

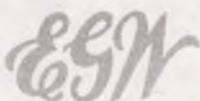
“A BIBLICAL MODEL OF INSPIRATION”

By William G. Johnson

**SPIRIT OF PROPHECY DAY SERMON
Sabbath, May 19, 1984**

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TO Elders and Pastors of the World Field

SUBJECT: Annual Spirit of Prophecy Emphasis Day Program for May 19, 1984

Dear Brethren:

In the Bible we discover how God used His prophet-spokesmen in a variety of circumstances. As we study the experiences of the prophets we are able to develop a model of how God spoke through them to the various crises and needs that the human family has encountered from the beginning of time.

We learn that the Lord's prophets had perhaps the most demanding and difficult responsibility ever entrusted to human beings. There were several who did not easily accept their calls and some prophets even actively resisted the Lord's request of them. Jonah, Jeremiah, and Moses come immediately to mind. The modern prophetic messenger, Ellen White, also did not eagerly accept her call as she "begged the Lord to lay the burden upon someone else" (1SM 32). But this was not to be.

Our annual Emphasis Day Program this year "A Biblical Model of Inspiration," has been prepared by William G. Johnsson, Editor of the *Adventist Review*. Elder Johnsson originally presented this topic to an International Spirit of Prophecy Workshop in 1982. We believe that his message should be shared with Adventists around the world through this Emphasis Day Program. We pray that you will find it timely and informative.

Seventh-day Adventists have always built their confidence in the prophetic ministry of Ellen White on the Bible model of inspiration. We have not recognized her writing as a part of Scripture, but still as a modern manifestation of the prophetic gift for the last generation on earth before the second coming of Christ. We believe that her prophetic ministry is clearly predicted in the book of Revelation.

We hope the enclosed presentation will help you to plan for this special day of emphasis. If we can be of any help to you personally, we hope you will write to us. You can be assured that we will respond to your letter. Let us pray together that we will always listen to the Lord's voice as He speaks to us through His prophets.

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A BIBLICAL MODEL OF INSPIRATION

William G. Johnsson, Editor
Adventist Review

Our topic for today is "A Biblical Model of Inspiration." Let us note four Bible texts.

Jeremiah 20:9: "Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in my heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay."

Amos 1:1: "The words of Amos, who was among the herdmen of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel. . . . And he said, The Lord will roar from Zion. . . . Thus saith the Lord."

2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is God-breathed." (NIV).

And 2 Peter 1:21: "Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."

What was this fire shut up in Jeremiah's bones? What did Amos see when he saw the word of the Lord? By what means did God breathe in all the Scriptures? How did the Holy Spirit move the holy men of old?

Ten Features of a Biblical Model of Inspiration

I will set forth ten features of a Biblical model of inspiration, this marvel of divine condescension through which in human words, God has come to men and women.

The *first* element is this, and I put it first because it must always be first—the element of mystery. To define inspiration is like trying to catch a rainbow. We may put forth our best efforts, but there always will remain an elusive quality—an element of mystery. We may know inspired writings, but we never may fully grasp them. Instead they grasp us, because through inspired writings God touches men and women. When we talk about inspiration, we are speaking about God; therefore let us never think that we may fully define inspiration. Let us be satisfied with a less-than-total understanding of inspiration. The first element, then, is the element of mystery—the elusive quality, the supernatural element.

The *second* element may be approached in two ways: first, we may see what Scripture says about itself. And we have already read some of those verses—the claims that the Bible writers make that they were moved by God. "The word of the Lord came unto me

saying." How often do we find this statement? "Holy men of God were moved." So we should study first of all the claims of Scripture. We might call this the self-identity of Scripture—what it says about itself.

Second, we must study what Scripture discloses about the process of revelation, about the nature of inspiration. We must study the Scripture to see by what means God's thoughts were translated into human thoughts. The Scriptures are accessible to us; the words are our words; the thought patterns basically are our thought patterns.

Scripture is accessible. But many people fall into a problem here. They assume that they already know what inspiration is and how it works, so they say, "The Scriptures should come to us like this: Thus and so," rather than letting God through Scripture explain how He has inspired Scripture. This, I think, is an important point with far-reaching implications. So I repeat this second element. We may approach the understanding of inspiration in two ways: by the self-identity of Scripture, and then by the self-disclosure of Scripture.

The *third* element deals with Biblical inspiration, which is what we are concerned about in this presentation. It is of a different order from creations of the human spirit alone. Now, this word *inspiration* is used in a variety of ways to indicate those outflowings of the human spirit that speak to our innermost soul.

We speak of Beethoven's "Fifth Symphony," or his "Ninth," as being "inspired." We think of great works of literature such as those by Shakespeare. There is a timeless quality about these creations of the human spirit. But when we speak of Biblical inspiration we are speaking of inspiration in a different sense. There is a higher order of inspiration that we are speaking of. We are speaking of that direct interposition of the Holy Spirit coming upon the human mind so that the divine mind is fused with the human mind and God communicates His will to mankind.

Biblical inspiration is different in several ways from the processes of inspiration that are on the purely human, creative level. First of all, in terms of know-it-all authority. The plays of Shakespeare, for instance, still speak to men and women because they describe the universal glory and tragedy of human existence. They are timeless. But they do not speak to us with authority. They are simply the product of a human mind, a brilliant mind, describing the human predicament. The Scriptures also speak about the human predicament, but they speak with authority,

because they describe God's way of understanding this predicament and His way of right and wrong. So they are timeless, and they are moral, and they are spiritual. The Scriptures are a pure, bright light that the centuries cannot dim. They ever will speak to human need. They are inspired in a way that other creations—those of the human spirit alone—cannot be, for they are not divinely inspired. This is our third element in this model.

The *fourth* element leads us to the Word of God. The Bible has many writers, but it has one Author. No matter who the writer is, God is the Author. "The word of the Lord came" to Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4), and to Isaiah, and to Matthew, and to Paul, and to Peter, and to John. There is a living, abiding character, because these human words, because of the Holy Spirit's work, are the word of God to us.

And yet—here is the *fifth* element—the Word of God has come to us clothed in raiment that is fully human. It is God's word, and yet the language, the thought patterns are our thought patterns. The images, the symbols, the illustrations, are ours. At times these images and illustrations may even sound strange, perhaps shocking. There are symbols, for instance, in the book of Ezekiel, that we would hardly dare to read aloud in church. The Word of God has come to us in the words of man.

Occasionally there are mistakes in grammar. Occasionally we find inaccuracies. There are slight discrepancies between the chronologies given in Kings and Chronicles. Even the words of Jesus Himself are recorded with slight variations from writer to writer. When Jesus was with His disciples in the boat during the storm, and they woke Him up, what did He say to them? Did He say, as Matthew records in chapter 8:26, "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" Or did He say, "Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith?" as Mark says in chapter 4, verse 40? Or as Luke puts it in chapter 8, verse 25, of his gospel, "Where is your faith?" Now, in each case, the *idea* is identical. But the *words* are recorded with slight variations. And so God's Word has come to us clothed in human language. The Scriptures are not only God-breathed, they are fully human.

The *sixth* element concerns the inspired writers. Actually, instead of speaking of "inspired words," we should speak of "inspired writers." Jeremiah felt a fire in his bones, and he could not keep silent. Holy men of God were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they proclaimed, "Thus saith the Lord," as did Amos. Throughout the Scriptures, then, we see human personality; we

see differences of style; we see the very backgrounds of the writers, because the total person is inspired by the Holy Spirit as the divine mind is mediated through the human mind.

The *seventh* element involves a process. We might think of the inspired writers as being at the center of a circle of inspiration. And so we find them, at times, employing helpers. We find Jeremiah calling upon Baruch, for instance. We find Paul dictating to Tertius as he writes to the church at Rome. We find men such as the writers of the Synoptic Gospels certainly employing other sources, Luke and Matthew very likely calling upon Mark. Occasionally, we find writers quoting from non-inspired sources, such as the Greek poets. And we find the writers calling to their help court records, oral histories, and such materials. There is a circle of inspiration, and the inspired person is at the center. But God is superintending a process so that His word may be communicated, His message communicated. From one point of view the Scriptures can be studied as purely human documents, for they are fully human, wholly human; but faith knows that the Scriptures are more than human. They are fully human, but they are more than human.

The *eighth* element reminds us that God, about whom the messenger writes, is more important than the messenger. Thus, while we properly speak of "inspired writers," yet the person of the inspired writer recedes. Think about that. We know exceedingly little about most of the Bible writers. Jeremiah does tell us a fair bit about himself, but most of the Bible writers do not. Who was Isaiah, who wrote so beautifully? Who was Matthew? Who was Luke, who gave us so much of the New Testament? Our knowledge is minimal. Much of it, in fact, is based on tradition. When we come to the Gospels, scholars of ancient histories and biographies have been amazed at the particular type of writing that we find in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The person of the biographer recedes and the person of Jesus Christ is dominant. And this, in fact, is a pattern for all of Scripture—the Bible writers recede. For although we have been speaking about "inspired men" rather than "inspired words," we have also been speaking about a circle of inspiration; and, beyond that, the Word of God being mediated through human mind and human words.

The *ninth* element concerns the message borne. As the person of the inspired writer recedes, the message of the writer comes to the foreground. We are drawn away from Matthew as a writer. We see Jesus. We are drawn away from Luke as a writer and a historian,

and we see the story of the early church. We are drawn away from Isaiah in Jerusalem to hear the word of the Lord. So in a peculiar, distinctive way, the one Author of all the Scriptures emerges. And the Scriptures are thus the Word of God. The message emerges—God—God coming to us, revealing Himself to us, and declaring to us His way of salvation.

Our *tenth* element is: Inspiration is experienced; it is not proved. At times, people have claimed to be able to prove inspiration. But this is a misunderstanding. We may present various arguments in favor of inspiration; for example, the unity of Scripture, its effect upon human lives, and the discoveries of archeology. But all of these are evidences rather than proof—on two counts: First, because of the nature of the subject matter. Creations of the human spirit, such as beauty—esthetic creations—cannot be proved in an empirical way. They grasp us; we enter them; and we know that they are genuine. And the Scriptures are of that order. Then, second, because God is too big for human proof. God does not come at the end of a syllogism or an argument. He is not subject to proof, as it were, in the laboratory. He does not come at the end of a chemical equation. God is not proved by the human mind. Rather, He is known as we open our souls to Him. He invites us in Psalm 34, verse 8: "Taste and see that the Lord is good." And to everyone who tastes, "The Lord *is* good."

Conclusion

To everyone who comes seeking, inspiration is known, as he opens Scripture and hears the Word of God. This, then, is the final word. God has spoken, and God still speaks through inspired writings. Though our humanity is weak and frail, our humanity is still noble, patterned in the image of God; and though our speech falls short of perfect communication, it is still beautiful, capable of marvelous persuasiveness.

Two thousand years ago, God took our humanity, and the Word became flesh. Thereby, He glorified it. In inspired writings, the Word became, and still becomes, flesh. It remains flesh. And thereby our human speech is glorified, and utters the mysteries of heaven.

INSPIRATION DEFINED

Inspiration is that influence of the Spirit of God upon the minds of the Scripture writers which made their writings the record of a progressive divine revelation, sufficient, when taken together and interpreted by the same Spirit who inspired them, to lead every honest inquirer to Christ and to salvation.

Inspiration may often include revelation, or the direct communication from God of truth to which man could not attain by his unaided powers. It may include illumination, or the quickening of man's cognitive powers to understand truth already revealed. Inspiration, however, does not necessarily and always include either revelation or illumination. It is simply the divine influence which secures a transmission of needed truth to the future, and, according to the nature of the truth to be transmitted, it may be only an inspiration of superintendence, or it may be also and at the same time an inspiration of illumination or revelation.

It may help our understanding of terms above employed if we adduce instances of

- (1) Inspiration without revelation, as in Luke or Acts, Luke 1:1-3;
- (2) Inspiration including revelation, as in the Apocalypse, Rev. 1:1, 11;
- (3) Inspiration without illumination, as in the prophets, 1 Pet. 1:11;
- (4) Inspiration including illumination, as in the case of Paul, 1 Cor. 2:12;
- (5) Revelation without inspiration, as in God's words from Sinai, Ex. 20:1, 22;
- (6) Illumination without inspiration, as in modern preachers, Eph. 2:20.

—Augustus Hopkins Strong
Systematic Theology, pp. 196-197.