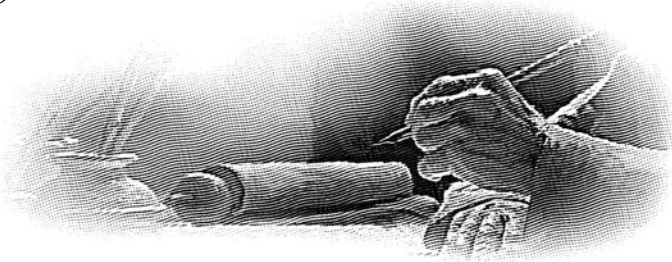


The Origin *and* Nature *of the Bible*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Pet. 1:19–21; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Deut. 18:18; Exod. 17:14; John 1:14; Heb. 11:3, 6.*

Memory Text: “For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe” (*1 Thessalonians 2:13, NKJV*).

The way we see and understand the origin and nature of Scripture greatly impacts the role that the Bible plays in our lives and in the church at large. How we interpret the Bible is significantly shaped and influenced by our understanding of the process of revelation and inspiration. When we want to understand Scripture correctly, we first of all need to allow the Bible to determine the basic parameters of how it should be treated. We cannot study mathematics with the empirical methods employed in biology or sociology. We cannot study physics with the same tools used to study history. In a similar manner, the spiritual truths of the Bible will not be known and understood correctly by atheistic methods that approach the Bible as if God did not exist. Instead, our interpretation of Scripture needs to take seriously the divine-human dimension of God's Word. Hence what is needed for a proper interpretation of Scripture is that we approach the Bible in faith rather than with methodological skepticism or doubt.

This week we will look at some foundational aspects of the origin and nature of the Bible that should impact our interpretation and understanding of it.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 11.

The Divine Revelation of the Bible

Read 2 Peter 1:19–21. How does Peter express his conviction about the origin of the biblical prophetic message?

The Bible is not like any other book. According to the apostle Peter, the prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit in such a way that the content of their message came from God. They did not invent it themselves. Rather than being “cunningly devised fables” (2 Pet. 1:16), the prophetic message of the Bible is of divine origin, and thus it is truthful and trustworthy. “Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21, NKJV). God was at work in the process of revelation, where He made known His will to selected human beings.

Direct verbal communication between God and particular human beings is an inescapable fact of the Scriptures. This is why the Bible has special, divine authority, and we need to take the divine element into consideration in our interpretation of the Scriptures. Having our holy God as their ultimate author, the biblical books are aptly called “holy Scriptures” (Rom. 1:2, 2 Tim. 3:15).

They were given for practical purposes, too. They are “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God’s people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16, 17, TNIV).

We also need the help of the Holy Spirit to apply to our lives what God has revealed in His Word. According to the apostle Peter, the interpretation of the divinely revealed Word of God is not a matter of our own opinions. We need God’s Word and the Holy Spirit to rightly understand its meaning.

Scripture also says, “Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7, NKJV). The biblical words for “revelation” (in its various forms) express the idea that something previously hidden has now been disclosed or unveiled and thus becomes known and made manifest. As human beings, we need such an uncovering, or revelation, for we are sinful beings, separated from God because of our sin, and therefore dependent upon Him to know His will.

It’s hard enough obeying the Bible even when we believe in its divine origin. What would happen if we came to distrust or even to question that divine origin?

The Process of Inspiration

Because God uses the medium of language to reveal His will to humankind, divine revelation is capable of being written down. Yet, as we already have seen, the Bible is the result of God's revealing truth to us through the work of the Holy Spirit, who transmits and safeguards His message through human instruments. This is the reason why we can expect the fundamental unity that is seen in all of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation (*for example, compare Gen. 3:14, 15 to Rev. 12:17*).

Read 2 Peter 1:21; 2 Timothy 3:16, 17; and Deuteronomy 18:18. What do these texts say about the inspiration of Scripture?

All of Scripture is divinely inspired, even if not all parts are equally inspiring to read or even necessarily applicable to us today (for example, the sections about the Hebrew feasts were inspired even though we're not required to keep them today). Yet, we need to learn from all of Scripture, even from those parts that are not so easy to read and understand or that are not specifically applicable to us now.

Also, not everything in the Bible was directly or supernaturally revealed. Sometimes God used biblical writers who carefully investigated things or used other existing documents (*see Josh. 10:13, Luke 1:1–3*) to communicate His message.

Even then, all Scripture is inspired (*2 Tim. 3:16*). This is the reason why Paul states that “whatever” was written, was written for our instruction, so that through “the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (*Rom. 15:4, NASB*).

“The Bible points to God as its author; yet it was written by human hands; and in the varied style of its different books it presents the characteristics of the several writers. The truths revealed are all ‘given by inspiration of God’ (*2 Tim. 3:16*); yet they are expressed in the words of men.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 7.

Today there are biblical scholars who deny divine authorship of many parts of the Bible, even to the point where many crucial teachings—Creation, the Exodus, the Resurrection—are denied. Why is it so essential that we not open that door—even a bit? After all, are we to pass judgment upon the Word of God?

The Written Word of God

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Write these words, for according to the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel’ ” (Exod. 34:27, NKJV). Why would the Lord have Moses write down these words as opposed to having Moses recite them to the people only? What is the obvious advantage of the Written Word?

The God who speaks and who created human language enables chosen people to communicate the divinely revealed truths and divinely inspired thoughts in a trustworthy and reliable manner. Hence, it is no surprise to find that God commanded biblical writers early on to commit His instruction and revelation in writing.

What do the following texts teach about written revelation?

Exod. 17:14, Exod. 24:4 _____

Josh. 24:26 _____

Jer. 30:2 _____

Rev. 1:11, 19; Rev. 21:5; Rev. 22:18, 19 _____

Why did God command that His revelation and inspired messages be written down? The obvious answer is so that we will not forget them so easily. The written words of the Bible are a constant reference point that directs us to God and His will. A written document usually can be preserved better and be much more reliable than oral messages, which must be told again and again. The Written Word, which can be copied again and again, also can be made accessible to many more people than if it were spoken only. Last, we can speak to a limited number of people at one time in one place, but what is committed to writing can be read by countless readers in many different locations and continents, and even be a blessing numerous generations later. In fact, if people can’t themselves read, others can read a written document aloud to them.

The Parallel Between Christ and Scripture

Read John 1:14; John 2:22; John 8:31, 32; and John 17:17. What parallels do you see between Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, and Scripture, the Written Word of God?

There is a parallel between the Word of God, who became flesh (i.e., Jesus Christ), and the Written Word of God (i.e., Scripture). Just as Jesus was supernaturally conceived by the Holy Spirit yet born of a woman, Holy Scripture also is of supernatural origin yet delivered through human beings.

Jesus Christ became a man in time and space. He lived during a specific time and at a specific place. Yet, this fact did not nullify His divinity, nor did it make Jesus historically relative. He is the only Redeemer for all people, all over the world, throughout all time (*see Acts 4:12*). Likewise, God's Written Word, the Bible, also was given at a specific time and in a particular culture. Just like Jesus Christ, the Bible is not time-conditioned (i.e., limited to a specific time and location); instead, it remains binding for all people, all over the world.

When God revealed Himself, He came down to the human level. Jesus' human nature showed all the signs of human infirmities and the effects of some 4,000 years of degeneration. Yet, He was without sin. Similarly, the language of Scripture is human language, not some "perfect super-human" language that no one speaks or is able to understand. While any language has its limitations, the Creator of humankind, who is the Creator of human language, is perfectly capable of communicating His will to human beings in a trustworthy manner without misleading us.

Of course, every comparison has its limits. Jesus Christ and Holy Scripture are not identical. The Bible is not an incarnation of God. God is no book. God in Jesus Christ became human. We love the Bible because we worship the Savior proclaimed in its pages.

The Bible is a unique and inseparable divine-human union. Ellen G. White saw this clearly when she wrote: "The Bible, with its God-given truths expressed in the language of men, presents a union of the divine and the human. Such a union existed in the nature of Christ, who was the Son of God and the Son of man. Thus it is true of the Bible, as it was of Christ, that 'the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.' John 1:14."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 8.

Why *must* Scripture be foundational to our faith? Without it, where would we be?

Understanding the Bible in Faith

Read Hebrews 11:3, 6. Why is faith so essential in understanding God and His Word? Why is it impossible to please God without faith?

All true learning takes place in the context of faith. It is the implicit faith of the child toward his or her parents that enables the child to learn new things. It is a trusting relationship that guides the child to learn the basic and fundamental aspects of life and love. Knowledge and understanding, therefore, grow out of a loving and trusting relationship.

In the same vein, a good musician plays a piece of music well when he or she not only masters the technical skills that help one to play an instrument but also when he or she exhibits a love for the music, the composer, and the instrument. In a similar way, we do not understand the Bible correctly when we approach it with an attitude of skepticism or methodological doubt, but in a spirit of love and faith. The apostle Paul wrote, “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (*Heb. 11:6, NIV*). Thus, it is indispensable to approach the Bible in faith, acknowledging its supernatural origin, rather than seeing the Bible just as a human book.

Seventh-day Adventists clearly have expressed this insight into the supernatural origin of Scripture in the first fundamental belief of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which states: “The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration. The inspired authors spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to humanity the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the supreme, authoritative, and the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the definitive revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God’s acts in history. (Ps. 119:105; Prov. 30:5, 6; Isa. 8:20; John 17:17; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Heb. 4:12; 2 Peter 1:20, 21.)”

What are people missing in their understanding of the Bible when they do not approach Scripture from an attitude of faith? Why is this faith not blind? That is, what are the good reasons that we have for this faith and why is faith still a necessity when dealing with the truths of the Bible?

Further Thought: Read the following pages from the document “Methods of Bible Study”: “2. Presuppositions Arising From the Claims of Scripture,” part a “Origin” and part b “Authority.” (“Methods of Bible Study” can be found at www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/bible-interpretation-hermeneutics/methods-bible-study.)

As essential as the Bible is to our faith, it alone would be of no real spiritual value to us were it not for the influence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds as we read and study it.

“In His word, God has committed to men the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience. . . . Yet the fact that God has revealed His will to men through His word, has not rendered needless the continued presence and guiding of the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, the Spirit was promised by our Saviour, to open the word to His servants, to illuminate and apply its teachings. And since it was the Spirit of God that inspired the Bible, it is impossible that the teaching of the Spirit should ever be contrary to that of the word.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 9.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why does God reveal Himself and His will to us? Why do we need revelation?
- 2 How does God reveal Himself? God uses different means to reveal something about Himself. He does so in a more general way through nature—but more specifically through dreams (*Dan. 7:1*); visions (*Gen. 15:1*); signs (*1 Kings 18:24, 38*); and through His Son, Jesus Christ (*Heb. 1:1, 2*). Has God revealed Himself to you personally? Share your experience.
- 3 Some Bible scholars reject many of the teachings of the Bible, seeing them as mere myths. Teachings such as the Creation story, a literal Adam and Eve, the Exodus, and the stories of Daniel are just a few examples (from the Old Testament) of teachings that are dismissed as nothing but made-up stories designed to teach spiritual truths. This is what happens when humans pass judgment upon God’s Word. What should this tell us about how dangerous such an attitude clearly is?
- 4 God has revealed His will in a powerful way in the Bible. Yet, God desires your help in spreading His will and the good news of His salvation in Jesus Christ alone. When people observe you, what kind of God do they see in you and through your behavior?

Three Filipino Baptisms in Cyprus

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Yolanda Malla, a Filipino domestic worker in Cyprus, saw that her friend Beatrise had tagged her in a Seventh-day Adventist sermon on Facebook.

Malla had met Beatrise, a Filipino domestic worker in Israel, several years earlier when they both worked as domestic helpers in Taiwan. Malla remembered that Beatrise had been baptized recently in Israel.

“Why did you become a Seventh-day Adventist?” she wrote on Facebook.

“This is where I feel comfortable,” Beatrise replied. “Just watch the video that I sent you, and you’ll understand.”

Malla clicked on the video and heard a sermon about God setting aside the seventh-day Sabbath at Creation, reminding His people to keep the Sabbath with the Ten Commandments, and calling for Sabbath observance throughout the New Testament. Malla was surprised and checked the sermon’s texts in the Bible. She saw that the Sabbath was on Saturday.

Why have I gone to so many churches and never heard a pastor preach about the Sabbath? she wondered. *Why does no one else talk about the Sabbath?*

She called Beatrise. “This has opened my mind!” she said. “I want to find this church that keeps the Sabbath, but where can I find it in Cyprus?”

Beatrise did some research and sent the telephone number of Branislav Mirilov, president of the Adventist Church in Cyprus. Malla called and received directions to the church in her town, Limassol.

Malla began attending the church’s Bible study group on Sundays. Soon she invited a cousin, Michelin, also a domestic worker in Cyprus, to accompany her. Then she invited another Filipino domestic worker, Maria, to attend as well. But Maria cared for an elderly woman who needed round-the-clock care, and she couldn’t get permission to leave the house.

“No problem,” said Marica Mirilov, who is married to the church president and works as a Bible worker. “We can do the Bible studies on Facebook Messenger.”

In a short time, Malla, Michelin, and Maria were baptized.



Leading friends to baptism is the natural result of knowing Jesus, said YOLANDA MALLA, 42, a single mother, still working in Cyprus to support seven- and eight-year-old sons in the Philippines. “Even though I come from a broken home, I have strength because I have learned that I have hope,” she said.

Part of the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering this quarter will help construct a new church building and community center in Nicosia, Cyprus.

Key Texts: *2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19–21; 1 Thess. 2:13; 1 Cor. 2:9, 10; Rom. 15:4; Acts 1:16.*

Part I: Overview

Our understanding of the origin and nature of Scripture significantly influences the way we read and treat the Bible. If the Bible were a human book, written just like any other book put together by fallible human beings, we could not trust it. Under such circumstances, it certainly would not carry divine authority. To be fair to the Bible, we need to allow the writers of the Bible themselves to define and explain what they think about their writings and thus allow the Bible to determine the basic parameters of how it should be treated. The writers of the Bible claim that their message is not humanly invented. Instead, the Bible is divinely revealed and its content inspired by God.

Our understanding of the process of revelation and inspiration is crucial for our approach to God's Word. Because God uses the medium of language to communicate with human beings, divine revelation is capable of being written down. The Holy Spirit enables the writers of the Bible to faithfully and reliably commit to writing what He has revealed to them. This divine inspiration gives the Bible its divine authority and guarantees the unity that we find from Genesis to the book of Revelation. Although penned by human beings, the Bible is, nevertheless, the Written Word of God. In this divine-human dimension, there is a certain parallel between Jesus Christ, the Word of God, who became flesh, and the Written Word of God, the Bible. We grasp and appreciate this reality only by faith.

Part II: Commentary

Imagine a purely human book that is written by many different authors over a period of hundreds of years. Imagine that these diverse authors would reminisce in their writings about God and their religious experience. Their differing perspectives would grant their writings little authority beyond their personal opinions. They would carry only some human authority, if any. But the Bible is not like that. It claims that the ultimate author is God. God communicates through His Holy Spirit with the writers of the Bible, delivering the content that *He* deems important for us to know. The biblical God is a God who speaks. He created human beings with the ability to speak and to understand verbal information. Thus, He

uses language to communicate with humankind. These divine messages are not given in an artificial heavenly language that only angels understand. They are given in the very language of the writers of the Bible. They also are given for practical purposes, so “that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (*2 Tim. 3:17, NKJV*). Hence, the collective biblical books are aptly called the “holy scriptures” (*Rom. 1:2, 2 Tim. 3:15*).

Thus, the authority of Scripture is a shorthand for God’s authority, speaking in and through Scripture. In order for the Bible to play its divinely intended role in one’s personal life, as well as in the life of the church, we must take its claim of divine origins seriously. It also means we must listen to all of Scripture, as it is written.

If we exclude some parts of Scripture as allegedly uninspired and thus merely human, we have no more than a selective authority of the Bible. Rather than standing above Scripture and judging Scripture, we should take our stand under Scripture, thus allowing Scripture to judge us.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:13 we learn something important about the attitude with which the believers in Thessalonica received the Word of God. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13 and reflect on how the believers in Thessalonica received God’s Word. What does their reception of Scripture tell us about how we should receive the biblical message when we read or hear it?

Scripture

We see God’s highest and most explicit revelation in the incarnation of His Son Jesus Christ. Apart from that, the most efficient and widely used form of divine revelation is divine speaking. In the Bible we find repeated references to the God who speaks. His Word is given to His spokespersons the prophets. The numerous occurrences of phrases such as the “word of the LORD” or “thus says the LORD” or the “word that the LORD spoke” testify to this fact. This divine speaking produces the Word of the Lord and eventually leads to its embodiment in a written document. The writing down of God’s Word also is the result of God’s initiative (*see Exod. 17:14, Exod. 24:4, Josh. 24:26, etc.*).

What is the purpose for God’s written revelation? It is a constant reference point for His people. It enables God’s people continually to hear it in an unaltered way and to be careful to do what it says (*see Deut. 30:9, 10*). A written document can be preserved better and more reliably than an oral message. There is greater permanency with a written text than with an orally spoken word. A written document can be copied and multiplied and thus made available to many more people in many different

locations than any oral message could ever be. It also is available across time and can be a blessing to readers and listeners many generations later. As a permanent written record, it remains a norm for the veracity of the biblical message throughout the ages.

While it is true that God inspires thoughts in the writers of the Bible, we would not know anything about these thoughts if they had not been communicated through words (i.e., in human language). Only words give us access to thoughts. Hence the process of inspiration encompasses thoughts as well as the end product of those thoughts: the written words of Scripture. “Whether inspiration should be attributed to the inspired writers or to the Scriptures written by them is to a large extent a needless dilemma. It is clear that the primary locus of inspiration is in people. The Holy Spirit moved upon people to speak or write; yet what they spoke or wrote was the inspired word of God.”—Peter M. van Bemmelen, “Revelation and Inspiration” in Raul Dederen, ed., *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), p. 39. Thus, the apostle Paul could write: “*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness*” (2 Tim. 3:16, NASB, *emphasis added*).

Illustration

There is an interesting parallel between the Word of God who became flesh (Jesus Christ) and the Written Word of God (the Bible). Just as Jesus was supernaturally conceived by the Holy Spirit, yet born into this world by a woman, so the Bible has the Holy Spirit as its ultimate author, yet was written by human writers.

Jesus Christ became flesh at a specific time and a specific place (i.e., He was born in Bethlehem, not in New York, Tokyo, or Nairobi; He was baptized in the river Jordan, not in the Mississippi, the Nile, or the Ganges). Yet, this particularity did not nullify His divinity, nor did it make Him relative only to a particular time historically. He is the only Redeemer for *all* people, *all* around the globe, throughout *all* time. In a similar manner, the biblical books were given at a specific time and in a particular culture. But as with Jesus, this transmission does not make the Bible purely time-conditioned or relative. The Bible is God’s Word for *all* people, *all* over the world, until the end of time.

Jesus became human and lived as a real human being with all the signs of human infirmities. Yet, He was without sin. In a similar manner, the language of the Bible is human language with all its limitations, not a perfect heavenly language. Yet, what the Bible affirms is trustworthy, not misleading!

When Jesus lived on this earth, He wanted to be accepted for who He truly was: the Divine Son of God. In a similar manner, God does not want the Bible to be read as just another book. He wants it to be accepted for what it truly is: the Written Word of God. As such, the Bible carries an innate authority that goes beyond any human wisdom. This qualifies the Bible to be God's only norm for all doctrine and religious experience.

Of course, Jesus Christ and the Bible are not identical. There are significant differences. The Bible is not an incarnation of God. God did not become a book. We do not worship a book. We worship the Savior who is proclaimed in the Bible. But without the Bible, we would not know much about Jesus at all. The Bible without Jesus would be missing the most important message. But without the Bible we would not know that Jesus is the promised Messiah. We could not accept Him as the assured Savior. We would be lost. Therefore, the Bible is foundational and indispensable to our faith.

Scripture

Not only is Scripture foundational to our faith but it also needs to be approached in faith, if we want to do justice to its divine nature. In Hebrews 11:6 we read that “without faith it is impossible to please God” (*NIV*). The life-changing message of the Bible is not discerned properly at a critical distance but must be accepted in faith and obeyed with love.

Part III: Life Application

To know that the Bible carries divine authority motivates us to treat it with respect and love. Whatever we love, we will not speak flippantly about. The way we talk about the Bible should reveal our deep appreciation for the Word of God. This appreciation will become evident, not just in the way we carry and hold the Bible—but more important, in how we follow and implement its teachings in our lives. Our attitude will be one of gratitude and faithfulness. To be faithful to the Written Word of God is not the veneration of a book. It is rather an expression of our love for the triune God about whom this book speaks. “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (*1 John 5:3, NKJV*). The Bible acquaints us with the living God and helps us to become more like Jesus.

What would an attitude of gratitude for Scripture and faithfulness to it look like? How does the authority of Scripture differ from that of other literature? Where are you tempted not to follow the Bible because of personal experiences and feelings that draw you in a different direction?

How can you gain an attitude of trust?

To be faithful to Scripture is not the same as being faithful to my own favorite ideas about the Bible. In the latter case, I would be faithful only to myself. Rather, faithfulness to Scripture calls for an openness to allow the Bible to shape and transform my thoughts and actions.

Notes
