

Bible - Inspiration & Authority

How can the Bible be God's Word when human beings wrote it?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

2 Peter 1:21 explains that the text of the Bible "never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

The Nature of the Bible

In this passage, Peter makes two points. His first point, in verses 16 through 19, concerns the witness and testimony of the apostles. They saw Jesus Christ with their own eyes. They saw all the Old Testament prophecies about His first coming fulfilled. And Peter himself, along with James and John, was on the mountain and saw Jesus Christ transfigured before them, and they heard the voice of God the Father from Heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." In other words, Peter is saying, the facts verify prophecy.

But then he goes on to say, in verses 20 and 21, that there is something even more important — something we must understand *first*. And that is the *nature* of prophecy itself. And not only the nature of prophecy, but also the nature of Scripture as a whole. Notice how Peter says it: "Knowing this first, that no *prophecy of Scripture...*" Prophecy is a part of Scripture, so what is true of prophecy is true of Scripture as a whole. "Knowing this first," he says, "that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

Getting the Whole Picture

Some people quote verse 20 by itself — "No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation..." But that's not the complete thought. Verses 20 and 21 form a single thought, and verse 20 is not complete without verse 21.

The word "for" at the beginning of verse 21 links the two verses together. "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, *for* prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." Verse 21 explains verse 20.

We also need to take a closer look at some of the words that are used here in our English Bibles. In some cases, it's difficult for translators to find a concise way of saying in English all that is said in the original Hebrew or Greek. 2 Peter 1:20-21 is one of those cases.

The Meaning of "Is"

Both the Authorized Version and the New King James use the word "is" in verse 20. "No prophecy of Scripture *is* of any private interpretation." Some other versions render it "comes" or "came about." Those words are closer to the original, but still not quite the full force of the original. In the original language, the word (a form of the Greek *ginomai*) actually speaks of how Scripture "originated" or "came into existence." Unlike the infamous incident involving an American president, we cannot waffle on the meaning of "is" to obscure truth! The words of Scripture originated not in the mind of sinful man, but in the mind and counsels of the holy God.

The Meaning of "Interpretation"

Another word we need to understand more carefully in verse 20 is the word "interpretation." This is the only place in the entire Bible where this particular Greek word, *epilysis*, is used. The word in the original language has to do with "determination" — the way in which something is determined to be true or not true.

So the idea of verse 20 is this: "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture *originated* as the result of any private *determination* of what is true or not true."

In fact, it would be closer to the original language to say it like this: "Knowing this first, no prophecy of Scripture originated in the *human writer's* own personal determination of what is true or not true." And if we say it like that, we see better how it connects to verse 21: "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture originated in the human writer's own personal determination of what is true or not true — *for this reason*: Prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

In other words, Scripture is not a mere collection of the words and ideas of men. It did not originate in man's understanding of things. The Bible is not the record of man's views, man's perspectives, man's opinions, or man's interpretation of events. Sinful man did not decide what is true and what is not true. "Prophecy *never* came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

Written by "Driven" Men

There is one other word we need to examine in order to understand these verses completely, and that is the word "moved" in verse 21: "Holy men of God spoke as they were *moved by* (a form of the Greek verb *phero*) the Holy Spirit." Some Bibles render it "carried along," and that is closer to the original. But it is still not the full force of what is being said. The word translated "moved" or "carried along" is better yet translated, "*driven* along" — driven along by an outside force.

The same word is used in the book of Acts, chapter 27, where we read the account of the shipwreck of the Apostle Paul and those who were with him. They were on their way through the Adriatic Sea when a huge storm came up. It went on for over two weeks. The ship was so badly beaten by the wind and the waves, that it was ready to break up and sink. The captain and the crew made desperate efforts to save the ship.

They took down the sails. They ran cables under the ship to try to keep it from breaking apart. And finally, they threw the cargo overboard to try to lighten the ship and keep it from sinking. They did everything they knew how to do in order to save the ship. But still the storm raged on.

Because the wind was so fierce, Luke tells us in a very graphic way, they stopped trying to steer the ship. So, he says, "we let her *drive*" (Acts 27:15), and "we were *driven*" (verse 17). The word is once again a form of *phero* in both cases. There was nothing else they could do. They just gave up and let the ship be *driven along* by the mighty wind. And that is the very same word used 2 Peter 1:21 — "holy men of God spoke as they were *driven along* by the Holy Spirit."

Revelation and Inspiration

2 Peter 1:20-21 states the two great doctrines concerning the nature of Scripture. The first great doctrine is that the text of the Bible, the content, the very words, are *revelation* — words from the mind of God, not merely the mind of man. And the second great doctrine is that the way in which the Spirit of God used men to record the words is *inspiration* — men *driven* by the Holy Spirit.

The Only Supernatural Book

So, here is what Peter is telling us: We must never think of Scripture as a collection of the thoughts and ideas of men. But more than that, when we read the Bible we must always keep in mind the fact that the men who wrote the words of the Bible were *driven* by the Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit came upon them. And without obscuring their personalities in the writing, He gave them the very words to write. He drove them along as they wrote.

The writers themselves constantly acknowledge this. It's always "thus says the Lord" — "the burden of the Lord" — "the word of the Lord came to me" and so on. And

often, we find that they actually wrote the message against their own will. And sometimes, Peter tells us in his first epistle (1 Peter 1:10-12), they didn't entirely understand what they were writing, because they were writing something for a later time. But they were *driven* to write the Word of God.

The Bible is absolutely unique among all books. The Bible is God's Word, even though human beings wrote it.

The Bible is almighty God speaking directly to man. Every other book in this world contains the conflicting — and constantly changing — opinions of men. But the words of the Bible are the very words of God. The Bible is a supernatural book from beginning to end — the *only* supernatural Book.

The Christian's Sole Authority

And because the Bible is God's revelation given by inspiration, certain other facts follow in an unbreakable chain of logic. 1.) The Bible is *inerrant*, because God, the Author, is inerrant. 2.) The Bible is *infallible*, because God, the Author, is infallible. 3.) The Bible is therefore *absolutely reliable* — not only in matters of doctrine, but *also* when it speaks of matters of history, science, and geography. And this is because God, the Author, and God alone, is absolutely reliable. He cannot lie. He cannot, and would not, give us a record that is in any way untrustworthy. 4.) The Bible contains *no contradictions*, because God, the Author, is not double-minded. 5.) Because the Bible is the only book from God, the Bible is *uniquely authoritative* for the individual Christian, and for the church as a body of believers.

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Since there are so many different interpretations of the Bible, isn't it really impossible to accurately define Christianity?

It's not our job to define Christianity. Our responsibility is to understand God's definition.

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