A grammatical exposition of 2 Timothy 3:16-17

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Abstract

The most definitive biblical text on the nature, function, and purpose of scripture, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, contains several difficulties that have made it the subject of much scholarly debate. The purpose of this article is to examine the Greek text phrase by phrase, exploring the difficulties and evaluating possible solutions. Concerning the nature of scripture, the first three words are best translated 'all scripture is God-breathed', although 'every scripture is God-breathed' remains possible. The inspired nature of the scriptures is presupposed by both these translations, and even by other interpretive options. Furthermore, it is proper to consider both copies and translations as inspired scriptures, while recognizing that in so doing we are referring to their true character rather than their absolute character. The function of scripture is represented by four prepositional phrases, which portray its functions as guiding believers towards correct belief and behaviour, while exposing wrong beliefs and behaviours. The ultimate purpose of scripture, however, is conveyed not by the four prepositional phrases in verse 16, but by the hina clause in verse 17—the word of God is given to prepare the man of God for every good work.

1. Introduction

Not only is 2 Timothy 3:16-17 the most definitive biblical statement on the nature and role of the scriptures, but it is also a passage with several well-known difficulties. The purpose of this article is to examine the Greek text phrase by phrase, exploring the difficulties and evaluating possible solutions.

The context for Paul's[2] definitive statement regarding the scriptures is a warning about the 'difficult times' which will characterize 'the last days' (2

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Tim. 3:1). People will abandon sound doctrine (see 4:3-4), and wickedness will be rampant. This description of Timothy's ministry context occupies verses 1-9. From verse 10, Paul addresses Timothy about how to be a faithful minister in such times. He twice uses the strong 'but you' (σὺ δέ, vv. 10, 14) to contrast Timothy with the prevailing spirit of the age. In verses 10-13, Paul reminds Timothy about his (Paul's) own teaching and example (vv. 10-13), which illustrates the principles that the godly will suffer and the wicked will continue to degenerate. In this context of the general degeneration of society (vv. 1-9) and the apostle's own teaching and example (vv. 10-13), Paul urges his disciple to stand firm for Christ, to swim against the current of society (vv. 14-17). He urges Timothy to stand firm in the truths he has known since childhood, truths grounded in 'the sacred writings' (τὰ ἱερὰ γράμματα, v. 15). Verses 16-17 elaborate on the allusion to 'the holy writings'.

I shall examine the text in three logical divisions. The controversial first three words, 'All scripture is God-breathed' (πᾶσα γραφὴ θεόπνευστος) make a statement about *the nature of scripture*. The four prepositional phrases that follow describe *the functions of scripture*. Finally, the ἵνα clause in verse 17 states *the purpose of scripture*.

2. The nature of scripture

The opening words of 2 Timothy 3:16 are notoriously problematic. πᾶσα γραφὴ θεόπνευστος has been the subject of endless discussion. The main difficulties are as follows:

- Should the singular πᾶσα be translated 'all' or 'every'?
- In terms of its meaning, is θεόπνευστος active (God breathed the scriptures) or passive (the scriptures breathe God) in force?
- In terms of its relationship to γραφή, is θεόπνευστος in an attributive ('every God-breathed Scripture') or a predicative ('every Scripture is God-breathed') position?

Despite extensive technical analysis of the intricacies of the passage (see Bennetch 1949; Roberts 1961; Miller 1965; House 1980; Goodrick 1982), no consensus has emerged.

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[2] Insofar as it affects the interpretation of the text, this study accepts the traditional view of the authorship, date, and occasion of the Pastoral Epistles, i.e. 2 Timothy was written by Paul to Timothy shortly before the apostle's death. The traditional view continues to be ably defended by scholars such as Guthrie (1990; 1996), Knight (1992; 1995), Mounce (2000), Fairbairn (2002), Carson and Moo (2005), and Towner (2006; cf. 1994).

The word γραφή occurs 50 times in the Greek New Testament (NA27). Although in extra biblical Greek it could refer simply to a piece of writing (BDAG, s.v. §1), in the New Testament it is a technical term for 'sacred scripture' (§2). Among the 50 occurrences, 30 are singular, typically referring to an individual passage from the Old Testament, although there are some passages in which it appears to be a collective singular alluding to 'scripture as a whole' (§2bβ). Regardless of how the relationship between γραφή and θεόπνευστος is interpreted (see below), γραφή alone refers to sacred, inspired writings.

The obvious referent of γραφή is the Old Testament. This is strengthened by the fact that verses 16-17 are an amplification of what Paul said about value of 'the sacred writings' (τὰ ἱερὰ γράμματα, v. 15), an unambiguous reference to the Old Testament as a collection.

Might Paul have included completed parts the New Testament in his conception of 'scripture'? Forty-seven of the 50 occurrences of γραφή refer unambiguously and exclusively to the Old Testament. Two, however, hint that the teachings of Christ and the writings of Paul were already considered as 'scripture' in the early decades of the church. First, in 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul writes, 'For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain", and "The worker deserves his wages."' The latter is a verbatim quote from Luke 10:7, which Paul places alongside Deuteronomy 25:4, both in the category of 'the scripture says'. Second, 2 Peter 3:15-16 speaks about how people distort Paul's letters, as they do 'the other scriptures' (τὰς λοιπὰς γραφὰς, v. 16). Thus Peter places Paul's letters among the scriptures. 'Since the early church viewed the words of Jesus as fully authoritative, it would not have been a large step for the early Christians to accept the writings of his apostles as equally authoritative with the OT' (Mounce 2000:569).

Moller (2008:66-68) draws attention to Timothy's familiarity with Paul and his gospel. Timothy is mentioned by name in ten of Paul's letters, and would have been intimately acquainted with Paul's claims regarding the divine origin of his message (e.g. Gal. 1:11-12; Eph. 3:1-13). Paul claimed to be an authoritative interpreter of the new revelation which came through Jesus Christ. There is every chance that Timothy could think of some of his writings as being 'scripture'. It does not seem a stretch to imagine that Paul and Timothy might have conceived of extant portions of the New Testament as scripture.

In any event, the point is somewhat moot, as Knight (1992:448) explains well:

> Looking at the question from a later historical perspective, it can be said that the unqualified statement that 'all scripture is God-breathed' would apply to all the writings that belong to the category of γραφή, including those that were not extant when Paul wrote. Paul's statement is not that 'these' certain writings are God-breathed and no others, but that 'all' γραφή are God-breathed. The way in which he makes this affirmation gives us warrant to relate that truth to 'all' of the NT, since it is recognized to be γραφή (cf. 2 Pet. 3:16-17, where this has already taken place in the NT age).

We can therefore conclude that γραφή in verse 16 refers explicitly to the Old Testament, and perhaps implicitly to extant portions of the New Testament which were known and accepted at the time of writing. By implication, it can be applied to the whole Bible, since the later New Testament writings were also divinely inspired γραφαί (Stark 1970:5; Grudem 1994:74; Mounce 2000:569).

Goodrick (1982:481-483) includes an excellent discussion of whether only the autographs can be called γραφή, showing that both *copies* and *translations* are referred to as 'scripture'. 'Several times in the NT the Bible-in-hand is inescapably identified as *graphē*' (p. 482; e.g. Luke 4:21; John 5:39; Acts 8:32; 17:2, 11). In each of these cases, Jesus and the New Testament writers referred to existing copies of the Old Testament writings as γραφαί. Goodrick also points out that there are fourteen times when the New Testament quotes from the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, yet explicitly identifies the source as γραφαί. Goodrick's conclusions are worth quoting:

> 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 (p. 482).

> 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 (p. 483).

We may conclude that Paul's reference to 'scripture' in 2 Timothy 3:16 refers primarily to the Old Testament, but by extension applies equally to the New Testament. Furthermore, it is proper to consider both copies and translations

as inspired scriptures, while recognizing that in so doing we are referring to their true character rather than their absolute character.

In the singular, πᾶς typically means *every*, 'emphasizing the individual members of the class denoted by the noun' (BDAG, s.v. πᾶς, §1). This is especially so when it modifies an anarthrous noun. Thus 'every scripture' would ordinarily be the expected translation. If γραφή is understood as a collective noun referring to the scripture as a collection, then 'all' or 'the whole' becomes the natural rendering. Roberts's (1961:35) claim that the singular γραφή 'is always used of the individual passage and never in the collective sense' is overstated. Among the 30 singular occurrences of γραφή, John 20:9, Galatians 3:22, and 2 Peter 1:20 clearly refer to 'scripture' as a collective, while John 2:22, 10:35, and 17:12 might also be interpreted this way. When the singular ἡ γραφή refers to a specific scripture, the context makes this clear. So it remains quite possible that πᾶσα γραφή in 2 Timothy 3:16 is an elaboration of 'the sacred writings' (τὰ ἱερὰ γράμματα) in verse 15, and should be understood as 'all scripture'. While 'every scripture' seems the more natural reading of the Greek text in isolation, the way Paul elaborates about the uses of scripture later in verse 16 suggests that he was thinking of 'all scripture', since it is 'all scripture' which achieves the four purposes he lists; it would not be true to claim that 'every scripture' can achieve all four. At the end of the day, it matters little since 'if "every scripture" is inspired, then "all scripture" must be inspired also' (Hendriksen 1957:301).

Θεόπνευστος is a rare word, used only here in the New Testament, and seldom in the centuries following. Unfortunately, we must resort to etymology to understand such rare words. Θεόπνευστος is a combination of the noun θέος ('God'), the verb πνέω ('to breath [out]'), and the adjectival suffix -τος. Zodhiates (2000:§2315) suggests 'the formation of the word should be traced to *empnéō*, inspire (Acts 9:1), urged by the *pneúma*', here the Spirit of God. The challenge is to understand the relationship between the nominal and verbal roots. Does scripture breathe out God (active sense)? Or did God breath out scripture (passive sense)? Barth's view (in Runia 1962:131) that it means both—God breathed out the scriptures and the scriptures breath out God—may may well be theologically true, but it is not exegetically valid for those committed to single-sense, author-intended interpretation. This question can be answered with a high degree of confidence. Compound verbal adjectives beginning with θεο- and ending in -τος follow a distinct pattern. The ending -τος is suffixed to the aorist passive stem, and θέος serves as the agent of the verbal action (see House 1980:57-58; Goodrick 1982:484; Mounce 2000:566). This favours the passive sense. The idea is analogous to 2 Peter 1:21, namely, the Holy Spirit breathed out the scriptures.

Now, is θεόπνευστος attributive, meaning 'every God-breathed scripture', or predicative, 'every scripture is God-breathed'? Roberts (1961) strains to show that in all twenty-one occurrences of πᾶς + noun + adjective (no articles) in the New Testament, the adjective stands in an attributive relationship to the noun. However, his examples are unconvincing since only one[3] occurs in a verbless clause where there is potential for ambiguity; all the others occur with expressed verbs or in prepositional phrases, and are thus of no help in establishing a principle which might apply to 2 Timothy 3:16. Common sense must surely prevail over such attempts to establish a grammatical rule to guide the interpretation of verse 16 (see Goodrick 1982:483). The two adjectives in the expression θεόπνευστος καὶ ὠφέλιμος must surely stand in the same relationship to γραφή, and since ὠφέλιμος is predicative, presumably so is θεόπνευστος. 'Every God-breathed scripture is also profitable' may be grammatically possible, but it feels terribly convoluted. 'Every scripture is God-breathed and profitable' is a much more intuitive reading of the text.[4]

In conclusion, πᾶσα γραφή could mean 'every scripture', but Paul seems to have 'all scripture' in mind. θεόπνευστος is most likely passive in meaning, hence 'God-breathed', and stands in a predicate relationship to γραφή. Therefore, 'all scripture is God-breathed' is the likeliest rendering in English.

3. The functions of scripture

Owing partly to their ambiguities and largely to modern interest in the inspiration of scripture, most scholarly debate has focused on the first three words of verse 16, namely, πᾶσα γραφὴ θεόπνευστος. Paul's own emphasis, however, is on the rest of the passage. The inspiration of scripture was not disputed. Paul's aim was not to assert the inspiration of the scriptures, but to elucidate the value of the inspired scriptures. In his opening assertion, the stress falls not on θεόπνευστος ('God-breathed'), but on ὠφέλιμος ('useful'); not on God's inspiration of the scriptures, but on his intention for them.

The semantic relationship between the two adjectives in the assertion 'every scripture is God-breathed and useful' is one of grounds-INFERENCE. The scriptures are useful *because* they are God-breathed. We could paraphrase: 'Every scripture is God-breathed; therefore, every scripture is useful …'. Proof that the focus is on scripture's usefulness lies in the fourfold elaboration of its usefulness:

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[3] That is, one other than 2 Timothy 3:16.
[4] I should hasten to add that although I believe in the plenary, verbal inspiration of the scriptures and the inerrancy of the autographs, I do not consider 'every God-breathed scripture' as an assault on the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.

> Every scripture is useful
>> for teaching
>> for rebuking
>> for correcting
>> for training   in righteousness

The Greek text has a fourfold repetition of πρός with the accusative. Here πρός functions as a marker of purpose (Louw and Nida 1989:§89.60), signalling the immediate purposes of the inspired scriptures; the ultimate purpose is indicated by the ἵνα clause in verse 17. Since a single πρός followed by four nouns would suffice to convey the basic meaning, repeating 'for' with each noun is rhetorically significant. It serves to focus attention individually on each function of the inspired scriptures (Goodrick 1982:485).

The four immediate purposes are akin to four functions or uses of scripture. *Teaching* (διδασκαλία; 15 times in the Pastoral Epistles) refers to the content of sound doctrine. Scripture is useful for instructing people in correct beliefs because it contains revealed truth. The meaning of *rebuking* (ἐλεγμός) and *correcting* (ἐπανόρθωσις) is difficult to pinpoint, since both terms occur only here in the New Testament. Büschel (1995:222) suggests that ἐλεγμός means 'the rebuking of the sinner', while Preisker (1995:727) interprets ἐπανόρθωσις as '"amendment," i.e. the restoration that means salvation'. However, Knight's (1992:449) proposal seems more promising. He suggests that the four commands in 4:2 correspond to the four functions in 3:16.

1 Timothy 3:16	1 Timothy 4:2
for teaching	preach the word
for rebuking (ἐλεγμός)	rebuke (ἐλέγχω)
for correcting	correct
for training in righteousness	exhort

If this mapping of terms is correct, then *rebuking* refers to 'correcting error', while *correcting* is 'most likely with reference to conduct' (Knight 1992:449). Thus the scriptures are useful for correcting both doctrinal and behavioural error. *Training in righteousness* (παιδείαν τὴν ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ) denotes guiding believers regarding how to live righteously.

Therefore, the four functions of scripture form a chiastic quartet in which the first two deal with belief and the last two with behaviour, the frames being positive and the centre negative. This is a graphic portrayal of these observations:

A	*teaching*	right belief	positive
	B	*rebuking*	wrong belief	negative
	B`	*correcting*	wrong behaviour	negative
A`	*training*	right behaviour	positive

'The profit of Scripture relates to both creed and conduct' (Stott 1984:103). The NEB paraphrase captures the sense quite well: 'for teaching the truth and refuting error, for reformation of manners and discipline in right living'.

4. The purpose of scripture

The ultimate purpose of scripture is expressed by the telic ἵνα clause in verse 17: 'so that the man of God may be *competent, equipped* for every good work' (ESV, emphasis added).[5] The primary reason God inspired the scriptures, according to these verses, is to equip his people for life and service. The major stress does not fall on the four functions (intermediate purposes) of scripture. Timothy is to keep his priorities in order. Preaching the scriptures is not an end in itself; equipping people for every good work is central. The word of God is given for the benefit of the man of God.

In preaching and teaching this verse, we often inadvertently put a period after verse 16, implying that God inspired the scriptures so that we might teach, rebuke, correct, and train. In so doing, we confuse the intermediate purposes (functions) for the main purpose, and misrepresent Paul's meaning.

The statement of ultimate purpose in verse 17 consists of a main (ἵνα) clause, amplified by an attendant circumstance participial clause. The word order of the two clauses is carefully crafted to draw attention to a play on the cognate words ἄρτιος and ἐξαρτίζω. In the Greek text, ἄρτιος is displaced to the front of the first clause, and ἐξηρτισμένος to the end of the sentence. Their displacement not only sets them positions of prominence, but also creates a frame around the ἵνα clause.

ἵνα **ἄρτιος** ᾖ ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ ἄνθρωπος
πρὸς πᾶν ἔργον ἀγαθὸν **ἐξηρτισμένος**.

The two focal words are cognate terms. The verb ἐξαρτίζω is formed from the preposition ἐκ the adjective ἄρτιος (Strong 1996:§1822). Both terms describe

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[5] An alternate interpretation takes the ἵνα clause as expressing the result of scripture's usefulness in believers' lives. On this interpretation, the four πρός phrases express the purpose of the scriptures, and ἵνα the result of their usefulness.

'the man of God' as being prepared, equipped, or competent for a task or function.

The exact phrase 'every good work' (πᾶν ἔργον ἀγαθὸν) also occurs in 1 Timothy 5:10, 2 Timothy 2:21, and Titus 3:1 in the Pastorals. The plural 'good works' (ἔργων ἀγαθῶν) is found in 1 Timothy 2:10. Throughout the Pastoral Epistles, ἔργον ἀγαθὸν is used interchangeably with forms of ἔργον καλόν (see 1 Tim. 5:10), which are found in 1 Timothy 3:1, 5:10, 5:25, and 6:18, and in Titus 2:7, 2:14, 3:1, 3:8, and 3:14. In all instances (except 1 Tim. 3:1), 'good works' refers to exemplary conduct befitting a person's duties towards God and others. The point in 1 Timothy 3:16-17 is that the scriptures equip the man of God to do what God wants in all circumstances; they equip him by instructing him as to what God expects (Knight 1992:450). Since the entire paragraph from 3:10 is addressed to Timothy (see the σὺ δέ in verses 10 and 14), the immediate referent of subject 'the man of God' must be Timothy himself, but the truth expressed is equally true for all God's people.
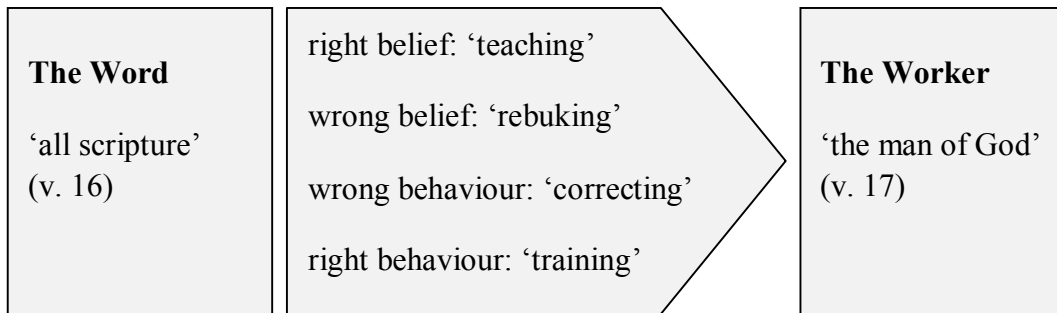
In summary, then, the primary purpose for which God gave the inspired the scriptures was to equip his people for every good work. The scriptures reveal his will to his people, thereby equipping them to do what pleases him.

5. Conclusion

It is likely that the phrase πᾶσα γραφὴ θεόπνευστος means 'all scripture is God-breathed', declaring scripture collectively to be inspired by God. Whereas modern debate rages around the inspiration of scripture, this was not a point of dispute in Paul's day. His emphasis lies not so much on declaring scripture to be inspired, as on outlining the functions and purpose of inspired scripture. In other words, his stress falls less on *God-breathed* than on *profitable*. The ultimate purpose for which God inspired the scriptures was to equip his people for good works. The scriptures achieve this equipping by teaching people what they should and should not believe, and how they should and should not behave.

The following diagram, which has been adapted from Wilkinson (1988), sums up the conclusions of the preceding analysis. The Word is given to equip the worker. It does so by providing God's instruction regarding belief and behaviour.

The Word	right belief: 'teaching'	The Worker
'all scripture' (v. 16)	wrong belief: 'rebuking' wrong behaviour: 'correcting' right behaviour: 'training'	'the man of God' (v. 17)

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