

LET'S PUT 2 TIMOTHY 3:16 BACK IN THE BIBLE

Edward W. Goodrick*

My neighbor to the south borrowed my electric drill. He tried to make it do something it was not designed for. When he returned it I had to repair it before I could use it again.

My neighbor to the north is a theologian. He borrowed a verse of mine and tried to make it perform a task it was not designed to do. He returned it to me all battered up. Would you like to look over my shoulder as I try to pound it back into shape?

The verse is found in a setting that shouts its importance because it is the remark of a dying man, at the close of a life that consistently brought suffering on itself by its persistent pursuit of a single goal, written to a person the author was grooming to succeed him in this same grueling task. He was anticipating that this person would have to traverse an eschatological cauldron that would even exceed his own trials. And this passage was written to identify the overriding force at Timothy's disposal that would keep him and his charges on course.

I. THE CONTEXT

The paragraph that I would call "Timothy's Involvement" (3:10-17) is embedded in an eschatological section that runs from 3:1 through 4:8. Paul perceives Timothy as a participant in these "last days" who must function well without his mentor in times of rejection and persecution. So Timothy must be self-controlled, suffer hardship, preach the gospel and complete his task (4:5).

The paragraph (3:10-17) is composed of four sentences conveniently marked off by vv 12, 14 and 16. The four split into two pairs.

1. Timothy and persecution (3:10-13)
 - a. Timothy has emulated Paul in many ways, including suffering (3:10-11)
 - b. Suffering is the common lot of devoted Christians (3:12-13)
2. Timothy and the Bible (3:14-17)
 - a. Timothy, stay with your Bible knowledge and your commitment (3:14-15)
 - b. The Bible is profitable (3:16-17)

The third sentence (3:14-15) shifts the subject from suffering to Scripture. It is a compound sentence with its second leg subordinated to it. It is the only imperative sentence in the paragraph. Subordinated to this first clause is a compound relative clause that expresses what it is that Timothy is to remain with—namely,

*Edward Goodrick, teacher of Greek (now retired) at Multnomah School of the Bible in Portland, Oregon, is the northwest regional chairman of ETS.

what he has learned and to what he has committed himself. The second leg (v 15) elaborates what Timothy has learned—namely, the Holy Scriptures, Scriptures that make him wise with a wisdom that results in his salvation, a salvation that stems from faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The fourth sentence (3:16-17) is our target text. It is an asyndetic, complex, equative sentence with an elided copula and compounded predicate adjectives. A final, equative clause follows expressing the purpose of the main clause. These four sentences form an interesting pattern: (1) a reminder to Timothy about persecutions; (2) a gnomic sentence (with “every”) about what persecution will do to those “wishing to live in a godly way”; (3) a reminder to Timothy about his Biblical heritage; (4) a gnomic sentence (with “every”) about what Scripture will do for “the man of God.”

II. THE TEXT

With this overview of its context in mind we proceed to a short examination of the target text itself (3:16-17). This second gnomic statement is heightened by asyndeton, the other three sentences all starting with a conjunction. We have here an important categorical theological statement, perhaps the most significant bibliological statement in Scripture.

1. *The subject of the sentence: “Every Scripture.”* The grammatical subject of our sentence is *graphē* (“Scripture”), a different expression from the one Paul used in the preceding sentence, *hiera grammata* (“sacred writings”). Paul employed this latter *hapax legomenon* because it is the common Greek expression used by Greek-speaking Jews to identify the OT and would be an appropriate expression when describing what Timothy had learned at the knees of his grandmother Eunice and his mother Lois (2 Tim 1:5).¹

But now Paul will return to the normal NT term for the OT, *graphē* (“Scripture”). Though this word in classical Greek means “writing” (etymologically “scratch”), in each of its fifty appearances in the NT it means “Scripture.” Clearly Paul, though he uses different terms, is referring to the same thing in vv 15-16.

The use of the plural “sacred writings” is enough to show that Paul had the separate scrolls in mind that together comprised the sacred library. He might have abruptly changed to view a monolithic canon in the next sentence, but it would not seem natural. We are so book-conscious that it is hard to imagine ourselves in a literary world of scrolls. We need to look no further than this for an explanation as to why twenty of the fifty appearances of *graphē* are plural, and this in spite of the fact that two-thirds of the remaining singulars are singular because they refer to the content of but a single scroll.

When one views the OT as a library of scrolls it is more natural to use the plural *graphai*. So why did Paul, after using the plural in v 14, change to the singular? An answer follows rather effortlessly when we see the qualifying adjective *pasa* (“every”) that accompanies *graphē*.

I do not think the NT accommodates itself very well to the classical Greek ca-

¹TWNT 1. 763-764 (7 times in Josephus and 8 in Philo).

nons of *ho pas* and *pas ho*. Our construction is anarthrous, however, and means "every Scripture." The NT grammarians are quite agreed that *pas* is not like *hekastos*, which would read, "Each one that has this quality." Rather, we should read, "Any one you choose to examine has this quality."² Paul is emphasizing the value of the Scriptures, and here he claims, "Any one of its scrolls you choose to examine has this quality."

The interpretation that insists on translating *graphē* as "writing" and translates the sentence, "Every writing that happens to be inspired is profitable," is so far from good translation that one becomes suspicious of theological manipulation.

Several ideas generated from an examination of the way the NT uses *graphē* contribute to our understanding of 2 Tim 3:16-17. First, the question is asked, "Must we exclude the NT from *graphē*?" Rather obviously, Timothy would have thought only of the OT. But I am not so sure that he would be confident that no more could be added. An articulated *hē graphē* would have helped Timothy to limit the term strictly to the OT.

Peter uses the term in a way that suggests that he considered some Scriptures to exist apart from the specific OT. In 2 Pet 3:16 he bemoans the difficulty of understanding some of Paul's writings and refers to people who twist them as they do *tas loipas graphas*, "the other Scriptures" (NIV). He seems to be identifying Paul's letters as *graphē*. Many would also see in the statement in 1 Tim 5:18 Paul identifying Matt 10:10 and Luke 10:7 as *graphē*: "A worker deserves to get paid."

Such a possibility as this might not be so difficult for Timothy to entertain as one might at first think. This lad, in spite of the fact that he was indoctrinated thoroughly with his OT from early childhood, already had negotiated one traumatic hurdle, one that subordinated the OT to the word of Christ. To Timothy this new word of God, inspired as it is, surely is as profitable as, if not more profitable than, his OT. It is even conceivable that under youth's pendulum syndrome he had gone too far and was here receiving from Paul a gentle nudge toward the center—that is, that Timothy now being so completely committed to the words of Christ needed to be reminded that his OT still had this quality and these values.

The process through which Christians today are able to identify the NT with the word of Christ, of course, would not be in his mind. I am talking about such things as the promise to the apostles of total recall (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-14), Paul's subordination to the words of Christ and his claim that he was both an apostle and was writing the Word of God (1 Thess 2:13; 2 Thess 2:15; 1 Cor 14:37-38), and the qualitative superiority of the NT over the OT (Heb 1:1-4). Although a new canon could hardly have been in Timothy's mind, I would not be too critical of today's interpreter who believes that the same attributes Paul explicitly attached to the OT apply equally to the NT. In fact, I find no way to avoid this conclusion.

A second question asks, "Is the idea of *graphē* limited to the autographs?" Modern preoccupation with the no-longer-extant autographs too often neglects the very real and pragmatic plight of present-day Christians who desperately wish that the custodians of Biblical inspiration would give them some inclination

²N. Turner, *Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 3. 199; BDF 143; C. F. D. Moule, *The Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge, 1959) 93-95.

as to the authority of their Bible, the one they hold in their hand. Is it or is it not the Word of God? Is it inspired or is it not?

Several times in the NT the Bible-in-hand is inescapably identified as *graphē*. Jesus could hardly have had the autographs in mind when he commanded his hearers to search "the Scriptures" (*tas graphas*; John 5:39). The same pertains to the Bereans, who daily studied "the Scriptures" (Acts 17:11). Jesus read from a *graphē* in a synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:21), Paul in the synagogue at Thessalonica (Acts 17:2) and the Ethiopian eunuch while riding in his chariot (Acts 8:32). The Bible-in-hand is identified in the NT as *graphē*, and our target text tells us that every *graphē* is given by the inspiration of God. Furthermore there is no way that anyone can claim that any one of these scrolls was completely free from copyist's error, and yet they were *graphē*, and every *graphē* is inspired.

Permit me to mention an interpretive option that I find attractive but have not adopted. When cataloging the different ways in which *pasa graphē* might be construed, perhaps we should include for the purposes of academic inquiry the idea that "every Scripture" might be taken as "every copy of Scripture is inspired."

A third question: "Can a translation be *graphē*?" Except for a very small fraction, the Bibles that present-day Christians own and read are in languages other than Hebrew and Greek. Are Christians to be denied the *graphē*?

The NT often quotes the OT. In each instance the NT writer must decide either to translate himself from the Hebrew or use a translation already at hand. More often than not he chose a translation, and that the LXX. Often one can not be certain which option the writer chose or whether he was paraphrasing. On the other hand there are examples where the words are so identical to the LXX or when the *Vorlage* of the LXX differs so radically from the MT that there can be no doubt but that the NT is quoting the LXX.

Among those quotations that are clearly from the LXX, does the NT identify the LXX translation as *graphē*? Swete lists 106 direct quotations from the LXX in the NT.³ An examination of these contexts reveals that some fourteen of these are explicitly identified as *graphai*. Besides Luke 4:18 and Acts 8:32-33, already mentioned as Bibles-in-hand, note the following: Matt 21:42/Mark 12:10 quotes LXX Ps 117(118):22-23; John 13:18 quotes LXX Ps 40(41):10; Acts 1:20 quotes LXX Ps 68:26 plus 108:8; Acts 8:32-33 quotes LXX Isa 53:7-8; Rom 4:3, 22 quotes LXX Gen 15:6; Rom 9:17 quotes LXX Exod 9:16; Rom 11:3, 5 quotes LXX 3 Kgdms 19:10, 14, 18; Gal 3:8 quotes LXX Gen 12:3; 1 Tim 5:18 quotes LXX Deut 25:4; Jas 2:8 quotes LXX Lev 19:18; Jas 4:6 quotes LXX Prov 3:34; 1 Pet 2:6 quotes LXX Isa 28:16; Jas 2:23 quotes LXX Gen 15:6. In answer to the question, "Can a translation be called a *graphē*?" we must say, "Yes." And every *graphē* is "God-breathed," and a translation is not infallible.

Miles Smith was one of the principal translators of the *KJV*. His was the responsibility to compose a preface and, together with Thomas Bilson, do the final polishing and see the version through the press. In the preface, called "The Translators to the Reader," Smith raises this very question: "Can a translation be the Word of God?" Here is his answer (rendered into modern English):

³H. B. Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek* (Cambridge, 1902; New York: Ktav, reprint 1968) 382-391.

Rather than deny, we actually claim that the poorest translation of the Bible into English offered by Protestants (we see none of the whole Bible offered by Romanists as yet) contains the Word of God—no, *is* the Word of God. The king's speech before Parliament, when translated into French, Dutch, Italian and Latin, is still the king's speech, although it is not always translated with as good a style or as apt a phrase or exact a sense.⁴

Smith continues by noting that something does not have to be absolutely pure to have a name. "Things are to take their denomination of the greater part," he says. The parts that we call "impurities" must not be permitted to deny to the rest its true character.

Although we must be quick to admit that its absolute character is lost when we leave the autographs and turn to the Bible-in-hand, we must insist that its true character is not lost.

2. *The elided copula: "is."* The clause has no verb. It reads: "Every Scripture God-breathed and profitable." The reader is expected to supply the verb. He finds it much easier to select one than to locate its proper place in the clause. Almost everyone agrees that the verb is *esti*, the common verb "to be." But experts are divided concerning where it goes. I have chosen "All Scripture is God-breathed," but I have little to defend what I have done. By placing it where I do I make the two adjectives "God-breathed" and "profitable" coordinate, the two together becoming the predicate adjective to the sentence.

I recall vividly an answer I received in a course on Epictetus at the University of Manchester taught by the renowned hellenistic scholar and textual critic G. Zuntz. When I questioned him about a certain interpretation, his only answer to me was, "It scans that way."

I resented that kind of answer. But it started me down a road I am still on. Now, years later, I find myself irritating my own students with the same answer. For I am reluctantly being dragged to the conclusion that an exegete of quality is one who has, by much exposure to the text and to the language in which it is written, developed a strong and reliable intuition.

I place the verb where I do because "it scans that way." One must not arbitrarily break up two back-to-back adjectives that are in perfect agreement and are joined by *kai* in order to place one in the attributive position and the other in the predicate position. Although one might grammatically accommodate each word individually in this manner, I see no way that one can say, "Every inspired Scripture is also profitable" or "Every profitable Scripture is also inspired." It simply would not scan.

3. *The first predicate adjective: "God-breathed."* Some theologians have a tendency to make *theopneustos* ("God-breathed") the focus of our text: "All Scripture is *God-breathed*." In the NT the Greek word is an *hapax legomenon*, late and rare. In fact the first time the word appears in Greek literature is in our text. Lampe defines the word as "divinely inspired."⁵ He reflects rather well the lack of sharp definition the fathers give to the word. It is strange that the earliest

⁴From the 1611 edition of the *KJV* (no page enumeration).

⁵*LPLG* 630.

patristic use is as late as the third century, appearing about four times in Origen and once in Clement of Alexandria. The fourth century yields eight Christian authors (cited by Lampe) who also used *theopneustos*. By contrast during the second century several heathen writers used the word: Plutarch, Vettius Vallens, and the author of *Pseudo-Phocylides*, who possibly was a Jew or a Christian and who possibly also wrote the fifth book of the *Sibylline Oracles*. If Paul coined the word, it is squeezing it to find the word on heathen lips after so brief an interval. But it is possible.

In the study of 2 Tim 3:16 one neglects Benjamin B. Warfield at great risk. He studies usages (such as survive), both heathen and patristic, of *theopneustos*, engages in elaborate etymology, and then proceeds with such precisely defined edges to a word that I think to be quite inappropriate to the data available. He rejects both "inspired" and "expired," opting for "spired" [*sic*].⁶ This word triggers such unacceptable images as a church building, an inflated tire, and a man holding his breath.

Etymology forces itself upon rare words, and *theopneustos* is a rare word. It combines two stems and an adjective suffix: *theo-pneu-stos*. The first stem, *theo-*, means "God," "god" or "divine." The second stem, *pneu-*, means "breath," "breathe," "Spirit" or "spirit." And the suffix, *-tos*, makes the adjective passive in voice.⁷ In almost all combined forms starting with *theo-*, God is the active agent.⁸

When an adjective ending in *-tos* is recast into a transitive sentence the first stem becomes its subject, the second stem its verb and the noun modified by the adjective its direct object. For instance, *theodidaktos*, "God-taught" (1 Thess 4:9), breaks down into *theo-* ("God"), *didak-* ("teach") and *-tos*. Converting the first stem to subject, the second to verb and the noun modified by the adjective to direct object produces the sentence "God teaches you." When you do the same with *theopneustos* you produce the sentence "God breathes the Scripture" or "God breathes out the Scripture" or (my preference) "God breathes into the Scripture." So "All Scripture is God-breathed" (*NIV*) suits the etymology plus the patristic idea as stated by Lampe.

I suspect that to one schooled as well as Timothy was in the OT the new word, *theopneustos*, would have triggered his recollection of that primeval episode in which God, by breathing into the nostrils of an image molded from inert clay, made it spring into life. Certainly Adam was God-breathed. Furthermore, by this analogy Timothy might effortlessly conceive that as it was with Adam so also this *theopneustos* is used to describe not only the Bible's vitality but also the Agent he used to bring it into existence. If this is how Timothy understood the word, he would have understood the inspiration of Scripture as did the writer to

⁶B. B. Warfield, "God-Inspired Scripture," *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 11, 89-130 (reprinted as chap. 6 in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948]).

⁷A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (New York: Harper, 1923) 158; J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), 1. 222; C. D. Buck, *A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages* (1949) 3078; G. B. Winer, *A Grammar of the Idiom of the New Testament* (7th ed.; Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1869) 96-97.

⁸Warfield, "God-Inspired" 281-282.

Hebrews, who says that the Word of God is *zōn* ("alive"). The parallel is remarkable, for just like our target text it is an equative sentence with the Bible as subject, an elided copula, and a pair of predicate adjectives, one stating the inspired quality of the Bible and the other its purpose with considerable amount of subordination elaborating on this value: "For the Word of God is alive and effective" (Heb 4:12).

That the apostle would reject other words that mean "inspiration" puzzles me.⁹ He did not have to select this new and rare word, or invent it (as the case may be).

4. *The second predicate adjective: "useful."* The adjective correlative to *theopneustos* is *ōphelimos* ("useful," "beneficial," "advantageous"). The word requires no explanation. What does require examination is its coordinate relation with *theopneustos*. I came very close to pontificating when I insisted that in this Greek sentence the two must be treated as coordinate predicate adjectives because it scanned that way. To translate them this way into English, however, is quite another matter. For most certainly "God-breathed" and "profitable," although they are grammatical coordinates, are not in semantic balance: One is serving the other.

Voices all around join to make this assertion. First, in contrast with *theopneustos*, which stands alone, *ōphelimos* is elaborated upon by four prepositional phrases. Scripture is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." Though Timothy is supposed to notice how Scripture is both God-breathed and useful, he is supposed to pay more attention to the latter to see how it is indeed useful. The text notices the first but expounds on the second, and it does so in a rather striking manner. Rather than using a single preposition with a fourfold object it repeats the preposition four times: "Scripture is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness." Paul is telling Timothy to look at each one separately to see each use to which he is to put the *graphē*. It is the basis for the doctrine one teaches, it forms the words of rebuke to those who know better and the words of correction to those who do not, it guides people in their ethical living. In less than a minute Paul will be telling Timothy to be ever at preaching this *graphē*, even when the itching ears of people during the "last days" will resist it for foreign voices (4:3-4). Look at the uses to which it can be put.

Further, Timothy has already been thinking about a very important use of Scripture. The sentence preceding our target text reminds Timothy how the Holy Scriptures had made him wise to salvation. In less than a minute Paul will be telling Timothy to "do the work of an evangelist" (4:5).

⁹For instance, in choosing *theopneustos* he passed over *epipnoōs*, its cognate *epipnoia*, and especially *entheos*, which means "full of God," "inspired," "being of divine origin" (LSJ 566; LPGL 474-475). Although the word is not found in the Bible, it has wide usage in classical literature and was used often by the early fathers to describe *graphē*. In *De principiis* (4.6.1) Origen talks of the prophetic writings that foretold Messiah's coming. In this short chapter he describes the prophetic writings four times: twice with *theopneustos*, once with *entheos* and once with *enthusiasmos* (a cognate of *entheos*). Origen uses these words in an alternating manner, and for the life of me I cannot see any distinction in meaning between the two words. Origen is the only father listed by LPGL who uses *entheos* to describe the OT prophets, although Clement, Athanasius and Epiphanius all used the word to describe the NT.

This is enough to show why the downbeat, the focus, must be on *ōphelimos* in preference to *theopneustos*. The following final clause is the clincher. In word count it is almost as long as its main clause. While ignoring *theopneustos* it devotes itself to justifying *ōphelimos*, "so that man might be thoroughly equipped for every good work." This *graphē*, throughout Timothy's impending, trying ministry, is the repository that will supply the spiritual needs of his people, and Timothy himself for certain must be included among them. For in less than a minute Paul will tell him to fulfill his own ministry (4:5).

III. CONCLUSION

When I emphasize the fact that the whole sentence hinges on *ōphelimos* I most certainly do not want to leave the impression that I see no role for *theopneustos*. The word is there, but it serves *ōphelimos*.

We can be certain that this lad who had learned the Scriptures at his mother's and grandmother's knees needed neither the information nor the reminder that the Scriptures were inspired. But it is not inappropriate, when undertaking an exposition of its usefulness, to describe such a Scripture as *theopneustos*, as "alive with the vitality of God, which he, himself, breathed into it when he created it." Scripture, because it is what it is, has this attribute, this pedigree. The use to which *theopneustos* is put in this sentence is causal. Following the lead of most scholars starting with Origen and including Warfield, I would put 2 Tim 3:16-17 into English something like this: "For Scripture, alive as it is with the vitality of God himself, is valuable for indoctrinating people, for rebuking people who should know better, for correcting people who do not, for guiding people, so that God's man can be completely equipped for every good work."¹⁰

We must all sympathize with the theologian who almost always works in tension. He sincerely wants to present a balanced organization of divine truth, balanced in the proportion of Biblical axiology, emphasizing where the Bible does. On the other hand he must hurry to reinforce that particular sector of the theological bastion that happens to be under attack. So his activity—more often than not, a history of doctrine tells us—does not represent the Biblical balance of truth. And I do not know how he can do both.

Controversy polarizes, makes mountains out of molehills, drives us to extremes we would otherwise not have taken. Sometimes in the heat of battle theologians will press into service a Biblical text to perform a task it was not designed for. When this happens it falls to the lot of the exegete to irenically restore that text to the use for which it was designed. In 2 Tim 3:16-17 one cannot change the fact that the focus is on *ōphelimos*.

I have no way of knowing whether the founding fathers of the Evangelical Theological Society anticipated what I have tried to develop here, but the way in which they formulated the terse and surprisingly simple doctrinal statement surely accommodates with comfort my contention. Their statement reads: "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God *written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs*" (italics mine).

¹⁰Origen writes: "Every Scripture, because it is theopneustic, is profitable" (Homily 20 in *Josham* 2, cited by Warfield, "God-Inspired" 293-294). Warfield himself translates our target text: "Every Scripture, seeing it is God-breathed, is as well profitable" (ibid., p. 134).

I and every other member of the Evangelical Theological Society subscribe to this doctrine. To me, anything less impugns the character of God. However, because of the way in which *graphē* is used to identify fallible copies and fallible translations, because of the vague edges of the meaning of *theopneustos*, and especially because of the purpose for the sentence and paragraph in which it is found, one should hardly enlist 2 Tim 3:16-17 to support the pristine character of the autographs. Rather, he should exploit it to the full to demonstrate how valuable the God-breathed Scriptures are. And this, after all, is more important.