

The Bible: Inspired by God or thought up by men?



Is there any way to know?

The Bible is the perennial best-seller of all time. It has been translated into more languages than any other book. However, the Bible is also controversial. For one thing it claims that God inspired its writing. An example of such a claim is “All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness”(1). The question I had when faced with such a claim was, how could I know whether it was true or not? After all, lots of holy books and even religious leaders make similar claims. The well-known atheist Bertrand Russell surveyed the plethora of religions, most making claims and statements contradicting each other, yet all claiming some Divine origin and concluded that all religions were false. Was Russell right? Or is there some evidence that the Bible has to validate its claim? Or does one choose whether to believe a scripture or not solely based on culture and upbringing, or on some whim and fancy?

As I struggled with these questions, looking for answers, but not sure I would really find any, I came across a set of verifiable tests that the Bible itself laid down to substantiate its claims to inspiration by God. They are spelled out in the following Biblical passages.

“You may say to yourselves, ‘How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?’ If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message that the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.” (2)

“Present your case,” says the LORD ... “you idols tell us what is going to happen ... declare to us the things to come, tell us what the future holds, so we may know you are gods.” (3)

The test that the Bible lays out is quite simple, yet clear-cut. To know if a message came from God the statements say that it should be supported by predictions of the future. The reasoning is that if God exists, He knows the future, whereas though people can make some educated guesses we can’t predict the future with consistent accuracy. Thus a message from God can be differentiated from those of people on the basis of its predictive abilities.

As I explored this line of reasoning I was acutely aware that predictive prophecy was subject to interpretation, especially if the predictive statements were vague. After all, New Years’ tabloids usually have headlines from some ‘psychic’ who predicts that there will be a disaster or turmoil in the course of the coming year. Such general predictions are bound to happen statistically. Were there prophecies in the Bible that were really substantive and precise? That gave a real sign of Divine inspiration? Let me share with you what I have learned on this topic.

In order to assess this evidence one needs to know some basic facts about the Bible. The

Bible has two main sections, the Old Testament, comprised of 39 books written in the period 1500 BC to 400 BC, and the New Testament comprised of 27 books written between 50 AD and 90 AD. The New Testament centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ. What is fascinating is that he claimed that the Old Testament also anticipated his person and work. For example, on one occasion Luke tells us of Jesus that “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets [i.e. the Old Testament] he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself”(4). This, if true, should include these predictive prophecies since Moses (ca 1500 BC) and the Prophets (ca 1000 – 500 BC) were written hundreds of years before Jesus walked the earth. What kind of predictions did they make? Were they vague and subjective? Or definitive? Let’s see.

Prediction: Isaiah 52:13-15 written 700 BC

See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him – his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness – so he will sprinkle [i.e. help or heal] many nations.

This passage predicts a coming ‘servant’ who will be known for being wise. The passage seems to contradict itself, however, since it says he will be highly exalted and lifted up – then it talks about him becoming disfigured and marred beyond recognition – so that all ‘nations’ will be affected. The controversy of the violence and blood in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion* movie shows us visually how this prophecy was fulfilled. Jesus was known as a wise teacher, and he is exalted by many. Yet the beatings and punishment he received at his death was so appalling and disfiguring that his form was literally marred beyond human likeness. People in all nations have recognized

him. That prophecy, written 700 BC, was literally fulfilled by Jesus in all its facets.

Prediction: Isaiah 53:5-11 written 700 BC

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed .. the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted .. he was led like a lamb to the slaughter .. by oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living. For the transgression of my people he was stricken .. After the suffering of his soul he will see the light of life and be satisfied. By his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many.

This continues on from the previous passage to describe the servant as being pierced for our transgressions. What an apt description of a person who is being nailed to a cross – he is being pierced. But this was written before crucifixion was even invented! The rest of the passage goes on to state that he was bearing our iniquities (sins) so that we can experience peace and healing in our relationship with God; that he would afterwards see the light of life and justify many. The Good News of the early Christians was exactly that: God is extending us his forgiveness since Jesus bore the penalty of our sins (through his death) and since he was resurrected we now have the hope of eternal life. Isaiah is anticipating not only the historical events around Jesus (his suffering, crucifixion & resurrection) but the implications of these events in our relationship with God.

Prediction: Psalms 22 written 1000 BC

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?... I am ... scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. ... I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My

heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me... a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet...I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me .. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing. .. All the ends of the earth will remember... Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn.

Jesus, while on the cross did call out “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”(5). In doing so Jesus was pointing to Psalm 22 which opens with the same words. As one reads that Psalm, the highlights of which I have produced, one gets a description of the crucifixion of Jesus, in first person, including the mocking and insults he received, the dislocating of the joints, the piercing of hands and feet, the dividing of garments. How was David, the author of Psalm 22, able to get such an accurate visualization of the crucifixion 1000 years before it occurred? And notice how the Psalm ends. It describes the legacy or effect of this person. It says that generations following the crucifixion will be told about it. And here we are about 2000 years after the crucifixion studying aspects of it – just as David predicted.

Prediction: Jeremiah 33:14-15 ca. 600 BC
“The days are coming’, declares the LORD, ‘when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land.

Note that this prophecy predicts that someone will come from David’s line (David was the famous Jewish King who defeated Goliath and founded the city of Jerusalem ca 1000 BC), and this person would be just and right. This

prediction was fulfilled by Jesus Christ who was a descendant of David as well as a person who is famous for being ‘just and right’. The lineages were meticulously preserved in that ancient Middle Eastern culture, and both Matthew (ch 1) and Luke (ch 3) trace Jesus’ lineage to his ancestor King David.

Prediction: Zechariah 3:8-9 written 500 BC
Listen O High Priest Joshua and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant the Branch. See the stone I have set in front of Joshua! ... and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day.

Zechariah picks up from Jeremiah and predicts more about the coming Branch of David. It is interesting that Joshua (who was the person in 500 BC to whom Zechariah was directly speaking) is a variant of the name Yeshua, which was Jesus name in Aramaic. In other words Jesus and Joshua are variants of the same name (like John and Jonathan are variants of each other). And Zechariah says that the Joshua of his day was symbolic of the Branch, and this Branch would remove the sin of the land in one single day. The day Jesus (Yeshua) died he did so for the sins of all people. So literally, in a single day the sins of the land were removed. In a sense, Jesus’ name and victory over sin were predicted 500 years before he lived.

Prediction: Micah 5:2 written 700 BC
"But you, Bethlehem, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

This prediction has of today been partially fulfilled. Jesus was born in Bethlehem (as the Christmas accounts tell us), but he has never yet ruled over Israel. It is interesting though that he claimed to be a King (‘Christ’ is a title

signifying kingship). For example, he declared, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory”(6). This indicates that he taught that he would return again to earth – this time to rule, which would thus fulfill both parts of Micah’s prophecy. At this point at least we have the fulfillment of his birth place.

In this short study we’ve had time to look at just a few predictions in the Old Testament that seem to be fulfilled in the person and life of Jesus Christ. What are some possible explanations? It could just be coincidence. If it were just these few prophecies we looked at then that could perhaps be contemplated. Sometimes bizarre and unusual coincidences just happen. But when we consider that there are several hundred direct and indirect prophecies and allusions in the Old Testament that are completed in Jesus, of which we have looked at just a few, it would seem that coincidence is a poor explanation for such a large and converging set of predictions. And people who did not know each other, living hundreds of years apart wrote these prophecies. In our little sample we looked at Psalm 22 written by David ca 1000 BC down to Zechariah who lived about 500 BC. Yet their writings independently converge on Jesus.

The most likely explanation that I considered was that the Old Testament writings were changed after the life of Jesus to make them ‘fit’. However, the Dead Sea Scrolls ruled that explanation out. The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1948, contain almost the entire Old Testament, they are dated at 200 B.C, and they are exactly the same as traditional Old Testament texts. Thus we have manuscripts in hand today that pre-date Jesus by about 200 years, containing the same predictions, so they could not have been altered after his life to make the predictions fit his life.

Or perhaps the life of Jesus was written in the Gospels of the New Testament to make it ‘fit’ the Old Testament prophecies. The problem with that explanation is that so many of the predictions and fulfillments revolve around public aspects of Jesus life. Take the first prophecies we looked at, for example, which foretell his passion and crucifixion. The Gospel writers could not just ‘make up’ a highly public event. In fact secular writers of that time refer of Jesus being crucified under Pontius Pilate (7). Early Christian writers refer to Pilate’s records of the crucifixion kept in Caesar’s official archives (8). It was as if it was common knowledge of that day.

So who was behind the writings of the Bible? Was it only men, or was it that, as the Bible itself says, “... [it] never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (9). The fulfilled prophecies should give us pause because no other set of writings, holy or otherwise, has this same kind of signature on it. I, for one, have come to believe that the Bible is the word of God. I’d encourage you to give it a serious look.

Questions? Comments? E-mail me at ragnar@website.considerthegospel.org
Visit website at www.considerthegospel.org

Ragnar O. Olson

1. 2 Timothy 3:16
2. Deuteronomy 18:21-22
3. Isaiah 41:21-23
4. Luke 24:27
5. Matthew 27:46
6. Matthew 25:31
7. Tacitus. 112 AD. *Annals* XV 44 & Josephus. 67AD. *Antiquities* xviii. 33
8. Justin Martyr 150 AD *First Apology* ch xxxv
9. 2 Peter 1:21

