

# The Authority of Scripture (4)

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By Jay Rogers

([http://forerunner.com/orthodoxy/X0003\\_2\\_Authority\\_of\\_Scri.html](http://forerunner.com/orthodoxy/X0003_2_Authority_of_Scri.html))<sup>1</sup>

## Contents

- The acceptance of a Book
- The Procedure for discovering Canonicity
- The Bible is inspired by God
- Biblical Description of Inspiration
- The Three Elements in Inspiration
- The Characteristics of an Inspired Writing
- Inspiration of the Old Testament
- Inspiration of the New Testament

## *The Acceptance of a Book*

The final trademark of an authoritative writing is its recognition by the people of God to whom it was initially given. God's Word given through His prophet and with His truth must be recognized by His people. Later generations of believers sought to verify this fact. For if the book was received, collected, and used as God's work by those to whom it was originally given, then its canonicity was established.

Communication and transportation was difficult in ancient times. It sometimes took much time and effort on the part of the Church Fathers to determine acceptance of a book. For this reason the full and final recognition by the whole Church of the 66 books of the canon took many, many years.

The books of Moses were immediately accepted by the people of God. They were collected, quoted, preserved, and transferred to future generations. Paul's epistles were immediately received by the churches to whom they were addressed (1 Thess. 2:13) and by other apostles (2 Peter 3:16). Some writings were immediately rejected by the people of God as lacking divine authority (2 Thess. 2:2). False prophets (Matt. 7:21-23) and lying spirits were to be tested and rejected (1 John 4:1-3), as indicated in many instances within the Bible itself (Jer. 5:2; 14:14).

Other messages and books were rejected because they held out false hope (1 Kings 22:6-8) or rang a false alarm (2 Thess 2:2). Thus, they were not conducive to building up the believer in the truth of Christ. Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). False teaching never liberates; only the truth has emancipating power.

Some biblical books, such as Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes, were questioned because they were thought by some to lack this dynamic edifying power. Once they were convinced that the Song was not sensual but deeply spiritual and that Ecclesiastes was not skeptical and pessimistic but positive and edifying (e.g., 12:9-10), then there remained little doubt as to their canonicity.

This principle of acceptance led some to question for a time certain biblical books such as 2 and 3 John. Their private nature and limited circulation being what it was, it is understandable that there would be some

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<sup>1</sup> The original article by Jay Rogers is not divided in five separate files, but is presented as one essay. No changes were made to the text of the article. We acknowledge the authorship of Jay Rogers and refer readers to other insightful articles he wrote: <http://www.forerunner.com>

reluctance to accept them until they were assured that the books were received by the first-century people of God as from the apostle John.

It is almost needless to add that not everyone gave even initial recognition to a prophet's message. God vindicated His prophets against those who rejected them (e.g., 1 Kings 22:1-38) and, when challenged, He designated who His people were. When the authority of Moses was challenged by Korah and others, the earth opened and swallowed them alive (Numbers 16). The role of the people of God was decisive in the recognition of the Word of God. God determined the authority of the books of the canon, but the people of God were called upon to discover which books were authoritative and which were not. To assist them in this discovery were these five tests of canonicity.

### ***The Procedure for Discovering Canonicity***

We should not imagine a committee of Church Fathers with a large pile of books and these five guiding principles before them when we speak of the process of canonization. The process was far more natural and dynamic. Some principles are only implicit in the process.

Although all five characteristics are present in each inspired writing, not all of the rules of recognition are apparent in the decision on each canonical book. It was not always immediately obvious to the early people of God that some historical books were "dynamic" or "authoritative." More obvious to them was the fact certain books were "prophetic" and "accepted."

One can easily see how the implied "thus says the Lord" played a most significant role in the discovery of the canonical books which reveal God's overall redemptive plan. Nevertheless, the reverse is sometimes true; namely, the power and authority of the book are more apparent than its authorship (e.g., Hebrews). In any event, all five characteristics were involved in discovering each canonical book, although some were used only implicitly.

Some principles operate negatively in the process. Some of the rules for recognition operate more negatively than others. For instance, the principles of authenticity would more readily eliminate noncanonical books than indicate which books are canonical. There are no false teachings which are canonical, but there are many true writings which are not inspired. Likewise, many books which edify or have a dynamic are not canon, even though no canonical book is without significance in the saving plan of God.

Similarly, a book may claim to be authoritative without being inspired, as many of the apocryphal writings indicate, but no book can be canonical unless it is really authoritative. In other words, if the book lacks authority it cannot be from God. But the simple fact that a book claims authority does not make it inspired. The principle acceptance has a primarily negative function. Even the fact that a book is received by some of the people of God is not a proof of inspiration.

In later generations some Christians, not thoroughly informed about the acceptance or rejection by the people of God to whom it was originally addressed, gave local and temporal recognition to books which are not canonical (e.g., some apocryphal books).

Simply because a book was received somewhere by some believers is far from proof of its inspiration. The initial reception by the people of God who were in the best position to test the prophetic authority of the book is crucial. It took some time for all segments of subsequent generation to be fully informed about the original circumstances. Thus, their acceptance is important but supportive in nature.

The most essential principle supersedes all others. Beneath the whole process of recognition lay one fundamental principle -- the prophetic nature of the book. If a book were written by an accredited prophet of God, claiming to give an authoritative pronouncement from God, then there was no need to ask the other questions. Of course the people of God recognized the book as powerful and true when it was given to them by a prophet of God.

When there were no directly available confirmations of the prophet's call (as there often were, cf. Exodus 4:1-9), then the authenticity, dynamic ability, and reception of a book by the original believing community would be essential to its later recognition. On the other hand, simply establishing the book as prophetic was sufficient in itself to confirm the canonicity of the book.

The question as to whether inauthenticity would disconfirm a prophetic book is purely hypothetical. No book given by God can be false. If a book claiming to be prophetic seems to have indisputable falsehood, then the prophetic credentials must be re-examined. God cannot lie. In this way the other four principles serve as a check on the prophetic character of the books of the canon.

### ***The Bible Is Inspired of God***

Through the centuries Christians have been called upon to give a reason or defense for their faith (1 Peter 3:15). Since the Scriptures lay at the very foundation of their faith in Christ, it has been necessary for Christian apologists to provide evidence for the inspiration of the Bible.

It is one thing to claim divine inspiration for the Bible and quite another to provide evidence to confirm that claim. Before examining the supporting evidence for the inspiration of Scripture, let us summarize precisely what it is that inspiration claims.

The inspiration of the Bible is not to be confused with a poetic inspiration. Inspiration as applied to the Bible refers to the God-given authority of its teachings for the thought and life of the believer.

### ***Biblical Description of Inspiration***

The word inspiration means God-breathed, and it refers to the process by which the Scriptures or writings were invested with divine authority for doctrine and practice (2 Timothy 3:16,17). It is the writings which are said to be inspired. The writers, however, were moved by the Holy Spirit to record their messages. Hence, when viewed as a total process, inspiration is what occurs when writers moved by the Holy Spirit record God-breathed writings. Three elements are contained in this total process of inspiration: the divine causality, the prophetic agency, and the resultant written authority.

### ***The Three Elements in Inspiration***

The first element in inspiration is God's causality. God is the Prime Mover by whose promptings the prophets were led to write. The ultimate origin of inspired writings is the desire of God to communicate with man. The second factor is the prophetic agency. The Word of God comes through men of God. God uses the instrument of human personality to convey His message. Finally, the written prophetic utterance is invested with divine authority. The prophet's words are God's Word.

### ***The Characteristics of an Inspired Writing***

The first characteristic of inspiration is implied in the fact that it is an inspired writing; that is, it is verbal. The very words of the prophets were God-given, not by dictation but by the Spirit-directed employment of the prophet's own vocabulary and style. Inspiration also claims to be plenary (full). No part of Scripture is without divine inspiration. Paul wrote, "All scripture is inspired by God."

In addition, inspiration implies the inerrancy of the teaching of the original documents (called autographs). Whatever God utters is true and without error, and the Bible is said to be an utterance of God. Finally, inspiration results in the divine authority of the Scriptures. The teaching of Scripture is binding on the believer for faith and practice.

Inspiration is not something merely attributed to the Bible by Christians; it is something the Bible claims for itself. There are literally hundreds of references within the Bible about its divine origin.

### ***The Inspiration of the Old Testament***

The Old Testament claims to be a prophetic writing. The familiar "thus says the Lord" fills its pages. False prophets and their works were excluded from the house of the Lord. Those prophecies which proved to be from God were preserved in a sacred place. This growing collection of sacred writings was recognized and even quoted by later prophets as the Word of God.

Jesus and the New Testament writers held these writings in the same high esteem; they claimed them to be the unbreakable, authoritative, and inspired Word of God. By numerous references to the Old Testament as a whole, to its basic sections, and to almost every Old Testament book, the New Testament writers overwhelmingly attested to the claim of divine inspiration for the Old Testament.

### ***The Inspiration of the New Testament***

Matthew 16:13-19 establishes the authority invested in His apostles who were the authors of the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. We have the testimony of Christ himself that the Apostles were given the "keys to the kingdom." These were men who had the authority to compile the Scripture of the New Covenant.

The New Testament was written by the eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry -- by His disciples, Peter, John and Matthew -- and by apostles that later arose in the first century Church -- Paul, Luke, Mark, James and Jude.

Eusebius, the 4th century historian, drawing information from Papias, who was the Apostle John's student, tells us that the Gospel of Mark was actually Peter's Gospel of Jesus Christ as told to his student Mark: "The Elder (John) used to say this also: 'Mark, having been the interpreter of Peter, wrote down everything that he mentioned, whether sayings or doings of Christ, not, however, in order. For he was neither a hearer nor a companion of the Lord; but afterwards, as I said, he accompanied Peter, who adapted his teachings as necessity required ... So then Mark made no mistake, writing down in this way some things as he (Peter) mentioned them; for he paid attention to this one thing, not to omit anything that he had heard, not to include any false statement among them.'"

The apostolic writings were boldly described in the same authoritative terms which denoted the Old Testament as the Word of God. They were called "scripture," "prophecy," etc. Every book in the New Testament contains some claim to divine authority. The New Testament church read, circulated, collected, and quoted the New Testament books right along with the inspired Scriptures of the Old Testament.

The contemporaries and immediate successors of the apostolic age recognized the divine origin of the New Testament writings along with the Old. With only heretical exceptions, all of the great Fathers of the Christian church from the earliest times held to the divine inspiration of the New Testament. In brief, there is continuous claim for the inspiration of both Old and New Testaments from the time of their composition to the present. In modern times this claim has been seriously challenged by many from inside and outside Christendom. This challenge calls for substantiation of the claim for inspiration of the Bible.