

Inspiration 1

Notes for 6 Jan

Steve Logan

This is the first of 4 discussions on 'inspiration' and I'd like it to be a general "let's figure out what we're talking about" session.

I'm going to propose a few 'thought experiments' which I'd like you to invest in fully. Do as instructed and give it a go!

Rules of the Thought Experiments

Firstly, I want you to bring all your prejudices and pre-dispositions with you. Don't think too hard about the questions. Just go with your first response.

Secondly, I'm deliberately *not* defining *any* of my terminology! Again, go with whatever your own personal definitions tell you.

Thought Experiment #1

Consider this passage from the book of Acts. We discussed this book for most of 2023 and so the stories contained therein should be fresh in our minds.

Then the commander called two of his officers and ordered, "Get 200 soldiers ready to leave for Caesarea at nine o'clock tonight. Also take 200 spearmen and 70 mounted troops. Provide horses for Paul to ride, and get him safely to Governor Felix."

Then he wrote this letter to the governor:

From Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings!

This man was seized by some Jews, and they were about to kill him when I arrived with the troops. When I learned that he was a Roman citizen, I removed him to safety. Then I took him to their high council to try to learn the basis of the accusations against him. I soon discovered the charge was something regarding their religious law - certainly nothing worthy of imprisonment or death. But when I was informed of a plot to kill him, I immediately sent him on to you. I have told his accusers to bring their charges before you.

So that night, as ordered, the soldiers took Paul as far as Antipatris. They returned to the fortress the next morning, while the mounted troops took him on to Caesarea. When they arrived in Caesarea, they presented Paul and the letter to Governor Felix. He read it and then asked Paul what province he was from. "Cilicia" Paul answered.

"I will hear your case myself when your accusers arrive", the governor told him. Then the governor ordered him kept in the prison at Herod's headquarters.

Acts 23:23-35

This passage was written by Luke and is a straightforward description of an event that happened to Paul.

1. Is this passage 'inspired'?
2. If 'yes', what do you mean by that?

3. Say some archaeologists dug up a scroll containing more-or-less the exact same words written by some unknown author (for the sake of our thought experiment let us call him Questus) who happened to be privy to these events and also wrote them down, would you consider that scroll 'inspired'? Why/why not?
4. If your answer to (3) was 'no', then what is it about the Luke+text combination that makes it inspired, whereas the Questus+text combination is not? I appreciate that your answer to this question might be long and complicated - but that's OK!

Thought Experiment #2

The spectrum of 'inspiration' definitions for most Christians runs from 'every single word that appears on the page is directly from God' (with the necessary addendum that nothing was lost in the various translations - indeed this viewpoint requires that the translators were inspired in a similar manner to the original author) to some rather more vague 'God provided the thoughts and there is something special about those thoughts that ended up in the Bible, but I'm not entirely sure how it all works'.

Let's go even further along that spectrum. For this Thought Experiment have a go at forgetting that you've ever heard of 'inspiration'. There's no such thing. And it's never even occurred to anyone else that 'inspiration' might be a thing. It's an unknown concept.

So, try and put 'inspiration' aside and ignore it for now: the Bible is a splendid collection of stories about the interaction between God and humanity and is not meaningfully different from, say, the writings of C.S. Lewis.

1. Note your initial reaction to this request. Write it down!
2. Having thought about it a bit more...
 - If your initial reaction was "Well, that's wrong!" then:
 - Can you articulate why?
 - Can you express (*as rigorously as you can!*) what is missing from C.S. Lewis that is present in, say, Jeremiah?
 - If your initial reaction was "I could go along with that..." then:
 - Is the usual Christian notion of 'inspiration' a [categorisation error](#)?
 - What is then to stop anybody from claiming that they have had a message from God, and that all Christians need to pay attention to their new vision?
 - How can you tell the difference between the actual messages from God and the self-claimed supposed messages from God?

The last point, that of "telling the difference", is something I find interesting. I wonder if our aversion to *not* having an easily identifiable set of messages from God has to do with our difficulties in parsing the differences. Just as we much prefer a hard set of rules that are clear (if not necessarily easy) to follow over the nebulous instruction from Jesus to "Love your neighbour as yourself", could our need for a clearly defined set of texts just be laziness?! Discuss...

At the risk of giving away my personal position on Thought Experiment #2, I must admit that I took this approach when reading the book of Acts over the last 9 months. I read it as a quasi-diary, a story, and crucially, a story in which people changed their minds, had arguments and in one case seemed to ignore a prophet! Rather than treating it as a mystical book of 'wooooo' it's a realistic telling of a story. 'Inspiration' seems unimportant for such a book. What do you think?

Thought Experiment #3

I've stolen this example from Alden Thompson's book ["Inspiration", Chapter 3](#).

But suppose a team of archaeologists in the Middle East unearthed an ancient manuscript. Experts conclude that the apostle Paul wrote it as a letter to the church in Corinth, a letter different from the two we now have in the New Testament. The question is: Would you include this additional letter in your Bible?

- If 'yes', does this mean we think that the important inspiration here is the authorship of Paul? It is he that is 'inspired' and, because we know this book is from him, then we *must* include it.
- If 'no', does this mean that God didn't want us to find this document? It is not part of the Bible because God hid it and it was unknown to the men who collated the canon? Thus, the 'inspiration' here lies with the collators and not with Paul?

Concluding thoughts...

As a scientist I'm uneasy with the idea of fixed truth. I'm a big fan of the maxim that "Everything you know is wrong", with the sub-clause "But some things are more wrong than others". Science is not fixed truth. It changes perpetually and that is its strength. The aim is to be less wrong.

Religious folks are (am I begin unfair here?) not happy at all with that way of thinking. They want, as [Douglas Adams](#) puts it, "rigidly defined areas of doubt and uncertainty". The contents of the canon of scripture, that book we call the Bible, are most definitely *not* in one of those areas of doubt and uncertainty.

But that's not what we've got. If God had wanted to tell us directly what to do via words (as opposed to via experiences) he would have chosen the language of mathematics, rather than Hebrew and Aramaic; we would have one gospel, rather than four; we would have something akin to a legal document rather than the poetry of the Psalms, the misery of Ecclesiastes and the 'what was all that about?' of Revelation. Perhaps the Bible is something other than what we think it is?

The next four weeks will be interesting!