

Chapter 2: The Doctrine of the Bible

The doctrine of the Bible (bibliology) encompasses several concepts that require definition and explanation. Among the most important are inspiration, inerrancy, infallibility, and canon. While they are conveniently examined under the umbrella category of the doctrine of the Bible, each of these terms can be referred to as doctrines as well.

Inspiration

The doctrine of inspiration is not something people have imposed on the Bible. Rather, the Bible claims inspiration in its own pages. That said, there has been much disagreement on just how to describe the concept.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 is of fundamental importance for the doctrine of inspiration. It is from this passage that the English-speaking world coined the term “inspired” to describe the Scriptures as the word of God.

¹⁶All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (ESV)

The English “breathed out” is a translation of the Greek term *theopneustos*, which literally means “God-breathed.” The proposition put forth by v. 16 is that “all Scripture is God-breathed.” What does that mean? First, the description of God’s role in producing Scripture is an anthropomorphism (attributing human characteristics to God or describing God in terms of human activity). God doesn’t literally have lungs, nor does he breathe, as though he requires oxygen to live. The idea is akin to what we read in Genesis 2, the capstone event in creating human life—giving breath to the man, Adam, so that he became a living creature in God’s image (Gen 2:7; cp. 1:26-28). “God-breathed” speaks of point of origin or ultimate source, not really a specific mode of production. Second, the text is clear that *all* Scripture is in view as having divine origin. There is no suggestion that “God-breathed Scripture” and “Scripture” are two separate categories. There is also no hint that some books of the Bible are more God-breathed (“inspired”) than others. This flawed idea extends from the mistake of applying the word “inspired” to the writers, not the writings. The Bible affirms the latter are God-breathed, not the former, as though biblical figures who are prominent in the Bible were somehow “more led” by God than lesser known, or even anonymous writers (e.g., Joshua claims no authorship).

The word translated “Scripture” is *graphē*. It occurs more than fifty times in the New Testament, always in reference to some part of the Bible. Importantly, this is true not only of the entire Old Testament (Luke 24:45; John 10:35), but the term is also used of New Testament books. For example, 2 Peter 3:16 refers to Paul’s writings as Scripture in the same breath as the Old Testament. 1 Timothy 5:18 is of related importance (“For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages’”; ESV). As Ryrie notes, “In 1 Timothy 5:18 Paul combined an Old and a New Testament reference and designated them both as Scripture. The Old Testament quotation is from Deuteronomy 25:4, and the New Testament one is Luke 10:7 (although that sentiment is found in Lev. 19:13 and Deut. 24:15, Luke was clearly not quoting either verse; indeed, the emphasis in Lev. 19 and

Deut. 24 is on not withholding wages overnight).”¹ The significant point here is that the Old Testament and New Testament are put on equal footing in regard to being called “Scripture” and thus being “God-breathed”). Extending inspiration to “all Scripture” in biblical thought means that inspiration extends to the very words of the biblical books of both testaments—and not beyond. The Bible does not use the language of inspiration for books outside those recognized by the believing community to extend from the work of a biblical prophetic writer (see below on “Canon”).

An important qualification is necessary at this point on our way to defining inspiration. We must be careful to avoid defining “God-breathed” as some mystical or paranormal experience whereby God or the Holy Spirit whispers each word into the ear of the writer, as though the Scripture authors were robotic stenographers of some disembodied dictation process. This sort of divine dictation view means that the intellects and abilities of the authors played no role in producing the Bible.

Scripture itself defies this approach in many ways. For example, there are four gospels. Three of them (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) share most of the material. This is why they are known as the three “synoptic” gospels, a term that expresses the fact that the content is largely the same, so much so that they can be read together in harmony. But when one reads through these gospels, one soon realizes that the material, though largely the same, is often not presented in the same order or style. In addition, dialog within the same scenes may also change, and there is entirely new material alongside the shared material. If the Spirit was whispering the words into the ears of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, why would he behave in such a manner create these circumstances? Why would the Spirit change what was whispered to one author in account of the life of Jesus and then re-arrange that material, or add or subtract from it, for the next gospel writer? Further, the dictation idea removes the creativity of the authors. In Luke 15, for instance, Luke relates Jesus’ parable of the lost sheep, but arranged it into what is known as a chiasm, where elements of the parable intentionally parallel each other (Luke 15:1-6). In this case, the result highlights the theme of the parable: restoration:²

- A. Which one of you
- B. one
- C. ninety-nine
 - 1. the lost
 - 2. find
 - 3. joy
 - 4. restoration
 - 3’. joy
 - 2’. find
 - 1’. the lost
- A’. I say to you
- B’. one
- C’. ninety-nine

If the Spirit simply dictated all the words, literary artistry like this would be equally present in all the same places, but reading the synoptic gospels makes it quite clear that isn’t the case. The Old Testament

¹ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 77.

² Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 151.

also has synoptic books: 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles. Comparing 1-2 Chronicles to the books of Samuel and Kings reveals they cover the same historical eras of ancient Israel, but Chronicles is intentionally selective with the episodes of the life of David and Solomon. David's sin with Bathsheba, for example, is not found in the Chronicles version of his life. There is also evidence of editing, seen most prominently in the Old Testament. One clear example is the opening of Ezek 1:1-3. The author changes grammatical person several times in these verses—sometimes speaking as Ezekiel, at other times referring to Ezekiel in the third person. This makes no sense in a dictation view, but perfect sense if God guided human hands to fashion Ezekiel's sermons and life into a readable book. Sometimes biblical writers quoted books that are not in the Bible to make some point (Num 21:14; Josh 10:13; Jude 14-15 [citing 1 Enoch 1:9]; 1 Cor 15:33 [citing the poet Menander]), or recite an episode in Israel's history and update the name of a place for later readers (Gen 28:19; Josh 18:13). There are literally hundreds of such examples in the pages of Scripture that make a dictation view completely unworkable. "God-breathed" cannot mean "dictated" or "whispered in the ear" of the author. The Bible is not a channeled book like so many cults and occult movements suggest for their own leader's writings.

The importance of 2 Peter 1:21 must also be noted. Its significance is not immediately evident from English translation: "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" (ESV). The reference to "prophecy" is in one sense a reference to the Old Testament prophets. "Prophecy" in biblical thought is not predominantly about predicting the future ("foretelling") but about preaching ("forth-telling"). This is why the content of the Old Testament prophets is primarily sermonic, not predictive. Prophets were covenant enforcers, preaching to God's people to live in according with the covenants made by God between himself and his people. More broadly, a prophet in biblical terms was any spokesperson for God, calling people to faithful obedience or repentance.³

The reference in 2 Pet 1:21 points to Old Testament figures who spoke, and ultimately wrote, the words of God to the people of God. None of their material, Peter tells us, derived *exclusively* from the minds of the authors. They spoke for God, and what they spoke we know because it was also put into writing by active, engaged authors, not passive, hypnotized men who were only stenographers. What is less evident is that the English words "produced" and "carried along" come from the same Greek verb, *pherō* ("to carry, bear"). What we have in 2 Pet 1:21 is an expression of both sides of the inspiration question. Human authors bear responsibility to write, or produce the text, but at the same time they are assisted and guided by the Holy Spirit. One scholar notes, "We have strong biblical support here for what [theologian] B. B. Warfield called *concursum*. Both human beings and God were fully involved in the process of inspiration. The personality and gifts of the human authors were not squelched or suppressed. We can detect their different literary styles even today. And yet the words they spoke do not cancel out the truth that they spoke the word of God. *Concursum* means that both God and human beings contributed to the prophetic word. Ultimately, however, and most significantly, these human words are God's words."⁴

³ See Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*, First Edition. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 232-240.

⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37 of *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 324.

The point to be made is that 2 Pet 1:21 does not teach dictation of the biblical text. Human authors produced the text—but ultimately, credit for the biblical text must go to God’s Spirit. God was responsible for preparing the authors for their task and influencing them in their task, but did not overtake their minds and abilities, turning them into passive vessels into which the words of Scripture were implanted. Human authors were active and so was God.

In 1 Cor 2:13 Paul comments on his preaching ministry to the Corinthian church, as well as what he was writing (and *had* written at an earlier time; see 1 Cor 5:9). Paul says, “we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual” (ESV). The apostle’s comment extends the assistance of the Spirit (cf. 2 Pet 1:21) in giving special revelation, the Scriptures, to the very words. Inspiration concerns the actual written words, not merely the thoughts of the writer.

Describing Inspiration

It is my view that inspiration is better described than defined. All Scripture comes from God. Inspiration extends to the very words of Scripture, not just the concepts or ideas the written word conveys. And yet the human authors, while assisted, were not passive robots in a dictation process. How do we fit these items together and describe inspiration?

The key to describing inspiration, in my judgment, is to describe it as a process, not a single event or series of overt, spectacular supernatural encounters. “God-breathed” is best understood as “God-originated.” That is, 2 Tim 3:16 informs us that all Scripture has its ultimate origin in the activity of God. For sure divine encounter may be part of what a prophet or apostle experienced, but it is a mistake to equate “God-originated” only with encounter events.

Inspiration involved preparing each writer—each hand that ever contributed in any way to the final product of each biblical book—for the tasks God wanted them to perform. This perspective has God operating from a sustained interest in every writer or editorial scribe through the course of their lives to ensure that the Scripture produced was what God wanted produced. God sovereignly oversaw each contributor’s upbringing, education, life experiences, etc. to prepare them for the occasion the Spirit would prompt them to produce or fashion the text of Scripture. In this way, each contributor did his work according to his own creative abilities, but God receives the credit for what was produced. A writer’s use of sources, literary creativity, tailoring content to specific genres or an audience, and editorial work (a biblical book was not written in one pass) are accounted for in this perspective. God was not passive or indifferent to his authors when he wasn’t encountering them in more dramatic ways. Rather, God was engaged in molding them for the great task throughout their lives. This sustained providential activity of God and his Spirit, behind the scenes as it were, describes inspiration.

Inerrancy and Infallibility

Two other terms associated with the doctrine of the Bible are inerrancy and infallibility. Bray writes, “A great deal has been written about the inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy of Holy Scripture, though only the first of these terms is found in the Bible itself. Infallibility and inerrancy are best viewed as logical deductions from the principle of divine inspiration.”⁵ The rationale is that if the Bible is truly inspired, its contents would be without error (“inerrant”) and therefore never wrong in what it teaches (“infallible”). Otherwise, readers would be led astray. The difference between the two terms (at least for

⁵ Gerald Bray, *God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 55.

some theologians) is that infallibility is a word used to assert that the Bible does not *teach* error, whereas inerrancy puts forth the notion that the Scriptures do not *contain* error.

This chain of thought appears reasonable, but problems are also obvious. Bray adds: “Arguments of this kind make logical sense, but they come up against the obvious objections that we do not possess the original manuscripts and that all the copies we have contain errors of various kinds. This means that no truly ‘inerrant’ text exists, but that does not necessarily imply that the copies we have are misleading and says nothing at all about whether they are inspired by God.”⁶ At the outset, then, inerrancy must proceed on the assumption that scholars have successfully been able to determine what the original biblical text said in every place, or at least in every place where some point of truth is at stake. This task is known as textual criticism—the painstaking comparison of all manuscript differences. In the vast majority of instances, the problem of manuscript variation is of little consequence (Did the original text say “Jesus went to the temple” or “Jesus visited the temple”?). No truth proposition is at stake in a question like this. Nevertheless, there are places where the divergence in what manuscripts say could be meaningful and require attention. Modern study Bibles will typically add footnotes to such verses, informing readers that scholars cannot reach a consensus about what the text said when originally composed.

More serious than manuscript differences, however, are challenges to whether something the Bible teaches is historically true. If some point of biblical teaching is presented that does not conform to reality, then that point may be construed by someone as an error. For example, were Adam and Eve real, historical figures? Did the miracles described in the Bible really happen? Questions of this nature further introduce the complicating factor of how what possible answers are acceptable and what methods should be used to attempt an answer. The modern scientific mind wants truth determined by observation and repeatability, but neither of these examples are repeatable. While they appear to conflict with scientific knowledge, that may not actually be the case.⁷ One cannot go back in time to confirm these things by observation. The tools of science are therefore unable to address the question adequately. We are once again in the realm of apologetics, a subject that is well beyond the scope of this book. Philosophers, Christian or not, have shown that the tools of philosophy (e.g., logic) can be mounted to defend the existence of God and, in tandem with his existence, the proposition that the Creator can interrupt the laws of creation to perform the miraculous. There is no logical obstacle to a God who can create from nothing being able to intervene in creation to perform a miracle. The coherence of creatorship largely extends from the failure of science to produce a coherent alternative to an external cause for the universe and all we know of in creation. This “First Cause” coherence problem is perhaps why many scientists embrace Christianity.⁸

Historians and archaeologists also deserve mention. Many would object to the notion that the Bible contains historical, factual errors. In some instances, though, debates over historicity depend on how one defines an error, a requirement that lacks a consensus among scholars. How can one agree on

⁶ Ibid., 55.

⁷ For example, leading geneticist S. Joshua Swamidass affirms the evolutionary record produced by genetic data but also affirms the validity of a historical Adam and Eve. See S. Joshua Swamidass, *The Genealogical Adam and Eve: The Surprising Science of Universal Ancestry* (IVP Academic, 2019).

⁸ To cite one instance of supporting this claim, see the American Scientific Affiliation (<https://network.asa3.org/page/ASAAbout>), an academic society composed of thousands of PhDs in the hard sciences who are also Christians. The list of believing scientists of course widens when one defines inclusion by theism, which means Jews, Muslims, Unitarians, become part of the picture. It is simply a fallacy to promote the idea that science and belief in a creator are incompatible.

errancy or inerrancy if one cannot agree on what constitutes an error? Is the Bible allowed to use the language of appearances, as we do in everyday expressions like “I watched the sun rise today”? What exactly is the measure of historical reliability? Multiple sources? Unbiased reporting? Is historicity only valid when external sources are available? Are bias and reliability really incompatible? Just because a record is not exhaustive doesn’t mean what is known is errant. Further, are our standards for historicity something we live by in our own lives? How many of us could “prove” our recollected account of our wedding day, or the day our first child was born? Such a day includes numerous conversations that were never recorded. Conversations certainly included opinion and bias—does that bias mean the words were never uttered? If we cannot recall every specific word does that mean our recollection is unreliable? One last problem is that of honesty in method. Biblical critics are especially fond of rejecting the Bible as a historical source because it has God as the cause of many events—but they refuse to use the same standard for ancient texts from Egypt and Mesopotamia. The fact that a pharaoh (e.g., Ramesses at Kadesh) gives credit to his god for success in battle doesn’t mean the battle never occurred or was reported erroneously. Historical records cannot prove a deity played a role—that, again, belongs to the realms of philosophy and apologetics. But referencing a deity is certainly no reason to disregard a source as containing real history.

These sorts of logical leaps abound in discussions of inerrancy. A full treatment of them and the problems of logic and method they induce would require its own book! Our view, established on the basis of the work of scholars in many disciplines, not merely theologians, is that Bible is a reliable record of what it asks us to believe happened. We are therefore comfortable using terms like inerrancy and infallible, so long as they are tempered with humility and honesty. To date there exists no historical problem in the Bible for which scholars have been unable to produce a viable, plausible response. While it is true that such response proposals may still yet need to be proven as the final answer, the proposals are workable and handle the data responsibly. We will likely never know the answer to every question that emerges from the Bible in terms of historicity, science, archaeology, philosophy, etc., because we are not omniscient. But it would be dishonest to presume that answers to these sorts of questions are not forthcoming.

Canon, Canonical, Canonicity

Discerning that the Bible claims inspiration for itself, and that inspiration extends to all parts of the Bible raises another important question. From the biblical period to the first century A.D. (ca. 2000 B.C. to 100 A.D.) a wide range of ancient books were authored in the geographical region in which the biblical story takes place (the eastern Mediterranean Sea and Canaan, modern-day Syria Palestine / Israel). Why are only a small number of those books considered inspired? By what process was a book’s inspired status determined? As complex as the historical discussion can be, this question can be answered by a handful of simple observations or tests. The process by which a book’s inspired, or sacred, status came to be recognized is relatively straightforward, but the same amount of historical data for each book’s acceptance in accord with that process is not available. Given this circumstance, our focus will be on the approach.

We first need an acquaintance with some new terminology. “Inspired” in the biblical sense means “God-breathed,” which in turn refers to the ultimate, providential origin of each biblical book. A book deemed to have been inspired is thus referred to as a *canonical* book, or one that meets the criteria for recognizing its *canonicity*. All *canonical* books compose the sacred *canon* of Scripture. These terms—*canon*, *canonical*, *canonicity*—derive from the Hebrew word *qaneh*, which was a reed used for

measuring. Metaphorically, then, these terms refer to an abstract measurement of fitness, or acceptability in accord with certain tests to assess its inspired nature.

Thousands of pages have been composed discussing the canonicity of each Old and New Testament book, as well as the rejection of other contemporaneous ancient books. For our purposes, a few observations will suffice.

To begin, a book's canonicity should not be construed as being *determined* by church leaders or other human authorities. Rather, canonicity should be thought of as something *recognized* in accord with some litmus tests that the historical record provides. What were these tests? For Old Testament books, one test was whether the believing community at large recognized a particular book as being written by, or inextricably connected to, a prophetic figure who lived during biblical Israel's history. The underlying assumption was that the Spirit of God would guide the believing community in recognizing this connection. In the case of the Old Testament, there was a palpable canonical consciousness during the first couple of centuries in the Second Temple Period (which period began ca. 500 B.C.). By 100 A.D., with the council of Jamnia, evidence suggests that the Old Testament canon had been fully recognized.

All of the historical Jewish sects during this period embraced the Torah as canonical (the Pentateuch, or the first five books of our Old Testament). Some ancient sources from this period have survived that include most or all of the rest of the Old Testament books being collected for use by the community (2 Esdras 14:44-48; Josephus, *Contra Apion*, 1:7-8). This is the sort of activity one would expect when a community sought to distinguish some ancient books from others for having authority within that community. Another litmus test was whether or not a book was originally written in Hebrew, the language of the Israelite / Jewish community during the biblical period prior to the exile, and of the priesthood in later periods. The Dead Sea scrolls provide such data for all the books of the Old Testament except Esther. (Esther's Hebrew origin isn't doubted, but there were no portions of it recovered among the scrolls). Another indication within the community of a book's recognition as canonical was whether its religious leaders and scribes discussed a book and its meaning in their own writings. The Dead Sea Scrolls make it clear that the biblical books had elevated status among the plethora of religious texts known by the Qumran community in that scribes wrote commentaries (called *pesharim*) on the biblical books. They would also cite biblical books in their writings in formulaic ways (e.g., "it is written") that assign authority to those books. This litmus test is important even though there are exceptions. For example, the book of 1 Enoch gets cited the way biblical books are, but that book was never accepted as canonical by Judaism outside the single sect of Qumran, primarily because there is no evidence for it in Hebrew. A book had to pass *all* tests of recognition to be considered canonical.

With respect to the New Testament, the notion of connecting a book to a prophetic figure was carried over to the apostles. To be recognized as canonical, the believing community (the Church) looked for a book's connection an apostle or a close traveling companion of an apostle witnessed in the book of Acts (e.g., Luke and Mark traveled with Paul). The period in question for recognizing the canonicity of New Testament books is more narrow than the Old Testament, a circumstance that is helpful. By 100 A.D. all 27 books of what we know as the New Testament had been composed and were being copied and circulated among churches.

Very soon thereafter we begin to get historical source references to the sort of "canonical consciousness" alluded to above—the making of evaluative lists of books for recognition (or not) as canonical, and discussion within the believing community. In 140 A.D. the heretic Marcion, who rejected the Old Testament canon, mentioned (with approval) books written by Luke and Paul. In 175 A.D. the early Christian scholar Tatian produced a harmony of gospel accounts of the life of Jesus. This harmony,

named the “Diatessaron,” was comprised of the four gospels we know today (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John). Tatian specifically rejected another early gospel, known today as the Gospel of Thomas. By 200 A.D. allusions or quotations of all the books of the New Testament canon could be found in the writings of the church leaders who followed the apostles (Clement, Tertullian, Irenaeus). This sort of evidence especially gives us proof of the rise of the recognition of which books were considered sacred and authoritative and which were not. The writings of the church historian Eusebius (lifetime dated variously at 260/265-339/340 A.D.) is invaluable for discerning canonical thinking. Eusebius grouped ancient books known to early Christians into four categories: (1) Undisputed books; (2) Books approved by many; (3) Spurious works (the content was theologically orthodox but no apostolic authority could be attached to the book); and (4) Rejected books (considered to contain aberrant, heretical theology out of step with the other categories). Eusebius’s work proved invaluable after the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. Though this council did not meet to consider the question of the canon (this is well known because of records kept by attendees), the Roman Emperor at the time, Constantine, demanded that the leadership of the organized Church produce a determinative list of books for what would become known as the New Testament. Eusebius’s scholarship informs us that there was not complete consensus at the time other than the “undisputed” category. Consequently, it was the books in that category that formed the required list—which matches our current New Testament. Debate over other books in the remaining categories continued, but eventually, proponents of books on the periphery concluded that the Holy Spirit had moved the overwhelming majority of the believing community in one direction, and so the matter became settled. This is why today there is agreement across all Christian denominations as to the canonical books of the New Testament. But circumstances associated with the earlier Old Testament canonical recognition process was not as neat among the earliest Christian churches.

The Old Testament situation among the earliest Christians gets complicated by something that occurred a few centuries before the New Testament era: the creation of the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (“Septuagint” is abbreviated by the Roman numerals LXX [=70], in line with the dubious tradition that it took 70 scholars 70 days to complete the translation). It was during this time, ca. 300-100 B.C., that not only was the LXX created, but many books focused on Judaism’s history and beliefs were being written *in Greek*. These books have tremendous value for informing us how Jews interpreted the Old Testament. They directly inform the material in the New Testament because most of the New Testament authors were Jewish. Paul in particular had expert knowledge of this material as a member of the Pharisees (Phil 3:4-6). Nevertheless, since the material was not written in Hebrew, these “extra books” were not considered canonical by Jews. However, when the Greek LXX came into existence, in time it became bound in book (“codex”) form with some of these extra books. Later, the New Testament, composed in its entirety in Greek, was added to these codex collections. The result was, in one volume as it were, the entire Greek Old Testament (LXX), plus the New Testament books, plus “extras” that had become customarily grouped with the Greek Old Testament. The early church therefore grew up with a complete Greek Bible, but parts of its Old Testament were never accepted by the earlier Jewish community.

This historical circumstance is still felt today. It is the reason that the Roman Catholic Bible contain “extra” books in its Old Testament. At the time of the Protestant Reformation (16th century A.D.), a movement to reform the Catholic Church, Reformation leaders such as Martin Luther and John Calvin decided to adopt the Jewish community litmus test for the Old Testament canon. Consequently, any book for which there was no primary source Hebrew evidence was not considered sacred by Protestants. This created a divergence between the Bibles of Catholics and Protestants when it came to the Old Testament. That divergence still exists today, with Roman Catholic referring to the extra books as

“deutero-canonical” (“secondarily canonical”). They are authoritative for Roman Catholics. A similar phenomenon occurred with respect to Eastern Orthodoxy, whose Bible differs slightly from both Roman Catholic and Protestant Bibles.⁹

⁹ As noted in the introduction, this book embraces the Protestant canonical tradition in its discussion of doctrine.