

100 TOUGH
QUESTIONS
————— *about* —————
GOD AND THE BIBLE

STEPHEN M. MILLER



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Introduction

Not being a preacher, I'm not inclined to preach at you.
So please don't expect me to tell you what to think.

I did graduate from seminary, but before that I was a news journalist—a newspaperman.

I love hard-hitting questions.

I love digging for answers.

I want the truth—even when it's contrary to what I think. Especially then.

What I don't want are:

- Clichés based on nothing in particular.
- Answers dodged because it's the safe thing to do.
- One-sided sermons about complex problems.

When I ask a question, I want an honest answer. Even if it's "I don't know."

I can handle that.

I think most Christians can, too. So can non-Christians and Bible newbies, especially those who are genuinely curious about God and the Bible but don't know what to make of it all.

Everyone respects openness and honesty.

Inside this book are some hard questions I've collected from Christians and non-Christians alike.

As for the answers, I won't be trying to sell you on one over the other.

Think of me as Switzerland.

Neutral.

I'm a journalist covering the Bible beat. I've tried to round up the best answers I can find and report them to you for your consideration.

I think you'll be surprised at some of the answers I found.

I was. And so was my editor.

A word of thanks

Books don't usually run credits like a movie does. But they should.

Books like this aren't a one-man show.

They're a three-ring circus.

Here are a few stars who deserve time in the spotlight:

Steve Laube, my agent. He pitched the book proposal to a select group of editors.

Tim Peterson, acquisitions editor. He caught the pitch.

Dan Pitts, **Ellen Chalifoux**, **Nancy Renich**, **Dan Malda**, and all the others at Bethany House who helped this book become reality.

God bless them. Every one.

Steve
Stephen M. Miller
StephenMillerBooks.com



1 What on earth do Christians mean when they say the Bible is “inspired by God”?

Did God:

- dictate it
- somehow mind meld his Spirit to the spirit of human writers
- or point out the general direction, and then let the writers run with it?

Yes. To all three.

Christians are that diverse in their opinions on the matter. They don't agree on how we got the Bible.

Many insist that God was so intimately involved in writing every word that the original manuscripts were error-free. “Inerrant” is the tech word Bible experts use.

Sadly, as far as we know at the moment, not one original manuscript survives. Not even a piece of one. So it's impossible to test inerrancy by fact-checking a manuscript for mistakes.

One mistake on an original manuscript is all it would take, it seems, to sink inerrancy—a bit like finding the corpse of Jesus would gut Christianity.

Other Christians argue that God played a less direct role in guiding the writers.

Despite their disagreements, both groups agree that God inspired the writers. To support their claims they turn first to the Bible:

- Prophets often introduced their messages by saying, “Listen to the word of the Lord” (Jeremiah 2:4).

- Jesus, debating Jewish scholars, quoted a line from Exodus and asked: “Haven’t you read what God told you?” (Matthew 22:31).
- Preachers described their sermons as messages from God: “Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let’s go back to every city where we spread the Lord’s word’” (Acts 15:36).
- The most famous link between the Bible and God shows up in a letter Paul wrote to his friend Timothy, who was pastoring the church in Ephesus, a city in what is now Turkey:

Every Scripture passage is inspired by God. All of them are useful for teaching, pointing out errors, correcting people, and training them for a life that has God’s approval. They equip God’s servants so that they are completely prepared to do good things.

2 Timothy 3:16–17

One problem with that quote.

Paul wasn’t talking about our Bible.

He was talking about his: the Jewish Bible. Christians call it the Old Testament.

Paul probably had no clue, many scholars say, that within 300 years his letter to Timothy would find its way into the Holy Bible. As far as Paul was concerned, he may have been simply writing a letter to his friend. But Christians apparently saw in the letter’s content evidence of God at work. So they made copies of it and circulated it among the churches, where Christians started reading it out loud in worship services.

Though most Christians agree God inspired Paul and the other Bible writers, few seem to know how he did it.

One exception: folks who lobby for dictation.

A minority among Christians, they draw some of their support from a phrase Paul used to describe Scripture in the quote above: “inspired by God.” A more literal translation is “God-breathed.”

This odd phrase comes from a Greek combo word that some guess Paul may have invented to explain what he meant by

inspiration: *theo-pneustos*. *Theo* is God. *Pneustos* is related to the word we use in English to describe tools, like nail guns, powered by air: *pneumatic*.

Paul's word literally means "God air," or "God-breathed."

As far as Paul was concerned, Scripture is "God-breathed," which some say means that every word in the Bible is God-spoken, God-approved, God-powered.

Other Christians who don't buy into the dictation theory struggle to explain exactly how God inspired the Bible writers.

Some compare God to a muse who mystically inspires a painter or a poet. But most Christians argue that the Bible comes from a higher grade of inspiration—and a higher Source. One Bible writer put it this way: "No prophecy ever originated from humans. Instead, it was given by the Holy Spirit as humans spoke under God's direction" (2 Peter 1:21).

Here's the hard question: How do we know which writings were inspired by the Holy Spirit?

It's the hard question because:

- We don't know who wrote most of the books in the Bible.
- We don't know exactly how those books ended up in the Bible.

Could it be that some books don't belong there? Say, the Song of Songs or Esther—neither of which even mention God?

Some Bible experts say we don't need to worry about it.

That's because they say the same Holy Spirit who inspired the writers inspires the readers. The Spirit within us recognizes the Spirit within Scripture. That's why the first Christians latched onto certain stories of Jesus and letters about the faith when there were plenty of other stories and letters from which to choose.

That's also why, these experts contend, Jewish and Christian scholars centuries later gave their stamp of approval to writings that their communities of faith had already revered as sacred: the Old Testament (Jews and Christians) and the New Testament (Christians).

In ancient religious council meetings, some Bible experts say, it wasn't just a matter of scholars working through a slush pile of submissions and then applying their checklist to figure out which manuscripts should make the cut:

- written by a prophet or apostle or someone who knew them
- in sync with other Bible teachings
- widely accepted by people of faith as God's Word

Instead, the process began in house churches all over the Roman world. When they got letters from Paul and others, along with the Gospels about Jesus later, they read them in worship services. They found them so inspired and inspiring that they copied them and passed them along to others.

The decision about what to include in the New Testament actually started with a heretic: Marcion. Most church leaders didn't like the Bible he proposed.

Bible historians say that about a century after Jesus, in AD 140, Marcion put together a short collection of what he called the sacred writings, which he edited to fit his teachings that weren't especially orthodox; he rejected the God of the Old Testament.

His Bible included just one gospel, Luke, along with most of Paul's letters. That's about half of today's New Testament.

Church leaders quickly began listing the writings they considered sacred and inspired by God. These were writings that churches had already been reading in worship services almost from the time Paul and others had first written them.

We have twenty-seven books in our New Testament. The first time that list shows up anywhere, it comes in an Easter letter that a bishop of Rome sent out to his churches in AD 367. He was quoting African bishop Athanasius, who listed all twenty-seven, then added: "These are the fountains of salvation, and they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain."

Thirty years later a council of church leaders agreed.

Many Bible experts say the Holy Spirit guided this process from start to finish. God’s Spirit helped:

- writers present spiritual truth
- readers recognize the truth when they saw it
- church leaders sanction and organize the library of sacred books

Bible experts say Jesus predicted as much: “When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into the full truth” (John 16:13).

After Jesus returned to heaven, and the Spirit arrived “on the day of Pentecost” (Acts 2:1 NLT), another writer reported that Jesus’ prediction had come true: “The Holy One has given you his Spirit, and all of you know the truth. So I am writing to you not because you don’t know the truth but because you know the difference between truth and lies” (1 John 2:20–21 NLT).

Still, Christians don’t agree on how involved God’s Spirit was in the process of inspiring the writers.

Two more tech terms:

Plenary—the ideas were inspired, but writers often chose their own way of expressing those ideas—their own words.

For example, the prophet Nahum may have been inspired to predict the fall of the brutal Assyrian Empire, which was based out of Iraq. But he may have used his own words:

“I am against you, Nineveh,” declares the Lord of Armies. “I will lift up your dress over your face. I will show nations your naked body and kingdoms your disgrace. I will throw filth on you. I will make you look like a fool. I will make you a sight to be seen.”

Nahum 3:5–6

For some readers, a quote like that sounds more earthy than celestial.

Verbal—the words were inspired, too. Not just the ideas.

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, signed in 1978 by about 300 evangelical Bible scholars, explains it this way: “The whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration.”

This doesn’t necessarily mean God dictated the words. But it does mean he somehow got his own choice of words into the heads of the writers and onto scrolls.

Many don’t buy into that particular theory.

Most do, however, agree on this: the Bible is a sacred collection of writings that contains messages from God to human beings.

Stories—some disturbing, but revealing.

Poetry—some raw, but insightful.

Advice—some hard to swallow, but worth digesting: “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

It would be wonderful if Christians could agree on how we got the Bible—even better if any one of their theories made perfect, rational sense.

But many hear these ideas and say just the opposite. Too many holes in the theories. Not enough evidence presented. Too much faith required.

In the end, many Christians would agree that it takes faith to believe that God inspired the Bible.

It’s a Holy Spirit thing, some would add. The Spirit who inspired the Bible is the Spirit who confirms it within the hearts and open minds of people searching for God.

Or as history quotes John Calvin (1509–1564), theological father of some Baptists and Presbyterians: “The testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason.”



2 We're supposed to believe that once upon a time people like Noah lived more than 900 years?

Imagine History 101 if folks today lived as long as some of those millennials in Bible times.

Skip books about the Crusades.

Forget PBS documentaries resurrecting those age-old battles with the help of cartoony, medieval etchings.

If people still lived as long as the Bible's record holder—Methuselah, age 969—call in the guest lecturers:

- Richard the Lionheart (1157–1199) speaking for Christians
- Saladin (1137/38–1193) defending the Muslim cause

Who in their right mind is going to believe that human beings used to live that long? The best we can do today—with a boost from modern medicine—is about 120 years.

Bible experts admit this is one tough problem to tackle. But they offer up a few theories.

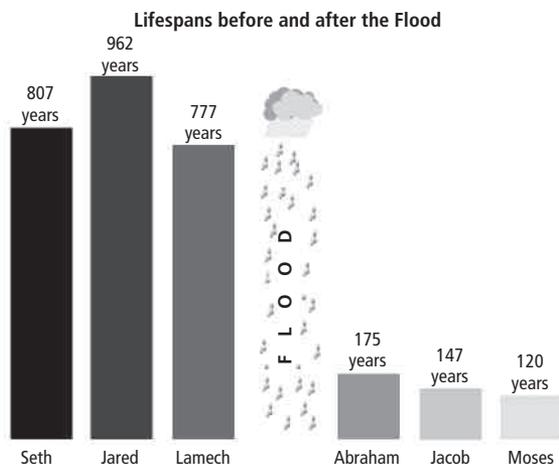
Believe it, as is. Many Christians take the numbers literally. They also call attention to a pivotal moment in the Bible's story: the flood. That's when human lifespans suddenly dropped off.

Some Bible students theorize that the flood changed the earth's environment, perhaps releasing underground toxins that tripped a chemical switch in the human body. Or maybe the rain that got squeezed out of the clouds somehow diminished the earth's protection from the sun.

On the other hand, some say there may have been no physical change at all. God may have decided that humans no longer deserved to live that long.

When the Bible writer warned of the coming flood, he said humans had become evil. He quoted God saying, "My Spirit will

not put up with humans for such a long time, for they are only mortal flesh. In the future, their normal lifespan will be no more than 120 years” (Genesis 6:3 NLT).



Year = month. For Christians who can’t warm up to a literal take on those huge numbers, one option is to interpret each year as a month—under a wild-guess theory that when ancients talked about a year they were talking about one cycle of the moon instead of the sun.

If we divide those huge numbers by 12, the lifespans are believable. Methuselah lived about 81 years instead of 969. Adam lived to age 77.

But that poses another problem: the age at which they fathered kids.

It seems a tad unbelievable that Adam fathered his third son, Seth, when he was still ten years old. It leaves us wondering how old he was when he fathered Cain and Abel. Five? That’s how old Mahalalel would have been when he fathered his son—or age sixty-five, if we go for the literal take on the story.

It’s exaggeration, to honor ancestors. Just as we honor our dead with glorified biographies and monuments, the ancients honored

their larger-than-life ancestors with larger-than-life stats. That's another theory.

Many Jews in Bible times taught that God rewarded righteous people with prosperity and long life. "If you obey all the decrees and commands I am giving you today," one Bible writer said, quoting God, "all will be well with you and your children. . . . You will enjoy a long life" (Deuteronomy 4:40 NLT).

So, as the theory goes, Jews often portrayed their most ancient ancestors that way. Prosperous and nicely aged.

Jews weren't alone in that.

One clay document from the world's first known civilization—Sumer—did the same for their kings. The document is a four-sided prism from what is now Iraq. Scholars date it to about 1800 BC. That's some 400 years or more before Moses, who is traditionally credited with reporting the huge lifespans in the Bible book of Genesis.

If we take the Sumer prism literally, the first eight kings in their empire ruled for nearly a quarter of a million years: 241,200. The king with the shortest reign ruled 18,600 years.

These are kings, by the way, who ruled before what the Sumerians report as a great flood.

That's a big "Aha!" for Christians who take the Bible numbers literally. Huge lifespans before the flood show up in the Bible and in other ancient documents.

Christians who take the numbers as polite exaggerations, however, make much the same claim: Exaggeration was in style back then.