Ye shall not eat of any tree of the garden? ... ye shall not surely die" (Genesis 3:1-4). Similar questionings about authority are being made today, and we in the churches of God consider it necessary to make a fresh affirmation concerning Holy Scripture. We accept its truthfulness; we rely upon its accuracy, and we give it the place of supreme authority in all matters relating to Christian life and witness, including our corporate testimony.

The deepest divisions which exist between Christians are on matters of doctrine. A notable example was that between the Roman Catholic Church and the leaders of the Reformation in the 16th century. Basically this arose through a fundamental disagreement about the authority of Scripture. The Reformers ac-

cepted Scripture as the supreme and sole authority. The Catholic Church agreed that Scripture was the Word of God, but insisted that God gave revelation also through the Church and that only the Church could correctly interpret Scripture. The Holy Spirit, the Interpreter of God's Word, was therefore reduced to the level of human authority as vested in the Roman Catholic Church.

In modern times the Roman Catholic position remains the same. "Protestants" are deeply divided among themselves, some having rejected the authority of the Bible; others diminishing its authority by discrediting parts of God's Word; yet others accept the Bible as wholly authoritative. This is one reason for the wide variety of doctrine and practice among "Protestant" groups. There is no commonly accepted basis of spiritual authority.

The modern trend towards ecumenism is growing daily. Christians are being urged to come together despite their differences. These differences, however, are immense in their proportions, and are irreconcilable. Any unity which may be achieved can only be the result of papering over the cracks and setting aside the Word of God. Those who elevate to equal status with the Word of God such things as pronouncements by ecclesiastical councils or church traditions have set aside the fact that "The Faith" was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). There are no more revelations to follow; God has spoken in His Son, and that speaking is final.

We therefore feel it is necessary to declare categorically that we believe The Bible is the Word of God, and that it is fully and finally authoritative for the life and faith of the believer. It is the record of the progressive revelation of God, and interprets itself.

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We affirm that it contains all that is necessary for the believer's spiritual guidance; there is not, nor can there be, any further revelation. The Holy Spirit has been given so that we might be enlightened by Him as to its meaning, and so be instructed in all spiritual matters for our life, witness and worship.

## CHAPTER 9: THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

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HAVING ESTABLISHED that all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God, and that as such it must have full authority for every child of God, we must now examine how best it may be interpreted. By this we mean, how best we can understand and apply its teachings, so that it is relevant and meaningful to our individual and corporate lives.

God has chosen to convey His Word to us through a succession of human writers who lived in a whole range of historical periods and in a variety of cultural, social and political backgrounds. They wrote also in a variety of ways producing a divine revelation varied in its composition, comprising a blend of history and prophecy, poetry and parable, as well as straightforward prose. It is nevertheless one whole revelation, but its interpretation must take into account its varied and complex nature.

There are several ground rules by which the interpretation of Scripture must be conducted:

1. We must always remember that the Holy Spirit is the Great Teacher and Interpreter of the Word of God. What better interpreter of Holy Scripture than the Person who was its Author?
2. We must also remember that Scripture interprets Scripture. God cannot contradict Himself in what He has said, although

He may have said it at different periods of history. Scripture principles must be seen as consistent throughout.

3. The New Testament completes the revelation begun in the Old Testament. The two are interwoven in their themes and are united in their meaning. The one interprets the other, thereby exhibiting an agreement which a careful study will demonstrate.

4. It is essential to identify the many themes which run through the whole of Scripture and which are key factors in our understanding of its message. Examples of such themes are: the coming of the Redeemer; the necessity of the shedding of blood for atonement and the truth of the House and Kingdom of God. Others will come to mind.

5. Every text of Scripture must first be studied in the context of the passage in which it is found. Many wrong doctrines and practices have been based upon a text taken out of context and given a meaning which it was never intended to convey. The passage in which the text is found must also be seen in the context of the book to which it belongs: and the book itself must be viewed as part of the whole of God's Word.

Such a study of particular passages of Scripture require therefore an appreciation of the whole outline plan of God's revelation in His Word. A particular book or passage can then be seen in the place it occupies in that total revelation, and its meaning made clearer. The wonderful thing about the study of Holy Scripture is that however broadly one views it, or however minutely it is examined, it has a beauty, and an accuracy, which takes its character from its great Author.

In considering the more detailed examination of Scriptural passages it is necessary to guard against the possibility of isolating a single word from its context, and imputing to it a meaning which it is not meant to convey in that context. Word for word translations do not always take account of the idiomatic or historical use of the word in the primary context, and must be used very carefully.

6. On certain matters upon which one would want to have the mind of the Lord no clear word of Scripture may be found to guide. In such instances it will be necessary to look at the principles which Scripture contains. There are such principles running throughout the Word of God upon which spiritual judgements can be based to meet situations for which no actual text can be found.

7. Not all the Old Testament is written in plain language. On the contrary, some of it is in the language of types and shadows, of proverbs and parables. There are also many areas of poetry, song and prophetic utterances. In the interpretation of such passages of Scripture, although much of it is literal, a misinterpretation can result from trying to find a literal meaning where none is intended. Conversely, to spiritualize, or give a figurative meaning to a statement which is meant to be taken literally is also to miss the point.

The types of the Old Testament are a rich source of teaching on many aspects of the Person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ, and also on the truths of the House and Kingdom of God. A proper interpretation of these is therefore vitally necessary for the people of God today.

8. The interpretation of the prophetic Scriptures also requires great care. The New Testament throws a great deal of light on the prophecies of the Old Testament. Many of these Old Testament prophecies had their fulfilment in the Person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ, but many have a relevance only to the future of the Nation of Israel and to the coming of the Son of Man. The Lord Himself by His own prophetic discourses complemented those which the Old Testament prophets had spoken, and gave a clear indication when and how they would be fulfilled.

The final prophetic unveiling through the Apostle John draws together the threads of the, as yet, unfulfilled prophecies in his great preview of the cataclysmic events which will attend the coming of the Son of Man. The interpretation of any prophecy must be seen in its place in the overall programme of Divine purposes.

### **Cultural and Historical Relativity**

There are some who assert that parts of the Scriptures are not relevant to believers today. They attempt to explain away permanent truths as applicable only to a particular time, or culture. They maintain that Scripture should be interpreted in the light of the historical, social and economic conditions of the time of writing, and that scripture is only completely authoritative for its original recipients. A notable example of this is the controversy about the role of women in the church. It is claimed by some that the teaching of the Apostle Paul about the place of women in the church can only be properly understood against the background of their status in society of that day.

They say that what Paul wrote to the church of God at Corinth was applicable only to those in the church, ignoring the fact that the epistle explicitly states: "unto the church of God which is at Corinth ... with all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place ..." (1 Cor.1:2). To say therefore that some parts of Scripture are not relevant to believers today is a direct challenge to the authority of Scripture. We believe that the principles of Scripture are constant and govern the whole of the New Testament period. The teaching of Scripture applies to Christians today as much as to those of the first century.

In the interpretation and application of any portion of Scripture the first task is to determine its meaning and then to apply the principle to the present-day situation. The cultural and historical background to the portion may provide illumination which may be helpful, and the expression of Scriptural principles may vary between different cultures, but the principles remain constant.

### **Redaction Criticism or Source Criticism**

This is the investigation into the editorial work which the writers the Bible may have done on earlier records. It attempts to trace the sources from which they may have drawn some of their material. For instance: it is claimed that Matthew and Luke made use of material contained in Mark's Gospel. Within certain limits, when used by scholars who have a high view of Scripture, this exercise may contribute something to more precise discernment of the distinctive character of each Gospel writer's witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. But in the hands of many scholars this literary tool has been used to undermine confidence in the authenticity of many portions of Scripture.



We have already observed that Scripture is a complete revelation from God, and the revelation does not lie in its literary sources. If such writers as Matthew and Luke had had access to a common literary source, this would be of interest to specialists in ancient literature, but it has little relevance to Scripture as God's revelation. The Holy Spirit inspired the writers, and whether they were using their own memories or some previously written material, it is not the sources which are God-breathed, but the writers' finished work.

### **Conclusion**

We have emphasised the importance of properly interpreting Holy Scriptures, and of basing our teaching and practice soundly on the Word of God. We realise however that certain aspects of study and research, particularly in the field of the original languages of the Scriptures, will be the preserve of those specially trained for this purpose. Nevertheless, the Word of God can be clearly understood by the 'ordinary' reader who prayerfully reads the Bible, and who looks to the Holy Spirit for the understanding of what it would teach. While this is undoubtedly the case, we would pay tribute to the immense amount of scholarship and painstaking research which God-fearing men throughout the ages have carried out. Much of this is available to us today by which we can be helped to a clearer understanding of the meaning of the text of Holy Scripture.

# APPENDIX: ORIGINAL TEXTS, TEXTUAL CRITICISM AND VERSIONS

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## THE TEXT OF THE OLD Testament

The Old Testament was written originally in the Hebrew language with certain parts in Aramaic. The original manuscripts, none of which exist today, were copied by hand, and since many synagogues of the Jews had their own copies of the Old Testament, a considerable number of such copies were obviously made. Although copying would have been carried out with the utmost care and reverence, it was inevitable that mistakes would be made, and these would have been perpetuated when copies were made of copies. In addition to such copying errors, some copyists made marginal notes by way of explanation of the text, and these were sometimes inadvertently included in the main text when being copied, and so variations were multiplied.

The profusion of such copies and their many variations created the need for a standard text of the Old Testament. As early as 100 AD Jewish scholars produced an agreed Hebrew text, and during the following centuries this text was studied and edited by succeeding generations of editors until a standard Hebrew text of the Old Testament was established. This is known as the MASORETIC text, and it became the standard for all subsequent copies of the Hebrew scriptures. The earliest copy of this standard text of which the age is certainly known is dated 916 AD. (See the Revisers Preface to the Old Testament, 1884).

However, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1948, which scrolls were fragments of manuscripts which had formed part of the library of a Jewish community at Qumran at the north west of the Dead Sea, brought to light manuscripts of the Old Testament which are thought to belong to the period of the last century BC and the first century AD. The most important of these was a complete copy of the prophecy of Isaiah, which when it was compared with the standard Masoretic text, confirmed that the transmission of the Hebrew Scriptures from antiquity to the present day had been accomplished with remarkable accuracy, and with no significant variations or loss.

We can therefore have confidence in our Old Testament knowing that its text is essentially the same as the earliest of the manuscripts, which in turn express accurately what was contained in the original autographs.

### **The Text of the New Testament**

The books of the New Testament were all written in the Greek of the day. While the Old Testament was written in the language of the Jewish people, the New Testament was not to be so confined. The Holy Spirit caused it to be written in what was at the time the day to day language widely used and understood in the Roman world. Although there are variations in the literary styles of the various parts of the New Testament; on the whole the language used is that of the common Greek (the Koine) and not the classical Hellenistic Greek.

Like the manuscripts of the Old Testament, none of the originals of the New Testament is known to exist today, but similarly

many copies were made for use in the churches of God, and no doubt also for use privately. Likewise, although great care would have been taken in copying, errors and omissions occurred, but once again it is a testimony to Divine providence that these are of such a nature that no vital loss or change has taken place.

The most important manuscripts of the New Testament belong to the period of the fourth to sixth centuries AD., but there are some fragment manuscripts which are even earlier. Perhaps the most famous are the Codex Sinaiticus written in the fourth century AD. And the Codex Alexandrinus, written in the fifth century AD., both of which contain the complete New Testament in Greek. These are in the possession of the British Museum in London. The Codex Vaticanus, which as its name suggests is in the Vatican library, is also a complete manuscript of the New Testament dating from about the fourth century AD.

The study of these and of the numerous other manuscripts of the New Testament is a very specialised area of research known as Textual Criticism and many have spent their lives in researching the original text. They have compared and classified the texts of the various manuscripts to produce a text which can be considered to be as near as possible to that which was originally given.

### **Textual Criticism**

Textual criticism is the science of classifying, examining and comparing ancient manuscripts to determine as accurately as possible the original text. It does not have to do specially with the Bible, and is used in the research of all kinds of ancient literature where the original text may have become obscured or

lost. It is a highly specialised field of study involving an immense amount of meticulous examination of ancient documents and learned treatises and must be clearly distinguished from "Higher Criticism", a religious philosophy which questions the inspiration, accuracy and authority of the Scriptures.

As far as the Old Testament is concerned, the problems facing the researchers have not been so difficult as those involved with the New Testament. We have already noted that the Masoretic text was an agreed text produced by a group of Hebrew scholars and is the text from which most translations, even those of modern times, have been taken. It is a well-defined text, and the problems of textual criticism are not so pronounced as they are with the New Testament.

The problem of establishing the Greek text of the New Testament is much more complex but as a result of the tremendous amount of research which has been done, a series of Greek texts have been produced by different scholars. One of these was by Erasmus (1516) which after being revised by Stephens (1550) became the common text used in Great Britain, and was the basic Greek text used for the translation of the New Testament of the Authorised Version of 1611.

### **Textus Receptus**

This is the name claimed for the edition of the Greek Text produced by Elzevir (1624) which was commonly used on the Continent of Europe. In the main, the texts of Stephens and of Elzevir are one and the same, and either may be referred to as the Textus Receptus, or 'Received Text', (See the Introduction to the

Englishman's Greek New Testament). Following the production of the Authorised Version, the Greek text was revised and edited numerous times. Fresh evidence came to light with the discovery of older manuscripts than those previously available. Several textual scholars produced their own editions of the Greek text in the nineteenth century and the need for a revision of the Authorised Version became more and more essential.

The Authorised Version had been the household version of the English-speaking world for 200 years and many of its words and phrases had changed their meanings. In addition the new textual evidence available towards the end of the nineteenth century was such that a revision was begun, and the Revised Version (New Testament 1881, Old Testament 1885) was the result. The Revisers departed from the Textus Receptus because, although it had been corrected from time to time, it had not been subjected to detailed critical examination and comparison with the great mass of early documents, most of which had been discovered since 1611.

The Revisers used a text which was hammered out during the translation process, producing what is known as an 'eclectic' text, one in which the translators exercised choice as between differing documents when doubts arose. It must be stressed however that modern Greek texts do not differ substantially from the Textus Receptus. It has been authoritatively stated that only about a thousandth part of the New Testament is affected by variations of any consequence and that no doctrine is at stake. (Textual Criticism of the New Testament 2nd edition, F.G. Kenyon (MacMillan) pp. 6, 7).

### **The Revised Version**

The Churches of God were wisely recommended to use the Revised Version when it became available. Although it had been strongly criticised, mainly because it was not based on the Textus Receptus, it was, and still is generally acknowledged by Bible Students to be the most accurate version available in the English language. An outstanding feature of the Revised Version, for the Christian who requires a detailed and accurate knowledge of the Scriptures, is its literalness. It keeps as closely as possible, consistent with clarity, to the original writings. The advantage of this is that the reader who knows little Greek or Hebrew can nevertheless gain a better appreciation of the actual words of the inspired writers.

However, because it is a rather literal translation, the word order is at times unfamiliar, and expressions are occasionally used which read strangely. Also, the language tends to be archaic, going back, not only to the late Victorian era, but also to 1611; indeed some phrases owe their origin to John Wycliffe's translation four hundred years before that. Other unfamiliar usages are the Old English personal pronouns and obsolete verb forms.

### **Modern English Versions**

For reasons such as those just outlined attempts have been made over the last century, first by individuals, then by committees of scholars to put the Scriptures into modern English. Many of these versions were unsatisfactory in one way or another, but the New International Version, first published as a complete edition in 1978, soon became popular among evangelical Chris-

tians. The fundamentalist stance of the translators probably had a lot to do with its popularity, but their objective was to make the version easy to understand, and they decided to aim for more than a word for word translation.

This is one of the major differences between the Revised Version and the New International Version, in that while the RV is a fairly literal translation, the NIV consciously abandons this and sets out to help the reader by taking a sentence or phrase as a whole and trying to convey its meaning in modern English. The NIV translators first of all made up their own minds as to the meaning and then put it into plain English. As a result they frequently introduce an element of interpretation rather than translation.

Although recognising that the NIV had certain defects, the Elders of the churches of God in Conference in 1981 were generally agreed that it was the best modern version available and approved it for public reading at assembly gatherings. They strongly recommended however, that the RV should continue to be used for Bible Study. If the NIV alone is used as a basis for study there is the danger that as a Fellowship we might lose certain insights into some aspects of the Truth. A deeper understanding of the Scriptures will only be obtained by using the RV or some other literal version of similar accuracy.

The detailed knowledge of Bible words which can only be gained through consulting lexicons, concordances and similar helps, must begin with the RV or the AV. The less literal style used for translating the NIV does not lend itself to this type of study.

### **Approved Versions**



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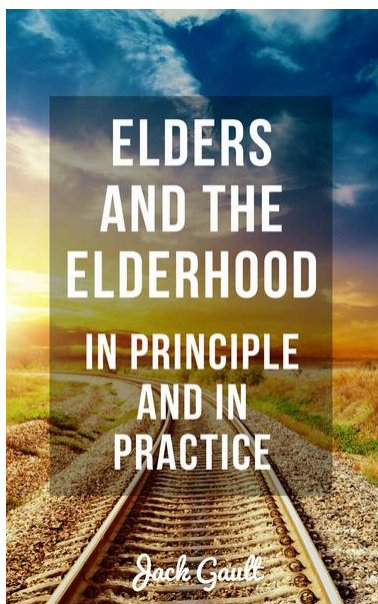
As a result of the Elderhood's consideration of Modern Versions the following have been approved, for the present, as suitable for use in the public meetings of the churches of God.

- The Authorised (King James) Version.
- The Revised Version.
- The American Standard Version.
- The Revised Standard Version (certain editions only).
- The New American Standard Version
- The New International Version
- The English Standard Version

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