

1 What's special about the Bible?

Several years ago a young man was attempting to beat the world record for riding on a Ferris wheel. He was provided with a telephone. After several days going round in circles, having beaten the record, he was asked if anyone had telephoned him. 'Only the nutters,' he replied.

If the Bible is merely a collection of ancient religious writings, then those who spend a great deal of time and effort studying it may well be classed as nutters. Such a study is only really worthwhile if it is true that the Bible is inspired by God.

'Inspiration'

What do we mean when we talk about the Bible being 'inspired'? We may talk about a musician giving an inspired performance, or a painter or sculptor producing an inspired work. What we usually mean in such cases is that the artist achieved a high level of skill and artistry.

This is not what we mean when we talk about the Bible being inspired. Though parts of it are wonderful poetry and memorable words, other parts are not. In some places the writers of the Bible even seem to have gone a bit wobbly with their grammar! Whatever skill the writers displayed, this is not what we mean by their 'inspiration'.

What we mean is that the Bible comprises God's message to us. Its words are the words of God. This book (we believe) declares with truth and authority what is to be known about God. It declares to us what God wants us to know. It speaks to us with the voice of God himself.

Why believe it to be inspired?

Why should anyone believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God? It is true that the Bible itself claims to be God's word, but we cannot depend on these claims alone. To do so would be circular reasoning. We would be saying, in effect, 'The Bible says it is the word of God, so what it says is true, and therefore it is correct when it says it is the word of God.' This gets us nowhere.

Other religions claim that their scriptures are inspired. Why should we believe the Bible rather than, say, the Koran or the Book of Mormon?

There are various reasons for considering some book to be special. It may be that it has been recommended to you by someone you respect highly—your parents, a beloved grandmother, a church leader you know well. Perhaps they have read the book daily and have found it a great help in their lives, so you decide to read it and follow what it says.

The trouble with this reason is that it is no better than second-hand. Isobel Kuhn was later to become a pioneer missionary to tribal groups in South-East Asia. When

she first went to college, her modernist professor discovered that she believed the Bible. 'Oh, you just believe that because your papa and your mama told you so,' he told her. She realized that this was so, and for several years she backslid from her Christian faith. (*By Searching*, OMF, 1957)

Maybe you consider that the teachings which the scriptures contain are of a very high moral standard, second to none in all the philosophies of the world. You may think what a good world it would be if only everyone obeyed what you find in this book. So you decide to study it and follow its precepts.

The difficulty here is that it relies on you being a judge of morality. On further inspection, you may feel that some parts of the Bible are highly moral, but others do not come up to your standards. You may respect the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, but feel less happy about what Leviticus and Romans have to say about homosexuality, for instance. How can you regard a book as God's authoritative word to mankind when it stands or falls by your opinion of it?

It could be that you have studied the ancient manuscripts in great depth and have come to see that they must be genuine and authentic. Not many of us have carried out such a study. Hardly any of us are equipped to do so. However, it may be that you have read of others who have spent their lives in such research and who have concluded that this book is unique. You trust their work, and decide that you also will take this book for your guide.

In the Alpha Course (Holy Trinity Brompton) evidence is presented to show that the manuscripts for the Bible give a much stronger foundation for the text than those for any other ancient work. This is a good and necessary exercise. However, this in itself cannot be a basis for taking the Bible as God's word (as the originators of the Alpha Course would, I am sure, be the first to admit). The manuscripts may be numerous, they may match each other well, they may describe contemporary events with historical accuracy—but this might also be true of other books. If you find good documentary evidence for the Trojan War, will you believe in the Greek gods? If you find that Caesar's *Gallic Wars* is well-attested, will you base your life on the Romans' religious practices?

If we are to accept the Bible as God's unique word, fit to live and die by, we need better reasons than these.

The best reason

The reasons mentioned above may be good enough for you to consider this book as better than any other book. They are valuable in helping you to consider the claims of inspiration, although they are not sufficient to show that it is inspired.

The point is that the Bible is not merely a book about God: it is intended to bring us into personal dealings with God. Those who have the best reason to consider that the Bible is the inspired word of God are those who have come into a relationship with him, and who know from first-hand experience that what the Bible says about God is true.

The Bible declares that you may come into a life-changing relationship with God through Jesus Christ. For example, Jesus prayed to the Father, ‘This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent’ (John 17:3). John tells us why he wrote his gospel: ‘These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.’ (John 20:31) Perhaps you have done this. You have experienced his forgiveness and peace. Maybe you have known the fulness of the Holy Spirit and have tasted joy and delight, and a close intimacy with God. Then you read the Bible and find that what you have discovered in personal experience is written down there already. You find that the scripture gives you a perfectly reasonable explanation for what has been happening in your own life. What is more, you find that the promises given within this book can be relied on as trustworthy. You can depend on them, and find them working out in reality. You then come to see that the Spirit who is at work in your life must be the same Spirit who caused the Bible to be written.

Computer programmers faced with a new piece of computer technology usually start out by trying things to see how it works. Some attempts are successful, but mysteries remain. It is at this stage that the programmer’s proverb is called into play: ‘When all else fails, read the manual.’ The manual confirms that the successes which have been achieved are indeed what the software is intended to do. Further, it describes how other things might be accomplished. The programmer then tries these out and discovers that they work. In a similar way, the Bible confirms what we have found in our own experience, and indicates other things which are true and will work. (In fact, it does this very much more plainly than many computer manuals do!)

Though the deciding factor for believing in the Bible needs to be personal experience, that does not mean that there is no place for objective evidence or thoughtful discernment. Reason alone will not bring you to Christ, but becoming a Christian does not mean you have to throw away your mind.

The view of Jesus

If we have come to know Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord, then as followers of him we will want to maintain the same attitude towards the Bible as he had. In fact, there are some who would say that our authority is Jesus rather than the Bible, as he is truly the Word of God. Either way, we need to find out what Jesus thought of the scriptures.

You may think that this is the circular reasoning mentioned above, finding out what the Bible says about the Bible. This is not the case. Jesus’ words recorded in the New Testament are about the Bible which Jesus knew, which was the Old Testament.

Jesus is reported as saying that ‘the Scripture cannot be broken’ (John 10:35). Throughout the gospels he quotes the Old Testament as authoritative: ‘It is written’

(Matthew 4:4, 7, 10; 21:13; 26:31 etc.) Jesus as depicted in the New Testament undoubtedly referred to the Old Testament as if it were inspired.

Could this be simply because Jesus was a man of his own time? Was it because he grew up surrounded by those who believed in the inspiration of the Bible, and so he accepted its authority unthinkingly? Should we be expected to know better in this day and age?

Alternatively, could it be that Jesus adopted this position because throughout his earthly life he was speaking to those who accepted the authority of the Old Testament? Paul relates how he conformed to the situation of those around him so that he might win them (1 Corinthians 9:19–22), concluding, ‘I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.’ Perhaps this was Jesus’ motivation, which caused him not to question the Old Testament for the sake of those around him, rather than based on his own personal conviction?

The truth is that Jesus did not always conform to the views of those surrounding him. He taught the scriptures as one who had authority, and not as their scribes (Matthew 7:28–9). He did not confine himself to the bare word of the scriptures, as the Pharisees might, but ventured beyond it. For instance, he asserted that there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah (Luke 4:25) and many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha (Luke 4:27), things which the Old Testament does not tell us. His treatment of the scriptures was amazingly radical.

Jesus’ dealings with the Sadducees show more about his views. The Sadducees only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch), and denied the doctrine of the resurrection (Matthew 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27). Jesus answers them from the Pentateuch (Exodus 3:6; Matthew 22:32; Mark 12:26; Luke 20:37). However, Jesus states that the reason why they are wrong is ‘because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God’ (Mark 12:24). He then proceeds to give an exposition of Exodus 3:6 which by its discernment and radicalness leaves them astonished (Matthew 22:33). Are these the words of someone who only accepts the authority of the scriptures in order to conform to the views of those around him?

The Bible’s claim

There are claims within the Bible that the Bible is inspired. This is not as circular as it sounds. These claims serve to bind the whole Bible together. It is hard to take one part as inspired and not another, if the one part you approve declares that another part is true. It is perhaps fair to say that it is easier to accept the inspiration of the whole of the Bible, or of none of the Bible, than it is to suppose that only one part is inspired.

Throughout Acts and the epistles the authors quote the Old Testament as authoritative. Paul affirms that all scripture is ‘God-breathed’ (2 Tim. 3:16). Peter seems to link Paul’s letters with the Old Testament scriptures (2 Peter 3:16).

The 66 books comprising the Bible as we know it have historically been recognised as inspired by God by Christians through the ages. This is not just a matter of traditions held by the major churches. Those who come to put their trust in Christ as their personal Saviour have in the main acknowledged the canon of scripture as applying to these books and no others.

The nature of inspiration

If the Bible is indeed the inspired word of God, how did God inspire it? There is still something of the authors' personality and style evident in the manuscripts. This is apparent even in translation, as you can see by comparing the matter-of-fact style of Acts, for instance, with the very different style of John's first epistle (the kind of writing you might expect from a very old man). So the underlying message which God wants to get across is not affected by the individual style of the writer.

If the Bible were to be written for the first time nowadays, and the language used were to be English, you could imagine various books being produced by very different writers. One book might be written by someone from the south of England who was well-educated and who had had a classical education. Another could be written in Yorkshire dialect. A third could be written by an American. Apparently, this would be of little concern to God, who could speak his word no matter what the style used by the writer.

Just the very words?

Some would contend that the very words (and all the words) of the Bible are the only ones possible; the ones decreed and chosen by God.

Certainly, any view of true inspiration would need to include an assurance that God prevented the *wrong* words from being used. Wrong words would give the wrong message. But was every individual word selected by God? This idea leaves us with a number of problems.

It is hard to imagine that the original style of the writers could be preserved if the very words were decreed by God as the only ones to be used. In various thrillers (usually spy stories) the hero, captured by the villain, is forced to write a letter dictated to him. But when the letter is received by his friends, it can be seen that the style is not typical of the hero, and the document is therefore suspect. If the villain were very clever, he might try to dictate the letter in exactly the style which the hero would himself use. Is this what God is supposed to have done? Are we to suppose that when Acts was written God chose all the words, but made sure that when put together they were in the style of writing which Luke, the author, always used? Does this seem likely?

If we believe in verbal inspiration, then there is another problem we must face. If the original words of the Bible were all inspired, then we need to ask whether we still have all those words. For the most part, it seems that we do, but there are some exceptions. 1 Samuel 13:1 reads as follows: 'Saul was [thirty] years old when he

became king, and he reigned over Israel for [forty-]two years.' A footnote indicates that the words in brackets are missing from the Hebrew.

No-one is likely to lose much sleep over the loss of the words in this verse. However, they do indicate that we do not quite have all the words which were once there. As a student, the basis of faith of my Christian Union was that we believed in the inspiration of the Bible 'as originally given.' Since we do not exactly have the Bible 'as originally given', this statement loses much of its value.

It has been said that the differences and omissions of the original manuscripts of the Bible make no difference to the doctrines. The problems are minimal, but they do serve as a caution if we are depending on the inspiration of the original words. Does it seem likely that God would choose the very words, yet not ensure that those very words would be available to us?

What about translation?

There is a much greater problem still for those who consider that the very words are all inspired. The inspired words would then be those used by the original writers, Hebrew in the Old Testament (with some passages in Aramaic), and Greek in the New Testament. How can these words be translated without losing the inspiration?

Words in one language almost never correspond exactly to words in another language. If they did, machine translation would be easy. An early attempt at translation by computer took an English sentence, translated it into Russian, and then translated it back again to see how the process was going. This caused the sentence 'The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak' to come back as 'The whisky is agreeable but the meat is bad.'

Sometimes the lack of equivalence between words means that a footnote may be needed in our translations. John 3:8 reads, 'The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear the sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.' This leaves us missing one fact which is apparent to anyone reading this verse in the original Greek. The word 'wind' and the word 'spirit' represent the same Greek word, *pneuma* (which has given us the word 'pneumatic').

If the words themselves are God's choice, and inspiration is vitally linked with this, then translation from one language to another is really impossible without losing the inspiration. (It has been said by some followers of Islam that the Koran cannot properly be translated, and should be read only in Arabic.)

The New Testament writers were quite willing to use a translation of the Old Testament. They wrote, of course, in Greek, and their quotations from the Old Testament were not usually from the Hebrew/Aramaic original, but from the Septuagint Version, a Greek translation. Jewish scholars in Alexandria had produced this version. (Tradition said that there were 70 scholars, hence the name 'Septuagint' meaning 'seventy'.) The fact that the New Testament writers were happy to use this translation (which at times does not stick as closely as it might to

the original language) shows that they were not excessively particular about the very words of the original.

Sometimes, it must be admitted, the actual words used *are* vitally important. An example is Galatians 3:16, quoting Genesis 12:7. Stress is laid here on the fact that the word 'seed' (in Hebrew or Greek) is singular, not plural. So one might say that not just the word but the very plural aspect of the word is inspired. It is at times when the actual wording is vital that translation becomes most difficult. This Galatians verse, for instance, causes the translators of the Revised Standard Version to use the word 'offsprings', which is hardly current English. The New International Version gives the rendering 'seeds', which is true to the Greek, but which we do not use when referring to descendants. One cannot say that there is any one correct translation. Both renderings have something to be said for them.

At other times the writers do not seem overly concerned with the minutiae of wording. Paul, describing the events at the last supper, quotes Christ as saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood' (1 Corinthians 11:25). Matthew and Mark give the wording as, 'This is my blood of the covenant' (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; some manuscripts have 'new covenant'). Does it make any difference? No, because the meaning is the same.

Meaning more than words

This seems to me to lie at the centre of the nature of inspiration. God inspired the *meanings*, so that they should be right. Different authors have phrased these as they found best. Others may quote them using slightly different words. Translations may be made into other languages. The important thing is that the meaning should be conveyed intact, not necessarily that the very words should be preserved.

Meaning is sometimes conveyed by a single important word, but more often than not it is conveyed by a string of words. The sentence 'She has it in for him' conveys a meaning of antagonism which is not carried by any individual word within it. One may change the words (using the same language or even another language) and not destroy the essential meaning. It is this meaning which I believe is more important than individual words. It is the meaning which (I believe) God inspired and preserved.

The inspiration of the Bible is, it seems to me, seen not merely in individual words or phrases, but in the overall sweep of the scriptures when they are interpreted in a sensible, self-consistent manner. This means that if we are to get the true benefit from the Bible we need to be able to interpret it in this kind of way. Easier said than done! How can you interpret the Bible aright? It is to this problem which we must now turn.