

Missing Keys

by Lynn Andrew

You cannot read the Bible without exercising your theory of inspiration, even if you are not aware that you have one or have not given it much thought. The way you interpret Scripture depends on several other things too, but this is a major one: just how were the inspired writings inspired?

While looking for something to illustrate a theory of inspiration it occurred to me that what the Spirit of God has to work with is broken keyboards. If the Z key is inoperative, you can still express your thoughts, but if the A key is missing, it becomes a real challenge.

There are 21 occurrences of the letter O in the above paragraph. Yet an equivalent could be written without using the O key:

While seeking a picture that illustrates divine guidance it struck me that what the divine Spirit must deal with is faulty input devices. If the Z key is stuck, there is scarcely any limit, but if the A key is missing, it is a real challenge.

The result is a little odd, but the thought remains intact. Missing a vowel key in English makes writing difficult but not impossible. If the reader did not know about the missing O, he would assume that the writer was handicapped in some other way; it would be an obstacle to appreciating the author that might

never be surmounted—because the reader's theory was faulty.

What if all of the vowel keys were unusable? Correct spelling becomes impossible, and consonant-only abbreviations prove to be insufficient. The paragraph would have to be reduced to something barely intelligible:

Dvn gdnc smlr 2 stk-ky kbds. Z stk, x pblm. 1st vwl stk, lg pblm.

Without the pun (2 = to) and the Y, it would be even more obscure. Naturally some writers make better keyboards than others—not meaning writing skill: the analogy applies to inspiration. A reliable prophet could be an unskilled writer who happened to have enough operable keys in his inspiration channel to render him usable. On the other hand, we know of skillful writers whose thoughts are as useless as the vowelless paragraph above.

But no one is perfect, and so the Holy Spirit must resort to creative workarounds for the missing keys. Thus we have a theory of inspiration that explains why Scripture seems odd in some places. There is nothing revolutionary about recognizing the idiosyncratic influences of human instrumentality. But where do you go from there?

Assuming you never before thought about this, here is the question it raises: how do you view those oddities? Almost everyone treats them, expressly or implicitly, as flaws to be corrected or explained away. I'm proposing that we give God a little credit for ingenuity and try to see where he has worked around the

prophet's stuck keys. If this theory is correct, we will discover more satisfying interpretations: the odd things may turn out to be the keys.

Take as an example the last portion of Isaiah chapter 34, which apparently describes the Negev wasteland, the land that was Edom. (Whether you take it literally or figuratively and whether it references the past or the future or both does not matter for this purpose.) The odd creatures that are to make that smoking ruin their home forever can be passed over as a poetic embellishment on the announcement of the curse. But the oddity that starts with the birds and animals becomes progressively odder. By the time you get to the end of the chapter your interpretive prowess gets severely tested. No one, as far as I know, has come up with a satisfying interpretation. Yes, your expositor will offer speculative explanations—speculative because he does not believe them himself.

If you are familiar with this passage in Isaiah 34, you will remember the odd emphasis on mates for the odd creatures. Then there is the surprisingly emphatic declaration in triplicate that the Lord has ordained this provision for the odd creatures and promised perpetuity in that particular wasteland to their offspring. Add to that the "without form and void" allusion to Genesis 1:1, and you have piled up an accumulation of at least three odd things. I do not know what Isaiah thought when he wrote this down, but I think the evidence is that the Spirit managed to say something that the prophet *would not have been able to say* on his own

because he did not understand it himself: that particular key was missing on his keyboard.

This is where we tread on the toes of scholars and where naturalistic biases are revealed. Isaiah may have liked it as poetry, but it must have seemed odd to him too. Maybe he liked pounding nail after redundant nail into the lid of Edom's coffin, as some suggest. I doubt it. I'm proposing that the Spirit was doing something before Isaiah's eyes that he not only was unaware of but *could not have been aware of* because he had no *thought* patterns for it on his keyboard. It was not a matter of lacking the ability to express a thought; in the day in which he lived the idea had not yet gained currency. But the Lord said it through the prophet in spite of the prophet's limitation. That is the kind of thing this theory leads to, and obviously it impacts interpretations. The problem it poses for scholarship is the same problem any science has with the metaphysical: the name of the game is finding natural causes for everything insofar as possible. Not many welcome this wildly supernatural element at the root of prophecy—this wild card that may cut the game short.

No doubt good use has been made of this Isaiah passage by leaving behind the bounds of interpretation and launching off into "application." Nobody objects to that: homiletic tradition imposes no bounds whatsoever. If you want to class my interpretation¹ of this passage as "application," I have no objection. However by itself it has no benefit for the congregation. But add it to

1 See the Lynn Andrew essay "The Sacrifice."

the first part of the chapter and it supports a unified interpretation that is overwhelmingly significant.

Imagine that Isaiah had a vision in which he saw a modern keyboard in action. He was impressed with the efficiency of the device until he noticed that the *Tav* key was not working. That gave him an inspiration for a metaphor about how God works through imperfect prophets; and so he wrote the following paragraph.

The Lord when speaking to me places his hands upon a writing tablet that consumes a letter as the sun consumes a drop of water on a warm afternoon. If four hundred drops disappear, he will still express his thought.

It makes perfect sense in English, and we understand his metaphor. But it is not what he was thinking, and it is not even what he wrote, for he wrote in Hebrew of course. It is either a fortuitous accident or providence—or by the skill of the Spirit—(depending on how you look at it) that the gist of it survived. He had no understanding of modern keyboards, so he described what he saw using the words at his disposal. Also there was an error in translating the stand-alone letter *Tav* into English: Hebrew letters have numerical values; the value associated with that letter is 400. The mistranslation skewed Isaiah's meaning, but the result turned out to express his intent even better than if the translation had been accurate. If this author can rig something like that, can we deny that God could do something similar? Nevertheless most scholars would object to making very much of this.

A related thing on a small scale that scholars do accept is parallelism. Pure parallelism in Hebrew poetry repeats a thought in different words. For example Isaiah 9:3a. If the second part of the couplet disagrees with the first, it is an odd thing that warrants investigation. The fault, if there is one, could have been introduced by a scribe. In this case the KJV translators should not have included the "not." We can give God the credit for using this device to help ensure that meanings get to us in spite of faulty instruments—even if we have to make the correction ourselves.

A keyboard without the vowel keys makes English impossible, but the Hebrew alphabet has no vowels. This has nothing to do with the point of the missing-key analogy. Simply by association it raises the language question regarding inspiration. Is Hebrew specially suited to transmitting the thoughts of God? There has been no prophet of Isaiah's stature who wrote in Greek as far as I know, but there could be several reasons for that. This issue has been aired by others. I mention it primarily to delineate the extent of the keyboard analogy.

You saw that I sneaked a bit of figurative language into my fanciful Isaiah quotation above. Scholars pay a lot of attention to styles and idiosyncrasies in order to decide who wrote what. We often disregard their conclusions, saying it does not matter because it is ultimately the Word of God. But I would like to know who made Isaiah's poetry. Obviously Isaiah was a poet. The question is, did the prophet cast a definite vision into words by his own art, or did he feel an urge to write, the same as any writer

does—and then out came the inspired words? Is God a poet too? His thoughts are far above our thoughts, but that gap must somehow be narrowed in particular cases; otherwise Scripture could not exist. When the writer deliberately quotes God—as the prophets do freely—what does that mean? If we seek to know God, it matters. The Scriptures brim with figures of speech, including puns. Is that God's manner? Does God like puns? I like to think so. This theory allows the Spirit to be in the very words too.

That cryptic reduction of the italicized paragraph above would be difficult or impossible for anyone but the author to decipher. The author has the advantage of knowing what the abbreviations stand for, but that advantage can be shared in various ways. For example, taking the whole Bible together we find clues that help decipher difficult passages. This is the good fruit of scholarship. Scholars are aware of allusions; they help us see through figures of speech; they point out puns; they may tell where types lurk.

But the best help comes from the Spirit himself. The better we know the Author, the better we understand and enjoy his writing. This is the other side of the inspiration equation.

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