
THE NATURE OF INSPIRATION

I. Introduction

- a. Understanding *how* God communicates with the prophet is just as important as believing *that* God communicates with the prophet. A belief in the prophetic gift without a working understanding of the nature of inspiration will invariably lead to misunderstandings, misapplication of teachings, disillusionment and possibly even apostasy from the faith.

II. Modes of divine communication in the process of inspiration

- a. *Revelation* – the act of disclosing information; the informational content of the message thus communicated through the process of inspiration
- b. *Inspiration* – the process by which God enables the prophet both to receive and communicate His messages accurately
- c. *Illumination* – the work of the Holy Spirit of enabling the non-inspired hearer/reader in comprehending and applying the message received
 - i.) The Holy Spirit is present with the earnest searcher. Its illumination shines upon the Word, stamping the truth upon the mind with a new, fresh importance. The searcher is filled with a sense of peace and joy never before felt. The preciousness of truth is realized as never before. A new, heavenly light shines upon the Word, illuminating it as though every letter were tinged with gold. God Himself has spoken to the mind and heart, making the Word spirit and life. Eternal life is the receiving of the living elements in the Scriptures, the doing of the will of God. – *Review & Herald*, Oct. 1, 1901.

III. Three views of inspiration

- a. Verbal/mechanical view
 - i.) Information is dictated to the prophet word for word
- b. Plenary/thought view
 - i.) God gives the message to the prophet via visions or dreams, but the prophet employs his/her own words and expressions in communicating the revealed message.
 - (a) This view does not deny that, on occasion, the prophets did indeed use the very words of God, but this was the exception, not the rule.
- c. Existential/Neo-orthodox/"Encounter" view
 - i.) Revelation is an experience, not a message.
 - (a) An "encounter" with God

- ii.) There are no words spoken, no information communicated, no statements of truth of any kind. We may say the prophet “feels inspired” as opposed to actually being inspired.
- iii.) In this view, the thoughts and words conveyed by the prophet are merely his/her own, and in some cases may be entirely false as far as reality is concerned
 - (a) Example – Moses’ understanding of a literal six-day creation
- iv.) This view holds to three basic principles:
 - (a) Inspiration is inherently subjective, rather than objective
 - (b) The Bible *contains* the Word of God; but it is *not*, in and of *itself*, the Word of God.
 - (c) Inspiration is *quantitative*, rather than qualitative.
- v.) The net result of accepting this view can be summed up as follows:
 - (a) The Bible is no longer the final authority in all matters of truth
 - (b) The reader becomes the authority as to what, for him/her, is inspired
 - (i) In practical terms, this leads to disbelief in the biblical creation account, the divine nature of Christ, the virgin birth, the resurrection, etc.

IV. The SDA view of inspiration

- a. “All Scripture is given by *inspiration* of God...” (2 Tim. 3:16)
 - i.) Theopneustos – “God-breathed”
 - (a) Although written by men, the Scripture claims to be of divine origin.
 - (i) “...As it is in truth, the Word of God” (1 Thes. 2:13)
 - ii.) A union of the human and the divine (1 Tim. 3:16; 2 Cor. 4:7)
 - (a) “Truly the Scriptures are **fully human** and **fully divine**. Any idea that some parts of the Bible are merely human while other parts are divinely inspired contradicts the way the biblical writers present the matter. Paul’s words, that ‘all Scripture is God-breathed,’ do not allow for any concept of partial inspiration. Neither are there any hints in Scripture suggesting degrees of inspiration. Some portions of Scripture may be more important than other portions (Jesus speaks in Matthew 23:23 about ‘the weightier matters of the law’), but that does not mean that they are more inspired. Every Christian would do well to receive the words of Holy Scripture... **‘not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God’** (1 Thess. 2:13).” - Dederen, R. (2001, c2000). Vol. 12: *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, p. 40.

b. Holy men of God were *moved* by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21)

- i.) “Moved” – Gr. *phero*, “driven” in Ac. 27:17, 27
 - (a) “carried along by the Holy Spirit” (ESV)
- ii.) God impressed men with thoughts; they expressed those thoughts in their own language as guided by the Holy Spirit in such a way as to preserve the message.
 - (a) As presented through different individuals, the truth is brought out in its varied aspects. One writer is more strongly impressed with one phase of the subject; *he grasps those points that harmonize with his experience* or with his power of perception and appreciation; another seizes upon a different phase; and each, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, presents what is most forcibly impressed upon his own mind – ***a different aspect of the truth in each, but a perfect harmony through all.*** And the truths thus revealed unite to form ***a perfect whole***, adapted to meet the wants of men in ***all*** the circumstances and experiences of life. God has been pleased to communicate His truth to the world by human agencies, and He Himself, by His Holy Spirit, *qualified men* and *enabled them* to do this work. He ***guided the mind*** in the ***selection of what to speak*** and ***what to write***. The treasure was entrusted to earthen vessels, yet it is, nonetheless, from Heaven. ***The testimony is conveyed through the imperfect expression of human language, yet it is the testimony of God;*** and the obedient, believing child of God beholds in it the glory of a divine power, full of grace and truth. – *Great Controversy*, introduction, p. vi.
 - (b) The writers of the Bible were ***God's penmen, not His pen***. Look at the different writers. 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. – *Selected Messages, Vol. 1*, p. 21.
- iii.) What about potential errors in translations?
 - (a) Some look to us gravely and say, "Don't you think there might have been some mistake in the copyist or in the translators?" This is all probable, and the mind that is so narrow that it will hesitate and stumble over this possibility or probability would be just as ready to stumble over the mysteries of the Inspired Word, because their feeble minds cannot see through the purposes of God... All the mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth. God committed the preparation of His divinely inspired Word to finite man. This Word, arranged into books, the Old and New Testaments, is the guidebook to the inhabitants of a fallen world, bequeathed to them that, by studying and obeying the directions, not one soul would lose its way to heaven. – *Selected Messages, Vol. 1*, pp. 16-17.

V. Inerrancy/Infallibility

a. The Scripture is the inspired Word of God – all of it! As such, the question is asked, can it contain any error? The initial response would be “impossible.” Yet it must be remembered and maintained that, though God is inerrant and infallible, yet the human channels used in communicating His messages were not (as we just briefly studied in our last section).

i.) “Holy men of God spoke...” (2 Pet. 1:21)

(a) The Bible is not given to us in grand superhuman language. Jesus, in order to reach man where he is, took humanity. The Bible must be given in the language of men. **Everything that is human is imperfect.** Different meanings are expressed by the same word; there is not one word for each distinct idea. – *Selected Messages, Vol. 1, p. 20.*

(b) In regard to infallibility, I never claimed it; God alone is infallible. His word is true, and in Him is no variableness, or shadow of turning.--Letter 10, 1895. – *Ibid, p. 37.*

ii.) Apparent contradictions

(a) Written in different ages, by men who differed widely in rank and occupation, and in mental and spiritual endowments, the books of the Bible present a wide contrast in style, as well as a diversity in the nature of the subjects unfolded. Different forms of expression are employed by different writers; often the same truth is more strikingly presented by one than by another. And *as several writers present a subject under varied aspects and relations, there may appear, to the superficial, careless, or prejudiced reader, to be discrepancy or contradiction, where **the thoughtful, reverent student**, with clearer insight, **discerns the underlying harmony.*** – *Great Controversy*, introduction, p. vi.

b. Categories of errors, mistakes, discrepancies (call them what you will)

i.) Unfulfilled prophecies

(a) Jonah

(b) Prophecies regarding Israel’s glory

(i) Worldwide mission of ancient Israel

(ii) Ingathering of the gentiles

(iii) Eternal rest in Canaan

(iv) Deliverance from their political enemies

▪ Distortion of 70 week prophecy

- (c) Food for worms vision
 - (i) I was shown the company present at the Conference. Said the angel: "Some food for worms, some subjects of the seven last plagues, some will be alive and remain upon the earth to be translated at the coming of Jesus." {1T 131.3}
 - (ii) Received on Tuesday, May 27, 1856. Youngest person in crowd was Willie White, a babe in his mother's arms. Willie died in 1937 at the age of 83.
- ii.) Small matters of minor detail
 - (a) In Scripture –
 - (i) Was the toll in David's battle against the Syrian army 40,000 *footmen* (1 Chr. 19:18) or *horsemen* (2 Sam. 10:18)?
 - (ii) Was Christ confronted at Gergesa by *one* demoniac (Mk. 5:2, 3; Lk. 8:27, 28) or *two* (Mt. 8:28)?
 - (iii) Was blind Bartimaeus healed by Jesus *as he approached* Jericho (Lk. 18:35) or *as he left* Jericho (Mk. 10:46)?
 - (iv) Who wrote the prophecy foretelling the betrayal of Christ for thirty pieces of silver – *Jeremiah* (Mt. 27:9) or *Zechariah* (Zech. 11:13)?
 - (b) In Ellen White's writings –
 - (i) Satan flattered our first parents that eating of the fruit of the *tree of life* of which God had forbidden them would bring to them great good, and would insure them against death, the very opposite of the truth which God had declared to them. "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." If Adam had been obedient, he would never have known want, sorrow, nor death. (RH, August 18, 1874)
 - (ii) The beautiful temple that *for more than four centuries* had crowned the summit of Mount Zion was not spared by the Chaldeans (PK 458). *But archeology has since proven that it lasted only 384 years (870-586 B.C.).*
 - Ellen White's dating was in accordance with the chronology of James Ussher (1581-1656), an Anglican bishop and scholar well-respected and accepted in her day.
 - (iii) When Ellen White joined her husband at Walling Mills, Colorado, she dated the event as "Monday, August 8, 1878" (4T 297). However, Monday fell on the 5th that week, not the 8th.
 - (iv) In 1864, Ellen White stated "The beautiful Eve was beguiled by the serpent to eat of the fruit of the only tree of which God had forbidden them to eat, or even touch it, lest they die" (4SP 120). Yet in 1874 she wrote "In Eve's

controversy with the serpent, *she added the clause*, ‘Neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die’” (RH 8/18/1874).

- (v) Sister Davis has just called my attention to an article printed in the *Youth's Instructor* of May 31, 1894. The question asked is, Did I design to have this sentence just as it appeared in the Instructor? I am surprised to see it just as it appears--"A meat diet is not the most wholesome of diets, and yet I would take the position that meat should not be discarded by everyone." I cannot explain why this appears just as it does. Since the camp meeting at Brighton I have absolutely banished meat from my table. It is an understood thing that whether I am at home or abroad, nothing of this kind is to be used in my family, or come upon my table... I would desire that the sentence should be modified by changing the not--"yet I would not take the position that meat be wholly discarded by everyone," for instance, by those dying of consumption. (14MR 324)

iii.) Major matters of substance

(a) In Scripture –

- (i) Nathan the prophet gives King David wrong information (2 Sam. 7:1-17; 1 Chr. 17:1-15)

(b) In Ellen White's Writings –

- (i) Time to begin the Sabbath (Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord*, p. 157)
- (ii) Southern Publishing Association (*Ibid.*, p. 155)

- During the night following our interview in my house and out on the lawn under the trees, October 19, 1902, in regard to the work in the Southern field, the Lord instructed me that I had taken a wrong position... For three nights in succession *I was instructed by the Lord that I had spoken unadvisedly*; that matters had not been correctly represented to me, some of the particulars not being given... - *Spalding Magan Collection*, pp. 282-84.

iv.) This does not in any way affect the inspiration of all Scripture! Rather, it is a part of the inspiration process.

- (a) W.H. Littlejohn, president of the Battle Creek College, was asked “Do SDAs regard Ellen White as infallible?” He replied “No. Neither do they believe that Peter or Paul was infallible. They believe that the Holy Spirit which inspired Peter and Paul was infallible. They believe also that Mrs. White has from time to time received revelations from the Spirit of God, and that revelations made to her by the Spirit of God are just as reliable as revelations made by the same Spirit to other persons.” (RH 12/11/1883)

b. In summary the prophet, as inspired from God, receives revelations from God in behalf of the church. The prophet then communicates that message *in his own words* and with the inherent

weaknesses of humanity. There are times that mistakes are made. However, in the case where the prophet errs, and that error is serious enough to affect the direction of God’s church, or the eternal destiny of even one soul, or the purity of even one doctrine, THEN (and only then) the Spirit moves in, usually immediately, and usually through the very same prophet who made the error, and God corrects the error so that there is no permanent damage done to the church or its members.

- c. SDAs continue today to hold that EGW was – and still is – reliable, trustworthy, authoritative (possessing all of the same prophetic authority invested in every other prophet of earlier times), and inspired (in the same manner and to the same degree as were the prophets who wrote the Bible). YET we do not make of her writings (1) another Bible, nor yet (2) an extension/addition to the sacred canon of Scripture.

For more info, see official SDA statement regarding inspiration and authority of Ellen White.

VI. Lesser light/greater light (Gen. 1:16)

- a. Little heed is given to the Bible, and the Lord has given a lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light. (3SM 30)
 - i.) Forty candles vs. one
 - (a) quality of light is the same
 - ii.) National map vs. state maps
 - (a) one gives more detail, both have equal authority
 - iii.) John the Baptist was a “lesser light”
 - (a) The prophet John was the connecting link between the two dispensations. As God's representative he stood forth to show the relation of the law and the prophets to the Christian dispensation. He was the lesser light, which was to be followed by a greater. The mind of John was illuminated by the Holy Spirit, that he might shed light upon his people; but no other light ever has shone or ever will shine so clearly upon fallen man as that which emanated from the teaching and example of Jesus. Christ and His mission had been but dimly understood as typified in the shadowy sacrifices. Even John had not fully comprehended the future, immortal life through the Saviour. – *Desire of Ages*, p. 220.
- b. Additional details, not additional truth
 - i.) “Ellen White does not introduce doctrines that are not in the Bible, but she does add details and insights so that those truths are seen in greater clarity, with deeper understanding” (Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord*, p. 420).
 - ii.) If not, what would be their purpose?