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Why Should We Believe the Bible Is Divinely-Inspired?

Introduction

Three of the foundational tenets of Christian apologetics are (1) the existence of God; (2) the reality of absolute Truth based on the nature and character of God; and (3) the revealed Truth of God as recorded in the Bible. It is no coincidence that these principles correspond to the central themes of Francis Schaeffer's apologetics trilogy: *The God Who Is There*, *Escape from Reason*, and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*.

The Fundamental Question

For Christians, the ultimate source of authority for what we believe and how we live our lives is (or should be) the Bible. But when we read the Bible or hear it referred to as "the (written) Word of God," how do we know that it has been divinely-inspired? How many sermons have you ever heard, or how many books have you read, that offer plausible and convincing reasons for why we should take the Bible seriously as an infallible source of spiritual and moral authority? Ironically, there are scores of Bible study courses and programs, many of which are quite in-depth or comprehensive, yet none address this fundamental question.

But simply studying the Bible without a thoughtful and defensible philosophy of the Bible is like building a castle in the clouds. There is no solid and objective foundation. Everything depends upon one's own subjective faith (and perhaps one's own personal experiences). But nonbelievers want to know – and certainly, Christians *should* want to know – why it is reasonable and sensible to have faith and confidence in the Bible as the divinely-inspired written Word of God. Simply studying the Bible without a thoughtful and defensible philosophy of the Bible, it is easy to miss the forest – the overall purpose and worldview of Scripture – for the trees (or as is often the case, individual branches, limbs, twigs or leaves) – specific stories, scenarios, principles, pronouncements, etc. Historically, this has been the root of many misunderstandings and even some heresies.

Divine Inspiration – the Reality and the Mystery

Christians believe that divine inspiration is a reality, but it is also a mystery. In II Timothy 3:16 the apostle Paul writes that all Scripture is "God-breathed" (Greek: *theopneustos*), and in II Peter 1:21 we are told that no prophecy came by way of the prophet's own initiative or his own interpretation, but rather, "holy men... spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." Regarding his own writings, Paul informs the Galatians, "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11). As the 3rd century Christian scholar Origen put it, "The Sacred Books are not the works of men... [but] were written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit at the will of the Father of All, through Jesus Christ." But what exactly is "inspiration?" The apologist Josh McDowell offers a clear and concise definition:

Inspiration can be defined as the mysterious process by which God worked through human writers, employing their individual personalities and styles to produce divinely authoritative... writings. [Josh McDowell, *New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p. 334.]

Note that McDowell acknowledges that the whole process is "mysterious" – i.e., inexplicable. No one knows exactly *how* God inspired the Bible,

but there are good reasons to believe that he *did* inspire it. Scripture itself is vague exactly how these revelations were conveyed to the prophets, the psalmists and the chroniclers, but apparently this esoteric knowledge was transmitted via four means.

(1) Dreams and/or visions. There are several scenarios in the *Tanakh* (the Old Testament) that refer to revelations via dreams and/or visions:

- Daniel 7: 1 – “In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream, and visions passed through his mind as he was lying on his bed. He wrote down the substance of his dream.”
- Obadiah 1:1 – “The vision of Obadiah. This is what the Lord God has said about Edom....”
- Micah 1:1 – “The word of the Lord came to Micah the Moreshite – what he saw regarding Samaria and Jerusalem in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.”
- Nahum 1:1 – “The oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite.”
- Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:2 – “The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw. ‘How long, Lord, must I call for help and You do not listen, or cry out to You about violence, and You do not save? Why do You force me to look at injustice? Why do You tolerate wrongdoing?...”

“The Lord answered me: ‘Write this vision; clearly inscribe it on tablets so one may easily read it.’”

(2) An audible voice or a mental impression.

On numerous occasions, Scripture records that “the word of the Lord” came to a certain prophet and commanded him to speak or write. In most instances, whether this admonition came via an audible voice or a mental impression is never explained.

- Exodus 34:27 – God commanded Moses, “Write these words....”
- Isaiah 8:1 – The Lord said to Isaiah, “Take a large piece of parchment and write on it....”
- Isaiah 30:8 – “Go now, write it on a tablet in their presence and inscribe it on a scroll....”
- Jeremiah 1:3, 4, 11 – “The word of the Lord came to [Jeremiah] in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah.... The word of the Lord came to me.... Then the word of the Lord came to me saying....”
- Jeremiah 36:27-28 – “[T]he word of the Lord

came to Jeremiah: ‘Take another scroll, and once again write on it....’”

- Ezekiel 1:3 – “The word of the Lord came directly to Ezekiel the priest.... and the Lord’s hand was on him there.”
- Hosea 1:1-2 – “The word of the Lord that came to Hosea son of Beeri.... When the Lord first spoke to Hosea, He said this to him....”
- Joel 1:1 – “The word of the Lord that came to Joel son of Pethuel....”
- Jonah 1:1 – “The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because their wickedness has confronted Me.’”
- Zephaniah 1:1 – “The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi....”
- Haggai 1:1 – “In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, the governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadek, the high priest.”
- Zechariah 1:1 – “In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berchiah, son of Iddo....”
- Malachi 1:1 – “An oracle: The word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi....”
- Revelation 1:9 – “I, John,... was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and heard behind me a great voice, as a trumpet....”

(3) Previous prophetic writings. Interestingly, some prophetic pronouncements came as a result of the prophet being inspired by those who had preceded him. As the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament testifies, the ultimate manifestation of inspired prophecy was the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

- In Daniel 9:2, God spoke to Daniel through the writings of Jeremiah (Jer 25:11).
- In Ezra 1:1, Ezra recognized the divine authority of Jeremiah’s writings.
- Likewise, in Ezra 5:1 the scribe recognized the divine authority of Haggai and Zechariah’s writings.
- In Zechariah 7:12, the prophet spoke of “the law and the words which the Lord had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets.”
- Likewise, in Nehemiah 9:30 the author acknowledged that God’s Spirit had inspired the former prophets.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul makes it clear that the spirit of revelation and prophecy that inspired the ancient Hebrew prophets was still in effect among the apostles and prophets of his generation, as he notes in Ephesians 3:2ff:

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other [previous] generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

Similarly, in Hebrews 1:1-2 we read that "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son" – the implication being that the author of Hebrews and Christ's apostles have likewise been chosen by God to propagate his Word as revealed through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

(4) Spirit-led research. Throughout the Old Testament various prophets and chroniclers refer to more than a dozen books and annals that have been lost down through the ages from which they derived some of their historical information. For example:

- *Book of the Wars of the Lord*, cited in Numbers 21:14;
- *Book of Jashar*, cited in Joshua 10:13 and II Samuel 1:18;
- *Book of the Annals of Solomon*, cited in I Kings 11:41;
- *History of the Kings of Israel*, cited in I Kings 14:19;
- *History of the Kings of Judah*, cited in II Kings 23:28;
- "The book of the kings of Israel," "the book of the kings of Judah," and "the book of the annals of King David," cited in I Chronicles 27:24;
- "The records of Samuel the seer," "the records of Nathan the prophet," and "the records of Gad the seer," cited in I Chronicles 29:29;
- "The prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite" and "the visions of Iddo the seer," cited in II Chronicles 9:29; and
- "The records of Shemiah the prophet," cited in II Chronicles 12:15.

In the New Testament the situation is considerably different, as the focus is on the ministry of Jesus Christ and the meaning of his life.

The gospel accounts are either eyewitness recollections as in the case of Matthew and John or narratives based on primary sources such as in Mark and Luke. The epistles of Paul, Peter, John, James and Jude offer no insight regarding the means by which the Holy Spirit might have inspired their thoughts, and the Book of Revelation includes only the cryptic reference cited previously (Rev. 1:9).

According to Papias, an early 2nd century church leader, the Gospel According to Mark was written based on the recollections of the apostle Peter. Luke, in the prologue to his gospel, relates that his information was compiled from interviews with "original eyewitnesses and servants" of Christ whom he "carefully investigated" in order to assure their accuracy.

Luke 1:1-4: Many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed them down to us. It also seemed good to me, since I have carefully investigated everything from the very first, to write to you an orderly account... so that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed.

The fact that the Old Testament writers relied upon previous historical accounts that were apparently not supernaturally-inspired, and that the Luke compiled his gospel (at least in part) using a methodology similar to that of other historians, reemphasizes the mystical nature of Scripture. Written by at least 40 different authors over a 1500-year span of time, and in some cases relying upon sources that were not divinely-inspired, nevertheless the end product was one that was superintended by the Holy Spirit in such a way as to present a unified and consistent theme. Most remarkably – and most inexplicably – the Spirit of God animates and quickens the words and the message of this book with the power to transform lives not only intellectually and morally but spiritually.

The Uniqueness of Biblical Revelation

Christians understand that biblical inspiration is qualitatively different from the kind of inspiration that comes when an artist conceptualizes and produces a work of art, or when a songwriter composes a song, when an author writes a book, when a pastor prepares and then preaches a sermon, or when a Christian offers up a prayer. But what exactly *is* the difference?

There are two elements of biblical inspiration that set it apart from other kinds of inspiration such as cited above. First, biblical inspiration is the result of “revelation” – i.e., original truths or new insights imparted to the prophets and apostles by the Holy Spirit. As cited above, in his epistle to the Galatians the apostle Paul emphasizes this point when he writes, “I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:11). All other forms of inspiration – be they thoughts, writings or other works, are simply the products of human intelligence and creativity, including those ideas that are reflections upon and expressions of the truths of biblical revelation. Extra-biblical inspiration can be impressively ingenious, but it conveys no new spiritual or moral truths.

Second, biblical inspiration is unique in that it is doctrinally and morally authoritative (or infallible). Other forms of inspiration, being the products of human thought and imagination, are simply reflections, interpretations, and expressions of the truths of biblical revelation. In this respect, extra-biblical inspiration is “true” only to the extent that it corresponds to the truths of biblical revelation. As Origen put it, the Bible is our “rule of faith” and “the standard by which we measure and evaluate all things.”

Part 1: Three “Bad” Reasons

In their efforts to defend the integrity of the Bible, Christians often resort to arguments that are, to say the least, unconvincing. The following are three commonly-used “bad” arguments for making the case for the divine inspiration of the Bible. These arguments are bad not necessarily because they are fallacious, but simply because no thoughtful spiritual seeker or skeptic would accept them as being in any way persuasive. These arguments can, however, be effective when used as supplements to the reasons put forth in Part 2.

1. The Argument from Authority.

The basic argument from authority goes something like this: “I believe the Bible is divinely-inspired and authoritative because that’s what my pastor (or church or denomination) teaches.” These sources of authority may be right, but nonetheless this is a poor argument. After all, what matters are the factual and rational reasons for believing in the divine inspiration of the Bible – not who or what authority claims that it is.

Furthermore, there are many acknowledged “authorities” – liberal pastors, priests, Bible scholars, seminary professors, etc. – who will argue that the Bible is *not* in fact divinely-inspired and authoritative. So unless we want to get into a battle of competing authorities, this argument is not a prime reason for accepting the authority of Scripture and is best relegated to supplemental status.

2. The “Spiritual” Argument.

We have all heard Christians say things such as, “I know the Bible is true because I feel it in my heart” or “I know the Bible is the Word of God because it has changed my life,” or “I believe in the Bible because God’s Spirit bears witness with my spirit that it is true.” Perhaps you have said things like this yourself.

Now all of this may be true, but we should understand that such professions of faith sound purely subjective to nonbelievers. We might think that testimonials such as these have a strong impact on skeptics, but in fact they are quite unconvincing. After all, this kind of “spiritual” argument can be dismissed as simply an emotional response that we have to reading the Bible. Furthermore, devotees of other religions and cults often claim the same thing:

they get a “warm feeling” when they read their favorite religious texts.

Many things in life, including interacting with various forms of literature, stir people’s emotions and evoke strong sentiments. Therefore, like the argument from authority, the claim that one’s spiritual life, one’s values and priorities have been profoundly transformed by reading and studying the Bible may very well be true. But it is also personal and subjective (although not *purely* subjective – there *is* an objective reality inherent in the process). But we should understand, both for our own sake and that of others, that there are other reasons for believing in the Bible that are more effective because they are essentially objective rather than subjective.

3. The Self-Referential Argument.

Logically, the argument that “the Bible is true because it says it is” is rather obviously fallacious. Of course, there are good reasons to believe the Bible is true, but self-referential arguments are inherently weak. It would be as if I said, “You can believe what I say because I can assure you that what I say is true.” This may in fact be true, but it is nonetheless a flawed argument. As the Christian philosopher William Lane Craig explains:

It would be circular reasoning if we were to try to *show* that the gospel is true on the basis of the Scriptures, since the Scriptures are a written expression of the gospel. Thus, while one can use the Scriptures as historical documentary evidence, one cannot, without begging the question, use them as God’s Word to argue for the truth of God’s Word. [Cited in Steven B. Cowan, *Five Views on Apologetics* (Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), p. 315.]

In several Scripture passages the claim is made that the writings of the ancient Hebrew prophets and chroniclers that constitute the *Tanakh* were divinely-inspired. In II Timothy 3:16 the apostle Paul writes that “all Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correction, and for training in righteousness....” In I Timothy 3:16 Paul also comments that “we all agree, our religion contains amazing revelation....” In John 5:39 Jesus is quoted as saying, “You study the scriptures thoroughly because you think in them you possess eternal life, and it is these same scriptures that testify about me.” These statements are all true, but philosophically none of them offers

convincing *reasons* to believe. Of course, as mentioned earlier, there is spiritual power in the words and message of Scripture that when animated by the Holy Spirit can be convincing in themselves, but here we are making the case that philosophically, self-referential arguments employ circular logic – just as if I were to say, “You should believe me because I can assure you that you should believe me.” If you were to ask me, “Why should I believe you,” I would respond, “Because I said so.” Not a particularly persuasive argument, is it?

Also consider that other religious texts claim to be true. For example, the very first verse of the Qu’ran, just following the introductory *Shahada* (“There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah”), declares, “This Book is not to be doubted.” But of course, the Qu’ran *should be* doubted: it is a false religion that constantly contradicts the Bible. So the fact that the Qu’ran assures us that it is true is no reason necessarily to believe that it is true indeed.

Part 2: Five Good Reasons

1. The Bible Is Historically Reliable.

We can never “prove” that the Bible was divinely-inspired, so why should we believe that it was?^{*} First, we can we build a circumstantial case for the supernatural inspiration of Scripture by showing that the Bible is historically reliable. Written by approximately 40 authors over 1500 years, it offers a reliable chronicle of God’s actions and interactions in human history. No book has been more studied, scrutinized and critiqued over the centuries, yet there is not a single verified historical error in the Bible. As Louis Markos has written in *Apologetics for the 21st Century*:

In order to substantiate the basic claims of Christ and the essential doctrines of Christianity, the apologist need not prove the inspiration or inerrancy of the Bible; he need only show the Bible to be reliable in its account of Jewish and Christian history. [Louis Markos, *Apologetics for the 21st Century* (Crossway, 2010), p. 146.]

This is a point that cannot be over-emphasized. Generally-speaking, ancient “historians” were not so much interested in relating truth as in promoting a particular agenda. History for them was almost exclusively a literary art, not a social science, and in that regard they were more like propagandists or polemicists than reliable chroniclers. Not that they were always averse to the truth or totally incapable of recording straight facts – they often did, but usually when it served their purposes. Otherwise, they had few qualms about twisting, distorting, and embellishing reality, omitting crucial information, and incorporating popular superstitions and fables into their narratives. As the acknowledged “father of history,” the Greek historian Herodotus (484-424 BC), informed his readers, history should primarily be entertaining.

In stark contrast to this mentality is the history we encounter in Scripture, which appears to be scrupulously (and sometimes excruciatingly) honest, unsanitized and unvarnished. Unlike the ultra-nationalistic pagan chronicles and the

^{*} In actuality, we can “prove” very little in this life. Virtually everything we believe we do so by faith – i.e., on the basis of reason and probabilities. For example, you cannot prove that you’re experiencing reality as you read this article – you might be dreaming, or perhaps this is all just an illusion (or a even nightmare!). But in all probability it is real, and in all likelihood you are in fact having a real existential experience as you read this scintillating book.

panegyric idolatry of great leaders, biblical history is written from a higher, more objective perspective that often offers scathing critiques of Israel, God’s “chosen people,” and central characters such as Abraham, Moses, David, and other national heroes. This same objectivity is carried through into the New Testament in its realistic depictions of Jesus’ disciples and hypocrites in the early church.

Of course, it is important to note here that historical accuracy isn’t in any way a conclusive argument for the divine inspiration of the Bible. Keep in mind that we are building a cumulative case for why we should believe the Bible is supernaturally inspired. But we can reasonably assume that *if* the Bible were divinely-inspired, it would be historically reliable. And that is precisely what we have.

The Bible is certainly a book of faith, but it is a faith grounded in actual historical events. In the case of the New Testament, as Markos notes, if it were some other ancient historical text, “it would be hailed by all critics, liberal and orthodox alike, as the most reliable text of the ancient world.” As for the Old Testament, the strongest case for its historical reliability is the fact that Christ often testified to its authority and historicity. Certainly, this alone should be sufficient reason for Christians to accept it as holy Scripture, but nonbelievers will demand more evidence – in which case we must point out that this is only one of five good reasons to believe the Bible was inspired by God.

Along with history, archaeology also confirms the historical reliability of the Bible. There has never been an archaeological discovery that disproves a Biblical narrative, and according to the renowned Jewish archaeologist, Nelson Glueck, “It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference.” Glueck also marvels at “the almost incredibly accurate historical memory of the Bible.” In the *New York Times* review of Werner Keller’s *The Bible As History*, the writer noted that “No archaeological discovery has ever been made that contradicts or controverts historical statements in Scripture.” Likewise, archaeologist John McRay is quoted in Lee Strobel’s *The Case for Christ* as affirming, “Archaeology has not produced anything that is unequivocally a contradiction in the Bible.”

Over the past 150 years scholars have charged the Bible with errors, but repeatedly they have been

proven wrong. As the Oxford historian A. H. Sayce observed:

Time after time the most positive assertions of a skeptical criticism have been disproved by archaeological discovery, events and personages that were confidently pronounced to be mythical have been shown to be historical, and the older writers have turned out to have been better acquainted with what they were describing than the modern critic who has flouted them. [Quoted in McDowell, *New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 415.]

But as means of accessing the truth of the past, it should be pointed out that history and archaeology have their limitations. History and archaeology can confirm many names, dates, locations, and events in the Bible, but cannot prove that Jesus, Paul, or any other biblical character said or did something that is attributed to them. Furthermore, they cannot prove what is most important about Jesus – the *meaning* of his life – nor can they prove the existence of God or the spiritual truth of the Bible. Just as the fact that the archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann discovered the ancient city of Troy doesn't verify that *The Iliad* is necessarily true, no historical or archaeologist evidence for the life of Christ or any other biblical story can verify the specific details or the meaning of these narratives. Historical and archaeological confirmations can only demonstrate that the biblical accounts *could be* true. Or stated otherwise: What history and archaeology can show is that there are no good reasons necessarily to doubt the biblical narratives.

2. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Christian faith is rooted in history. As the late-2nd century Christian scholar Clement of Alexandria observed, “The Bible is the narration of a revelation which has been experienced in history; it is the story of the acts of God toward humanity, and of repeated divine interventions in history.” In recent times, the theologian George Eldon Ladd put it this way: “The uniqueness of the Christian religion rests in the mediation of revelation through historical events.”

Christianity is different than other religions in that its unique truth claims are testable – or in other words, it is subject to falsifiability. It is not merely a subjective leap of faith. Its unique truth-claims can be verified based on historical evidence – in particular, the evidence for the historicity of the resurrection of Christ.

The resurrection is the cornerstone of the Christian faith, and it is the linchpin that holds the

Christian faith together. If the resurrection is true, then all the rest of Christianity makes sense. As the Anglican cleric N. T. Wright argues in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, “Without the resurrection, there is a gaping hole in first century history that nothing else can plug.... [But] once [we] grant that Jesus really was raised... all the pieces of the historical jigsaw puzzle of early Christianity fall into place.” Similarly, the Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan puts the centrality of the resurrection in its proper place when he stresses, “If Christ has *not* been raised from the dead, then nothing else matters. If Christ *has* been raised from the dead, then nothing else matters.”

In I Corinthians 15:1ff, the apostle Paul emphasized that Christ's resurrection was the basis for the faith – without which the Christian faith is “useless” and “futile.”

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you....

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living.... This is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead.... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile.

Furthermore, in I Peter 1:16 the apostle Peter reminded his readers that Christ's resurrection was not a legend or a myth but a real historical event in that he and others witnessed the resurrected Christ; “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.” In the Lee Strobel's *Case for Christ*, Gary Habermas emphasizes that “The earliest Christians didn't just endorse Jesus' teachings; they were convinced they had seen him alive after his

crucifixion. *That's* what changed their lives and started the church.” Similarly, New Testament professor Ben Witherington of Asbury Seminary declares that the historicity of the resurrection cannot be overemphasized:

Whether Christianity stands or falls depends on certain historical facts.... Among these facts that are most crucial to Christian faith is the fact of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. The Christian faith is not mere faith in faith – but rather a belief about the significance of certain historical events....

The resurrection demonstrates that there is a power in the universe greater than death – namely, the life-giving power of God. This power means not merely that God is capable of creating new life from scratch, but that he is able to re-create life which has died. The resurrection means that God, not death, has the last word about human ends and destiny.... From this point of view, the resurrection of Jesus is the most important event in all of human history....

With regularity I am confronted with students who ask why it matters that this or that event happened as long as they find their own personal faith experiences to be satisfying and transforming. The answer is that if we retreat into pure subjectivity, then there is no objective criterion by which we may determine the difference between a heartwarming experience sent by God and mere heartburn, between things that are good for us and things that merely feel good.

'Resurrection Lite,' or the resurrection as pure metaphor... was not what the earliest Christians believed in.... They had an interest in historical reality, especially the historical reality of Jesus and his resurrection. ["Resurrection Redux," in Paul Copan, ed., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* (Baker Books, 1998), p. 138, 140.]

The fact that the early church believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the best-attested facts of ancient history. So what accounts for their belief in this phenomenal event? For centuries skeptics have tried desperately to refute the historicity of the resurrection by putting forth various alternative theories:

- The gospel accounts of the resurrection are contradictory;
- There is insufficient evidence to believe that Jesus actually rose from the dead;
- It isn't necessary to believe that Jesus actually rose physically from the grave; what matters is the spiritual symbolism surrounding the concept of the resurrection;

- Pagan mystery religions included similar resurrection myths and legends;
- Jesus didn't rise from the dead; his body was stolen from the tomb either by his followers, by Jewish religious leaders, or by the Roman authorities;
- The "swoon theory" – Jesus never actually died on the cross, and he was resuscitated while in the tomb and escaped;
- The hallucination theory – Jesus' followers only imagined that they had seen him after his burial;
- The whole story of Jesus' resurrection was simply a legend that early Christians concocted to claim that he was the Messiah and the Son of God;
- The whole concept of resurrection is unscientific and reflects a premodern mentality.

However, a careful examination of these alternative hypotheses shows that each of them is seriously flawed. Furthermore, none explain how and why a pseudo-resurrection or a purely symbolic resurrection could have animated the early followers of Christ and led to an explosion of belief in Christ as the divine Son of God.* As the Candler New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson comments:

The matter is one of simple logic: for an effect, we need a necessary and sufficient cause. [Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, pp.136, 139.]

Christianity begins with Jesus' followers experiencing Jesus after his death in a radically new way. Christianity is a religion of personal encounter with God, and resurrection faith is the birth of Christianity. [Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, p. 101]

When all is considered, the only sensible explanation for the genesis and subsequent growth of the Christian faith is that God raised Jesus from the dead, thereby validating his life and ministry including Jesus' claim to be the divine Savior of humanity. In addition, not only does the resurrection lend ultimate credibility to Christ's claims concerning his own messianic mission, but it also lends credence to belief in the divine inspiration of Scripture.

* For a comprehensive defense of the historicity of the resurrection and a critique of alternative theories, see Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (IVP Academic, 2010).

3. A Consistent and Progressive Theme.

The Bible, written over 1500 years by some forty authors, is consistent from beginning to end in terms of...

(1)General theme. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible offers up a progressive unfolding of God's plan for humanity from creation to fall to redemption through Jesus Christ.

(2)The nature of Ultimate Reality in the personhood, the nature and the character of God.

(3)The human condition. In Scripture we find a consistent and realistic appraisal of the paradox of human nature as having been created in the *Imago Dei* (the image of God) and yet existing as fallen, egoistic sinners.

(4)The solution to mankind's problem – as summarized succinctly in Habakkuk 2:4 in the Old Testament and Romans 1:17 in the New Testament: “The righteous shall live by faith.”

4. A Rational and Plausible Worldview That is Coherent, Consistent, and Comprehensive.

Many Christians spend a lifetime studying the Bible, and some even progress on to become knowledgeable and astute amateur or professional theologians. But few Christians ever seriously ponder the Bible philosophically or ruminate on the most profound question we can ask of Scripture: “What exactly *is* the Bible?” If you couldn't use the standard stock answer, “The Bible is the Word of God,” how would you answer that question?

The lack of philosophical reflection is a problem because, when it comes to understanding the Bible, the tendency among many Christians is to miss the proverbial forest for the trees (or in many cases, miss the forest for fixating on individual branches, limbs or twigs on a particular tree). Yet it cannot be overemphasized that in addition to understanding the broad theological themes of Scripture (see #3 above), it is imperative that we understand the basic philosophy of the Bible. But once we grasp this, the divine inspiration of Scripture becomes all the more apparent.

The Bible offers a particular worldview that sets it dramatically apart from all other belief systems. This is a vast topic, but the following is a succinct summary of the key arguments on behalf of a biblical worldview that would imply divine inspiration.

First, a biblical worldview is **coherent** – i.e., it is orderly and rational. Certainly, there are tenets set forth in Scripture that are *supra-rational* – i.e., above

and beyond mere human understanding – such as the doctrines of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the Incarnation, the Atonement and the Resurrection. But although supra-rational mysteries, none of these is philosophically *irrational*.

Second, a biblical worldview is **consistent**. Of all the core doctrines that Christians hold, none are inherently contradictory. (Note: This would include the doctrines of the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ.)

Third, a biblical worldview is **comprehensive**. The Bible presents rational doctrines regarding what philosophers call the perennial issues of life, including:

- **Origins of the universe.** Unlike all other ancient religions and philosophies that taught an eternal universe, the Bible is the only ancient text that affirms that the universe had a beginning – the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing).
Obviously, something (or someone) has to be eternal, and there are only two options: either matter or a Supernatural Being. Now it makes no sense to argue that matter is eternal: where did it come from, where did the laws of physics come from, and how did matter arrange itself into its present forms? It is more sensible to believe in a personal, eternal and omnipotent God as presented in the Bible than to imagine that impersonal matter is responsible for all that exists.
- **Origins of life.** Only the Bible offers a plausible explanation for the appearance of life on earth and human life in particular. Otherwise, it is impossible that non-living matter could spontaneously produce life for the simple reason that non-living matter has no *potential* to produce life. Life-producing energy has to be added from the outside by an omnipotent and omniscient Intelligent Designer. As C. S. Lewis argues in *Mere Christianity*, only a Superior Being such as the God of the Bible has the potential to bring into existence complex beings such as ourselves.
- **Human nature.** Being made in the *Imago Dei*, human beings have attributes such as consciousness, self-awareness, self-determination, intelligence, creativity, and a sense of morality. That being the case, why do humans often behave so badly – like predatory animals?

The answer, according to Scripture, is due to the noetic effects of the Fall that corrupted every aspect of our human nature:

- It distorted our understanding of the nature and character of God;
- It corrupted the divine image of God within us and rendered us selfish, rebellious, and alienated from God; and
- It broke our relationship with God.

As James Sire writes in his classic study of alternative worldviews, *The Universe Next Door*, “In this manner people ... have attempted to set themselves up as autonomous beings.... They chose to act as if they had an existence independent from God.” The result is that intellectually, our thinking became muddled and confused; morally, we lost the ability to discern good and evil; socially, we take advantage of others and use them for our own selfish ends; and creatively, our imagination became separated from reality – or as Sire puts it, “imagination became illusion, and artists who created gods in their own image led humanity further and further from its origin.” This is essentially why, as the Christian philosopher J. Budziszewski observes, “Reality poses a constant problem for fallen man.”

So while we are capable of great acts of love, compassion and self-sacrifice, Scripture constantly reminds us that we are also prone to great selfishness, jealousy, bitterness, cruelty and brutality.

- **Morality.** Materialistic elements such as atoms, molecules and cells are not conscious entities, nor do they have a sense of right and wrong. This is true for atoms, molecules and cells individually, and it is also true when they unite to form more complex physical properties. But if matter is all that is real, how is it that we carry within us an innate sense of good and evil? Obviously, there must exist a metaphysical (non-material) realm of reality. Our moral sensibilities are totally inexplicable from a purely naturalistic and materialistic worldview perspective, but are immanently explicable if we have been created in the image of a God who is the source and the personification of goodness and morality.
- **A sense of purpose and meaning.** As in the case for morality, there is no reason to think that materialistic elements would have a sense

of purpose and meaning in life. Such elements merely exist physically, not consciously, and they possess no metaphysical properties. Yet we as human beings do indeed have an innate sense of purpose and meaning. The Bible offers the reason: we have been made in the image of a purposeful God and imbued with a soul. We have been made for spiritual union with God, as Augustine wrote 1600 years ago: “O God, you made us for yourself, and our hearts will never find peace until they rest in you.”

- **The longing for eternal life.** As C. S. Lewis observed: “If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.” God has set eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11), and our deepest longing is to become “partakers of the divine nature” and experience eternal life (II Peter 1:4).

5. Fulfilled Biblical Prophecy.

Throughout the New Testament the apostles constantly appealed to two arguments from the life of Jesus to establish his messiahship: (1) His resurrection; and (2) His fulfillment of messianic prophecies. But much misunderstanding accompanies this whole issue of biblical prophecy, and it is imperative that we have a sound understanding and a firm grasp of the nature of prophecy.

The Bible uses the word “prophecy” in two senses:

(1) **Foretelling** – i.e., predictive prophecy of things yet to come; and

(2) **Forthtelling** – speaking God’s message in the present.

Regarding predictive prophecy, the Bible is unique. No other religious writings include predictive prophecies such as we find in the Bible, which is a powerful testimony to the fact that it was supernaturally inspired. On numerous occasions Jesus cited various prophecies in order to authenticate his life and ministry:

- Luke 4:20-21 – At the outset of his ministry, Jesus read from Isaiah 61 in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. “Then he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture was fulfilled in your hearing.””

- Matt. 5:17 – “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.”
- John 5:39ff – “You study the scriptures thoroughly because you think in them you possess eternal life, and it is these same scriptures that testify about me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me.”
- Luke 24:27 – “And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”
- Matt. 26:56 - “But all this was done that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.”
- Luke 24:44 – “Then [Jesus] said to [his disciples], ‘These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.’”

Biblical authority rests in part on more than 200 prophecies fulfilled by Jesus’s birth, ministry, death and resurrection, including...

- Micah 5:2-4, which indicates that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.
- Isaiah 52:13-53:12, which speaks of the coming suffering Servant (Acts 8:30-35; I Peter 2:23).
- Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem as a fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9.
- Jesus’ burial in a rich man’s grave in keeping with prediction of Isaiah 53:9.
- Malachi 3:1-5, which refers to a coming messenger who will carry out the work that only God can do.

The Problem – and the Fulfillment. However, there is a problem that has to be reconciled regarding biblical prophecies related to Jesus. If we look at the historical context for many of these attributions, we find that they related to specific people or events in OT history – not to the coming Messiah. For example:

- Matthew 2:15 attributes Hosea 11:1 to Jesus – “*Out of Egypt I called my son*” – but in fact this is a reference to the Exodus.
- Matthew attributes Isaiah 7:14 to Mary – “*Behold, the alman [maiden, or virgin] shall conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*” But this prophecy was addressed to King Ahaz of Judah, and the context

indicates that this child would be born in Ahaz’s day and would be a sign to the king and the people of Judah that God would protect them from an invasion by the Northern Kingdom of Israel and its ally, Syria. The child, whom many scholars identify as Isaiah’s son, Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (Isa. 8:3), would be called “Immanuel” because he would be a sign to the people of Judah that God was with them and would protect them. Of course, Isaiah’s wife wasn’t a virgin when she gave birth to their son – but presumably she was a virgin (or a young maiden) at the time Isaiah wrote the prophecy.

- Matthew 2:17 cites Jeremiah 31:15 as the basis for Herod’s slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem when Jesus was an infant: “A voice was heard in Ramah, a lament with bitter weeping – Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children because they are no more.” But the original context for this verse related to the Babylonian Exile.
- In Matthew 15:7-8, Jesus quoted Isaiah 29:13 in his criticism of the Jewish leaders of his day: “You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.’” But Isaiah was not literally predicting that the Messiah would deal with hypocritical Pharisees – Jesus was simply drawing a comparison between apostate Jews in the time of Isaiah and those of his day.
- During his crucifixion (Matthew 27:47), Jesus quotes the first line of Psalm 22 – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But this cry of anguish was originally uttered by David, who in the midst of his own suffering felt abandoned by God as he was being mocked and pursued by his enemies. Similar feelings were also expressed by Job in the crucible of his sufferings.

So the question is: Did Jesus really “fulfill” these prophecies – and if so, in what sense? Critics, including Jewish scholars, charge that the early Christian writers merely mined the Old Testament for anything they could find that they could attribute to Jesus to make the case that he was the Messiah.

This controversy centers around a basic misunderstanding of what the New Testament writers meant when they declared that Jesus

“fulfilled” certain predictive prophecies that were written centuries earlier. What they meant was this: in certain respects, Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament *typologically* in the sense that all previous Scripture anticipates the coming of the Messiah – from Genesis 3:15 on (“I will put hostility between you [Satan] and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel”). The point here is that Jesus, along with the writers of the New Testament, interpreted some (but not all) of the ancient Scriptures Christocentrically. In other words, they understood Jesus as the ultimate representation, personification, completion, or the perfection of various historical events, concepts, images and personages that we find in the ancient Hebrew Scriptures. For example:

- Israel was intended to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 42:6), while Jesus proclaimed himself “the light of the world” (John 8:12).
- Alluding to the manna that came to Israel during the Exodus, Jesus referred to himself “the living bread” and “the bread of life” (John 6:48-51).
- In the ancient scriptures, YHWH was depicted as the shepherd of his people (Psalm 23:1; Ezekiel 34:15); similarly, Jesus described himself as “the good shepherd” (John 10:11-16; Mark 14:27).
- Jesus’ temptation in the desert lasted 40 days, symbolizing Israel’s 40 years of testing in the wilderness during the Exodus.
- Jesus selected twelve disciples as symbolic of a new community of God that replaced the twelve tribes of Israel.

In most instances, the term “fulfillment” in the New Testament doesn’t mean the fulfillment of a prediction. In fact, in most cases ancient prophets were not knowingly or intentionally writing predictive prophecy. As Paul Copan explains in *That’s Just Your Interpretation*:

The Greek word for “fulfill” (*pleroo*) means something much broader than “the completion of a prediction. In fact, most instances of the word “fulfill” do not imply prediction at all. Fulfillment is part of the very fabric of the New Testament, which sees Jesus and his work bringing to fruition the significance of the entire Old Testament...

[F]ulfillment has the sense of embodying, bringing to completion, or perfecting. [Paul Copan, *That’s Just Your Interpretation* (Baker Books, 2001), p. 191.]

For example, in Matthew 5:17, when Jesus says that he came to “fulfill” the Law and the Prophets, the implication is that he was consummating the ultimate intention of the Law by completing the symbolic meaning of the sacrificial system, the priesthood, the Sabbatical laws, the Year of Jubilee, and other sacred traditions.

Likewise, in Matthew 27:46 Jesus “fulfills” (or embodies) the suffering that David wrote about in Psalm 22. But whereas David was writing metaphorically of his suffering, many of his allusions were fulfilled literally and historically in the crucifixion of Christ:

- “Everyone who sees me mocks me; they sneer and shake their heads: ‘He relies on the Lord; let Him rescue him; let the Lord deliver him, since He takes pleasure in him [22:7-8].
- “All my bones are disjoined” [22:16].
- “For dogs have surrounded me; a gang of evildoers has closed in on me; they pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people look and stare at me. They divided my garments among themselves, and they cast lots for my clothing” [22: 16-18].

Therefore, throughout the New Testament the writers declare that Jesus personifies, symbolizes, or completes certain Old Testament themes or personages. In his book, *Jesus and the Old Testament*, R. T. France explains the fuller significance of Jesus’ messianic mission:

Jesus uses *persons* in the Old Testament as types of himself (David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jonah) or of John the Baptist (Elijah); he refers to Old Testament *institutions* as types of himself and his work (the priesthood and the covenant); he sees in the *experiences* of Israel foreshadowings of his own; he finds the *hopes* of Israel fulfilled in himself and his disciples and sees his disciples as assuming the *status* of Israel; in Israel’s *deliverance* by God he sees a type of the gathering of men into his church, while the *disasters* of Israel are foreshadowings of the imminent punishment of those who reject him, whose *unbelief* is prefigured in that of the wicked Israel. [R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (InterVarsity Press, 1977), pp. 38-39.]

The accusation that early Christians plundered the Old Testament texts in a desperate attempt to argue that Jesus was the fulfillment of earlier prophecies misrepresents what actually happened. In fact, the element of predictive prophecy is one of its most unique features of the Bible, and it is a valid reason why we should regard the Bible as

divinely-inspired. But as Christians we should be prudent in the way we use biblical prophecy to argue for the truth of Scripture. This is an issue that is commonly misunderstood, and it can lead to some erroneous conclusions.

We should be also be cautious in terms of how we interpret the Bible in general, holding to the principles of the grammatical-historical approach to biblical hermeneutics lest we interpret Scripture in cavalier and bizarre ways that actually detract from its inherent integrity.

The Summa

Christians should be well-prepared, knowledgeable and wise when it comes to explaining why we believe the Bible is the divinely-inspired written Word of God. After all, it is our ultimate authority for what we believe about the things that matter most: our concept of God and our understanding of the human condition, our purpose and meaning in life, issues related to right and wrong, and our ultimate destiny. In this respect, the Bible presents the one and only way by which we can be reconciled to God, and it alone offers the true and unadulterated “words of life.”

As the apostle Peter wrote in II Peter 1:3-4:

[God’s] divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of [Christ] who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

There are five good reasons that cumulatively offer a compelling argument for why belief in the divine inspiration of Scripture is sensible:

- (1)The Bible is historically reliable;
- (2)The resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the best-attested events in ancient history;
- (3)Written over a period of 1500 years by some 40 authors, the Bible puts forth a consistent and progressive central theme and message;
- (4)The Bible offers a rational and plausible worldview that is coherent, consistent and comprehensive, and one that provides rational and realistic answers to the perennial issues of life; and
- (5)The phenomenon of fulfilled prophecy makes the Bible unique among all religious texts.

Supplemental to these reasons are the three deficient arguments cited previously. In fact, these arguments are “bad” not necessarily because they are fallacious or erroneous, but because they are

primarily subjective or self-referential. In fact, the Bible *does* claim to be true – and there are good reasons to believe that it is – but self-referential arguments are inherently weak. Likewise, some sources of authority (Bible scholars, church leaders, church traditions, etc.) are indeed reliable, but unfortunately others are not. And of the course the argument from a changed life can certainly be a powerful one – but only if we have earned the trust and respect of those with whom we are sharing our faith. Otherwise, they might dismiss our personal testimony as purely subjective and unconvincing. After all, followers of other religions and cults have testimonies, too. So unless we want to get into a battle over whose personal testimony is better or more persuasive, we are well-advised to base our arguments for the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible on more solid and objective grounds.



For further reading:

- Paul Copan, Chapter 21: “Old Testament ‘Prophecies’ Are Taken Out of Context in the New Testament,” in *That’s Just Your Interpretation* (BakerBooks, 2001).
- C. F. D. Moule, “Fulfillment-Words in the New Testament: Use and Abuse,” *New Testament Studies* 14 (1967-68), pp. 293-320.