

“Read this excellent primer and read the Bible better as a result.”

—Darrell L. Bock,
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“Well written and carefully researched, I believe *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible* is an invaluable resource for anyone who has serious questions about the Holy Scriptures.”

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Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Aristotle once said that those who wished to succeed must ask the right preliminary questions. Plummer asks forty of them. Even better: he answers them, providing beginning students with all they need to know about biblical interpretation in general and the specific kinds of texts found in the Old and New Testaments in particular to begin interpreting the Bible profitably.”

—Kevin J. Vanhoozer,
Research Professor of Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“How appropriate that Plummer’s *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible* is itself eminently understandable, crystal clear, and thoroughly engaging. The organization and breadth of coverage makes this book both a delight to read and highly instructive. Each chapter concludes with reflection questions and suggested resources for further study. I can’t imagine a more helpful introduction to the subject of biblical interpretation than Plummer has produced.”

—Bruce A. Ware, Professor of Christian Theology,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Nuanced sufficiently for seminary courses and accessible enough for church groups, *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible* helpfully acquaints students and church leaders alike to central principles of biblical interpretation and related matters like inspiration, canon, translation, and current discussions. This warm and engaging work would make a superb textbook for university and seminary courses on biblical interpretation.”

—Christopher W. Morgan, Professor of Theology,
California Baptist University

“It is a wonderful thing to teach a person the Bible. It is even more wonderful to teach people how to study the Bible for themselves. Plummer has given us a helpful survey relative to how to understand the Bible. You will profit greatly from his insights.”

—Jerry Vines,
Pastor Emeritus, First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida

“*40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible* is a condensed discussion of a wide variety of important issues for the beginning student in the area of biblical studies. The question-answer format is a nice way to pique the students’ interest and provide answers to their questions at the same time.”

—Paul D. Wegner,
Professor of Old Testament, Phoenix Seminary

“In the twenty semesters I’ve taught the Bible Study Methods class, *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible* has always been the number-one recommended resource I encourage my students to read. I wholeheartedly recommend it to anyone who desires to study the Scriptures for themselves.”

—Andy Deane,
Professor, Calvary Chapel Bible College

See 40Questions.net for additional free resources keyed to this book.

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40 QUESTIONS ABOUT
Interpreting the Bible
Second Edition

Robert L. Plummer

Benjamin L. Merkle, Series Editor



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Foreword

Who introduced the chapter and verse divisions regularly found in our current Bibles? What do we mean by “autographs”? What is the proper definition of “inerrancy”? How were the biblical manuscripts copied and transmitted over the centuries? What is the oldest extant fragment of the New Testament, and what is its date? Who determined what was included in the canon? What is the Apocrypha? Is the canon closed? What is the best available English Bible translation? What is the overarching message of the Bible? Why can’t people agree on what the Bible means?

In this fascinating and well-crafted book, Robert Plummer takes up these and many other questions related to understanding the Bible. Informed by recent scholarship and presented in an accessible format that is both practical and relevant, this volume is a joy to read. The author has, in essence, provided us with a book on biblical interpretation broken up into digestible bits and pieces, using a format that makes it easier to stomach a subject that often gets stuck in beginning students’ throats.

Plummer quotes one of his mentors, Robert Stein, who once told him, “I wrote my text on hermeneutics because I could not understand the other books on the subject.” As one who has written a book on biblical interpretation myself (*Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, Kregel), and as one who has taught biblical interpretation on the college, master’s, and doctoral levels for more than twenty-five years, I appreciate the challenges confronting those who would write a work on interpreting the Bible that readers can understand.

The present volume resoundingly succeeds in making the task and process of biblical interpretation transparent and in initiating the beginning student to a lifetime of study of God’s Word. As Paul wrote to Timothy, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). For anyone who aspires to acquire the skills necessary to handle God’s Word of truth correctly, this book will prove invaluable. I highly recommend it.

Andreas J. Köstenberger, Founder, Biblical Foundations™
Research Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology,
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Introduction to Second Edition

I am pleased that the Lord has graciously allowed the first edition of this book to help people read their Bibles more faithfully. I pray the second edition will do the same. The last four chapters of the first edition are available as a free PDF at 40Questions.net. Four new chapters were added after feedback from professors and students who have used the book. Thank you to Greg Wolff for his careful proofreading of the entire revised edition.

Sentiments and suggestions expressed in the introduction to the first edition are unchanged, so I encourage you to continue reading below. Also, please note that translations of this book are available in Spanish (ISBN: 9780825413742), Korean (ISBN: 9788934111795), Chinese (ISBN: 9787542651341), Portuguese (ISBN: 9788581324098), and Kazakh (ISBN: 9789965561726).

Introduction to First Edition

This book is intended to help you understand the Bible. As a New Testament professor, I regularly teach an introductory course on biblical hermeneutics (interpretation) at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. I have had difficulty finding a textbook that covers briefly and accurately all the issues that we survey in the course. (Topics covered in my course include: canon, manuscript transmission, English Bible translations, general interpretive questions, approaches to the major literary types in the Bible, and current hermeneutical debates.) I wrote this book in order to address these issues in one volume. Ideally, this book will serve as a textbook for an introductory Bible course at a college or seminary, but I endeavored to write so that the book will be beneficial to any curious Christian. My goal was to be accessible without being simplistic and scholarly without being pedantic, while always keeping an eye to practical questions and real-life application by the Christian reader.

Although you may choose to read through the entire book in order, it is organized so that particular topics may be accessed without knowledge of the prior contents. I encourage you to scan the forty questions in the table of contents before beginning to read. Is there a particular topic that catches your attention? Why not start there? Each chapter also closes with discussion questions and books recommended for further study.

There are many people whom I should thank for helping make this book a reality. Foremost, I would like to express my appreciation to the trustees and administration of Southern Seminary, who graciously granted me a sabbatical leave for 2008, during which this book was written. Thanks are in order to my dear friend, the series editor Ben Merkle, who provided constant encouragement. I also want to express thanks to my assistants Andy Hassler, Ben Stubblefield, and Matt Smethurst, for proofreading and research assistance. Others who offered helpful comments on the manuscript include Robert Stein, Danny Akin, Chuck Deglow, Laura Roberts, Wes Smith, Jonathan Pennington, and Robert Peterson. Special appreciation goes to Valerie Angel for checking the Scripture index. Thanks also to the helpful staff at the Southern Seminary library, not least Michael Strackeljahn.

My dear wife, Chandi, and three beautiful daughters (Sarah Beth, Chloe, and Anabelle) have kept me anchored in reality even as the mental demands

of writing have tipped me more toward the eccentric band on the personality spectrum. Indeed, without them, I might have become a hermit or worse. As I wrote this book, I thought regularly of my young daughters, whom I hope will one day read it and benefit from their father's advice about how to approach the Bible. I continue to grow in my understanding of the Scriptures. If given a chance to revise this book in the future, I'm sure that there will be additions and changes.

This book is dedicated to two of my former professors, Robert Stein and Mark Seifrid. Both served on my doctoral dissertation committee. Dr. Stein infected me with his commonsense approach to interpretation and his exemplary clarity in communication. Mark Seifrid, my doctoral supervisor and now also a colleague, has become a dear friend over the last decade. His attention to the nuances of Scripture, as well as his understanding of several thorny interpretive issues, have helped me see much farther than I could have on my own. His genuine Christian friendship is a rare and treasured one.

Even as I thank these many persons who have helped create this book, I also take personal responsibility for the final product—flaws and all. I am encouraged that God uses all things—even our weaknesses and failures—to bring about ultimate good for us, conforming us to the image of his Son and lifting up Jesus as the greatest treasure (Rom. 8:28–30).

QUESTION 1

What Is the Bible?

Most people who pick up this book will be familiar with the Bible. Yet, I am including this first, basic question for two reasons: (1) There will be some people who happen upon this book who have little to no knowledge of the Christian Scriptures. If that describes you, there is no better place to start than right here. (2) Even people who have spent many years reading the Bible can benefit from returning to the fundamentals. It is my hope that the answer below will be understandable to people ignorant of the Bible but not so simplistic as to be of no benefit to those already well-versed in the Christian Scriptures.

Overview of the Bible

The Bible is a collection of writings that Christians consider uniquely inspired and authoritative. While it is one unified book, the Bible is also a compilation of sixty-six smaller books, or literary works. These works, produced by men of various historical time periods, backgrounds, personalities, and cultures, claim the Holy Spirit as the ultimate authority and safeguard behind their writing. As 2 Timothy 3:16 asserts, “All Scripture is God-breathed.”

The Bible can be divided into two large sections—the Old Testament and the New Testament. The word *testament* comes from the Latin word *testamentum*, meaning “covenant” or “agreement.” Thus, in its basic division, the Bible records two covenantal relationships between God and humanity.¹ The first (old) covenant relationship was ratified at Mount Sinai between God and the Jewish nation (Exod. 19–31). This covenant was anticipatory and pointed to a new covenant, promised in Jeremiah 31:31, when God would draw a

1. For a masterful explanation of how the various covenants throughout Scripture relate to each other and to the overarching theme of kingdom, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *God's Kingdom through God's Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

people to himself from all nations and write his words on their hearts (Isa. 49:6). In fact, this new covenant was in reality nothing other than a fulfillment of the many saving promises God had made throughout history—that Satan would be crushed by a human descendent of Eve (Gen. 3:15), that through Abraham’s offspring all the nations of the world would be blessed (Gen. 22:18), etc.

Within the Old Testament are thirty-nine books of various genres (historical narratives, proverbs, poetry, psalms, etc.). The New Testament contains twenty-seven books, again made up of various literary types (historical narratives, letters, parables, etc.) See question 2 for more information on the organization of the Bible (that is, order of books, origin of chapter and verse divisions, etc.). Also, see the latter half of this book for interpretive approaches to specific biblical genres.

The Purpose of the Bible

The Bible itself is evidence of one of its main claims—that is, that the God who made the heavens, earth, and sea, and everything in them is a communicator who delights to reveal himself to wayward humans. We read in Hebrews 1:1–2, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.”

These verses in Hebrews point to the culmination of biblical revelation in the eternal Son of God. This Son became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, forever uniting God and man in one person—100 percent God and 100 percent man (John 1:14). The prophecies, promises, longings, and anticipations under the old covenant find their fulfillment, meaning, and culmination in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:20, “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ.”

The purpose of the Bible, then, is “to make [a person] wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). The Bible is not an end in itself. As Jesus said to the religious experts in his day, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39). So, under divine superintendence, the goal of the Bible is to bring its readers to receive the forgiveness of God in Christ and thus to possession of eternal life in relationship with the triune God (John 17:3).

Basic Story Line of the Bible

The Bible explains the origin of the universe (God made everything, Gen. 1–2). The Bible also reveals why there is sin, disease, and death (humans rebelled against God and brought sin and decay into the world, Gen. 3:1–24). And, the Bible promises that God will send a Messiah (Jesus) who will defeat death and Satan and ultimately renew all things (Gen. 3:15; Rev. 22:1–5).

God prepared for the coming of this Messiah by focusing his revelatory and saving work on the descendants of Abraham—that is, the Israelites or the Jews. Even as God gave his holy laws and sent his prophets to the one nation Israel, it was clear that he planned a worldwide blessing flowing forth from the Jews at a future time. God promised Abraham, “*All peoples on earth will be blessed through you*” (Gen. 12:3, my emphasis). Likewise, in the book of Isaiah, we read of God speaking prophetically to the coming Messiah: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. *I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth*” (Isa. 49:6, my emphasis). According to the Bible, Jesus has now inaugurated this worldwide salvation, which will be consummated at his return. While all persons are justly condemned under God’s holy wrath, Jesus’s death on the cross provides forgiveness for those who trust in him. A person becomes a part of God’s people—a subject of King Jesus’s domain—by turning away from his rebellion and trusting in the Savior’s substitutionary death for his sin. As we read in John 3:36, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”

The consummation of God’s salvation is yet to be revealed. The Bible teaches that Jesus certainly will come again (1 Thess. 4:13–18). While scholars debate some of the specifics concerning Jesus’s return, the Scriptures are clear that death and sin (now already defeated by the cross) then will be done away with forever (Rev. 20:14–21:4). All who have received God’s forgiveness in Christ will dwell with God forever in endless joy (John 14:2–3; 17:24). Those who have remained in rebellion against God will not be given a postmortem, second chance at repentance; they will be punished through eternal separation from God (John 3:36; Matt. 25:46).

Functions of the Bible

Under the overarching purpose of revealing God and bringing people into a saving relationship with him through Jesus Christ, there are a number of related functions of the Bible, including the following.

- *Conviction of Sin.* The Holy Spirit applies God’s Word to the human heart, convicting people of having failed to meet God’s holy standard and convincing them of their just condemnation and need for a Savior (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 3:22–25; Heb. 4:12–13).
- *Correction and Instruction.* The Bible corrects and instructs God’s people, teaching them who God is, who they are, and what God expects of them. Both through a believer’s individual study and through the church’s gifted teachers, God edifies and corrects his people (Josh.

1:8; Ps. 119:98–99; Matt. 7:24–27; 1 Cor. 10:11; Eph. 4:11–12; 2 Tim. 3:16; 4:1–4).

- *Spiritual Fruitfulness.* As the Word of God takes deep root in true believers, it produces a harvest of righteousness—a genuine manifestation of love for God and love for others (Mark 4:1–20; James 1:22–25).
- *Perseverance.* Empowered by the Holy Spirit, believers hold fast to the saving message of the Scriptures through the trials and temptations of life. Through this perseverance, they gain increasing confidence in God’s promise to keep them until the end (John 10:28–29; 1 Cor. 15:2; 2 Cor. 13:5; Gal. 3:1–5; Phil. 1:6; Col. 1:23; 1 Tim. 3:13; 1 John 2:14).
- *Joy and Delight.* To those who know God, the Bible is a source of unending joy and delight. As Psalm 19:9–10 attests, “The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.”
- *Ultimate Authority in Doctrine and Deed.* The Bible is the ultimate authority for the Christian in terms of behavior and belief (Luke 10:26; 24:44–45; John 10:35; 2 Tim. 3:16; 4:1–4; 2 Peter 3:16). The correctness of all preaching, creeds, doctrines, or opinions is decisively settled by this question: What does the Bible say? As John Stott notes, “Scripture is the royal scepter by which King Jesus governs his church.”²

Chronology of the Bible’s Composition

The first five books in the Old Testament, the books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), most likely were written around 1400 B.C.³ As the books describe events from thousands of years prior, however, it is almost certain that many oral and written sources underlie our current text. Of course, Moses’s selection or editing of such sources took place under God’s superintendence. The last book in the Old Testament, Malachi, was written around 430 B.C. So, the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament were composed over a thousand-year span by about forty different authors. (Some books in the Old Testament were written by the same author—Jeremiah and Lamentations, for example. Other books, such as 1 and 2 Kings, do not explicitly cite an author. Still other books, such as the Psalms or Proverbs, cite multiple authors for

2. John R. W. Stott, *John Stott on the Bible and the Christian Life: Six Sessions on the Authority, Interpretation, and Use of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006). The quote is from the first DVD lecture, “The Authority of Scripture.”

3. Some scholars think Job predates the books of Moses.

various portions.) The Old Testament was written in Hebrew with a few small portions in Aramaic (Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26; Dan. 2:4b–7:28; Jer. 10:11).⁴

The first book of the New Testament (possibly James or Galatians) likely was written in A.D. mid- to late 40s. Most of the books in the New Testament were written in the 50s and 60s. The last book of the New Testament, the book of Revelation, also called the Apocalypse of John, probably was written around A.D. 90. The New Testament was written in Greek, the *lingua franca* of its day, though it contains a few transliterated Aramaic and Latin words.⁵

FIGURE 1: TIME LINE OF BIBLICAL EVENTS AND BOOKS	
Adam and Eve	<i>l.t.a.</i> ⁴
Noah	<i>l.t.a.</i>
The calling of Abraham	2000 B.C.
The exodus	1446 B.C. (first books of the Bible written by Moses)
The monarchy begins	1050 B.C. (God chooses Saul)
King David	1010–970 B.C.
King Solomon	970–930 B.C.
The divided kingdom	931 B.C. (Israel and Judah divided)
The Assyrian exile	722 B.C. (destruction of Samaria)
The Babylonian exile	586 B.C. (destruction of Jerusalem)
The Persian period	537 B.C. (return of Jews under Cyrus)
Second temple finished	515 B.C.
Nehemiah/Ezra	mid-400s B.C.
Malachi (last Old Testament book)	430 B.C.
Intertestamental period	430 B.C.–A.D. 45

4. Also, two words in Genesis 31:47 are in Aramaic—*Jegar-sahadutha* (“heap of witness”).

5. *L.t.a.* stands for “long time ago.” While I believe that Adam and Eve were historical persons, I will not venture to guess the year that God created them. It was (we can all agree) a long time ago.

Jesus's birth	7–4 B.C. ¹
Jesus's ministry	A.D. 27–30
Jesus's crucifixion	A.D. 30
First New Testament book(s) written	A.D. 45
Revelation written	A.D. 90 (last book of the New Testament)

Summary

The Bible is a collection of sixty-six “books” that Christians claim are uniquely inspired and authoritative. The Bible is divided into two large sections—the Old Testament (anticipation) and the New Testament (fulfillment). The Old Testament was written from roughly 1400 B.C. to 430 B.C. The New Testament was written between A.D. 45–90. The Bible records God’s interventions in history as he progressively revealed his plan to provide salvation to a broken, sin-stained world. God’s saving plan finds its culmination in Messiah Jesus, whose death on the cross provides forgiveness of sins to all who place their faith in him.

The Bible is the ultimate authority in any question of belief or behavior. As applied to the heart by the Holy Spirit, the Bible not only brings conviction, correction, and true knowledge of God, it also is a source of delight. The Christian can praise God with the psalmist, who wrote, “The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold” (Ps. 119:72).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is one new thing that you learned about the Bible? (Or, possibly note a previously known fact that struck you afresh.)
2. One purpose of the Bible is to bring persons into a saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Has that purpose been accomplished in your life? How do you know?

1. It is widely recognized that although the division between B.C. and A.D. in our calendar was supposed to turn on the actual date of Jesus’s birth, the creator of that calendrical marker, Dionysius Exiguus (A.D. 470–544), made a miscalculation.

3. How would you rank your knowledge of the Bible on a scale of 1 to 10? How did you learn about the Bible? (Or, why do you not know much about the Bible?)
4. Have you read the entire Bible? If not, consider committing to do so over the next year.
5. Do you have a general question about the Bible that this section failed to answer? What is it?

For help in answering these questions or for other free resources keyed to *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible*, see 40Questions.net.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

The Bible. (There is no better way to learn about the Bible than to read it for yourself. See question 7 for suggestions of which English translation to read.)

Bruno, Chris. *The Whole Story of the Bible in 16 Verses*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.

Carson, D. A. *For the Love of God: A Daily Companion for Discovering the Riches of God's Word*. Vols. 1 and 2. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998, 1999. For free, legal copies of these devotionals, see these links provided by The Gospel Coalition: volume 1 (s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/carson/1998_for_the_love_of_God.pdf), and volume 2 (s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/carson/1999_for_the_love_of_God.pdf). These devotional books include one-page readings for each day and a Bible-reading plan that takes you through the Old Testament once and the New Testament twice in one year. Carson's writing is faithful and insightful, though challenging for persons with little biblical knowledge.

Lillback, Peter A. and Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. *Thy Word Is Still Truth: Essential Writings on the Doctrine of Scripture from the Reformation to Today*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013.

Piper, John. *Reading the Bible Supernaturally: Seeing and Savoring the Glory of God in Scripture*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017.

QUESTION 2

How Is the Bible Organized?

Maybe you grew up in a church where the children participated in competitions to memorize the locations of the books in the Bible. Or perhaps you are unsure of the order of the books of the Bible and feel intimidated when asked to look up a verse. Is there any discernible order or logic in the way the books in the Bible are arranged? When were chapter and verse divisions added? These are some of the questions we will answer in this section.

The Basic Division—The Testaments

The first three-fourths of the Bible was written between 1400 B.C. and 430 B.C. It includes thirty-nine books in the Hebrew language (Daniel and Ezra have a few small portions in Aramaic, a related Semitic language).¹ This part of the Bible is called the Old Testament. Non-Christian Jews, of course, simply refer to these books as their Scripture, or TaNaK (Hebrew acrostic for Law, Prophets, and Writings). In its three consonants, the acronym TaNaK starts with the successive sounds of the Hebrew words for “Law” (*Torah*), “Prophets” (*Nebi'im*), and “Writings” (*Kethubim*). Jews who reject Jesus as Messiah do not recognize the New Testament as inspired.

The word *testament* comes from the Latin word *testamentum*, meaning “covenant” or “agreement.” Apparently the first person to use this term to describe the divisions of the Bible was the early Christian apologist Tertullian (A.D. 160–225).² The idea of the Bible being organized around two covenants between God and humanity was not new to Tertullian, however, but is found explicitly in several biblical texts.

1. Jeremiah 10:11 is also in Aramaic, as are two words in Genesis 31:47, *Jegar-sahadutha* (“heap of witness”).

2. *Against Marcion* 3.14; 4.6.

Jeremiah 31:31–33, written between 626 and 580 B.C., predicts the coming of the Messiah with explicit reference to a new covenant.

“The time is coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a *new covenant* with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the *covenant* I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my *covenant*, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “This is the *covenant* I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (my emphasis)

In instituting the Lord’s Supper on the night he was betrayed, Jesus alluded to the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy in his death, saying, “This cup is the *new covenant* in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20, my emphasis). Because Jesus taught that his death and resurrection instituted God’s promised new covenant, it was only natural for books that witnessed to and expounded on this reality to be referred to as the New Testament. Thus, Christians call the twenty-seven inspired books that came from Jesus’s apostles and their companions the New Testament. These books, which make up the latter one-fourth of the Bible, were written between A.D. 45 and 90.

Number and Order of the Old Testament Books

The Old Testament includes thirty-nine individual books. These books vary in literary genre from historical narrative to romantic poetry. As they stand currently in our English Bible, they are organized somewhat topically (see figure 2).

FIGURE 2: THE OLD TESTAMENT			
LAW	HISTORICAL BOOKS	WISDOM BOOKS	PROPHETIC BOOKS
Genesis	Joshua	Job	MAJOR PROPHETS Isaiah
Exodus	Judges	Psalms	Jeremiah
Leviticus	Ruth	Proverbs	Lamentations
Numbers	1–2 Samuel	Ecclesiastes	Ezekiel
Deuteronomy	1–2 Kings	Song of Solomon	Daniel
	1–2 Chronicles	(Song of Songs)	
	Ezra		MINOR PROPHETS Hosea–Malachi
	Nehemiah		(The Twelve)
	Esther		

- *Law (Genesis–Deuteronomy)*. These five books are also called the Books of Moses or the Pentateuch. (*Pentateuch* is a Greek word meaning “the five books.”) These books describe the origin of the world, the beginnings of the nation of Israel, God’s choosing of Israel, the giving of his laws to them, and his bringing them to the border of the Promised Land.
- *The Historical Books (Joshua–Esther)*. These twelve books recount God’s dealings with Israel, primarily through historical narrative.
- *Wisdom and Songs (Job–Song of Solomon)*. These five books include proverbs, other ancient wisdom literature, and songs.
- *The Major Prophets (Isaiah–Daniel)*. These five books are called the major prophets because they are longer, not because they are more important. These books witness to God’s many warnings, instructions, and promises that he sent to Israel through his divine spokesmen, the prophets.
- *The Minor Prophets (Hosea–Malachi)*. These prophetic books are shorter and are thus called the minor ones. In the ancient Jewish collection of Scriptures, they were counted as one book, called The Book of the Twelve (that is, the twelve prophetic books).

If one were to visit a modern-day Jewish synagogue (“temple”) and pick up a copy of the Hebrew Scriptures, it would include exactly the same contents as the Christian Old Testament but in a different arrangement. From ancient times, the Jews have organized their holy writings in three main divisions—Law (*Torah*), Prophets (*Nebi’im*), and Writings (*Kethubim*). The first five books of the Hebrew Bible are the same as the Christian Old Testament—the books of Moses, or the Law. After that, however, the order changes noticeably, and sometimes multiple books are grouped together. The last book in the Hebrew Bible is 2 Chronicles.

Jesus possibly alludes to the traditional Jewish order of the Hebrew Scriptures in Luke 11:49–51, where he says,

Because of this, God in his wisdom said, “I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.” Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all.

According to the Jewish canonical order, the Hebrew Bible begins with Genesis and ends with 2 Chronicles. Thus, Abel is the first martyr

(Gen. 4:8), and Zechariah is the last (2 Chron. 24:20–22). Jesus also references the threefold division of the Jewish canon when he speaks of “the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). (Sometimes the Writings section was simply referred to with the most prominently used book in that section—the Psalms.)³ When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek and Latin, the books began to appear in a more topical arrangement, from which we ultimately derive our order in the English Bible. Even so, there is not complete uniformity of book order among early Greek and Latin manuscripts or later translations. Knowing of this variety in the manuscripts should prevent modern interpreters from claiming divine sanction or meaning for any particular order of books in our current English Bible.

Number and Order of the New Testament Books

During Jesus’s earthly ministry, he used a variety of striking mnemonic devices (e.g., rhyme, unexpected details, and captivating stories). Furthermore, he promised his disciples that the Holy Spirit would bring his teaching to their memory (John 14:26). Following Jesus’s resurrection and ascension, the stories of Jesus apparently were told for some time primarily as oral tradition that was carefully safeguarded and transmitted by eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1–4). Over time, authoritative collections of these stories were written and recognized by the church as having apostolic sanction—the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.⁴ Luke also wrote a second volume, Acts, explaining how the Holy Spirit came as predicted and propelled the early church outwards to testify about Jesus the Messiah.

As the apostles started churches all over the ancient Roman Empire, they continued instructing those communities through letters. From the earliest time, these apostolic letters were copied, circulated, and recognized as timelessly authoritative for the life of the church (Col. 4:16; 2 Peter 3:15–16). Thirteen of the letters in the New Testament were written by the apostle Paul (Romans–Philemon). Paul’s letters are organized in the New Testament by decreasing order of size, first to communities and then to individuals.⁵ If more than one letter was written to the same community

3. Paul D. Wegner notes that even in the tenth century, Arab historian al-Masudi refers to the Jewish canon as “the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms, which are the 24 books” (*The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999], 109).

4. See Craig S. Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019).

5. One exception is Galatians, which, although it is slightly shorter than Ephesians, “may have been placed before Ephesians as a frontispiece to the collection of the Prison Epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians) because of its use of the term *kanōn* or ‘rule’ (Gal 6:16)” (William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004], 114).

or individual, the letters are kept together. The anonymous letter “to the Hebrews” (i.e., to Jewish Christians) was apparently included after Paul’s letters because some people in the early church believed Paul or a Pauline companion wrote the letter.

Other New Testament letters were written by James, Peter, John, and Jude. Perhaps these letters are arranged in a decreasing order of prominence of the authors. Paul mentions “James, Cephas [Peter], and John” as Jerusalem church “pillars” in Galatians 2:9. This Pauline list mirrors the order of their respective letters in the New Testament (James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John). The letter of Jude, a half-brother of Jesus, appears next. The final book of the New Testament, the Revelation or Apocalypse of John, is a mixed genre, including letters, prophecy, and apocalypse. As much of the book is made up of visions and symbolic images that point to the end of the world, it is fitting as the last book of the twenty-seven-book New Testament canon (see figure 3).

FIGURE 3: THE NEW TESTAMENT		
GOSPELS AND ACTS	PAULINE LETTERS	GENERAL LETTERS AND REVELATION
Matthew	Romans	Hebrews
Mark	1–2 Corinthians	James
Luke	Galatians	1–2 Peter
John	Ephesians	1–3 John
Acts	Philippians	Jude
	Colossians	Revelation
	1–2 Thessalonians	
	1–2 Timothy	
	Titus	
	Philemon	

It is worth noting that the practice of including multiple literary works within one book is not widely attested until at least the second century A.D. Prior to this time, most books in the Bible would have circulated as individual scrolls. A community of believers likely would have had a cabinet in which they kept the various scrolls with tags on the end to identify their contents. In the second and third century, however, books with multiple leaves (i.e., codices) began to appear with greater frequency. Some scholars have suggested that the canonical impulse of early Christians was the force behind the creation of the codex.

Chapter Divisions

Early Christians and Jews often cited Scripture with reference to a book, author, or textual event but with little further specificity. Jesus, for example, in referencing the account of Moses, refers to the text simply with the phrase “at the bush [passage]” (Mark 12:26; Luke 20:37, my translation). As biblical texts came to be copied, read, and commented on, some made various attempts to further subdivide and label them. For example, Eusebius (ca. A.D. 260–340), a prominent historian in the early church, divided the four Gospels into a number of canons, or divisions. Eusebian canons are included in such ancient manuscripts as Codex Sinaiticus. Likewise, ancient Jewish rabbis applied various organizational subdivisions to the text.

Our current chapter divisions were added to the Old and New Testament by Stephen Langton (1150–1228), Archbishop of Canterbury in the early thirteenth century, while he was lecturing at the University of Paris.⁶ Langton added the divisions to the Latin text, and subsequent publications came to follow his format. Langton’s chapter divisions were inserted in modified form to the Hebrew text by Salomon ben Ishmael around A.D. 1330.⁷ In light of this background, it seems unwise to claim any divine meaning behind Langton’s chapter divisions, which are widely recognized to break the text unnaturally at some points. For example, the division between chapters 10 and 11 of 1 Corinthians introduces an unnatural split in Paul’s thought.

Verse Divisions

Verse divisions in our modern English Old Testament are based on the versification standardized by the Ben Asher family (Jewish scribes) around A.D. 900. When Langton’s chapter divisions were added to the Hebrew Bible at a later date (see above), the chapter divisions were sometimes adjusted to fit the Ben Asher scheme.⁸ Thus, there are sometimes slight differences between the chapter and verse numbers of Hebrew and English Bibles. Scholars generally recognize the superiority of the Hebrew divisions in keeping together thought units.

Verse divisions in the New Testament were added to a Latin/Greek diglot text in 1551 by Robert “Stephanus” Estienne, a printer from Paris. Drawing from an obscure comment by Estienne’s son, some scholars have claimed that the printer made the verse divisions while riding horseback on a journey from Paris to Lyons (thus explaining the sometimes unnatural breaks). More likely,

6. Bruce M. Metzger, *Manuscripts of the Greek Bible: An Introduction to Palaeography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 41.

7. Wegner, *Journey from Texts to Translations*, 176.

8. *Ibid.*

Estienne's son intended to say that his father divided the text while resting at inns during the trip.⁹

Prior to Estienne's verse divisions, biblical scholars were forced to refer to texts with phrases such as "halfway through chapter 4 in Galatians." However flawed, Estienne's versification was a major advance in allowing for specificity in citation. The first English Bible to have verse divisions was the Geneva Bible of 1560. Though Estienne is still criticized for some of his segmentations, it is virtually unthinkable that any other scheme will ever challenge the universal acceptance of his system. Again, knowing the history of our current verse divisions should prevent us from engaging in creative biblical mathematics, claiming divine meaning behind current verse numbers.

Summary

The first three-quarters of the Bible is the Old Testament. The Old Testament includes thirty-nine books written in Hebrew between 1400–430 B.C. While the ancient Jews grouped their Scriptures into three main divisions (Law, Prophets, and Writings), our modern English Bible follows a more topical order: Law (five books), Historical Books (twelve books), Wisdom and Songs (five books), Major Prophets (five books), and Minor Prophets (twelve books). Thus, in book order, our Old Testament follows the topical Latin Vulgate, which modified slightly the order of books found in earlier Greek translations (the Septuagint or LXX). The content of our Old Testament, however, is the same as the Hebrew Scriptures used by Jews in both Jesus's day and our own.

The last quarter of the Bible is the twenty-seven-book New Testament, written between A.D. 45–90. The four Gospels (theological biographies of Jesus's life)¹⁰ begin the New Testament, followed by a historical account of the apostolic church (Acts); Paul's thirteen letters to the churches; a letter "to the Hebrews"; letters by James, Peter, John, and Jude; and finally the Apocalypse of John (Revelation).

Chapter divisions were added to the Bible by Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, in the early 1200s. Old Testament verse divisions find their origin in the text segmentation of the rabbinic Ben Asher family (c. A.D. 900). New Testament verse divisions were added by the Parisian printer Robert "Stephanus" Estienne in 1551.

9. Metzger, *Manuscripts of the Greek Bible*, 41n.106.

10. The Gospels could also be classified as historical narrative, but they are historical narratives that focus on a person (Jesus) with the intent of explaining the theological significance of his teaching, life, death, and resurrection.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When you have spoken of the Old Testament and New Testament, have you thought of the term *testament* as meaning “covenant”? How does viewing the Bible as based on covenants between God and humanity affect your reading?
2. Prior to reading the material above, where did you think the chapter and verse divisions in the Bible originated?
3. What is one new fact that you learned about the Bible in the section above?
4. Has this section raised any new questions for you?
5. Can you recite the Old Testament and New Testament books in order? If not, make it your goal to learn them over the next week.

For help in answering these questions or for other free resources keyed to *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible*, see 40Questions.net.

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QUESTION 3

Who Wrote the Bible—Humans or God?

God said it. I believe it. That settles it.” So goes a popular fundamentalist mantra about the Bible. But if God wrote the Bible, why does Paul say in his letter to Philemon, “I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand” (Philem. 19)? Or, at the end of John’s Gospel, we read, “This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down” (John 21:24). So, who did write the Bible—humans or God?

Theories of Inspiration

Everyone who claims the name “Christian” would agree that the Scriptures are inspired. Yet, a wide variety of meanings are attached to the adjective “inspired.” What are some of the main theories of inspiration?¹

- *The Intuition Theory.* According to this view, the writers of the Bible exhibit a natural religious intuition that is also found in other great philosophical or religious thinkers, such as Confucius or Plato. Obviously, the absolute truth claims of Scripture are denied by those holding this view of inspiration.
- *The Illumination Theory.* This view holds that the Spirit of God in some way objectively impressed himself upon the consciousness of the biblical writers but not in a way that is essentially different from the way

1. See chapter 3 (“The Inspiration of Scripture: How has the church come to believe that all the words of Scripture are ‘God-breathed’ such that the Bible is the actual Word of God?) of Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 59–78.

the Spirit communicates with all humanity. Only in degree is the Spirit's influence different, not in kind.

- *The Dynamic Theory.* This view asserts that God gave definite, specific impressions or concepts to the biblical authors but that he allowed the writers to communicate those concepts in their own words. That is, the exact phrasing of Scripture is due to human choice, while the main tenor of the content is determined by God.
- *The Dictation Theory.* This view holds that God dictated the exact words to the human authors. Like court stenographers, the authors of Scripture exercised no human volition in the composition of their writings. Sometimes those holding the verbal plenary theory (see below) are wrongly accused of believing in such mechanical dictation.
- *The Verbal Plenary Theory.* This view (the biblical one, I believe) asserts that there is a dual authorship to the Scriptures. While the authors of the Bible wrote as thinking, feeling human beings, God so mysteriously superintended the process that every word written was also the exact word he wanted to be written—free from all error. Labeling this view the “verbal plenary” theory recognizes that it affirms the full (“plenary”) divine superintendence of every word in Scripture. (*Verbum* means “word” in Latin.) This view is sometimes called the verbal theory. It will be explored in greater detail in the following sections.²

The Dual Authorship of Scripture

When writing a letter to the Corinthians, Paul did not enter an ecstatic state, recite the letter to a secretary, and then, when finished, pick up the completed composition and say, “Let’s see what God wrote!” Yet, as an apostle, Paul expected his teaching to be fully obeyed and believed—received, in fact, as the very word of God (1 Cor. 7:40; 14:36–37; 2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2; Col. 1:25; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Thess. 3:14). Similarly, Psalm 95 is clearly written by an ancient Israelite leading other ancient Israelites in worship. The psalm begins, “Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song” (Ps. 95:1–2). Yet, hundreds of years later, the author of Hebrews can quote Psalm 95 with the introductory citation, “The Holy Spirit says” (Heb. 3:7). Such apparent inconsistencies (Paul as author and his communication as the word of God; an ancient Israelite and the Holy Spirit as the author of the

2. This five-theory summary is derived from Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 231–33. Erickson calls the verbal plenary theory the “verbal theory.”

same psalm), in fact, convey a profound truth about Scripture—it is dually authored. Each word in the Bible is the word of a conscious human author and at the same time the exact word that God intends for the revelation of himself.

Variation within Dual Authorship

As is clear from a cursory glance at the Bible, God revealed himself “at many times and in various ways” (Heb. 1:1). Some Old Testament prophets gave oral denuncements, often with the repeated introductory phrase, “Thus says the Lord” (e.g., Isa. 7:7; Ezek. 2:4; Amos 1:3; Obad. 1:1; Mic. 2:3; Nah. 1:12; Hag. 1:5; Zech. 1:3; Mal. 1:4). Elsewhere, God’s revelatory servants were given visions and prophecies, sometimes as the prophets themselves admitted their ignorance of all the meanings of their proclamations (Dan. 12:8–9, cf. 1 Peter 1:10–12). In other genres, the author’s conscious role in composing or selecting the material is more on the surface of the text. For example, at the beginning of his Gospel, Luke writes,

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1–4)

Note, Luke does not say, “I prayed and the Holy Spirit brought to my mind the stories of Jesus to write.” Luke was a historian—engaged in real historical research. Yet, as an inspired companion of the apostles, Luke was also God’s revelatory agent. Similarly, Paul’s role in composing his own letters is undeniably on the surface of the text. For example, in Galatians 4:19–20, Paul is exasperated with the Galatians for their implicit denial of the gospel he preached to them. He writes, “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!” Undoubtedly, depending on the situation, authors were more or less conscious of relating divine revelation (for example, relaying a “Thus says the Lord” prophetic message versus the writing of a personal letter).

Much of the Bible comes as situational literature (documents addressed to specific persons facing particular historical situations), so it is worth asking how this situational literature can be the timeless Word of God. Muslims, for example, have in the Qur’an mostly abstract poetry that praises the attributes of Allah. Such poetry came to Mohammad, Muslims claim, in ecstatic utterance. The Bible, by contrast, testifies to God revealing himself in history

through repeated, consistent, and anticipatory ways. That is, God spoke repeatedly to his people; he was consistent in his message; and, while God addressed the people in their current situation, his earlier revelation anticipates and points to a climactic intervention that ultimately came in Christ's life, death, and resurrection.³ Yet, it is not in abstract poetry but in the reality of daily life that God's Word came. Strikingly, when the Word of God became flesh (the incarnation), it was also in the seeming ordinarieness of life that he appeared.

Some Implications of Dual Authorship

The fact that the Bible presents itself as a dually authored book has a number of implications for the way we approach it.

1. The clear purpose of the human author is a good place to start in understanding the Bible. The Scripture cannot mean *less* than the human authors consciously intended. Admittedly, there are a few places where the human author confesses his ignorance of the revelation given to him (e.g., Dan. 12:8–9), but these are exceptions. The human authors usually seem acutely aware of conveying timely messages to their current audiences.
2. God, as the Lord of history and revelation, included patterns or foreshadowing of which the human authors were not fully aware. Under God's sovereign hand, his prior historical interventions were in themselves prophetic—pointing forward to Christ. About the Old Testament regulations given to Israel, the author of Hebrews says, “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves” (Heb. 10:1). Similarly, Paul notes that the inclusion of the Gentiles and Jews together under the saving work of Christ was a “mystery” present in the Scriptures but not fully revealed until the Spirit declared this truth through the New Testament prophets and apostles (Eph. 3:3–6). We should seek explicit statements in later revelation to clarify any such divine intentionality. One should be cautious against finding symbolic or prophetic details in the Old Testament when no New Testament author has provided authoritative interpretation of the text.
3. Sometimes it is asserted that the Bible can never mean something of which the human author was not consciously aware as he was writing. It is possible, however, to affirm a hermeneutical approach based on authorial intent without affirming the above statement. The biblical

3. See Trent Hunter and Stephen Wellum, *Christ from Beginning to End: How the Full Story of Scripture Reveals the Full Glory of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018).

authors were conscious of being used by God to convey his word and believed that their revelation was part of a grand scheme of history. The Old Testament authors knew they were somewhere along the stair steps of revelation, but few, if any, knew how close they were to the top of the stairs (i.e., Christ). Though they could not know all the future events, the prophets certainly would not deny God's providential control of history, which exceeded their conscious reflection⁴ (see question 24, "How Do We Interpret Prophecy? [Typology]").

Inspiration and the Incarnation

It is often noted that the divine-human dual authorship of Scripture can be compared with the Lord Jesus Christ, who is both fully human and fully God. To some degree, this comparison can be helpful. Just as no one can explain exactly how both human and divine natures can be fully present in the one person of Jesus, neither can one explain fully how God so superintended the writing of Scripture so that each word is divinely inspired and yet also a word chosen by a human author. To affirm the divine and human natures of Christ and the divine-human authorship of Scripture, one need not be able to explain fully the mystery of these revealed truths.

T. C. Hammond's insightful comparison between inspiration and incarnation is worth quoting at length.

The living Revelation was mysteriously brought into the world without the intervention of a human father. The Holy Spirit was the appointed Agent. The written revelation came into being by a similar process without the aid of human philosophical abstractions. The Holy Spirit was again the appointed Agent. The mother of our Lord remained a human mother and her experiences throughout would appear to have been those of every other mother—except that she was made aware that her child was to be the long-expected Redeemer of Israel. The writers of the biblical books remained human authors, and their experiences appear to have been similarly natural, though they were sometimes aware that God was giving to the world through them a message of no ordinary importance (e.g., "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you . . ." 1 Cor. 11:23). Mary, the mother of our Lord, probably brought into the world other children by the normal process of birth. The writers of the biblical books probably wrote other purely personal letters which were not necessarily of canonical importance. More important

4. One can rightly affirm both authorial intent and biblical typology. See Robert L. Plummer, "Righteousness and Peace Kiss: The Reconciliation of Authorial Intent and Biblical Typology," *SBJT* 14/2 (2010): 54–61. This article may be accessed freely online: equip.sbts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/SBJT-V14-N.2-Plummer.pdf (accessed March 31, 2020)

still, no student should fail to grasp the fact that the divine-human personal life of our Lord is one and indivisible by any human means of analysis. On no recorded occasions can we say that in the one instance there was *purely divine* thought, and in the other a *purely human* thought. The two natures were united in one indissoluble Person. From the manger to the cross, the Lord must always be thought of and described from that point of view. Similarly, though the parallel is not quite complete, the student will be saved much unsound thinking, unnecessary confusion and, injury to his faith, by observing that in the Scriptures the divine and human elements are blended in such a way that in few cases can we, with any certainty, analyse the record to demonstrate purely human elements.⁵

One also should note that the divine-human dimension of the Bible concerns its authorship, *not* its very nature. We listen reverently to the Bible as the written Word of God, but we worship Jesus as the incarnate Son of God. It is apropos to remember Jesus's words to the Jewish religious authorities of his day: "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39–40).

Summary

People have proposed various theories to explain how God inspired the writers of Scripture. If one is faithful to the biblical text, one is constrained to say that the Bible is dually authored. The human authors consciously wrote even as God mysteriously superintended the writing of every word. This is sometimes called the Verbal Plenary (or simply Verbal) view of inspiration.

In studying the Bible, we recognized that the text cannot mean less than human authors consciously intended. Yet, with God as divine inspirer and Lord of history, many texts pointed forward in a way that exceeded the original authors' abilities to fully comprehend.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How can a letter from a dead man to dead people (Paul's letter to the Galatians, for example) be of significance to modern people?
2. Besides the Bible verses cited above, can you list other verses that point to the dual authorship of Scripture?

5. T. C. Hammond, *In Understanding Be Men: An Introductory Handbook of Christian Doctrine*, rev. and ed. David F. Wright, 6th ed. (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 34–35. I have retained the author's nonstandard capitalization.

3. Is anything lost in ignoring or denying the human element in the writing of the Bible? Is it too simplistic to just say, “God wrote it”?
4. If one affirms the dual authorship of Scripture, what controls are left to prevent the finding of hidden “divine meanings” everywhere?
5. In what ways are Jesus’s human and divine natures similar to and different from the divine-human authorship of Scripture?

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