

God Doesn't Give Autographs

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What does it mean when Christians say the Bible is inspired?

God doesn't give autographs. What I mean by that is that God doesn't allow us, or apparently hasn't in His sovereignty, to keep the autographs of the writings of the Bible. I am tempted to say the original autographs, but the autograph is an original so that would be like saying the original original. In other words, those things that the Apostles actually penned, which copies were made of to disperse around the Mediterranean region and then be copied and recopied, etc.--Greek copies of which we have some 5,366 plus now, and in addition, the Aramaic and Coptic and Latin Vulgate. We have lots of different copies to make comparisons to see if what we have now is accurate.

That's actually a separate question, by the way. The question of lower criticism, or textual criticism is, have the documents been passed on in an accurate fashion? We have a transcript on that issue called "Is the New Testament Text Reliable?"

But the question can be raised, why didn't God allow us to have the autographs, the originals? I guess I need to back up here a moment and talk about inspiration because this whole question that I want to approach here is grounded in the idea of inspiration. It's really important that you understand precisely what we mean when we say that God inspired the Scripture. Let's just take the claim at face value right now. I won't defend the notion; that's a different issue. What it means is that God worked in a supernatural way such that those who were actually doing the writing wrote down precisely what God wanted them to write. He was moving through a human individual.

It was not automatic writing. It wasn't like Paul was in a trance writing away with his eyes glued open and someone asked, "What are you writing?" And he said, "I don't know, it's Greek to me." That isn't what happened. He was writing like you would a letter. You can read letters from different writers and they have their own personality in the letter. They may have used research like Luke did, interviewed other people, compiled information. They might have even borrowed from secular sources. That seems to have happened in the book of Proverbs.

The point is, when we say it's inspired we mean that whatever the words were that were written down, these were the precise words that God wanted to have written down. God worked powerfully through those people such that their words were God's words and God's words were their words. That's why we call the Scripture the Word of God, even though they may be the words of Peter or Paul or John or the Prophets. They are still the word of God because God was working in a concursive way. He was writing together with them, in a sense. We call this operation inspiration.

What we mean by this, for example in the case of the New Testament, is that these are the particular words in the Greek language that most precisely reflect the meanings that God wanted to convey. Notice I used two terms there: words and meanings. In other words, the very words are the out-breathing of God. Technically they are not inspired; they are expired. I don't mean they are dead. They are theopneustus, "the breathing of God." "God-breathed" is what that means, literally. So now we have the words flowing from the pens of Peter and Paul and Moses and the Prophets that are the particular words that God chose to express His thoughts to us, but we don't have in our possession the inspired original words. No problem. That's actually a good thing.

Think for just a moment what a word is. Let's take the word table. The meaning signified by the word table or by the sound table is not the letters on the page or the sound itself. The meaning is something other than that. When we utter the word table, what we mean is, "that thing out there with four legs and a flat top." We can even point to it and say That, right there. So the sound or the written word signifies a particular object and this signifies relation, this pointing to business that is caught up between the word we utter and the thing that we are pointing at, this is what we call meaning.

Words convey meaning and God chose very specific words. He inspired them in order to convey particular meanings. The word points to something out there in the world. In other words, sometimes the meaning of the word is a physical object like table. Other times it is not physical--love, for example. The point that I'm making is that we can have two tangible things--a sound or a written word--on a page that points to another tangible thing--the table for example--but that pointing to is not something tangible. The meaning is not physical.

Now stay with me for a moment, because this is all going to cash out in a very important way. First of all, think of this. It's not just the meanings of the Bible that are inspired. When I gave you our definition of inspiration which seems to be the biblical teaching on the issue, we're not talking about the meanings that are inspired. It's the words themselves--the Greek words. 2 Timothy 3:16 says "all graphé is inspired", all Scripture. What are the graphé? The writings. All the writings are inspired.

We've been talking about the fact that there's a big difference between the word and the meaning. For example, the word could change. You might say table in English, or mesa in Spanish or tdoe in Thai--but it's still table. The word changes but the meaning is the same. The meaning is fixed. The words can change, but the meaning stays the same. Meanings are static and words can change to identify the meanings.

This difference identifies the distinction between what is called a type and a token. The meaning of the word is the type. It's the thing itself. The token is the t-a-b-l-e that signifies the meaning. The type doesn't change. The meaning or the type is a universal. It can be in more than one place at one time. The same meaning of

table can be in mesa or tdoe and table at the same time. The different tokens have the same meaning but it takes different forms. The words are the particulars, the tokens, the examples, in a sense.

So, the simple rule is there is one type, many tokens. The type is not tangible, the tokens are. Meanings give the words meanings.

If you write table on the board three times, how many words are on the board? Well, it's not entirely clear how many there are. There are three words, and there is one word, meaning that there are three tokens--the token table three times, but only one type. One meaning is represented there, but there are three different tokens of that meaning on the board.

God has chosen a particular set of tokens in words recorded in the Scriptures that can be communicated equally to everyone. Therefore everybody has the same shot at the truth.

How does all this relate to the issue of Scripture and the original documents? There's a couple of conclusions we can draw. First is that the only way we can really communicate meaning is by using some kind of token of it--in this case, words. It can be a spoken word or a written word or sign language or some kind of token which communicates meaning. This is why it is so critical that it is not the meanings only that are inspired in Scripture but the tokens themselves, the writings, the words. If you lose the tokens, if you can't count on the tokens, then we don't have access to the meanings either. Another way of putting it is, how can you get inspired meanings without inspired words? Yet there are some people who hold that it is not the words that are inspired. The words can be fallible, but it's the meanings that are the things that really count. But how do you get one without the other? You've got to have some fixed point from which to depart. You've got to have the words--the tokens--which are a point of public access to the meanings. All of us can see the same word there. In this case, the fixed point is the words in the original manuscripts in the Greek, and God has given those things as a fixed point, particular tokens so that we can work with those tokens to get at the meaning. That's what we do when we do biblical interpretation.

Another advantage is that meanings themselves aren't reproducible. Only tokens are reproducible. So it makes sense that we have a Bible that is given to us in tokens. That is, written words which allow us to reproduce the tokens so that the meaning carried with the tokens can be transferred as well. Some people ask, Why doesn't God just speak to me? Why doesn't He just show himself to me? In a way He has. He has spoken. But to avoid showing Himself to every single person in some kind of special and unique fashion that may be confusing or misleading, God has chosen a particular set of tokens in words recorded in the Scriptures that can be communicated equally to everyone. Therefore everybody has the same shot at the truth. They have this shot through a fixed medium of the particular words that God has chosen. You can see how helpful this makes things, can't you? It deals decisively with the problem of each person having to interpret his

own individual subjective revelation that is not tied to something objective like a text--words.

Think for a moment if you were the owner of a company and you wanted all your employees to be very, very clear on a set of principles that you had for running the company. You wouldn't simply emote your desires and hope that all of your employees picked up your vibes. You'd want each employee to understand you so you would articulate your thoughts as precisely as possible through the tokens of words and expect each employee to read the same words in order to get your meaning clear. Right? That's exactly what God has done.

There's another tremendous advantage to this, by the way. If God were to give us such a memo, such a revelation, it would be a very valuable revelation, right? How do you protect such a revelation? God writes through someone His divine word on a piece of paper. How do you protect that? How do you guard against its destruction. If it's only one copy and it was destroyed, bang and it's gone. When it gets destroyed, we are back in the dark again.

Or even more importantly, how do you guard against it being changed or tampered with or corrupted by someone? It's one thing not to have any record at all and then everyone's in the dark. It's another thing altogether to have a spurious record, a faulty record giving commands from God that are not from God at all. That's worse.

Well, the way God handled that is to solve both problems by allowing the original to be destroyed. How does that solve the problem? He made sure there were thousands and then millions of copies. So many copies that they could not all be destroyed.

That's why I don't get it when some claim that the early church took out all the references from the Bible about reincarnation. Some claim that the Council of Nicea took out all the references to reincarnation, that it was originally in the Bible. First of all, how would anybody know that if it was taken a millennium and a half ago? How would you even know that it used to be there and now it's not there any more? Would you find eraser marks or something?

Then there's another problem. How is the church going to gather up the thousands of manuscripts that are being circulated all over the Mediterranean--actually there were tens of thousands; only thousands have survived--and expunge every reference in the Bible to reincarnation? Well, they can't do it when there are thousands of copies, but if there was only one they could. They could take it out and they could rewrite it. They could pretend that what they changed was really the original. That is, I think, one of the reasons God has allowed such a thing. If you had only the original, that could be done. But when you have thousands of copies it can't be done.

The Scriptures become dispersed abroad to all peoples in an objective form so that everyone gets the same thing in a way that protects the document from ever being forged or falsified. That can be done because even the original represents meaning through words as tokens and the tokens can be copied. They can be reproduced such that the copy of the token is the same as the original token. Just like the three words table on the board. They are the same as each other. So if we have a copy using the exact same tokens as the autograph, we essentially have the autograph. The same tokens convey the same meanings that are behind them.

In one sense, the original tokens are gone, the autograph is gone. But if we demonstrate that our present copies are accurate copies then it's fair to say that in regards to the tokens we have millions of originals all over the world. By golly, that's a pretty good system.

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