



“Understanding the Bible”

Section 2: How Did We Get the Bible?

Unit 2.1: A Display of Divine Inspiration



I) Outlining the Origin of Scripture

- Now that Section One has helped us define what the Bible is, we need to continue our journey here in Section Two to discover how the Bible originally came to be. To faithfully address this issue, we will chart our course for the next six units by navigating through the ten progressive stages of **biblical formation**. Below is a brief outline of these ten stages that we will cover throughout the section:
 - a) **Revelation** – From the mind of God to the hearts of man, God reveals special truth about Himself, His creation, and His eternal plan, speaking to the world through select individuals.
 - b) **Inspiration** – The Holy Spirit superintends the human recording of this revelation through inspired written manuscripts that contain divine truth without any blemish or mixture of error.
 - c) **Duplication** – Scribes carefully reproduce hand-written copies of these ancient documents on several different materials including leather, papyrus, and animal skin parchments.
 - d) **Canonization** – Leaders of the early church recognize the divine marks of inspiration on sixty-six individual books and place this collection of inspired writings into one complete book.
 - e) **Preservation** – Several men endure persecution through numerous historical efforts to destroy the Bible, as God sovereignly protects and preserves His Word to be shared with future generations.
 - f) **Publication** – Through the technology of the Gutenberg Printing Press, Scripture is eventually published through typeset printing and mass quantities are produced and distributed worldwide.
 - g) **Translation** – Practicing the science of textual criticism, scholars produce modern versions of the Greek and Hebrew texts and later translate Scripture into numerous languages of the world.
 - h) **Interpretation** – Having access to God’s Word in a native language, and God’s Spirit to illuminate the text, Christians begin reading, interpreting, and responding to God’s offer of eternal grace.
 - i) **Transformation** – By responding to the Bible’s good news of Jesus Christ through repentance, faith, and obedience, Christians begin a lifelong transformation of becoming more like Christ.
 - j) **Proclamation** – As transformed believers in Christ seek to fulfill the Great Commission, they go out into the world to preach, teach, and distribute the Bible, making Christian disciples of all nations.

II) Where Did We Get the Word “Bible?”

- Before we begin working our way through these steps of biblical formation, we need to first acknowledge how we came up with the word “*Bible*” to describe this collection of divinely-inspired writings. This English word *Bible* comes from the Greek word *Biblion*, which means “**book**.” *Biblion* is a derivative of the word *Byblos*, which is another name for *Papyrus*. Ironically, Papyrus was the original material that Scripture was written on, as a reed plant that was grown along the marshy banks of the Nile River in Egypt. When scholars were first reproducing Scripture, they used multiple sheets of papyrus spliced together and wound around wooden dowels to make scrolls. This type of scroll was called a *biblos* in Greek, and thus the English term *Bible* became the defining term for this divine book.

III) Recording Revelation Through Divine Inspiration

- In Section One we discussed the primary purpose of the Bible being God’s self-revelation of personal and propositional truth. While revelation was the final product recorded in Scripture, **inspiration** is the process by which this information traveled from the mind of God to the words of God’s book. Christians often confuse the concepts of revelation and inspiration, so the following distinctions should be helpful: Revelation is the what, the content, the message, and the product; Inspiration is the how, the conveyer, the means, and the process.

IV) Thinking Through Theories of Inspiration

- Although most Bible-believing Christians acknowledge that Scripture is inspired, there are many different theories that seek to define what this concept of inspiration means. Below are six of the most common theories that have been developed throughout church history:
 - a) **Natural Theory** – The Bible is not supernaturally inspired, but just “inspiring” like classic literature
 - b) **Illumination Theory** – The biblical authors were “inspired” just like us when we study the Bible
 - c) **Neo-Orthodox Theory** – The Bible is not God’s Word unless He uses the text to speak to someone
 - d) **Dynamic Theory** – Scripture only contains God’s words in areas of salvation, faith, and daily practice
 - e) **Mechanical Dictation Theory** – Scripture was dictated word-for-word to passive human instruments
 - f) **Verbal Plenary Theory** – Every word of the Bible was superintended by God but also written through the unique personalities of human authors and contains divine truth without human error.
- The **Verbal Plenary** Theory is the standard view of orthodox Christianity because it has the most biblical support. The word *plenary* means “complete or full” and term *verbal* simply means “words.” Therefore, a verbal plenary approach to inspiration means the entirety of Scripture, down to every word, is fully-inspired by the Holy Spirit, yet also written through distinctive human personalities. So, just like Christ as the *incarnate* Word of God is fully divine and fully human, the Bible as the *written* Word of God is also fully divine and fully human.

V) Balancing the Bookends of Inspiration

- **2 Timothy 3:16** and **2 Peter 1:20-21** are the two bookend passages in the New Testament that offer us a well-balanced view of biblical inspiration. First, in 2 Timothy 3:16 we read, “*All Scripture is breathed out by God.*” This portrait of inspiration could better be described as “*expiration*” because it means the very words of Scripture come right out the mouth of God. When Paul says that *all* Scripture is God-breathed, this also means that God not only inspired the writers who wrote the Bible, but He inspired the actual text of Scripture itself. 2 Peter 1:20-21 offers us even more clarity on divine inspiration when the Apostle Peter states, “*Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*” This idea of being “*carried along*” by the Holy Spirit does not mean God *dictated* every word for the authors to write, but by superintending the entire process He intentionally *guided* every word as it was written through the unique personalities of each writer.

VI) Surveying the Scale of Inspiration

- If we were to view the full scale of biblical inspiration like the expanding and contracting of an accordion, we could say that inspiration extends to the writing of Scripture (not merely the idea), the words of Scripture, the tenses of the verbs, the letters of the words, and the smallest parts of the letters. Jesus pointed to the divine nature of the smallest unit of Scripture in **Matthew 5:17-18** when He said, “*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.*”

VII) Examining the Expressions of Inspiration

- The diversity of biblical genres also reflects the diversity of **expressions** through which the Holy Spirit inspired each human author. God spoke to these writers through many forms including direct dialog (Exodus 20), dreams (1 Kings 3), visions (Daniel 10), guided historical research (Luke’s gospel), and personal letters of admonition to individuals and churches (from Paul and others).

VIII) Setting Sail with the Spirit

- The concluding illustration of a **sailboat** might best summarize this concept of biblical inspiration. Concerning the guiding work of God’s Spirit, Michael Green says, “*The prophets raised their sails, so to speak, and the Holy Spirit filled them and carried their craft along in the direction He wished. Men spoke: God spoke. Any proper doctrine of Scripture will not neglect either part of this truth.*”