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INSPIRATION AND TRANSLATION

THE BIBLE BASIS



he Bible does not, as do the holy books of some religions, try to convince the reader of its own inspiration and authority. Instead, the Bible plunges directly into a story, the grand story of the Almighty Creator and His dealings with His creation. That story occupies its pages from beginning to end, and when the Bible refers to itself it does it in an almost incidental way, as part of a much bigger story. But to the careful reader the Bible leaves no doubt as to its true author. The Bible records words God spoke to Adam, to Cain, to Noah, to Abraham, and to many other people of different races and walks of life. Always the record is simple and unpretentious, written as though the writer meant to record the facts of history with no agenda of his own.

By the time of the New Testament, God's people had fully developed their understanding of God's Word. Paul wrote that all Scripture is inspired, or breathed out, by God.¹ Peter wrote that holy men of God spoke as they were moved or carried along by the Holy Ghost.² Thus we see that the early Christians viewed the words of the Bible as words that God Himself spoke, or words that God put into holy men who then spoke or wrote the words. The testimony of Jesus is strongest of all. He says without qualification, "The Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35 NKJV).

1 2 Timothy 3:16

2 2 Peter 1:21

For those who know the living Word, His witness of the written Word is the end of the discussion.

WHICH BIBLE DID GOD INSPIRE?

The Bible is inspired by God. Since God cannot lie or make a mistake, we know the Word He inspired cannot be false or in error. Yet in today's world, we may well ask, "Which Bible did God inspire?" Did He inspire the KJV? Did He inspire the NIV? Did He inspire the ESV, or the NKJV, or *The Message*, or any other version you care to mention? Or is it more accurate to say God inspired men to write the Bible thousands of years ago in other languages, and all the versions we have today are imperfect, even if they are very good renditions of that original text?

Maybe the following scenario can help us understand what we believe.

Teacher Smith was leading a Bible study of the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Everything was going fine until one of the students, Sam, read the last section of the story, Acts 8:36-40, from his ESV Bible. He had barely finished reading when another student, Bob, blurted out, "You missed something—the part about the eunuch believing that Jesus is the Son of God!" So Sam read the passage again, more slowly, but that familiar little conversation of Acts 8:37 between Philip and the eunuch simply was not in the ESV.

The students were immediately divided on the issue. Many of them sided with Bob who declared, "The ESV left something out of the Bible!" Others stuck up for Sam and said, "But maybe it's the KJV that added a verse to the Bible." Teacher Smith just stood shaking his head until things quieted down, then he said, "Actually, I think all of you are wrong. Bob, I want to ask you a

question. Why do you believe that this verse is supposed to be in the Bible?”

“Well,” Bob hesitated, then held up his KJV, “because it’s in the Bible!”

“OK,” Teacher Smith said. “Sam, why do you think the verse is not supposed to be in the Bible?”

Sam could already see where the conversation was going, but he decided to play the game. Holding up his ESV, he declared, “Well, it’s not in the Bible.”

“So you see our problem.” Teacher Smith turned to the class. “Bob thinks that the ESV is wrong because it does not match the KJV. Sam thinks the KJV is wrong because it does not match the ESV. But both of them are using their favorite version to measure the other one. When there is some difference, both of them assume their own Bible is right and the other one is wrong.”

“But Teacher,” Bob spoke up, “everyone knows that this verse belongs in the Bible. I have been hearing it in church as long as I can remember. And as for the KJV, it has been around for much longer than anyone can remember. Grandfather used to tell how he started reading the Bible way back before my father was born, and how God used it to change his life. And he was reading the KJV. As for all these new translations that you can buy nowadays—I don’t trust them. But this—my KJV—I know it is the Word of God.”

“That’s a good point,” the teacher replied. “It’s true that the KJV has been around for many years, over four hundred years in fact. But it’s also true that there was a time when the KJV was new and people did not trust it. At that time most people used the Geneva Bible, and for years people preferred it to the KJV. So we can see that your argument for the KJV would not have worked back in those days. If people would have waited to use it until it

was time-tested and proven, when would they have ever started using it? People often distrust things that are new. Sometimes that's not a bad idea, and it is wise not to be hasty, but obviously something's age does not by itself make the thing true or false."

This time Sam had something to say. "It's true that the KJV is very old. Since that time hundreds of scholars have been studying the Bible, and surely in all their studies they have learned something. If the modern scholars don't think this verse is supposed to be in the Bible, I think they are right."

"So you trust the modern scholars?" Bob challenged. "These days it seems hardly anyone actually follows the Bible anymore, so is it any wonder that some people want to change the Bible? Now back when the KJV was made, I think those scholars were more godly than any scholars you will find today."

"I don't know about that," Teacher Smith replied. "I'm sure scholars had their faults both then and now. We do know that Erasmus, the foremost Greek scholar behind the Greek text the KJV was translated from, remained in the Roman Catholic Church in a day when it was burning heretics at the stake—though he did criticize much about the church. The men who translated the KJV were all members of a state church, the Church of England. So even though we live in post-modern America, I expect the ESV translators all go to churches that are closer to the New Testament model than either of those churches."

"But I don't think that looking at the character or beliefs of the translators is the most important thing to consider in looking at a translation. You see, all translators are human beings that are prone to error. I am not looking for a perfect Bible translator any more than I am looking for a perfect Bible translation. I don't think either one is possible. But I do want a Bible translation that is as close as possible to the original Bible."

Bob jumped to his feet. “What did you say? You said you are not looking for a perfect Bible? How in the world can we base our lives on God’s Word if we have imperfect Bibles?”

“That’s a good question,” Teacher Smith said. “To answer it I want to ask you a question: Which Bible is the perfect Bible, the one that God inspired? Is it the KJV or the ESV? Or it is some other Bible?”

This time neither Sam nor Bob knew what to say. Finally someone from the back of the class spoke up, “You tell us, Teacher.”

“Okay, let me tell you which Bible God inspired,” Teacher Smith said. “God inspired the very words that the apostles and prophets actually spoke and wrote down, thousands of years ago and in other languages. When the aged Apostle John finished writing the fourth gospel and laid down his pen, the manuscript in front of him was perfect—God’s Word exactly the way God wanted it. But that was very long ago, and we no longer have that manuscript. In fact, even if we had the manuscript, we could not read it unless we first learned to read Greek.”

By now many in the class had question marks on their faces. Sam spoke for all of them, “So are you saying that only the original manuscripts of the Bible were perfect, and that all our Bibles today are somehow less than perfect? How is this possible? Doesn’t the Bible say that God’s Word is forever settled in Heaven, and that He will preserve it forever? How could God allow any kind of mistake to come into His Word?”

“Well, it’s like this,” Teacher Smith replied, “suppose your mother tells you, ‘Go tell the children that supper is ready.’ So you trot outside and call, ‘Time to eat! Come inside!’ Have you changed your mother’s message to the children? No. It’s true that you used different words. You didn’t even exactly say that supper