

## ***The Prophetic Gift***

# ***The Inspiration of the Prophets***

Lesson #5 for January 31, 2009

Scriptures: Jeremiah 36:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:16; Titus 1:12; 2 Peter 1:1-4, 20,21.

1. The purpose of this lesson is to discuss what we mean when we say something is “inspired.”
2. Are there clear guidelines for distinguishing “ordinary writings” from those which have been inspired by the Holy Spirit? If a certain person is inspired, does that mean that everything he/she has written is inspired? Solomon wrote most of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. We consider those books to be inspired and a part of the Bible. But Solomon also wrote many other songs and proverbs. (1 Kings 4:32) Are we to conclude that some of Solomon’s writings were inspired while others were not? When Ellen White wrote letters home to her children, were those letters inspired? Read 2 Timothy 4:13. When Paul asked Timothy to bring his coat because winter was coming, did that require special inspiration from the Holy Spirit?
3. Read 2 Timothy 3:16 (in different versions) and 2 Peter 1:20,21. How do you understand these verses? In the original Greek language, the word translated *inspired* means *God-breathed*. What does that imply? Is there a simple test for what is *God-breathed* and what is not? Is 2 Timothy 3:16 inspired when it is located in our Protestant Bibles but not when located in Catholic or Orthodox Bibles? What does that verse really say?
4. When Paul wrote those words to Timothy, there were a lot of writings (“scriptures”) claiming to be inspired that were circulating around the Mediterranean world. No doubt, Timothy had read many of them and certainly had been exposed to some of their claims. There were no “printed” copies of the Old or New Testament as we know them now! Paul was telling Timothy to read carefully! His words were, “Every inspired Scripture has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, or for reformation of manners and discipline in right living,...” (2 Timothy 3:16, *New English Bible*) And Paul expected Timothy to know which ones were reliable and which ones were not. So where does that leave us?
5. Roman Catholic scholars repeatedly have made the claim that because 2 Timothy 3:16 is in Roman Catholic Bibles, that is proof that the apocrypha is also inspired. How would you answer that claim? Hundreds of scholars and the Christian body as a whole have recognized that the “deutero-canonical” books that we call the apocrypha are not of the same quality as are the “sixty-six.” Roman Catholic scholar Jerome and Protestant reformer Martin Luther are among the very prominent scholars who have rejected those “extra books.” But God does not expect any of us to just accept the opinion of others on our own behalf. Read the books for yourself and see—after considering what scholars have said—whether you agree with them.
6. Ellen White never claimed that every word she wrote was inspired.

But now I must respond to the letters received from you and others. In your letter you speak of your early training to have implicit faith in the testimonies and say, “I was led to conclude and most firmly believe that every word that you ever spoke in public or private, that every letter you wrote under any and all circumstances, 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*, Bk. 1, p. 24.

7. Looked at superficially, this is scary. It means that we, in consultation with others, must do our “homework” and make up our minds for ourselves. Unfortunately, many have done a superficial work and basically rejected what they did not like and accepted what they did like, both from the Bible and from the writings of Ellen White. If we take that approach, we are, in fact, setting up ourselves and our own intellectual choices as superior to Scripture. While we must use wise judgment in deciding what is inspired, God has never permitted us the privilege of choosing what we like and throwing out what we do not like! If we have already made up our minds what is right and what is wrong, why bother with God’s Word at all?

8. Let us review once again how the process of inspiration takes place. First, God decides that He/They have a message for us. Through the Holy Spirit and sometimes with angels as intermediaries, He/They communicate that message to a human prophet. That human prophet then speaks or writes down the message using the best words he/she can find to describe what he/she has heard or seen. If the message is a written message, it then gets copied many times. Eventually, it is also translated into other languages which in turn are copied. All during this time, people are reading the message, and if the thought that they receive is something close to what God originally intended, then that person has been “inspired” by a message from God. Inspiration includes the entire process from the time when God has an idea until that idea occurs in our minds. It is people who are inspired, not printed books. A book that sits on the shelf at home does one no good at all! Theologians often break this process down into different steps: 1) “Revelation” is that process by which God reveals His will to the prophet; 2) “Inspiration” is that process through which the prophet commits to paper his understanding of what he/she heard/saw; and 3) “Illumination” is the final process in which the reader reads and attempts to understand the prophet’s words. The final question must always be: how does God communicate with my brain?
9. So, in our day what do we say to or about people who claim to be inspired? Let us ask some basic questions:
- 1) Does something have to be true to be inspired? Are Genesis 3:4 and 1 Kings 13:18 inspired? Both of those verses include lies! But they correctly represent what happened. We need to know that Satan lied to the human race! That is an essential part of the great controversy.
  - 2) Could a mistake be inspired? Read Matthew 23:35 and Luke 11:50,51 and compare 2 Chronicles 24:20-22 and Zechariah 1:1. The Zechariah who was murdered at the end of the Hebrew Old Testament (2 Chronicles) was Zechariah the son of Jehoiada and not Zechariah the son of Berechiah. (Zechariah 1:1) Matthew apparently forgot to check that before he wrote it down. Luke, carefully researching his material before he wrote it down, did not include the comment about Berechiah. People have quoted what they believed were mistakes in the writings of Ellen White to prove that she was not inspired. Does that mean that we should reject Matthew as well? Information quoted in Matthew 27:9,10 was written by Zechariah and not by Jeremiah. Should we throw Matthew out? Never! Should we admit that Matthew was human? Of course! If you believe that the Bible was dictated by God, this is a problem. But if you believe that the prophet who was inspired then wrote things down in his own language, it should not be a problem.
- Some years ago, a critic of Ellen White said that she was not inspired because she made mistakes. When these mistakes in the Bible were pointed out to him, he turned livid red and said, “Don’t you try to destroy my Bible to save your Ellen White!”
- 3) Is it all right for an inspired writer to quote from uninspired sources? In Acts 17:28, Paul quoted a Cilician poet, Aratus, who lived from about 315 to 240 B.C. (See also 1 Corinthians 15:33 and Titus 1:12) In those places Paul mentioned that he was quoting someone. But what about quotations from sources where no credit was given? See Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2:4. See also Jude 14,15 where the book of Enoch is quoted. Is it wrong for inspired authors to borrow from “uninspired” sources? There are several “books of Enoch” written before Jude in which these very words are stated. Are Bible writers allowed to borrow from uninspired sources? Was it wrong for Ellen White to borrow from other sources?
10. Generally, there have been two different approaches taken to the subject of inspiration. Some believe in “verbal inspiration.” According to that theory, God takes responsibility for the exact words written down by the **original** prophet or apostle in the **original** language. Some extend “verbal inspiration” to what might be called “dictation inspiration” in which they believe that God actually dictated the exact words to be written down. If we take that approach, it leaves us with several serious questions. 1) If we want to read the “inspired Scripture,” we would have to read Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Any translation into any other language would result in some variations in thoughts and ideas, and it would not be deemed “God’s own words.” 2) Furthermore, we do not have a single copy of a single book as written down by the original author. We only have copies and/or translations of their original writings. When people who believe in “verbal inspiration” find something in Scripture that they personally disagree with, they say that it has been changed by the copyists or the translators. When they do that, they are setting up their own judgment as superior to the Word of God. Did God intend for us to go

through the Bible and “correct” it according to our own personal opinions?

11. A second approach to inspiration is called “thought inspiration.” According to this approach, God gave visions, dreams, and ideas to His prophets and apostles who then spoke them or wrote them down—to the best of their ability—using the language and culture that they understood in their day. Those who believe in “thought inspiration” recognize that there have been times when God spoke directly to the prophet and told the prophet to write down His words. (Exodus 20:3-17; Jeremiah 29:30,31; Revelation 19:9) Sometimes, God speaks directly through a prophet (Numbers 22:35; 23:1-12,26) regarding an issue. Ellen White wrote:

The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. 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. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God. — *Manuscript 24*, 1886 (written in Europe in 1886).—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, Bk. 1, p. 21.

So what difference does it really make if you believe in verbal inspiration or thought inspiration?

12. At times there are unusual physical phenomena connected with God giving a dream or vision or with God or an angel speaking to one of His messengers. (Daniel 10:7-9,17,18; Acts 9:1-5; Revelation 1:17) Repeatedly, in the Bible we read that when prophets or apostles saw an angel or God in vision, they fell to the ground with their “faces in the dirt.” In every case, God or the angel reached down, raised them up, and, in effect, said, “I want to talk to you.” What does that imply about the relationship between God and His messengers? Ellen White had a number of dreams and visions. She wrote:

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*, Bk. 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. (As quoted in *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Tuesday, January 27, 2009)

13. So, what should we learn from all this information? God provides the evidence He thinks is required to convince those of sound mind regarding the inspiration of His messages and messengers. But, despite the fact that some of those physical phenomena may be quite remarkable, what is the ultimate test of a prophet’s reliability? The Bible standard is known as the Canon. All subsequent books in the Bible were tested against the standard set by the first five books of Moses. Imagine seeing your pastor coming down from a mountain that had been shaken and saw him covered with black smoke representing the presence of God. How would you feel about the words that he brought down the mountain from God? Moses received his messages directly from God and came down out of the mountain from the very presence of God. After the biblical Canon was complete, any subsequent claims to inspiration must be judged on the basis of their revealed words. The writings of Ellen White must be rejected if they are not consistent with prior revelations from God. **Truth must always be**

***consistent with itself.***

We need to recognize that there are two large churches that do not agree with this premise. The Roman Catholic Church believes that if the pope speaks “ex cathedra” (on behalf of the church), his words take precedence over any previous writings—even the Bible. The Mormon Church also believes that their prophet has the right to “correct” any previous revelation from God. Seventh-day Adventists believe that every new revelation must be tested by all previous revelation.

14. What should we do if we discover that there is evidence that a portion of what we have come to regard as inspired, crept into the text from later copyists or editors? There is very good evidence that John 5:3b,4 (KJV)—“*They were waiting for the water to move, because every now and then an angel of the Lord went down into the pool and stirred up the water. The first sick person to go into the pool after the water was stirred up was healed from whatever disease he had.*”—was not in the original manuscripts. Those words, while correctly representing a common belief and tradition of those days, were not actually true. (Compare John 5:7) No doubt, a later copyist recognizing that subsequent readers might not understand why so many people were gathered at the pool, added that note for “clarification.”
15. Read 1 John 5:7,8 in the *King James Version* and compare a more modern version. Some late Latin versions added, “in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. <sup>8</sup>And there are three that bear witness in earth....” These words got into the *King James Version* because a Roman Catholic bishop was determined to include them from the Latin and so translated them back into the Greek. He convinced Erasmus to put them into his third Greek edition of the New Testament from which the *King James Version* was translated. Therefore, virtually all modern versions leave those words out.
16. Is it all right for a prophet to use an assistant or even an editor in preparing his/her writings? Read Jeremiah 36:1-4; Romans 16:22; 1 Corinthians 16:21; Colossians 4:15-18; and 2 Thessalonians 3:17. Paul the apostle used scribes to write virtually all of his material. Ellen White used copy editors and secretaries to put together material which she had previously written so she could produce some of her most famous books.
17. Could inspired writers ever “plagiarize” from other sources. The apostle Luke apparently spoke to many people in Palestine getting their first-hand reports before writing his Gospel. (Luke 1:1-4) About 90% of the book of Mark is copied in Matthew and/or Luke. Should we then throw out Matthew and Luke because they copied so much from Mark? 2 Kings 19 is copied almost verbatim from Isaiah 37. And there are other similar duplications in the Old Testament.
18. So, when all is said and done, what criteria do you use to determine whether the material you are reading is truly inspired by God? What do you do with 1 Corinthians 7:10-12,25,39,40? Should verses which are the “personal opinion” of people like Paul be considered inspired? Should we be allowed to reject certain portions of Ellen White’s writings because we think they are her “personal opinion”?
19. The question of inspiration is of vital importance to Christians today. Have we done our homework adequately so that we know what is reliable and what is not reliable?
20. What does it say to us about God that He allows all these questions to be raised? Shouldn’t God have found some way to tell us exactly what is inspired and what is not? Wouldn’t the Devil immediately seize upon any such “proof” and use it to his advantage? How do you feel about the fact that God has apparently challenged us to read for ourselves and use our own intelligence to make up our own minds regarding such an important topic? If we are going to stumble over some insignificant detail, what will we do when the Devil himself comes masquerading as the Son of God, the Messiah? (Jeremiah 12:5,6)

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