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# The Inerrancy of the Breath of God: An Examination of the Bible's Claim to Inerrancy

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## Introduction

As the 2018 State of Theology survey reports, wide-spread uncertainty exists inside and outside of the church regarding the extent of the truthfulness of Scripture. While evangelical organizations such as the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy have adamantly insisted on the total inerrancy of the Bible since 1978, recent studies show that only half of a random sampling of American adults believe in such a doctrine today. Consequently, disagreement over this issue causes many to doubt whether the Bible should have any authority in a person's life at all, or any influence in the public square. However, as the Scriptures assert, the Bible is God's Word and therefore entirely inerrant because God is not capable of falsehood or error. This truth, as the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy asserts, will be further discussed along with America's current position on inerrancy. After this, the Bible itself will be examined to see what it says in its own defense before drawing a number of practical implications from the doctrine of inerrancy.

### **A Survey of Current Opinions About the Bible and Inerrancy**

Between April 24 and May 4, 2018, the before mentioned nationwide survey was conducted in order "to measure the current theological awareness of adult Americans."<sup>1</sup> As part of that survey, participants were asked a host of questions pertaining to what they believe about the truthfulness, or inerrancy, of the Bible. According to the survey, which questioned a

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<sup>1</sup> "2018 State of American Theology Study Research Report," *Lifeway Research*, 2018, accessed November 3, 2018, <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Ligonier-State-of-Theology-2018-White-Paper.pdf>.

“demographically balanced” group of 3,002 American adults,<sup>2</sup> 50% of those surveyed agreed that “the Bible is 100% accurate in all that it teaches,” while 41% disagreed and 9% were unsure.<sup>3</sup> When asked if “the Bible has the authority to tell us what we must do” 54% agreed, 38% disagreed and 8% were unsure.<sup>4</sup>

To help explain this divide, the survey proceeded to ask questions regarding the overall content of the Bible. To the statement “modern science disproves the Bible” 37% of those surveyed agreed, while 48% disagreed and 15% were unsure.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in response to the statement “the Bible, like all sacred writings, contains helpful accounts of ancient myths but is not literally true,” 48% agreed, while 43% disagreed and 9% were unsure.<sup>6</sup> With such findings as these, it is no wonder that opinions were equally mixed when questions arose in the survey about other issues such as God, sin, Christ, the church and the afterlife. However, findings such as these regarding the truthfulness of Scripture should come as no surprise since evidence of disunity on this issue, even in the church, can be traced back as early as the Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy**

Though this may be the most recent survey of its kind, its findings are by no means new. In fact, roughly 40 years ago, divisiveness over the issue of biblical inerrancy became so apparent in the evangelical church that an international council was formed in order to “win

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 104.

Christians to the view that inerrancy is true and important.”<sup>8</sup> This organization, known as the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, existed from 1977 to 1987 and in October 1978 they drafted a document called the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy which helped clarify for the world mainline evangelicalism’s position on biblical inerrancy. What is particularly special about this document is that 240 committee members from around the world signed it upon its completion, making it a widely agreed upon and authoritative resource for understanding the issue. In short, the document says that inerrancy “signifies the quality of being free from all falsehood or mistake”<sup>9</sup> and, according to Article XII “Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit.”<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, Article XIII goes on to say that while the Bible does regularly make use of estimations, observational descriptions of nature, and report falsehoods, all while at times using imperfect grammar, these imprecisions in no way violate the principles of inerrancy. Some suggest that, given all these qualifications, the word “inerrancy” cannot appropriately be applied to the Scriptures. However, as R. C. Sproul has said in defense of the term “inerrancy” in his commentary on the Chicago Statement, “such qualifications do not negate the value of the word but only serve to sharpen its precision and usefulness.”<sup>11</sup>

In light of such wide-spread uncertainty regarding the truthfulness of Scripture, and with popular evangelicalism’s insistence upon the inerrancy of the entire Bible, it is now appropriate

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<sup>8</sup> R. A. Peterson, “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” *EDT* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 226.

<sup>9</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Can I Trust the Bible?*, Vol. 2, The Crucial Questions Series (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009), xxv.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-47.

to look at the Scriptures to see what they have to say for themselves. Since scholars most often cite 2 Timothy 3:16a as the most straightforward claim to biblical inspiration and inerrancy in the entire Bible, it will be the primary focus of this investigation.<sup>12</sup> What follows will be an examination of the text in its original language after a brief introduction to its historical context to determine if this verse actually intends to suggest that all of the Bible is “God-breathed” and therefore inerrant as popular evangelicalism claims.

### **An Examination of 2 Timothy 3:16a**

#### The Historical Context

Paul writes 2 Timothy to his disciple Timothy while under Roman custody, not expecting to survive this imprisonment as he had once before. As many commentators observe, this is Paul’s final letter, and some consider it to be a “last will and testament” of sorts.

The closeness of Paul and Timothy’s relationship is well documented throughout the New Testament and is evidenced by the fact that Paul affectionately refers to Timothy as his son (1 Cor. 4:17) and by the fact that Timothy wrote letters on Paul’s behalf while spending time with him during his first Roman imprisonment (Phil. 1:1, Col 1:1). In this letter Paul bares his heart, expressing to Timothy his primary concerns as he sees the end of his life approaching. Paul conveys to Timothy that while false teachers run rampant throughout the church, and while many of his co-workers have abandoned him, he expects Timothy to remain faithful to the teaching he received, and to stand firm against the growing tide of unrighteousness that rises against him. While giving Timothy this final charge, he encourages Timothy by reminding him that he is equipped with everything he needs to complete this task in the divinely inspired Scriptures which have been taught to him since his infancy (2 Tim. 3:14-17).

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<sup>12</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *2 Timothy*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 137.

Encouragement is without question the intent of the verse being examined here, however, roughly two millennia later, scholars are calling into question the content of this encouraging statement. Does Paul mean to express to Timothy that all the texts referred to as Scripture are “God-breathed” and profitable? Alternatively, does Paul mean to express that only the inspired Scriptures are profitable while the uninspired ones are not? Did Paul believe in such a thing as uninspired Scripture? These questions and others will be the focus of the paragraphs that follow.

### An Examination of “Scripture”

The first portion of 2 Tim. 3:16a to be examined is its subject, which the NIV and others render as “Scripture” namely, the word *graphē*. In secular Greek, this term refers to various types of writing, from letters or business records to pictures or other types of art,<sup>13</sup> so the question must be asked, what is Paul referring to here? A clue to its meaning comes from the way *graphē* is used throughout the New Testament. In the New Testament *graphē* is most frequently used to refer to the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) especially those passages that have been fulfilled (i.e. John 19:36; Acts 1:16).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in the verse immediately preceding 3:16, Paul is doubtlessly speaking about the Hebrew Scriptures (though he uses another term, *hiera grammata*) which have been making Timothy wise for salvation in Jesus Christ since his infancy (2 Tim. 3:15). Therefore, given the immediate context and the uniform use of the word in the New Testament it is reasonable to determine that “Scripture” is what is being spoken about here.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 129.

<sup>14</sup> Douglas Mangum, Derek R. Brown, Rachel Klippenstein, and Rebekah Hurst, eds. *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), Logos Edition.

<sup>15</sup> Donald Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, Vol. 14, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 181.

## An Examination of “God-Breathed”

The next term to be examined in this phrase is the adjective used to describe Scripture, namely *theopneustos*. While this term is more commonly translated as “inspired” by most Bible translations, the NIV’s translation “God-breathed” is more faithful to the original language and does a better job conveying the force behind the term.<sup>16</sup> In Greek, *theopneustos* is a combination of two words<sup>17</sup> and was likely coined by Paul<sup>18</sup> since it is not found in Greek writing until after this letter.<sup>19</sup> As John Stott explains, the implication of this term is that Scripture was not written and then breathed into by God, nor were its human authors “breathed into” as they wrote, but the Scriptures themselves came into existence as God figuratively exhaled them.<sup>20</sup>

When it comes to the term *theopneustos* commentators agree that what Paul intends to express by the word is divine inspiration, however, they disagree over the placement of the word. As Robert Wall and Richard Steele explain, because this phrase is missing a verb, *theopneustos* could technically be translated as an attributive adjective (All God-breathed Scripture) or a predicative adjective (All Scripture is God-breathed).<sup>21</sup> This is a significant issue because the placement of the adjective greatly affects what Paul is saying. Does Paul say that all Scripture is

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<sup>16</sup> Walter L. Liefeld, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 279.

<sup>17</sup> Aída Besançon Spencer, *2 Timothy and Titus: A New Covenant Commentary*, Edited by Michael F. Bird and Craig Keener, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 130.

<sup>18</sup> Ceslas Spicq and James D. Ernest, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 193.

<sup>19</sup> Andreas Köstenberger, *Commentary on 1-2 Timothy and Titus*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), Kindle Edition, 5281 of 24816.

<sup>20</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Gospel the Message of 2 Timothy*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 101.

<sup>21</sup> Robert W. Wall and Richard B. Steele, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 274.

God-breathed or is he speaking with Timothy about only those Scriptures that are God-breathed while implying that some Scripture is not God-breathed? While arguments exist on both sides of the debate, the most persuasive are those for the former for the following reasons. First, Paul would likely not refer to “inspired” Scripture because that is a double limitation<sup>22</sup> since a document would not be considered Scripture unless it was believed to be inspired. Second, if some Scriptures were inspired while others were not, how was Timothy (or anyone else) supposed to differentiate between the two?<sup>23</sup> Finally, the most persuasive argument against making *theopneustos* attributive is that it does not do justice to the word *kai* (and) which is found between “God-breathed” and “profitable.” As Stott explains, “This ‘and’ suggests that Paul is asserting two truths about Scripture, namely that it is both inspired *and* profitable, not merely one. For this reason, we should render the sentence: ‘all Scripture is God-inspired and profitable’.”<sup>24</sup>

#### An Examination of “All”

To further convey the extent of the inspiration of Scripture Paul precedes the term *graphē* (Scripture) with the term *pasa* (translated “all” in the NIV). According to commentators, the term *pasa*, when lacking a definite article, usually suggests that the ideal translation is “every” rather than “all”<sup>25</sup> however, there are multiple exceptions to this rule where “all” is clearly preferred (Acts 2:36, Eph. 2:21; 3:15; Col. 4:12).<sup>26</sup> As a result, Thomas Lea and Hayne Griffin agree that

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<sup>22</sup> Stott, *Guard the Gospel*, 100.

<sup>23</sup> MacArthur, *2 Timothy*, 142.

<sup>24</sup> Stott, *Guard the Gospel*, 101.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, Vol. 34, The New American Commentary (Nashville: TN Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 235.

<sup>26</sup> Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, 181.

“‘all’ seems preferable, but the meaning comes out similarly with either translation. If we affirm that each part of Scripture is inspired, we come eventually to assert that its entire content is inspired.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, if the term previously examined (*theopneustos*) is meant to be applied to Scripture then translating *pasa* as “all” or “every” is inconsequential. What is of consequence however, is what Paul was referencing when he spoke of “all Scripture.” Was Paul referring strictly to the Hebrew Scriptures or did he also have in mind at least some of the writings referred to now as the New Testament?

Commentators disagree as to whether or not Paul means to include New Testament documents when he speaks of “all Scripture” here. Some make the point that, historically speaking, Paul must have been talking about the Old Testament only because there was no agreed upon New Testament canon at the time.<sup>28</sup> However, as others observe, there is evidence to the possibility that Paul may have had New Testament documents in mind as well. One such evidence is found in Paul’s first letter to Timothy where he refers Timothy back to “Scripture” and quotes a verse from Deuteronomy and the Gospel of Luke (1 Tim. 5:18). Additionally, while Paul never directly referred to his epistles as Scripture, he came close to it by claiming to speak the Word of God (1 Thess. 2:13) with the authority of Christ (2 Cor. 2:17).<sup>29</sup> When that is added to the fact that Peter considered Paul’s letters Scripture (2 Pet. 3:16) one is left with the impression that, though the New Testament was not yet complete, those documents that were complete were intended to be considered God’s Word along with the Old Testament.

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<sup>27</sup> Lea, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 235.

<sup>28</sup> Linda Belleville, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews*, Vol. 17 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 197.

<sup>29</sup> Stott, *Guard the Gospel*, 101.

To help clarify this issue B. B. Warfield reminds his readers that the church did not appear on its own but was instead founded by Christ and those he put in authority to carry his word to the ends of the earth. From the beginning the church had Scriptures, though at first only in the form of the Old Testament. However, as doctrines were taught, recorded and distributed, they were immediately considered to be as authoritative as the Scriptures. This is demonstrated by a number of biblical and extra-biblical writings.<sup>30</sup>

### **Assuming Inerrancy Based on Inspiration**

After realizing that the Bible is “God-breathed” in all of its parts, the inerrancy of the Scriptures is assumed because of the character of the God who spoke them.<sup>31</sup> As it says in Deuteronomy 32:4, the next verse to be examined, God “is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just.” Furthermore, he is “a faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he” (NIV).

### **Moses’ Teaching on the Dependability of God**

#### The Historical Context of Deuteronomy 32:4

In its context, Moses spoke this verse to his people on the eve of his death, after journeying through the desert with them for several decades.<sup>32</sup> Knowing the nature and history of his people, Moses spoke these words between a prophecy of the Levites’ apostasy (31:24-29) and a rebuke of Israel’s “foolish and unwise behavior” (32:5-6). As John Calvin observes, Moses spoke Deuteronomy 32:4 “before he begins to treat of the wicked ingratitude of the people” to

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<sup>30</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Canon of the New Testament: How and When Formed* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1892), 5-9.

<sup>31</sup> John M. Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 68.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

demonstrate to them “that they were not induced to transfer their affections elsewhere by any deficiency in God.”<sup>33</sup>

#### An Examination of Deuteronomy 32:4

Moses begins this verse with a metaphor to emphasize the strength and dependability of God by referring to Him as “the Rock” (*šûr*).<sup>34</sup> According to Moses, God has proven himself to be “the Rock” because of the nature of both His “works” (*pōāl*) and “ways” (*děřěķ*). The first term, *pōāl*, references God’s deeds or actions, and the second, *děřěķ*, speaks of God’s behavior.<sup>35</sup> “His works,” says Moses, are *tāmîm*, that is, “complete” and “without blemish,” or “perfect” as the NIV renders it,<sup>36</sup> “and all His ways” are *mišpāṭ*, or “judicially favorable.”<sup>37</sup>

To further underscore God’s trustworthiness, Moses repeats himself in poetic fashion, saying that He is “a faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he” (NIV). The first adjective, which the NIV translates as “faithful,” is *ēmûnâ* in the original language, and this refers to God’s dependability, just as the Rock metaphor did in the first half of the verse.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, the terms translated “does no wrong, upright and just” also highlight what was said in the first half of the verse.

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<sup>33</sup> John Calvin and Charles William Bingham, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010) 338.

<sup>34</sup> Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1987) 889.

<sup>35</sup> James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997) Logos Edition.

<sup>36</sup> James Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009) 125.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>38</sup> Edward J. Woods, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, Edited by David G. Firth, Vol. 5, The Tyndale Commentary Series (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011) 309.

The phrase “does no wrong” is the NIV’s translation of the two Hebrew words *āyin* and *āwēl*. In the original language *āyin* is “a marker of negation in a declaration or proposition”<sup>39</sup> and *āwēl* can be defined as persons, actions or behaviors that are contrary to a standard.<sup>40</sup> To translate this phrase another way, Moses says that God is “without injustice” as a way of conversely emphasizing that “his works are perfect, and all his ways are just.” Then, just before addressing Israel’s corruption, Moses further asserts God’s worthiness by using the terms *šāddîq* (“upright”) and *yāšār* (“just”) both of which speak of something that is “proper according to a standard.”<sup>41</sup>

By repeating himself in this fashion, Moses emphasizes that God “does no wrong” either maliciously or unintentionally, because He is “perfect” in “all his ways.” For Israel, this meant that God was worthy of their unwavering trust and loyalty and undeserving of their chronic unfaithfulness. Today, the implications of this verse are the same, and as “God’s breath” the Bible is worthy of that same trust and loyalty. In short, God’s Word is entirely trustworthy because God is entirely trustworthy. Indeed, to question the trustworthiness of the Word of God is to question the integrity or ability of God to give revelation that is trustworthy.<sup>42</sup>

### **The Practical Implications of an Inerrant Bible**

In conclusion, it is now appropriate to discuss the importance of attributing inerrancy to the Bible. As many Christian scholars admit, a belief in inerrancy is not required for salvation,<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages*, Logos Edition.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Matthew M. Barrett, *God’s Word Alone – The Authority of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 273.

<sup>43</sup> Barrett, *God’s Word Alone*, 297.

so why should anyone continue to hold to inerrancy even against apparent evidence to the contrary? The answer is simple. If the Bible contained even one error then that means that God has erred and therefore cannot be trusted to fulfill even one of His promises.

Additionally, an inaccurate Bible would mean that a higher standard of truth existed above God and He failed to keep it.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, if the Bible were not inerrant then mankind would be hopelessly lost and not have a reliable guide for understanding the most important issues in life. However, if the Bible is completely inerrant, as it claims to be, then it is vitally relevant for every part of a person's life.

Since the Bible speaks to every stage of life, every emotion felt, every significant responsibility, and contains the knowledge necessary for salvation, it can be trusted and applied as no other resource can. Indeed, if the Bible is what it claims to be, then it is a light, a guide (Ps. 119:105), and even a source of life (Matt. 4:4) in an otherwise dark, misguided, and dying world (John 3:19).

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<sup>44</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 100.

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