

THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

Before we spend a lot of time learning to understand the Bible, we need to be sure about one thing – that the Bible is really God’s Word. If it is full of myths and fables, as some people suggest, we could be wasting our time. But if it is a message from God, we would be foolish to ignore it. Many religions have their sacred Scriptures, or holy writings. How can we be sure about what is written in the Bible? This chapter looks at something the apostle Paul says right at the start and from there examines the authority and accuracy of the Bible.

❖ Word of Prophecy

Right at the start of Paul’s Letter to the Romans he refers to his calling as an apostle of Jesus Christ, and then he says something about the gospel which might surprise some readers. He says this:

*“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, **which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures**” (1:1,2).*

Paul is saying that the gospel is not just a New Testament message; it is contained in both the Old and New Testaments. You can find the gospel throughout the Bible. That’s another of the challenges the Bible presents to its readers. Ask yourself if your understanding of the purpose of God is just about the life and work of Jesus. Does it include things that are taught in the 39 books of the Jewish part of the Bible – the Old Testament? As a simple check:

- 1 What do you understand by the phrase Jesus used lots of times when he taught about “*the kingdom of God*”?³ Do you realise that this kingdom once existed in Old Testament times?
- 2 What do you make of these verses?

*“And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, **preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham**, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed’” (Galatians 3:8);*

*“Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. **For good news came to us just as to them**, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened” (Hebrews 4:1,2).*

First we are told that Abraham had the gospel preached to him. A specific passage is referred to (Genesis 12:3) which is said to be a part of the gospel. Then the writer of another New Testament letter says that the Jewish nation had the gospel preached to them. However they were unable to receive what God had promised because they did not believe His promises. Then he warns us about the same danger. So you will see that both Testaments claim to have the same message from God. It follows that we must read and understand both parts of the Bible. The whole Bible is necessary for our salvation.

❖ What Paul told Timothy

One of the early companions of the apostle Paul was a young man named Timothy who had been brought up in a mixed home. He had a Gentile father but a Jewish mother – and he became a devoted follower of the Lord Jesus. Writing to him on one occasion, Paul said this about his upbringing:

*“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with **the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God** and (is) profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:14-17).*

This shows us how important the Old Testament is. Timothy lived at a time when the New Testament had not yet been written, or when only parts of it were in circulation. His Scriptures, which he had been brought up to read and respect, were the Old Testament. They are what the apostle calls “*the sacred writings*” – and they held the key to his spiritual education. They had a lot to teach him; they could reprove and correct him; they could train him in righteousness – in right living before God. These Scriptures could make him acceptable to God by bringing him to “*faith in Christ Jesus*”.

The reason given for this remarkable power of the Scriptures is that **“All Scripture is breathed out by God”**. In some versions of the Bible the translation reads that the Scriptures are *“inspired”* by God, or given by *“inspiration”*, but the ESV uses a more literal rendering. Scripture claims to have come out of the mouth of God, just as our words come from our mouths.

❖ Jesus’ Use of Scripture

This was something that Jesus also taught. Once he was tempted to turn stones into bread and whilst resisting the temptation he said this about the Word of God:

*“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but **by every word that comes from the mouth of God**’” (Matthew 4:4).*

In his reply Jesus quoted from the Old Testament Scriptures, thus endorsing their claims and showing that he accepted them fully. The verse he used is from the Book of Deuteronomy. It was written on the occasion when the nation of Israel was wandering in a wilderness. It was a time when the people were fed miraculously by food that God supplied daily for them.

“He (God) humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deuteronomy 8:3).

If we think for a moment about what we have learned from these words of the Lord Jesus, we can see that:

- ✓ Jesus believed the Old Testament absolutely, as something that had come *“from the mouth of the LORD”*;
- ✓ He used it in the way God had intended, to ‘equip him for every good work’ and to help him resist temptation;
- ✓ He believed in the wilderness experience of Israel after its miraculous Exodus experience – when the infant nation escaped from slavery in Egypt;
- ✓ He believed in the miraculous provision of Manna – something that happened daily for forty years, to keep the wanderers alive.

At this point it is worth asking whether your approach to the Scriptures is the same as that of the Lord Jesus Christ – the founder of Christianity. Do you believe in the history of the Bible, in the possibility of miraculous events occurring as part of God’s programme of events, and are you willing to accept that Scripture is God-given or God-breathed? These straightforward questions would catch out a lot of people. Many people reckon that the Bible is mainly myth and legend, handed down over centuries and thus substantially distorted before the various books were written down. Would you rather follow them or believe what the Lord Jesus believed? There really is no choice!

❖ Jesus Believed the Scriptures

If we collect together a few of the sayings of Jesus about the Scriptures, it will soon show us exactly what he believed. Evidently he was schooled in the Old Testament, as many Jewish boys would have been in his days. He had a wonderful understanding of the people who featured there, the things they said and, even more importantly, what they meant by what they said. His grasp of Bible teaching was so extensive that he could easily out-think his accusers and leave them bewildered.

Some people said of Jesus that: *“No one ever spoke like this man!” (John 7:46)*. Jesus had an outstanding grasp of Old Testament truth because he was God’s Son and had come with God’s message. He was the God-given Saviour of the world, so we need to pay the most careful attention to what he said and believed.

Here are some of the things Jesus said about the Old Testament Scriptures:

*“(Jesus) rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, **“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”** (Luke 4:20,21)*

*“And taking the twelve, he said to them, ‘See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and **everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished**. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spat upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.’ But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said” (Luke 18:31-34).*

“The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born” (Matthew 26:24).

“For I tell you that **this Scripture must be fulfilled in me:** ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors.’ For what is written about me has its fulfilment” (Luke 22:37).

“And he said to them, ‘O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ **And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself**” (Luke 24:25-27).

“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life ... Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me; **for he wrote of me.** But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” (John 5:39-47).

❖ Life History in Advance

There are many more examples of similar statements made by Jesus. These few provide a flavour of the Lord’s absolute conviction that the Old Testament Scriptures were inspired and prophetic accounts. As Jesus understood matters, they spoke of him because they predicted his coming and his life history. A very considerable list of such prophecies can be compiled, which show beyond doubt that the Bible can predict the future. On the next page are listed just a few, all about the life of Jesus.

That table gives some idea of the range of Old Testament prophecy about just one subject – the life history of the Lord Jesus. These prophecies were written hundreds of years before his birth and come from many different time periods and many different writers. But they speak with one voice because the message is God’s, not man’s. The prophets were impelled to speak and write as God’s messengers: “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” (2 Peter 1:20).

❖ Detailed Predictions

We will get an even better idea of the Bible’s remarkable accuracy by looking at just one prophetic passage. Psalm 22 was written by King David, who lived about 1000 years before Jesus was born. In it he predicts what was to happen to the promised descendant who would, one day, occupy David’s throne in Jerusalem.

David wasn’t just a poet; he was a prophet. In his own words, just before he died he said how grateful he was that: “The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken, the Rock of Israel has said to me ...” (2 Samuel 23:2,3). The results of that process of inspiration are breathtaking. They achieve a remarkable blend of God’s message with some personal characteristics of the prophet. Look at the scenario described in Psalm 22 as it depicted what would happen in the life of David’s successor. Bear in mind that at the time of writing crucifixion was unknown – it was a form of public execution introduced much later, one which was perfected by the Romans. Yet King David, inspired by God, could write about this. His successor would:

- Feel forsaken by God at a crucial time in his life when he was in dire trouble (Psalm 22:1) – these are the very words spoken by Jesus on the cross (Matthew 27:46).
- He would be despised and rejected by his fellows, who would openly mock him and challenge him to save himself, if he could (verses 6-8) – these were precisely the taunts that were hurled at Jesus.
- He would suffer the agony of feeling that his entire body was being pulled apart (verses 14-17), would have an intense thirst, and would be a public spectacle. This is a quite remarkable depiction of crucifixion well ahead of its time, including the piercing of hands and feet.
- His clothing would be divided between others who would cast lots for his garments – exactly as the soldiers did (verse 18 and John 19:24).
- The suffering one would not lose hope. He would continue to put his faith in God, in the firm belief that he would be able to bear witness to a lot of people that God is a Saviour and Redeemer

(verses 21-31). This was something that Jesus began to do after his resurrection, when he was seen by more than 500 people (1 Corinthians 15:6), but the complete fulfilment of those words is still to come (see Zechariah 12:10).

❖ Remarkable Book

So far we have taken just one topic – the way that writers of the Bible could foretell the future, because they were inspired by God. And we have looked at just one subject – the life history of the Lord Jesus Christ, which was written in advance. We have seen that:

- ✓ the Bible was able to predict exactly what would happen in precise detail;
- ✓ the Lord Jesus valued the Old Testament Scriptures and used them in his own life to obtain guidance and help; and
- ✓ he clearly believed what he read in those Scriptures.

We saw some of the things that the Bible foretold about how Jesus would live and die (there are many more of those prophecies we did not consider). We looked at just one prophetic passage (Psalm 22) to see a remarkable prophetic picture of the crucifixion that Jesus would suffer, and the way he would overcome it with God's help.

❖ More from Jesus

But we have still only scratched the surface. If we were just to consider more fully the testimony of Jesus, we would discover that he relied upon the authority and accuracy of God's Word to such an extent that he:

- ☞ Could base his argument on just a word (John 10:35);
- ☞ Rely on just the tense of the original Hebrew (Mark 12:26,27);
- ☞ Accepted as absolutely historical fact:
 - ☞ the creation of *Adam and Eve* (Matthew 19:4-6),
 - ☞ the death of *Abel* (Matthew 23:35),
 - ☞ the flood at the time of *Noah* (Luke 17:26,27),
 - ☞ the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (17:28-32), and so on.

And there are still lots of things the Lord said about the Scriptures that we haven't considered, such as:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil 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” (Matthew 5:17,18), or

“If he called them gods to whom the word of God came – and **Scripture cannot be broken** – do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?” (John 10:35,36).

The example of Jesus is very important in working out our approach to the authority of Holy Scripture. If we want to know what the Bible *really* teaches, the lead that Jesus gives is one of the very best ways of finding a correct understanding. Jesus accepted the Bible as the inspired and wholly accurate Word of God.

❖ God has Spoken

When Jesus came he was a further link in the chain of Divine revelation. From the very beginning of His dealings with mankind, God communicated with His creation. He gave Adam and Eve instructions about how to live; told Noah when to build an ark; made great promises to Abraham and his family; gave Israel a code of laws through Moses, as well as many prophecies about their future. This was part of an almost continuous process of communication in which God made known His will to mankind. A New Testament writer says this:

“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Hebrews 1:1).

The Old and New Testaments are that record of God communicating with mankind and they leave us in no doubt about that. Over and over again the prophets declared that they were speaking on God's behalf. Here's just one sample in which the prophet Haggai makes that point repeatedly:

*“Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, **declares the LORD**. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, **declares the LORD**. Work, for I am with you, **declares the LORD of hosts**, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. For **thus says the LORD of hosts**: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, **says the LORD of hosts**. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, **declares the LORD of hosts**. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, **says the LORD of hosts**. And in this place I will give peace, **declares the LORD of hosts**” (Haggai 2:4-9).*

The prophets were God's spokesmen. The expression “says the LORD” occurs over 500 times in the Bible because, time and again, the various writers of the Bible want us to know that their message was not theirs, but God's. Even Jesus repeatedly made that same claim:

*Jesus answered them, “My **teaching is not mine, but his who sent me**. If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority” (John 7:16,17);*

*Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that **I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me**” (John 8:28).*

❖ Internal Harmony

Notice that wherever you look in the Bible – whether it's the prophet Haggai, or the words of the Lord Jesus – there is an unmistakable consistency so far as the message is concerned. The 66 books that make up the Bible were written over a time span of more than 1500 years, and by more than 40 different writers. They came from quite different backgrounds and lived in quite different times, yet the message has a remarkable harmony and unity. For there is only one author – Almighty God.

People have written entire books about the unity of the Bible, or the way in which incidental details tie in wonderfully with one another. Here is just one snippet from a book about the Bible, which will give you a flavour of the way in which these arguments could be extended:

“The Bible, at first sight, appears to be a collection of literature – mainly Jewish. If we enquire into the circumstances under which the various Biblical documents were written, we find that they were written at intervals over a space of nearly 1400 years. The writers wrote in various lands, from Italy in the west to Mesopotamia and possibly Persia in the east. The writers themselves were a heterogeneous number of people, not only separated from each other by hundreds of years and hundreds of miles, but belonging to the most diverse walks of life. In their ranks we have kings, herdsmen, soldiers, legislators, fishermen, statesmen, courtiers, priests and prophets, a tent making Rabbi and a Gentile physician, not to speak of others of whom we know nothing apart from the writings they have left us. The writings themselves belong to a great variety of literary types. They include history, law (civil, criminal, ethical, ritual, sanitary), religious poetry, didactic treatises, lyric poetry, parable and allegory, biography, personal correspondence, personal memoirs and diaries, in addition to the distinctively Biblical types of prophecy and apocalyptic.” (The Book and the Parchments, F. F. Bruce)

❖ A Book from God

This book is not written to show you *why* the Bible is the Word of God. We have not considered the way in which the Bible:

- ✓ predicted the future of various nations;
- ✓ was in advance of its time;
- ✓ contains accurate historical data which has been shown to be true when historians and archaeologists have made further discoveries; or
- ✓ has a message which has been remarkably preserved, so that we can be sure about its accurate transmission.

Enough has been written in this chapter, however, to show that it is very worthwhile to seek to understand the Bible for yourself. It is a quite remarkable book – a book from God – and it has a message which is unlike anything else that has ever been written. It was written by eyewitnesses of the events that are recorded. It is utterly frank about the weaknesses and failures of the people it describes, for the Bible was not written to glorify man, or to magnify the nation of Israel, from which

most of the writers came. It was written to glorify God and to explain His gracious purpose.

The Bible is a Holy Book, because it has come from God. For that reason it is set apart from all other books. And it has been written to help to make us holy. Remember that it is *“able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work”* (2 Timothy 3:15-17).

Guidebook for Life

The Bible is a deeply moral book. It shows us the difference between right and wrong in every aspect of life: it defines what God considers right and describes both what He says is wrong and what will happen to us if we do wrong things. That is why there is so much history in the Bible. It is the record of God inviting men and women to walk in His way and then observing them doing the very opposite and getting into trouble – sometimes into big trouble. But if it was no more than that, the Bible would make very depressing reading. It would be a catalogue of disasters, and it is certainly not that.



The Bible is our Guidebook for Life. It shows us what God is like, what He wants to do with us and with our world. It shows what we must do if we want to be part of that gracious purpose, and how we can achieve a Christ-like life. Most people think of improving themselves in terms of getting things and getting on. God wants us to learn to live differently; to accept His standards as those by which we will live, and to model ourselves on the way the Lord Jesus lived.

This remarkable book from God can help us achieve those God-given objectives. It is a word of life which has the power to transform the way we think and then the way we behave. As we get to understand for ourselves what the Bible says about our situation and what God really offers – as opposed to what many people think God offers – we will come to realise how the Bible can change our lives. For the moment here is the testimony of one of its inspired writers, a fisherman whose life was entirely transformed by his encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ. This is what the apostle Peter wrote:

*“Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since **you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God**; for ‘All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever’ And **this word is the good news that was preached to you**”* (1 Peter 1:22-25).

Peter wrote to people whose previously impure lives had been made pure by their obedience to the things they now understood and believed. They were people who had found a new life in Christ. The way in which this had come about was that they had been reborn through the effect of the *“living and abiding word of God”* in their lives. That same transformation awaits us as we continue our journey of understanding.

Things to Read

-  This chapter is full of Bible references and you might look some of them up, both to become familiar with the layout of the Bible – where the different books are located – and to check out the setting or context of the passages referred to. It is always a good thing to check up Bible references, rather than just taking them for granted.
-  To see how the Bible exposes the weaknesses of its writers, so that we can learn from their mistakes, read 2 Samuel chapter 11 – about King David’s big mistakes – and then Psalm 51, in which he fully repents of what he had done.

Questions to Answer

- 2.1 How do you know that the apostle Paul still believed the Old Testament prophecies after he had become a follower of the Lord Jesus? (Acts 17:2; 24:14 and 28:23)
- 2.2 Nowadays some people say that much of the Old Testament is myth and legend and that parts of it, like the Book of Genesis, were written very many years after the events there described. What help do we get from the way the Lord Jesus Christ viewed the Scriptures? (Mark 1:44; Matthew 15:4 and Mark 7:10; Matthew 19:3-9 and Luke 20:37)
- 2.3 Did the New Testament writers claim to write inspired Scripture? (John 14:26; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Peter 3:15-16; 1 Corinthians 14:37)