

Can the Words of Men Be the Word of God?

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“The Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven.”

Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (Doubleday, 2003 p.231)

“... when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the *word of men*, but as it actually is, *the word of God*.”

Apostle Paul, *1 Thessalonians 2:13*

In his novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown reminds the readers that the Bible “did not arrive by fax from heaven”. If not, then how could it be “The Word of God?”

No one knows what words are—how random chemical reactions in a human body turn into rational theories explaining the cosmos, an “inspired” poem celebrating patriotism, a novel promoting parenting, or simply a sentence intended to hurt a sensitive soul. What is language? Is it an accidental product of blind chance or an essence of a spiritual “animal”: mere dust turned into a “living soul”?

The Bible is very different from other books that claim to be inspired, such as the Qur'an. Usually it does not use the phrase “the Word of God” in the same way as other ancient and contemporary “revelations” do. For example, unlike the Prophet Muhammad, none of the writers of the four Gospels claim that they received their information in a prophetic trance by revelation from God or from an angel. Nor do the gospel writers claim that a spirit entity used them as channels for “automatic writing”.

Private revelations cannot be confirmed as supernaturally inspired unless they predict specific events that come true exactly as predicted. Most books of the Bible are not revelations received in a subjective, trance-like experience.¹ The Gospels, for example, claim to be public truth. That is, they bear courageous witnesses to public events such as a crucifixion. They challenge the interpretations of Jewish scholarship and a brutal Roman state and open themselves to cross-examination. Matthew, Mark and John ask us to believe their writings because they claim that their eyewitness accounts are true. Luke asks us to believe his gospel because he claims to have researched the facts systematically and checked them out with eyewitnesses. This is a very human way of writing indeed!

Muslim and secular critics (including Dan Brown) assume that Christians believe the Bible because the Roman Catholic Church decided that it was God's Word. The reality, however, is that the Church believes the Bible because Jesus lived and "died according to the scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:2-3; Luke 24: 44-48 etc.).

The Gospels make it clear that Jesus did not have a martyr complex: he did not want to die (Luke 22:41). He could have escaped arrest in the garden of Gethsemane. In fact, at the moment of his arrest Peter gave Jesus an excellent opportunity to escape into the dark but Jesus rebuked him (Luke 22:49). Jesus could also have saved his life during his trial; for neither of the two judges—Pilate and Herod—found him guilty. Yet, instead of trying to save his life Jesus laid it down. And he did it for one reason alone: so that the Scriptures may be fulfilled (Matthew 26:54, Mark 14:49 etc.). Why did Jesus take the Scriptures so seriously that he chose to die to fulfill them?

From the very beginning the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) reveal a God who speaks: "And God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light." (Genesis 1:3). Thus the Jewish worldview sees language as a characteristic not of chemistry but of the spirit. Human beings speak because they are made in the image of a Spirit that said, "Let us make man in our image" (Genesis 1:26). Man became a "living soul" when God breathed his spirit (or "breath") into a body of clay (Genesis 2:7). That is why the human language has both spiritual as well as physical aspects.

The biblical worldview teaches that God is love and love includes communication. Both Old and New Testament assume that God speaks to us because He loves us. And He gave us the gift of language so that as His children we may know and love Him, one another, and the earth. Love, Jesus taught, was the whole point of divine revelation or communication (Matthew 22:37). Thus, in Judeo-Christian understanding, love and language are aspects not of our chemistry but of our *psyche* or soul. Our chemistry is specifically designed to facilitate love, knowledge, and communication, including worship.

¹ It is understandable that Daniel who received private prophetic visions did not try to get his contemporaries to believe his prophecies: "I, Daniel, was deeply troubled by my thoughts, and my face turned pale, but I kept the matter to myself." (Dan 7:28) Later generations, including Jesus Christ, believed him because his prophecies turned out to be so true that many modern scholars thought that his book must have been written centuries after Daniel's time.

Jesus, Daniel and the Jewish Scriptures

Jesus treated the Hebrew Scriptures in the same way as did the Hebrew prophet, Daniel, who was an administrator in Babylon.

Daniel was the younger contemporary of prophet Jeremiah. In his day many prophets claimed to be receiving revelations from God. The prophets who predicted peace and prosperity for Jerusalem enjoyed religious and political patronage. Yet, their prophecies turned out to be false. Jeremiah, on the other hand, called his nation to repentance: otherwise, he said, God would bring doom and destruction through the Babylonians. Jeremiah was condemned for treason and almost killed, but events had proved him right. Therefore, Daniel took Jeremiah's predictions seriously.

Decades after Jeremiah was gone, Daniel kept reading Jeremiah's scrolls. The more he read, the more convinced he became that Jeremiah was a prophet from God. Finally, Daniel was so convinced that Jeremiah's words were God's words that he was willing to be thrown into a den of lions for the sake of those words. Here is what happened:

One of Jeremiah's prophecies was that Jerusalem would be rebuilt seven decades after its destructions (Jer. 25: 11-12). That was just about the time when the Medo-Persian coalition defeated Babylon. Jeremiah's prophecy helped Daniel understand the significance of that momentous event. He believed "the word of the Lord given to prophet Jeremiah" (Daniel (9:2) and began to pray for rebuilding of Jerusalem. Just then the king issued a devastating edict: no one was to pray to any god except to the king for thirty days. The penalty for violation was the lions' den!

Daniel, by then the Administrator-in-chief of the empire, knew that his rivals had engineered that edict specifically to target him. So he had to choose: would he stop praying for his nation and save his life, or would he trust Jeremiah's words and risk his life?

The deeper question was: Who was sovereign—God or the king? Daniel had no other basis for disobeying the king and risking his life except that he was confident that Jeremiah's words were God's words. God was sovereign over history. God had used the Babylonians to destroy the wicked city of Jerusalem in order to fulfill the words spoken by a number of prophets beginning with Moses, and God was going to use the Persian emperor to rebuild his temple, not withstanding the schemes of Daniel's rivals. Daniel believed Jeremiah's prophecy and, therefore, kept up his practice of opening his windows towards Jerusalem and praying three times a day.

Daniel was arrested, tried, and thrown into the lions' den. Next morning the king discovered to his total astonishment that something (or rather Someone) had prevented the lions from harming Daniel. His miraculously escape so moved the king that a new edict was issued, encouraging the Jews to go back to Jerusalem to build the temple for the living God and pray for the king!²

² See passages such as Daniel chapters 9 and 6, Ezra 1:1 "In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that *the word of the LORD* by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:"

Like Daniel, Jesus treated the words of the Hebrew Scriptures as God's word. He lived by the Scriptures (Matthew 4:1-10), died according to the Scriptures, was buried, and on the third day he rose again "according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:2-3). Jesus' apostles like Peter and Paul followed Jesus in teaching that the Hebrew Scriptures were man's words that had been inspired by God (2 Peter 1:19-21; 2 Timothy 3:15-16).

Did Jesus lay down his life to fulfill the Scriptures, because he was a mere first century Jew conditioned by his culture's mistaken view of the Scriptures? Or was he God, keeping his own word, teaching us to use our gift of language responsibly, to say what we mean and mean what we say: to keep our word whatever the cost? (Matthew 5:37)

Even a superficial reading of the Gospel is enough to show a skeptic that Jesus' culture rejected him because he rejected their understanding of the Scriptures (Matthew 22:29). He was anything but a product of his culture. He spoke not as an exegete but as one with a unique authority to explain God's original intention behind the words of the Scriptures (Matthew 7: 28-30). The Jews persecuted Jesus because he claimed that he had greater authority than Moses (Matthew 19:1-11), who had received *the "very words of God"* (Romans 3:10; Hebrew 3:1-6).

Is the New Testament the Word of God?

The epistle to the Hebrews exhorts the Jewish followers of the Messiah to "Remember your leaders, who spoke *the word of God* to you" (Hebrews 13:3). How could the apostles' words be regarded as "the words of God"? How could Apostle Paul thank God for the Thessalonians who received his message "not as the *word of men*, but as it actually is *the word of God*"?

The apostles already believed that God's word created the universe (Genesis 1 & John 1:1-3). They saw Jesus' words heal the sick and raise the dead. Jesus assured them that "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works." (John 14:10). Therefore, he said that if they abide in his word, they would know the truth and the truth would set them free (John 8: 32) and that their prayers would be answered if they remain in his word (John 15:7).

Having seen Jesus' words raise a dead man, what were the apostles to do with his claim that the day was coming when the dead would hear his voice and those who believe would rise again and live eternally? (John 5:24-25).

The apostles' thought that the Messiah would conquer Rome, but Jesus predicted that he would be crucified and resurrected. The apostles witnessed Jesus' words come true. Their first-hand experiences compelled them to conclude that Jesus' words were God's words. That Jesus was the eternal, creative word of God (*logos*) become flesh (John 1:1 & 14) Jesus himself used the testimony of the Scriptures (more than his incredible miracles) as the proof of his divinity (John 5:39).

In John 17:8, in his prayer to his Father, Jesus said, "For I have given them [the disciples] the words that you gave me." He breathed his Spirit upon the apostles (John 20:22), assuring them that the Holy Spirit would remind them what He had taught them (John 14:26) and would guide them into all truth (John 16: 13). Jesus did not send them merely to teach and preach what they had heard and seen; he also gave them the authority to heal the sick and cast out demons with

their words (Matthew 10:1-8). Therefore, the apostles became “the servants of the word” (Luke 1:2). They devoted themselves to “the ministry (service) of the word.” (Acts 6:4) God’s Spirit confirmed the apostles’ words by supernatural signs and wonders (Acts 2:42-44; 5:12; 14:3 etc) leading unbelievers to treat the words of the apostles as the words of God (Acts 13: 7). What would you have thought if you saw Peter’s words heal a man born lame (Acts 3:1-10)?

The apostles’ contemporaries interpreted the growth of the church as the growth of the word of God: “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied” (Acts 6:7). Following Jesus’ example, the apostles sealed their words with their blood. They did not struggle for personal survival, because Christ’s word assured them of their eternal survival.

The Church did not invent the word of God: the church was “built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets,” i.e. on the New and the Old Testaments (Ephesians 2:20).

Ill-informed skeptics (represented by people like Dan Brown) assume that the Bible—especially the New Testament—was deemed to be the Word of God in AD 325 by the Church Council of Nicaea, which determined the Canon of the Scriptures. At the end of this appendix I quote a few verses that show that Jesus believed that his message was God’s word. His apostles believed that what they were preaching was God’s word. Christ’s original companions and followers in Jerusalem were all Jews and took the Jewish law so seriously that they would not go to Jesus’ tomb on the Sabbath. Most of the first Christians in Jerusalem knew Jesus personally; many of them knew the apostles intimately, yet they accepted the apostles’ words as the word of God, just as the Thessalonian believers accepted Paul’s words as *the word of God*.

The original Christians knew the word of God, hence, the apostle John could say to his readers that they already knew the truth and did not need anyone (not even a Church Council) to determine for them the word of God (1 John 2:19-21). The first and second century Church already knew which books had genuine apostolic authority behind them. They did not need canonization of Apostles’ writings by a Church Council to start laying down their lives for “the Word of God”. They had been affirming their faith in these writings by choosing martyrdom for well over two hundred years prior to Constantine (Revelation 20:4).

The Old Testament Canon existed before Jesus’ time. Canonization of the New Testament became necessary only because spurious books began to appear claiming to have been written by the original Apostles. Canonization did not turn Paul’s epistles into God’s word. The purpose of Canonization was to refute the spurious works such as the Gospel of Thomas and Barnabas as inauthentic.

It is extremely interesting that only one book in the New Testament, Revelation (to John), claims to have been received supernaturally, in a trance-like state and this book met with the toughest scrutiny before being included into the canon. A book with similar title, “The Revelation of Peter”, was rejected, as were the alleged Gnostic “Gospels”. Why? Because Christianity is about public truth, not about private, subjective, unverifiable, secret, inner, “religious” experience. Private intuition may indeed be from God, but it has to be publicly authenticated before the public follows it. Revelation of John was included in the Canon because it is not a “fax from heaven”. John “saw” and “heard” certain things and then wrote

down his eyewitness account—exactly as he did in the Gospel of John.³ The Church canonized books with known apostolic authority to undercut the deception of power-hungry “religious” prophets, apostles and mystics. The authorship of Revelation has been disputed, but it is clear that if someone other than John the apostle forged the book in John’s name, than the forgerer would have made an effort to establish his credentials as an apostle. The author of the book of Revelation simply states that his name was John, and expects the intended readers to accept his apostolic authority.

The point is this: the Church does not believe the Scriptures because the Council of Nicaea canonized some books. Even the Roman Catholics know that Church Councils have sometimes been wrong. The Council of Nicaea did not create the Bible. The process of canonization of the New Testament, quite appropriately, began with a heretic—Marcion (A.D. 90-160)—who identified a widely accepted Canon in order to challenge it. The Church affirmed the New Testament canon in order to repudiate heresies. Inclusion in the canon was not dependent on unverifiable issues such as “divine inspiration” but on verifiable matters such apostolic authority and theological harmony with the already existing Old Testament Canon. The Gnostic forgeries did claim apostolic authorship, but they did not and could not claim to be in harmony with the Old Testament. For example, John’s Revelation is a very deliberate unpacking of the book of Daniel. The scroll that is sealed in Daniel 12 begins to be unsealed in Revelation 5.

Can the Natural also be *Supematural*?

The Church Fathers knew perfectly well that fallible men had authored the books of the New Testament. The Bible did not come down as a fax from heaven. The Council of Nicaea wrestled with a worldview issue raised by Gnosticism: could the natural (material/physical) be simultaneously spiritual, non-material, supernatural and good?

The Gnostics maintained that the natural realm was evil. Therefore the Christ Spirit could not incarnate in the flesh; Christ did not die on the cross, it was the evil, material body of a man—Jesus—that was crucified; the Christ spirit was laughing at the folly of his enemies as they were crucifying Jesus, thinking that they were killing the Christ. The Council of Nicaea rejected the Gnostic worldview in favor of the Old Testament teaching that the material world was good, the work of the Almighty God. Man (male and female) really was made in God’s image; the human body was good. Therefore, God could become man, and our physical bodies can be and ought to become the temple of the Holy God (1 Corinthians 6:19).

Just as Satan could enter Judas to do evil (John 13:27), God’s Spirit can and does use human beings to speak his words (Isaiah 59:21, 1 Corinthians 2:13) and do his will. Therefore, the work and words of men and women can be human, satanic, or divine. Just as Jesus could be fully man and fully God, so could man’s words be God’s words. Why can’t a President take a speechwriter’s words and make them his words? Why can’t Paul communicate God’s words

³ In Revelation 1:11 John is told: “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches.” Although John was “in the spirit” when he saw his visions, it is very clear from the book that John’s rational functions were never arrested. His book is not “automatic” spirit-writing. This is eye-witness testimony. Revelation 1:2 states that John “bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.” In John *marturew*—“bear witness” means “eye-witness”. See John 1:32 And John (the Baptist) bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.”

just as an ambassador speaks a king's words? (2 Corinthians 5:20). It is absurd to claim that Jesus was the greatest prophet (as skeptics often do) and to claim at the same time that the Scriptures that Jesus believed to the extent of laying down his life was merely a human hoax.

Church Fathers did not know the mystery of human language any more than we do. Nor did they conclude that the New Testament was God's word on the basis of abstract philosophical arguments. They relied on the eyewitnesses who saw the words of Jesus and his apostles make the lame to walk, the blind to see, and the dead to come back to life. The Holy Spirit confirmed the words of the apostles with signs and wonders, just as the supernatural acts of God had confirmed Moses' words. (Exodus 7:2-4, Deuteronomy 6:22, Acts 2:22, 43, Acts 14:3 etc.) Future generations will understand language better than we do. Contemporary medicine has just begun to research the healing power of human words. Yet, it is futile to speculate how they would explain words that bring a dead person back to life?

* * *

The following verses demonstrate that the New Testament saw Jesus and his Apostles' teaching (speaking and writing) as "the Word of God" centuries before Church Councils:

Luke 5: 1 - "One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the **word of God**,"

John 3:34 - "For the one whom God has sent speaks the **words of God**, for God gives the Spirit without limit."

Acts 4:31 - " After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke **the word of God** boldly."

Acts 6:2 - " So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the **word of God** in order to wait on tables.'"

Acts 6:7 - "So the **word of God** spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith."

Acts 8:14 - "When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the **word of God**, they sent Peter and John to them."

Acts 11:1 - "The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received **the word of God**."

Acts 12:24 - "But **the word of God** continued to increase and spread."

Acts 13:5 - "When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed **the word of God** in the Jewish synagogues."

Acts 13:7 - "The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear **the word of God**."

Acts 13:46 – “Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: ‘We had to speak **the word of God** to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.’”

Acts 18:11 – “So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them **the word of God.**”

Colossians 1:25 – “I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you **the word of God** in its fullness.”

Revelation 19:9 – “Then the angel said to me, ‘Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’ And he added, ‘These are the **true words of God.**’”

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Appendix 1

From the upcoming book:

Must The Sun Set On the West?

An Indian Explores the Soul of Western Civilization

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