

IS THE BIBLE GOD’S WORD?

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An agnostic, i.e. someone who believes that nothing is known, or can be known, of the existence or nature of God or of anything beyond material phenomenaⁱ, asked me whether I believed that the Bible was the Word of God. This person is part of my generation – a generation which was raised with a sincere perception of the holiness of the Bible in the sense that one would not even dare write in it. You will not find a single pencil or ink mark in the Dutch Bible of my namesake grandpa in my bookshelf, which was printed in 1899 except the part right in the front in which one recorded the birth of your children, as well as a message of the person who gave my grandpa and grandma this Bible.

I thought a lot about the matter, not because I doubt the truth that has been recorded for us in the Bible, but because everywhere there is such an enormous onslaught today against the biblical content and believers in Christ. This onslaught sadly does not only come from outside the institutional church environment, but also from within.

In South Africa, the destructive pronouncements of UNISA theologian, Professor Sakkie Spangenberg and others who initiated a so-called New Reformist Network have enjoyed wide publicity in the past years. Among other things he stated that the Bible is simply a basis book for faith. In another statement he described the Bible as a mere collection of folklore and myths.ⁱⁱ Spangenberg was still a registered member and candidate for the ministry of the Dutch Reformed Church when he enjoyed regular publicity in newspapers such as Beeld and Rapport with his statements.

Spangenberg's usage of the word 'faith' is simply a synonym for 'religion' in my view.

The singer Steve Hofmyer again, declared that he would return to the church if the alienating command of Jesus in John 14:6, that He (alone) was the way and the truth and the life, and that no one could come to the Father but through Him, was removed from the Bible.ⁱⁱⁱ

Many more examples could be mentioned, but these are sufficient for the purposes of this article.

The question once again: Is the Bible God’s Word? I have two answers in this regard – a short answer and a long one. Let us consider these now.

SHORT ANSWER

Yes and no!

LONG ANSWER

The Bible is a collection of **66 books** – therefore a library – written over a period of **1400 plus years** on **three different continents** in **three different languages** by **some 40 different writers**. I wish to accentuate the ‘some’ because there is not complete consensus in the wider church and academic environments about the authorship of all the books of the Bible. Also, and for example, there are those who hold the opinion that the book of Isaiah as it is found in our Bible today, may be the work of three people/groups (e.g. that the work of Isaiah had later been extended or added to by students of his). Isaiah is therefore divided into Proto-Isaiah (1-39), Deutero-Isaiah (40-55) en Trito-Isaiah (56-66).

Each book of the Bible has a unique character – something of the writer who had been inspired by God.

In this library, and in the words of a university lecturer of the Hebrew language (himself a Hebrew descendant), one finds many voices with a variety of perspectives and styles.^{iv} It is not a remote text reserved for churches and synagogues but rather a human document full of history, poetry, politics, theology, and spirituality

The apostle Paul wrote the following to his student Timothy:

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim 3:16-17; King James Version).

The Holman Christian Standard Bible renders it *“All Scripture is inspired by God (...).”* The Greek word used here is *theópneustos*, which literally means to be breathed into the writers by God. It cannot justifiably be interpreted as if the Holy Spirit of God had dictated it to the writers. They were inspired. by the Spirit to put their experiences, environments, circumstances and spiritual impressions in writing. One should also bear in mind that Paul was referring here to the Old Testament Scriptures, although that does not imply the same God breathed inspiration did not lead the authors of the New Testament writings. I fully believe that was what happened.

Books such as the two books of the Chronicles provide us with an historic record of events and people, extensive genealogies, but it also contains the Word of God – see 1 Chronicles 17:4-14, for example, where Nathan brings David the Word of God that he was not to build the temple. The history of the

nation of Israel is not limited to a single book, however, but is interlaced in all of them with little exception. This history never stands apart from Israel's seesaw relationship with God. This is also not the primary purpose of the Scriptures, but the message contained in the books.

Read the Bible with an open mind and you will hear the voices of people everywhere in the pages of the Bible books. When Pharaoh speaks, it is his ruler's voice that is recorded. We can say the same, for example, of the Babylonian and other kings. In the book of Ecclesiastes we have the voice of the preacher and we find the voices of several people in the Proverbs. The Song of Solomon and Esther have their own voices. In Deuteronomy 32:1 it is Moses saying, "*Give ear, O ye heavens, and I will speak; and hear, O earth, the words of my mouth*" (KJV). These few examples of the words of people should be sufficient illustration.

However, when Moses or the Prophets clearly proclaim that it is what the Lord had spoken, we have the word of God. Jeremiah is a good example of a prophet that clearly distinguishes between his word and the **word of God**:

"The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, of the priests that were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin: To whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah, unto the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah the son of Josiah king of Judah, unto the carrying away of Jerusalem captive in the fifth month" (Jer. 1:1-3).

In verse 4 Jeremiah clearly states that the word of the Lord came to him and it is a statement he repeats regularly. In the same way we can clearly distinguish the word of the prophet from the word of God in all the books of the Prophets. Make a point to look out for this when you read the Prophets.

It would seem at first that this principle of God's word as opposed to the word of people is found much less in the New Testament. The letters especially bring us the voices of people. The gospel by Luke is a more extensive and chronological-historical rendition of events than the three other gospels. This applies to the book of the Acts as well. There are scholars who hold the opinion that the Gospel of Luke and Acts formed one single document for Paul's defence before the Roman Caesar (in modern terms, the legal document for his court hearing).

Would this then imply that the New Testament is to be questioned as part of the Bible? No, not all, because a new dimension is added in Christ Jesus. In John 1:1 we see that He is the Word which was in the beginning, who was with God, and who was God. Jesus stated (John 5:19) that He could do nothing of himself, but what He saw the Father do. The words of Jesus of Nazareth that were recorded in the four Gospels are the word of God. This is accentuated unequivocally by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews:

"God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds" (Heb 1:1-2; KJV).

How should we then describe the Bible other than that it is the Word of God?

The answer is a simple one and in my view fully rooted and grounded in the books of the Bible. It is the recorded revelation of God to humanity from the first page to the last. In those pages we find direct revelations by God himself to individuals, families and nations. The truth of these revelations as coming from God can be seen in the historical fulfilment of all the prophesies. There are also revelations written down by people such as the apostles through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Likewise I accept that the writers of the gospel accounts had been led by the Holy Spirit. If someone should therefore say that the Bible contains the word of God it would not be wrong, but taking into account that it also contains the words of humans.

**The Bible is the recorded
revelation of God to humanity.**

A CONNECTED UNDERSTANDING: THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

I have personally stood alongside a preacher of the word in a congregational meeting as he ministered deliverance (from demonic influence) to some people. In the process of praying for a person, he would chop him against the neck with his Bible while saying, “*Devil, I smite you with the Sword of the Spirit,*” as if the physical Bible book were the sword. This is a good illustration of the confusing result caused by inaccurate interpretation of the Scripture on the word of God. Please note that I am not noting this in a derogatory spirit against the person – I have been guilty of such practises due to wrong teaching as well.

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul refers to the word of God as the Sword of the Spirit. Does this not then simply mean that the Bible is the Word of God?

The Greek word used by Paul in this case and which is regularly translated with the English ‘word’, is *rhēma*. This word refers to a spoken word; a word that is spoken by a living voice. Zodhiates^v explains its application in the case of Ephesians 6:17 as referring to the doctrines and promises contained in the Scriptures. The Sword of the Spirit is consequently much more than the physical Bible book. It is the dynamic word that ‘happens’ when the message of God is spoken by someone. This *rhēma* word may be found in various forms, such as in preaching, for example, or as a manifestation of one of the spiritual gifts such as a word of wisdom or of knowledge described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12.

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ⁱ TULLOCH, S. (ed). 1995. *The Oxford Dictionary And Thesaurus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ⁱⁱ SPANGENBERG, S. 2001. Verskille in Bybel: Skrywers gaan kreatief om met geloof. *Beeld*. 13 August, p.8.

ⁱⁱⁱ SMIT, M. 2003. Steve Hofmyer dalk Sondag terug in die kerk mits... *.Beeld*. 9 January, p.6.

^{iv} CARASIK, M. 2014. *The Bible’s Many Voices*. Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society. Sales Excerpt.

^v ZODHIATES, S. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*. Add-on to e-Sword, Version 10.1.0, 2000-2012, Rick Meyers.

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