

The Inspiration of the Prophets



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Jer. 36:1–4; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 3:16; Titus 1:12; 2 Pet. 1:1–4, 20, 21.*

Memory Text: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

Christians have long debated the question, *What does it mean when we say that the Bible is inspired?* For Seventh-day Adventists there is, in addition, the question of the inspiration of Ellen G. White. In 1906, she wrote a letter to an Adventist physician in which she refuted the idea that every word she wrote was as inspired as the Ten Commandments: “My brother, you have studied my writings diligently, and you have never found that I have made any such claims, neither will you find that the pioneers in our cause ever made such claims.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 24. This week we will study some of the issues surrounding the question of inspiration.

The Week at a Glance: What is the difference between inspiration and revelation? What is the difference between verbal and thought inspiration? Can prophets get help from others when they write? What are some examples of prophets quoting sources outside the Bible?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 31.*

Revelation-Inspiration

Study 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:20, 21. What do these texts tell us about the divine activity in the production of the books of the Bible?

In 2 Timothy 3:16 Paul says that the Bible is *theopneustos* (God-breathed). In the Latin translation of the Bible the text reads, *scriptura divinitus inspirata*, from which we get the English word *inspired*. Paul is saying that the Bible had its origin in an activity of the Holy Spirit. Through visions and dreams, the Holy Spirit revealed truth to the prophets (revelation), and then He ensured, through His guidance in the writing process (inspiration), that what the prophet wrote was in harmony with what God had revealed.

Second Peter 1:21 tells us that “men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (*NIV*). As a ship is carried along by the wind, the biblical writers were moved by the Holy Spirit. Thus, revelation-inspiration refers to that process whereby the Holy Spirit revealed to the prophets what God wanted them to know and then guided them in the proclamation of that message. Some spoke the word; others wrote it down. The written form became the inspired (God-breathed) Scripture.

Although in the New Testament the apostles did not claim inspiration as frequently as did the Old Testament writers, it is obvious that they regarded their messages as given by divine authority. Paul, for example, wrote, “These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches” (*1 Cor. 2:13, NKJV*), and “When you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God” (*1 Thess. 2:13, NKJV*).

Yet, the Bible is also a human book. At face value it bears all the hallmarks of human authorship. Authors in recording their own experiences refer to themselves with personal pronouns (*Neh. 1:1–11, Dan. 10:1–9, Gal. 1:12–20*), the customs and traditions of the authors’ times are seen in the writings, and some of the psalms and proverbs reflect the literature and culture of the surrounding nations. In short, though inspired by the Lord, the Bible also reflects the humanness of its penmen.

Of all the Bible authors, which one’s humanity comes through most clearly to you? In what ways can you sympathize and relate to that author purely on a human level? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Verbal or Thought Inspiration

What do the following texts tell us about inspiration in Scripture?

Isa. 2:1, 2; Ezek. 36:16; 1 Cor. 7:10–12, 39, 40; 1 Thess. 2:13.

Two important theories of inspiration are:

Verbal Inspiration. The focus in verbal inspiration is on the words of the Bible rather than on the author. All the words are said to be inspired by God, who chooses from the vocabulary and educational background of the writer. According to this view, only the original writings of the biblical writers are inspired, not the copies, which might have errors. This view must be distinguished from the dictation theory of inspiration, in which every word in Scripture is dictated by the Holy Spirit without reference to the vocabulary and educational background of the writer.

Thought Inspiration. The focus here is on the writers, not on the words. Primarily the thoughts, not so much the words of the Bible, are inspired (*1 Cor. 7:10–12, 39, 40; 1 Thess. 2:13*), except when the words of God or an angel are quoted (*Jer. 29:30, 31; Rev. 19:9*) or when God speaks directly through a prophet (*Num. 22:35; 23:1–12, 26*). The writer receives the vision, dream, or thought and puts it down in writing in his own words (*Isa. 2:1, 2; Rev. 4:1*); the Holy Spirit ensures that the words used convey God’s truth correctly. The Bible, therefore, is declared to be the infallible revelation of God’s will.

On the basis of Scripture and the writings of Ellen White, Adventists hold to thought inspiration. “It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man’s words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the Word of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 21. As the last sentence indicates, the words of the prophet become the Word of God. In the same vein David wrote, “The Spirit of the Lord spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue” (*2 Sam. 23:2, NKJV*). This indicates that inspiration not only imparted thoughts but ensured that the Written Word accurately conveyed God’s thoughts.

Why is it important to have a correct understanding of how inspiration works? What are the dangers of holding wrong views?

Visions and Physical Phenomena

What do the following texts tell us about how heavenly visions affected some biblical prophets? *Dan. 10:7–9, 17, 18; Acts 9:1–5; Rev. 1:17.*

To stand in the presence of a heavenly being can be a powerful experience. Daniel, Saul (Paul), and John all fell to the ground when they received a heavenly vision. Daniel wrote, “No strength remained in me” (*NKJV*), and John said, “I fell at his feet as dead.”

Ellen White describes her experience with these words: “As inquiries are frequently made as to my state in vision, and after I come out, I would say that when the Lord sees fit to give a vision, I am taken into the presence of Jesus and angels, and am entirely lost to earthly things. I can see no farther than the angel directs me.”—*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 36.

In 1868 her husband, James White, gave the following description of her physical appearance while in vision: “1. She is utterly unconscious of everything transpiring around her; 2. She does not breathe. . . . [This] has been repeatedly proved by pressing upon the chest, and by closing the mouth and nostrils; 3. Immediately on entering vision, her muscles become rigid, and joints fixed, so far as any external force can influence them; . . . 4. On coming out of vision, whether in the daytime or a well-lighted room at night, all is total darkness. Her power to distinguish even the most brilliant objects, held within a few inches of the eyes, returns but gradually.”—*Life Incidents* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Steam Press, 1868), p. 272.

Many observed her during her visions. Joseph Bates, for example, wrote, “I have seen her in vision a number of times, and also in Topsham, Maine; and those who were present during some of those exciting scenes know well with what interest and intensity I listened to every word, and watched every move to detect deception or mesmeric influence. And I thank God for the opportunity I have had with others to witness these things. I can now confidently speak for myself. I believe the work is of God.”—*Christian Experience and Teachings of Ellen G. White*, p. 89.

However impressive these physical manifestations might be, why must we not base our belief in her gift on them? What ultimately must be the final test of Ellen White’s prophetic calling?

Inspiration and Literary Assistants

Prophets were not God's pens but His penmen. What they saw or heard in visions and dreams they wrote down according to the best of their ability. From Scripture we know that some of the biblical authors had secretaries to help them write down the messages of God.

Read Jeremiah 36:1–4, Romans 16:22, 1 Corinthians 16:21, Colossians 4:15–18, and 2 Thessalonians 3:17. What do they tell us about the use of literary assistants?

Thus, both Old Testament and New Testament writers used literary assistants or scribes to write down the messages God had given them.

From New Testament times we know that at times scribes used a wax tablet to take down the gist of what the author wanted to say before they wrote a good copy of the letter. Prior to sending it, the author would go over the letter to make sure it conveyed to the reader what he wanted to say.

Ellen White also used literary helpers. Here's why:

1. With formal schooling ending at the age of nine, she recognized her own limitations as a writer. "I am not a grammarian. I will try, if the Lord will help me, at forty-five years old to become a scholar in the science. God will help me. I believe He will."—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 90. Thus, some of her assistants functioned as her copy editors.

2. The great demand for her writings made it necessary for her to have literary help. "After my husband's death, faithful helpers joined me, who labored untiringly in the work of copying the testimonies and preparing articles for publication."—*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 50.

3. Because most of her books were not written as books but were put together from previously written material, she needed special assistance in their production. Marian Davis was Ellen White's book-maker. "She takes my articles which are published in the papers, and pastes them in blank books. She also has a copy of all the letters I write. In preparing a chapter for a book, Marian remembers that I have written something on that special point, which may make the matter more forcible. She begins to search for this, and if when she finds it, she sees that it will make the chapter more clear, she adds it. The books are not Marian's productions, but my own, gathered from all my writings."—*Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 91.

How does this understanding help us better grasp how inspiration works? What wrong views might you have held on the topic of inspiration?

Inspiration and the Book of Luke

What does Luke say about how his Gospel came into existence, and what does this tell us about inspiration? *Luke 1:1–4*.

In writing his Gospel, Luke doesn't seem to have relied on dreams or visions. Neither was he an eyewitness to the events he describes. Instead, he worked from what he had learned from others, all, no doubt, under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, which ensured that what he wrote down was in harmony with the historical events and God's will.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul not only received information orally from others (*1 Cor. 1:10, 11*) but in a few places quoted from the writings of pagan authors. For example, in Acts 17:28 he quotes from the Cilician poet Aratus (ca. 315–240 B.C.) who wrote, "It is with Zeus that every one of us in every way has to do, *for we are also his offspring*." See also 1 Corinthians 15:33 and Titus 1:12, where Paul quoted other sources, all in order to teach inspired truth.

Ellen White from time to time used other books as sources for her own works. In the introduction to *The Great Controversy* she wrote: "The great events which have marked the progress of reform in past ages are matters of history, well known and universally acknowledged by the Protestant world; they are facts which none can gainsay. . . . In some cases where a historian has so grouped together events as to afford, in brief, a comprehensive view of the subject, or has summarized details in a convenient manner, his words have been quoted; but in some instances no specific credit has been given, since the quotations are not given for the purpose of citing that writer as authority, but because his statement affords a ready and forcible presentation of the subject. In narrating the experience and views of those carrying forward the work of reform in our own time, similar use has been made of their published works."—Pages xi and xii.

Prophets using other sources? Many people find that disturbing. What does this tell us, though, about how inspiration can work? If you think about it, what's wrong with prophets under the guidance of the Holy Spirit going to other sources as a way of helping express truth?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Inspiration of the Prophetic Writers,” pp. 15–23, in *Selected Messages*, book 1.

“Yet now when I send you a testimony of warning and reproof, many of you declare it to be merely the opinion of Sister White. You have thereby insulted the Spirit of God. You know how the Lord has manifested Himself through the Spirit of prophecy. Past, present, and future have passed before me. I have been shown faces that I had never seen, and years afterward I knew them when I saw them. I have been aroused from my sleep with a vivid sense of subjects previously presented to my mind and I have written, at midnight, letters that have gone across the continent, and arriving at a crisis, have saved great disaster to the cause of God. This has been my work for many years. A power has impelled me to reprove and rebuke wrongs that I had not thought of. Is this work of the last thirty-six years from above or from beneath? . . .

“. . . In these letters which I write, in the testimonies I bear, I am presenting to you that which the Lord has presented to me. I do not write one article in the paper, expressing merely my own ideas. They are what God has opened before me in vision—the precious rays of light shining from the throne.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 27.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a class, read your answers to Sunday’s study and compare notes on which prophets members were able to relate to. Which prophets were picked, and why?
- ❷ Some people have worked on the assumption that some parts of the Bible are more *inspired* than others. Though it’s true that some parts might be more relevant to us today than others, that’s radically different from the idea that some parts are more inspired than others. What’s the great danger of taking such a position? As you think about it, ask yourself the following questions: Who decides which parts are more *inspired* than others? What criteria does one use to make that determination? Where does the authority to make these decisions come from? What happens when people disagree about which parts are more inspired than others?
- ❸ Think about the life and teachings of Ellen White during her long years of ministry. Despite the large amount of misinformation out there about her and her ministry, and despite the frequency with which her writings have been abused, what great evidence and reasons do we have for believing in the reality of her prophetic gift?

Saved by a Watermelon

by HOMER TRECARTIN

The 12 members of a small church in Dubuque, Iowa, planned evangelistic meetings. They asked Elder Dave Weigley to lead out. For three months before the meetings were scheduled to begin, the members prayed for Elder Weigley, the meetings, and the people who were searching for something better in their lives.

As time for the meetings drew near, Pastor Weigley remembered a girl he had studied with a year earlier in Florida. She wanted to clean up her life and start over, but she didn't know how to break free from her current situation. She had thought about moving back to Iowa to be near her family. She hoped that a move would give her the new start she needed.

Weigley called the local elder in Florida and asked about the girl. The elder remembered her first name, Sharon, but he couldn't remember her full name. He knew that she moved north, but he did not know where she had gone. Weigley urged the local elder to pray for this girl. If she was in the Dubuque area, he wanted to invite her to the meetings.

On the first day of the meetings, a young woman entered the rented hall, walked up to a greeter, and said, "Hi, I came to see Pastor Weigley." The greeter took her to the local pastor.

"I am Pastor Wagly," the man said, smiling.

The young woman looked at him and said slowly, "No, you're not the man I'm looking for."

Laughing, the man said, "Oh, you mean the other Pastor Weigley. Our names sound the same, but they are spelled differently. Let me take you to Pastor Dave Weigley." The pastor escorted the young woman to a back room where Elder Dave Weigley was preparing his message. When the two walked through the door, Pastor Weigley's mouth dropped open. "Sharon!" he exclaimed, "How did you come to be here?"

Sharon laughed. "I moved here shortly after I met you last year. It's been good for me to start over again. Then yesterday my mom invited me over for watermelon. She covered the table with newspapers to catch the juice, and we sat down to eat and talk. As I was eating, my eye fell on an advertisement for some prophecy meetings. Then I saw your name, and I decided right then I had to come."

Sharon attended the meetings faithfully and was baptized.

God doesn't always send a bright light and loud voice to catch someone's attention, as He did with Saul. Sometimes He uses simple things—such as a juice-soaked newspaper ad on the kitchen table.

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