

The God-Breathed Scriptures

“Inspired by God”

By Richie Temple

The truth of the Bible is self-evident for those who read it with a heartfelt desire to know and live for God. There is a very simple reason for this. As the Bible states and confirms time after time throughout its pages, “all Scripture is God-breathed” or “inspired by God” (II Tim. 3:16). This, however, is not the general view of Western intellectual society today. One example will suffice.

Yesterday’s mail brought to us our weekly edition of *The Economist*, my favorite news magazine on current events and international affairs. It is a British publication that I’ve been reading for over 25 years beginning in my college days when I studied history and international relations. Since it is in good “Oxbridge” style I find it very informative not only about world events, but also about the English language. However, occasionally it veers off into making comments about spiritual and religious matters. When this occurs it usually can be counted on to echo the usual anti-Christian sentiments of Western intellectual skepticism and secularism. Yesterday’s issue was no exception to this rule. It contained the review of a new book entitled *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason*. The review begins with the following statement,

“This book will strike a cord with anyone who has ever pondered the irrationality of religious faith and its cruel and murderous consequences...”

It then goes on to say in words that typify the entire book that

“The least educated person among us simply knows more about certain

matters than anyone did 2000 years ago – and much of this knowledge is incompatible with scripture.”

Such statements, though common enough in intellectual circles, betray a predetermined bias that sees what it wants to see, rather than engaging in a sincere search for truth. Such statements reveal more about the people speaking them than about the Bible itself. My own personal experience would be the exact opposite of this statement because the more I’ve learned and experienced in life, the more I’ve become convinced of the truth of the Scriptures. More importantly, however, such statements also contradict the personal and collective experience of millions of Christians through the centuries – educated and uneducated - who have received comfort, strength and spiritual guidance from the self-evident truth of the “God-breathed Scriptures.”

But what does the Bible mean by the phrase “God-breathed”? Is it to be taken literally as though God literally breathed his word into the scriptures, such as through human agents by means of inspired dictation? Or is it meant to be taken figuratively to simply describe inspiration from God in a more general way as he inspires the biblical writers through his Spirit and guides the process of forming the Bible through his providential care. Here we touch on an important matter in anyone’s search for biblical truth because any close reading of the Scriptures themselves will show that the latter option is the *only* sense in which the Bible can correctly be said to be “God-breathed.” Though the Greek word *theopneustos* can be literally and correctly translated as “God-breathed” as the NIV does in II Tim. 3:16, a comparison of major English Bible translations throughout the centuries will show that translators have always understood this phrase in the less literal sense of “inspired by God” and that this translation best conveys the *meaning* of the phrase. Compare the following:

“*All scripture is inspired by God*”
(Wycliff Bible, the first major English
NT translation from Latin, in the year
c. 1380-83)

“*All scripture is inspired by God*”
(William Tyndale, the first major
English NT translation from Greek, in
1525-6)

“*All scripture is inspired by God*”
(Miles Coverdale, 1535)

“*All scripture is inspired by God*” (The
Great Bible, 1539)

“*All Scripture is given by inspiration of
God*” (The King James Version, 1611)

“*All scripture is inspired by God*”
(Revised Standard Version, 1952)

“*All scripture is inspired by God*”
(Phillips Modern English, 1957)

“***Every inspired scripture***” (The New
English Bible, 1961, and its revision,
The Revised English Bible, 1989)

“*All Scripture is inspired by God*”
(Today’s English Version or Good News
For Modern Man, 1966)

“*All scripture is inspired by God*”
(Jerusalem Bible, 1966, and its revision, the
New Jerusalem Bible, 1985)

“**All Scripture is God-breathed**” (The
New International Version, 1972)

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of
God” (New King James Version, 1979)

“All scripture is inspired by God” (The
New Revised Standard Version, 1990)

“**All Scripture is breathed out by
God**” (English Standard Version, 2001)

There is an obvious consistency in these
versions over the centuries in translating
“inspired by God”, or some close variant, rather

than the very literal “God-breathed” (NIV) or
“breathed out” (ESV). Though both of the latter
translations are literally correct, they can imply
something that the Greek word does not actually
convey in its New Testament *meaning* and
usage. It is especially surprising that the NIV
would translate this word so literally given its
translation philosophy of placing meaning over
form when necessary. For further insight on the
meaning of this word *The New International
Dictionary of New Testament Theology* explains
the meaning of the Greek word *theopneustos* as
follows:

“The adjective *theopneustos* means
literally “God-breathed”. It does not
imply any particular mode of inspiration,
such as some form of divine dictation.
Nor does it imply the suspension of the
normal cognitive faculties of the human
authors. On the other hand, it does
imply something quite different from
poetic inspiration. It is wrong to omit
the divine element from the term implied
by theo-, as the NEB [and REB] does in
rendering the phrase “every inspired
scripture”. The expression clearly does
not imply some Scriptures are inspired,
whilst others are not. The sacred
scriptures are all expressive of the mind
of God; but they are so with a view to
their practical outworking in life.”
[NIDNTT, Vol. 3, p. 491, ed. Colin
Brown].

It is, of course, incorrect to think that the
Bible must be literal throughout for it to be true
throughout. No language or literature anywhere
in the world, or at any time in history, works
this way. It is simply the nature of language and
literature that truth can be conveyed in both a
straightforward literal form or in a variety of
figurative forms. Given our limitations as
human beings, figurative language, which we
use throughout every day, is many times the
best way to convey truth because it allows us to

present truth in a variety of ways that are more vivid and real to people's experience and understanding than literal language itself. All Scripture is truly "inspired by God" for the Bible is the God-inspired record of God's words and works, written in history, in the words of men. It is, par excellence, the Book of Books and the one book upon which most of that which is good in our Western heritage was built upon.

Unfortunately, a couple of weeks ago I was reminded of the fact that the Bible no longer forms a basis for a common knowledge, language and source of allusion in the Western world as it once did. While teaching a U.S. history class I remarked concerning a specific incident that "the handwriting was on the wall." After noticing many blank faces, I asked how many of them understood this expression. The response, from a class of about twenty 10th graders (ages 15 to 16), was one hand being raised. After further inquiries to find out whether my initial assessment was in fact correct I had no choice but to face an all too common conclusion – knowledge of the Bible is on the way out in American and Western culture. Though my disappointment was abated somewhat by the fact that the one person who did know the allusion knew it well enough to explain it to all her fellow students, such occurrences in which knowledge of the Bible is shown to be practically nil amongst a large portion of American youth have become the norm. This, of course, is a great loss not only to the future well being of our society in a spiritual sense but also simply from the point of view of understanding our Western heritage, and for those of us who are Americans, U.S. history itself – a history founded upon and built upon truths found in the Bible.

In fact, no other book in history has had the profound effect on Western society that the Bible has had. Especially, from the Reformation of the 16th century to the mid-20th

century the Bible held a unique position as the common fountainhead of truth, wisdom and allusion for all aspects of life for much of the Western world. In his book *From Dawn to Decadence: Five Hundred Years of Western Cultural Life*, Jacques Barzun described this position the Bible once held:

"The Bible was a whole literature, a library. It was an anthology of poetry and short stories. It taught history, biography, biology, geography, philosophy, political science, psychology, hygiene and sociology (statistical at that), in addition to cosmogony, ethics and theology. What gives the Bible so strong a hold on the minds that once become familiar with its content is its dramatic reporting of human affairs. For all its piety, it presents a worldly panorama, and with particulars so varied that it is hard to think of a domestic or social situation without a biblical example to match and turn to moral ends." (p. 28).

The Bible, of course, remains this same vast anthology of truth today despite its loss of popularity and familiarity in Western culture. In fact, its truth is self-evident to those who desire to know and live for God. No other literature of the world even comes close to matching it. Though many people in religious, academic and education circles talk about "the religions of the world" or "the scriptures of the world's major religions" as though Christianity and the Bible were simply "one religion amongst many other equally good religions" or "one set of holy writings from amongst many other equally holy writings", the truth is that very few of these people have ever actually read any of these other "scriptures", except perhaps, in a very superficial way. Nor do most of these people have anything more than a very peripheral knowledge of the Bible. This is easy to tell for two simple reasons. First, when you listen to such people talk or read their writings the superficiality becomes immediately apparent. And second, when a person gains a

deep knowledge and understanding of the Bible as a whole all other literatures immediately pale in comparison.

The late British biblical scholar F.F. Bruce made this last point very well. Bruce, who was originally educated as a Latin and Greek Classicist before turning strictly to biblical studies, was so highly respected for his knowledge and familiarity with the Bible and other ancient literatures that he at various times held the Presidency of the Society for Old Testament Studies and the Society for New Testament Studies. This is an almost unheard of honor in such highly specialized fields of study. When writing about the preparatory nature of the Old Testament in its relationship to the New Testament in his book *The Books and Parchments: How We Got our English Bible*, he describes the view of some Hindus on this matter:

“On the other hand, the contrary difficulty is experienced in India, one hears, where the Old Testament is uncongenial to the intellectual heritage of educated Hindus. Hindu thought is abstract, impersonal and static, whereas the Old Testament outlook is concrete, personal and dynamic. The Indian sometimes says the Old Testament reflects a morality and a conception of God, which lower than that of the best Indian religion, and asks why the ancient literature of his own people should not play for him the role of gospel preparation, which the Old Testament plays for others. A cursory comparison of even the earliest and purest literary monuments of Indian religion with the Old Testament may well fill one with surprise that such an idea could ever be entertained; but it certainly has been and still is entertained, and not by Indians only. Perhaps it all depends on what one means by “morality” and “religion.” [p. 71].

As one who teaches World history and who is thus expected to have some familiarity with the literature of the world’s ancient

religions I would echo Bruce’s sentiments. I have yet to read any of the world’s ancient “scriptures” apart from the Bible that did not fill me with an abhorrence and distaste for both its religious and moral aspects. For example, this summer I read through the entire *Koran* to prepare myself for the school year. It was a very informative, distasteful and unpleasant experience. That anyone who has read it and is also deeply familiar with the Bible would consider it to be in any way comparable to the Bible would be very surprising to me. It reflects a bizarre religion of bondage, a history of war and oppression and a literature that is full of fables, tales and deceptions. In fact, its style and subject matter fit in well with the fabricated and obviously unbelievable stories of the so-called New Testament Apocrypha which includes such 2nd to 5th century forgeries as *The Gospel of Peter*, *the Gospel of Philip*, etc. - from which the popular fiction novel *The DaVinci Code* draws its false inspiration.

But this last comment is illustrative. It is often said, “a little knowledge of a subject is a dangerous thing.” This is certainly true when it comes to the Bible in general and Christianity specifically. Many people have just enough superficial or peripheral knowledge of these subjects to think that they actually know something about them, yet it is often these same people who would accept *The DaVinci Code’s* assertion that Jesus had a child with Mary Magdalene, simply because such a possibility is alluded to in the so-called *Gospel of Philip* – a non-canonical book - despite the fact that this would be a clear contradiction of the New Testament record itself.

But, in contrast, when the Bible is read deeply and consistently with an open heart the results are almost always dramatic and long lasting in their effect on people’s lives. When the famous Christian writer C.S. Lewis was an atheist at Oxford University in England he began his turn to Christianity when a fellow Oxford atheist told him that the New Testament

documents actually had a high historical reliability. Intrigued, he decided to read the New Testament for himself in the original Greek, which he knew as a Professor of Medieval Literature. What he read shook him to the core because as an expert on literary fables, style and writings he recognized that the Gospels he was reading belonged in a totally

different class. They were eyewitness historical accounts of real events – not fables or tales as he had been taught and heard. Simply put, their power unleashed upon him the conviction that the Bible was “inspired by God”. What followed was the conversion of one of the most influential Christians of the twentieth century.