

The Chaos Ladder

Episode 6 - And then God said, “Everybody down on the floor! Now!”

[Podcast intro]

Hi, I'm Steve Flowers and you're listening to The Chaos Ladder-- a podcast that explores how the Bible is not a gaping pit waiting to swallow us but a ladder for us to climb.

[Episode intro]

Your view of biblical inspiration drives what you understand the nature of the Bible to be. And regardless of whether you can articulate one or not, that view is reflected in how you apply (or don't apply) the Bible.

[Main content]

If I were to make the story of The Three Little Pigs an analogy for the episodes of this podcast, then I would describe the episodes of The Chaos Ladder before this one as mostly the cautionary tales of what stands to blow down our view of the Bible when we construct it from straw or sticks. But starting with this episode and over the next several after this one, we start learning how to construct a view of the Bible made of bricks so we're no longer afraid of the big, bad wolf.

In this episode I want to share some background on biblical inspiration and then use a story to give you an introduction to it.

Biblical inspiration is most commonly and simply defined as the Holy Spirit of God acting “on the minds and hearts of” people in such a way that they become the instruments that transmit their understanding of God's revelation.¹

So where did this belief of the Bible being inspired originate? The short answer is the Bible itself. It has a number of passages from which we draw the two primary components of biblical inspiration: one, God using people to share God's message; and two, people writing down God's message.²

I'll give you a few examples that illustrate one or both:

¹ Harper's Bible Dictionary, (1973), pp. 281-282

² Exodus 17:14; Deuteronomy 17:18-20

- Leviticus and Numbers describe God as speaking through Moses and Aaron to establish the religious laws and administration of early Israel.³
- In the book of Judges which was before ancient Israel had a king, we're told that "the spirit of Yahweh" came upon a leader in order to deliver the Israelites from a foreign threat.⁴
- And then there's the myriad of prophets throughout the Old Testament prophets which the Bible states that the words they wrote or spoke were from God, often using the phrase that "the word of the Lord came to" them.⁵
- You may be familiar with the law in Deuteronomy that says "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."⁶ But the passage also commands to "write (these words) on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."⁷
- The book of Jeremiah includes that God commanded him to "write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you."⁸

So the basic foundation for biblical inspiration is found throughout the Old Testament. By the time of Jesus, the belief was assumed. Jesus' teachings imply He considered the Jewish Scriptures inspired as would ancient Jews well before Him. Overall, the New Testament authors do not appear to feel any need to argue that the Jewish Scriptures were inspired as it's either assumed or tacitly noted as when the author of Acts quotes from the Psalms. Two times the author describes the Psalm simply as the work of "the Holy Spirit through David."⁹

But New Testament authors did add a few nuances to the belief.

- 2 Timothy states that "all scripture is inspired by God," though it's referring to the only books thought of as scripture at the time it was written which was the Jewish Scriptures, or our Old Testament. Scholars have noted that the author's point in the passage is to list the qualities of inspired scripture which are that it is "useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."¹⁰
- The book of Hebrews adds a subtle but very impactful nuance. Multiple times the author uses a present tense verb to describe the Holy Spirit's work in the Jewish Scriptures. For example, when referencing a Psalm, the writer states "Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says" in the Psalm instead of writing it as "as the Holy Spirit said" in the Psalm.¹¹ Using a

³ Leviticus 1:1, 11:1; Numbers 1:1

⁴ Judges 3:9-10

⁵ 2 Samuel 7:4; 1 Kings 17:1-2; Ezekiel 1:3; Hosea 1:1; Joel 1:1; Micah 1:1; Zechariah 1:1

⁶ Mark 12:28-30

⁷ Deuteronomy 6:4-9

⁸ Jeremiah 30:2

⁹ Acts 1:15-20, 4:23-26

¹⁰ 2 Timothy 3:16

¹¹ Hebrews 3:7-11 (referencing Psalm 95:7b-11); see also Hebrews 10:15-17 (referencing Jeremiah 31:33, 34b)

present tense verb is the writer showing that their understanding of inspired scripture is that the Holy Spirit *continues* to speak through those texts. That's an important element in the belief of an inspired Bible.

Familiarity with a definition and biblical basis are helpful background but thinking through the nuts and bolts of what it means to believe in an inspired Bible is complicated.

The "kingdom of God," which Jesus taught was at hand, was also one of those seems-simple-on-the-outside-but-can-get-real-complicated-trying-to-figure-out-the-details kind of belief. Jesus helped his disciples and others to explore the belief by telling parables. His parables were always in a setting to which his audience could relate, but also included some twist or shocking detail that would have been unusual for its setting. Every story would have his hearers casually nodding along, then they'd hear that twist and go, "Wait, what?!" It was a very astute instructional method that invited the hearer to think through and embrace the concept for themselves instead of Jesus detailing out a definition or some doctrine.

I think discovering biblical inspiration through a similar experience can be helpful. Now, I don't have Jesus' ability to author parables but in that same spirit of using a story to help think through something, I'm going to tell you one that's meant to serve as an analogy for what it means to say that the Bible is inspired.

Ok, a little background before I tell the story-- I've previously mentioned that I'm a retired FBI Agent. Early in my career I spent about three years investigating bank robberies. The following story is fictional but includes elements based on my experiences. It's based on a crime of violence, but I do not want to make light of that, especially acknowledging all those who have suffered physical or psychological trauma from an actual crime of violence. I've interviewed many victims and witnesses so I understand the damage it can cause. But I believe this fictional story can help illuminate the challenges of thinking through what it means to believe in an inspired Bible.

So, without further adieu, here it is, complete with an introduction fashioned just like Jesus did for one of his parables---

"What is [an inspired Bible] like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a [bank robbery]."¹²

A masked gunman stormed into a bank, waving his weapon, and barking commands. The bank employees and customers all complied as quickly as they could while praying more than anything no one was hurt. It was a terrifying event that seemed to never stop but afterwards everyone realized it was all over within a few minutes when the bank robber ran out with a bag full of money.

Local police officers quickly arrive and thereafter so do the detectives who interview all the employees and customers who were present during the robbery. Later, when the detectives compared their notes, there was one particular witness who stood out to

¹² Luke 13:18-19

them. He was the customer who was wearing an NFL Cincinnati Bengals sweatshirt. Most all of the witnesses were consistent in describing the size and age of the bank robber, except for Bengals sweatshirt guy. They were consistent in describing the things the robber said, except for Bengals sweatshirt guy. And they were consistent in describing the movements and amount of time in which the bank robber acted, except for Bengals sweatshirt guy. It made the detectives amusingly wonder if Bengals sweatshirt guy was even there during the robbery.

But the detectives know from experience that each witness's account brings different pieces to the puzzle in recreating exactly what happened. So they did not disregard what Bengals sweatshirt guy told them. In fact, they paid even more attention to his story because of a detail he added that no other witness did. Most of the witnesses said the bank robber was wearing a ball cap with something on it but none could recall what the logo was. But Bengals sweatshirt guy was a fan of not only Cincinnati but all NFL teams and as such confidently noted that the robber was wearing a Carolina Panthers ball cap. Bank camera photos were developed later and could not clearly show what was on the bank robber's cap, but it appeared similar to the Panthers logo.

Days later, the detectives' investigation identified the bank robber. They executed a search warrant on the subject's residence and among the items they seized was a Carolina Panthers ball cap. That piece of evidence together with Bengals sweatshirt guy's testimony became an important part of their case that helped convict the bank robber.

When we make this bank robbery story an analogy to the inspiration of the Bible, all the biblical authors are the victim witnesses, we are the detectives trying to piece together everything the witnesses saw and what actually happened, and the bank robber is, well, the bank robber is God. Side note if you find yourself not too sure about that comparison, keep in mind that Jesus likened his purpose to that of a home-invasion robber in his one-verse parable in Mark about entering the strong man's house.¹³ The Bible's inspired nature, like Jesus, is at times unexpected.

All right, back to the bank robbery analogy-- The struggles of bank robbery witnesses to accurately describe the crime and the robbers can be comparable to the struggles and limitations of the Bible's inspired authors to put into writing how God actually revealed God's self. Some authors, like some bank robbery witnesses, are highly accurate. But none of the authors are perfect in what they say God is like, what God did, or why something happened. And some even add details that never happened because that's the way they're recalling the event.

But experienced detectives, such as we should see ourselves when it comes to looking at the Bible, don't discard the testimonies of witnesses who seem to add details, be confused, or are the most errant like Bengals sweatshirt guy. Because experienced detectives know that every witness may have seen or heard some detail that the others missed. Likewise, we need to have

¹³ Mark 3:27

an open mind as we investigate all the pieces of the Bible, including when we find authors who added items, sound confused, or are errant or even offensive, so we can fully identify how God may have inspired it. Just like the witnesses in a bank robbery, each biblical author has something to offer. Inspiration is many witnesses telling varying versions of a bank robbery while faithful detectives understand that all the accounts speak to the same robber-- God.

That's it for this episode. Over the next three episodes, I'm goin to share three traits of the Bible that I think make it inspired.

Just a quick reminder that the specific citations for scripture I've referenced can be found in the footnotes of the essay version of this episode located on StoriesFromAVillage.org.

Thanks for listening to The Chaos Ladder. Hope you'll join me next time. Take care.

[Outro statement]

The Chaos Ladder is part of StoriesFromAVillage.org, a podcast and essay ministry of Stone Village Church in Columbus, Ohio. You can find a transcript of this podcast on the web site.
