

# The Living Word

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## Summary

*The Bible, which is indisputable regarded as the inspired word of God, is written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Man, as an earthen vessel, was used by the Holy Spirit to pen the revelation of God's truth in Jesus Christ. The Holy Scriptures are "God breathed" words to the Church and are key in interpreting and fulfilling God's telos for creation. This write-up wishes to emphasize and survey the critical role of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures. Due to the inspiring role of the Spirit, the word of God is not a dead letter, rather a life-giving word that spills new life into the believer and the Church. Precisely this connection of Spirit and letter marks the Holy Scripture as living and active and conveys the desired transformative dimension for the individual believer and the faith community.*

Key words: *Holy Scripture, inspiration, Holy Spirit, God breathed, living, authority, Bible, illumination.*

The notion that words or writings were created under divine action, is found not only in Judaism and Christianity, but also in Islam, Hinduism, classical Greece, and ancient Rome. The term "inspiration" in the Christian realm is understood to mean the special influence of the Spirit of God upon the authors of the biblical texts, so that these texts are indeed the word of God and can be regarded as such. The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, which, according to the faith of the Church, contain divine revelation, have a special character: they are inspired, i.e., their authors were under the charismatic influence of God or the Holy

Spirit. They contain God's word, which was written down by men, and thus, they differ from all other works of world literature. Bloesch, hence, invites theologians today to "recover the paradoxical unity of Word and Spirit, for only on the basis of this unity can Scripture be made to come alive and be a transforming leaven in the life of the church. Scripture in itself is the written Word of God, comprising by virtue of its divine inspiration a reliable witness to the truth revealed by God in Jesus Christ" (Bloesch 1994, 25).

This paper will not only focus its attention briefly on inspiration, but also on the life-giving, illuminating, and sanctifying character of Holy Scriptures due to the action of the Holy Ghost. As inspired, or better yet, God breathed word, do Scriptures have the ability to give life? Do they impact the believer and faith community in a life changing way?

### **God breathed**

Before we go further in our reflections about life giving Scripture, we should examine the "inspired" or "God breathed" factor of Scriptures. The classical doctrine of inspiration lays on the witness of the Old and New Testament. The idea of the spirituality of Scripture, as encountered in 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21, is based on the Old Testament. The prophets appear as tools of the Spirit, and since their word was regarded as the word of God, it was obvious to attribute the same authority to their written tradition (cf. Jer 25:13; 36:1; 45:1; Ezek 11:5). And the more the spoken prophets' words fell silent, the more importance the written words gained (Cranford 1999, 577). Through the writings, the power and Spirit of God were captured and thus were able to have an effect for all times. The writings of the Old Testament were understood by Jesus, Paul, and the evangelists, and by the first Church, as a valid document of God, and as spiritual instructions (Cranford 1999, 577). Thus, if the author of 2 Peter 1:19–21 equates the inscription and prophetic inspiration, he stands in the tradition of Judaism of their times (Sasse 2010, 109–10).

While the passage from 2 Peter aims at the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures<sup>1</sup> (Berkouwer 1975, 142), the Timothy Letter quote is about the effect of Holy

1 "This statement has always been related to the God-breathed character of Scripture. For also in this passage the fact that the Word of God comes to us is referred to the origin of prophecy. The *apoteou* is made the dimension of authority, trustworthiness, and immutability. This origin does not exclude the human character of it (men have spoken); but this 'from God' gives a unique quality of trustworthiness to these human words, which is essential for the God-breathed Scripture. Confronting a rising of God's Word out of the human heart is the impulse of the Spirit. The firmness of these human words is the mystery of Spirit" (Berkouwer 1975, 142).

Scriptures (Warfield 1999, 839–40). Both statements are taken together in the Church’s inspirational doctrine; in both places Scriptures are attributed to the *pneuma* of God, because they are *θεόπνευστος*—breathed by God (Warfield 1999, 839–40). The word *θεόπνευστος*, although a singular occurrence (i.e. *hapax*)<sup>2</sup> in the Bible, meets the basic statement of inspiration (Williams 1995, 3:171). Scripture is thus called a living word that has emerged from the mouth of God (breath = word of God). There is, therefore, no contrast between the living word and the dead letter, and the revelation fixed in Scripture is *γραφή θεόπνευστος* (Williams 1995, 3:172–4). And as the Petrine Letter shows, there is no distinction between the written and the spoken word regarding its divine character. Both are placed on the same level; the Spirit of God has the same share in both. It is said by the Apostles of the Gospels that they had been “moved by the Holy Spirit,” and the written prophets’ word is given by the Spirit (Grenz 1994, 381–2). Berkouwer highlights the connection of Spirit and letter,

The term “God-breathed” does more justice to the unique work of the Holy Spirit in Scripture than does the word “inspiration.” II Timothy 3:16 speaks literally of Scripture’s having been given by breathing, not by inspiring. ... Thus, *theopneustos* points to an essential relationship between the breath of the Spirit and the *graphe*. This is the mystery of Scripture which the church desired to express in its confession. This mystery is the uniqueness through which Holy Scripture in all its humanity was distinguished from all other human writing. Men clearly realized that II Timothy 3:16 did not offer us a theory of the “mode” of the God-breathed character of Scripture (1975, 139–40).

### What about the “mode”?

The subject of what this inspiring work of the Spirit exactly looked like, three main theories were developed: verbal, personal, and real inspiration. The verbal inspiration is probably the oldest and best known theory. God or his Spirit dictated the Bible (word for word) to man (see e.g. Ex 19:3–6; Num 7:89; 1 Sam 9:15), and it is for that reason, infallible (Böttingheimer 2016, 94–5).<sup>3</sup> While up to the Middle Ages there was no doubt or attack against such an “inspiration,” this

- 2 “The singular occurrence of *theopneustos* in the NT is one of the earliest known occurrences of this word in Greek literature Non-Christian writers used the word in the second century and Christian writers used it in the third and fourth centuries” (Williams 1995, 3:171).
- 3 Philo of Alexandria sometimes spoke of the fact that, for example, Moses was under the possession of the Spirit, or was seized by God, to receive revelatory words (c.f. Philo, *De Vita Mosis* I, 250.259.263.273.275. 280). Also, Williams mentions in his article that contemporary historical and critical ejects the notion of dictation, though talk of (literal) infallibility is still used, like the belief in some kind of dictation that is not entirely disappeared (1995, 162–3).

actually became an ongoing debate in the Western Churches after the Reformation (Allison 2011, 59, 69). Karl Barth said to the idea of infallibility of Scriptures that in spite of the fallible human word God used it and one has to receive it in such a manner (Allison 2011, 74). The typology of the “treasure in earthen vessel” (cf. 2 Cor 5:7) makes perfect sense regarding infallibility and inerrancy. Scripture becomes this creaturely servant, not unearthly of origin, but in the form of anthropomorphic language by human agency. This makes sense in the bigger picture of the biblical narrative, where God chose his servants as partners in his operations. “The advantage of the concept of Scripture as servant,” explains John Webster, “is its affirmation that the creatureliness of the text is not an inhibition of its role in the communicative self-presentation of God; and so the text does not have to assume divine properties as a protection against contingency” (Webster 2003, 24–5).

When one speaks of personal inspiration, it is thought that the biblical writers were “inspired” personalities (i.e. the authors remain free creators of the ideas contained in the Bible; the divine aid is confined to its purpose) (Maier 1990, 89ff). Both personal and real, inspiration gave space for biblical criticism. It is said that this concept gained prominence during the period of Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Schleiermacher himself could dismiss the Old Testament on this basis (i.e. it is the person, not the written word that is inspired, so Scriptures could be handled in a human way) (Maier 1990, 89–90). Of course, the Bible testifies that people were inspired by the Spirit, so the question then was only could this theory stand on its own (Maier 1990, 90).

Lastly, real inspiration means that the great ideas and concepts of the Bible are inspired (e.g. the scribes were not inspired, nor were their words, but their thoughts were; inspiration is restricted to the religious content) (Maier 1990, 92ff). This approach is problematic because man becomes the one who judges the word of God and not the other way around (cf. Heb 4:12). The point is simply that Scriptures are breathed by God through his Spirit, the know-how is secondary to this paper.

## Counter Opinion

Wolfgang Pannenberg, for instance, disagrees with the classical doctrine of inspiration (particularly verbal) supported by the verse in 2 Timothy 3:16. In his view (and some scholars disagree<sup>4</sup>), this verse talks about the inspired texts of the Old

4 Liefeld argues that the NIV’s translation of the Greek word *theopneustos* (“God-breathed”) with “inspired” is not quite exact. The term is too extensive in its regular usage. The Greek word *theopneustos*, which is put together from *theo* (“God”) and *pneustos* (a Greek notion that has to do with breathing), is much stronger. He continues: “The affirmation of inspiration at

Testament, not the New Testament texts. 2 Timothy 3:16 states the Scriptures' function: "for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness," hence the verse is not meant as confirmation for Scriptures infallibility (Pannenberg 1997, 2:212–3). Consequently, Pannenberg argues for a different basis for divine inspiration. Namely, the content of the Gospel message (i.e. mystery) is Spirit-filled. The Holy Spirit enabled the Apostles' ministry, "He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:8)<sup>5</sup>. "Certainly," says Pannenberg, "the New Testament scriptures are the most authentic documents of the apostolic proclamation and teaching, and therefore Paul's affirmation of the proclamation of the gospel as being impregnated by the Spirit does indeed justify the conclusion that the writings of the New Testament also participate in some way in that divine inspiration" (Pannenberg 1997, 2:213).

Furthermore, he explains: "The Pauline affirmation of the spiritual nature of the gospel is itself founded upon the spiritual reality of the content of the gospel, because it proclaims the Lord who is spirit (2 Cor. 3:17). The spiritual nature of the gospel of Christ has to be interpreted in the light of Paul's statement that the risen Christ is 'life-giving spirit' (1 Cor. 15:45)" (Pannenberg 1997, 2:213).

## Living Word or Dead Letter?

The truth is that the "word of God"—the *Logos*—existed even before anyone was there to hear or read it (cf. Rev 19:13, John 1:1-3, 1 Cor 8:6). The words of Scriptures (preaching of the prophets and apostles) are alive and mighty like the eternal Word is living and mighty. The Churches' proclamation of the word "shares the life and power of him who is the Word." Sasse claims, "Holy Scripture is never a dead letter" (Sasse 2010, 108–9). As a "life-giving spirit," the Holy Ghost is not finished with Scriptures (cf. Achtemeier 1999, 123-4; Böttigheimer 2016, 73). His work is as active today as it was during the formation of the Canon. The continuing work of the Spirit is referred to as illumination and rooted in verses like Job 32:8; 1 John 5:7, 11; and 1 Cor 2:6–16; 2 Cor 3:14–17 (Grenz 1994, 382). The undertaking of God's spirit is to illuminate men's hearts (minds) in order to enter

the center must not be isolated from this context of purpose. The 'Scripture' referred to here includes both Old and New Testaments because of the reference in 2 Peter 3:16 to Paul's writings as 'Scriptures.' No distinction is drawn in the New Testament between Paul's letters and the other books as regards their divine origin and authority, so it is reasonable to apply 2 Timothy 3:16 to the entire Bible" (Liefeld 1999, 431, 435).

5 Unless otherwise noted, all Bible passages are taken from the NIV.

a relationship with the Almighty. Calvin in Commentary of Ezekiel (Chapter 2) puts it this way,

This work of the Spirit, then, is joined with the word of God. But a distinction is made, that we may know that the external word is of no avail by itself, unless animated by the power of the Spirit. ... since God always works in the hearts of men by the Spirit, yet his word is not. ... so we must conclude concerning his word, because the Holy Spirit penetrates our hearts, and thus enlightens our minds.

This exhibits that God's word is not static—a dead letter; rather, the Scriptures are alive and dynamic (see Brueggemann 2005, 25). Clearer, “[The Holy Spirit] makes the Bible ‘come alive,’ as he causes the people of God to understand the significance of the biblical texts for life in the present” (Grenz 1994, 383). This work of the Spirit, the testimony, links man to the core of the biblical texts, specifically, Jesus Christ. Thus, “belief in the divine nature of Holy Scripture ‘rests upon the experience of spiritual life’” (Berkouwer 1975, 19). God opens a “new world” to men, creating new opportunities; a genuine “newness” which the Spirit creates from nothing in the hearts of those who are willing to see and believe. Brueggemann defines this as a “fresh reality that are on offer nowhere else” (1975, 8, xvi–ii).

### **The Agency of Holy Scripture**

“When one is in contact with Holy Scripture,” states Berkouwer, “the testimony of the Spirit shows him as the sinner and shows the marvelous way of deliverance. It is in this way that the Spirit witnesses concerning the Word, as ‘Holy Scripture in divine splendor commences to scintillate before our eyes’” (1975, 45, 19). Karl Barth regards Scripture, i.e. the knowledge of Christian faith, as “meeting” with God; accordingly, creatures must change concurring to the standards set by the party which reveals itself on its own terms (1959, 24). Ultimately for Barth, God is revealed in Jesus Christ, and Scriptures are the written witness to that truth (Grenz 1994, 392). So, Scripture becomes an aid in the quest of *theosis*, which is the ultimate *telos*. Webster's vital observation that Scripture is also a “means of grace” has its advantages. This concept is its soteriological idiom, its exposition of the nature of Scripture in terms of Scripture's place in the saving dealings of God with humankind, rather than simply as authority or epistemological norm” (Webster 2003, 24).

A vital point should not be overlooked. The work of the Holy Spirit, in faithful reading (and interpreting) of the Word, in the believer is fresh and surprising over and over again. The reader is inspired by the biblical text in such a way that one interprets beyond the author's deliberate intentions, thereby rethinking one-

self against the background of the text, which evokes faith (Böttigheimer 2016, 71–2). Martin Luther (and Karl Barth) were convinced that God’s work happens through the agency of the text (Böttigheimer 2016, 72). So, Luther in St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians explicates:

Human reason, with all its wisdom, can bring it no further than to instruct people how to live honestly and decently in the world, how to keep house, build, etc., things learned from philosophy and heathenish books. But how they should learn to know God and his dear Son, Christ Jesus, and to be saved, this the Holy Ghost alone teaches through God’s Word; for philosophy understands naught of divine matters.

Still, not all reading of Scriptures is inspired and illuminating, yet it happens, argues Brueggemann. It happens in study, prayer (and reflection) of Scripture that one receives healing, understanding and guidance, i.e. something “strange and new.” His conclusion thus is “[t]he script of the book is a host and launching pad for the wind among us that the world cannot evoke and the church cannot resist” (2005, 33–4). Martin Buber<sup>6</sup> suggests the reader should “face the Book with a new attitude as something new. He must yield to it, withhold nothing of his being, and let whatever will occur between himself and it” (Buber 1968, 5 *in* Brueggemann 2005, 17).

Another operation of Scripture as stated in John 17:17, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.” Paul confirms the same in 2 Thess 2:13, “...to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.” To be sanctified means made holy by divine action and this process of “sanctification refers to the work of the Spirit of Christ through which creaturely realities are elected, shaped and preserved to undertake a role in the economy of salvation: creaturely realities are sanctified by divine use.” Likewise, Webster argues: “Sanctification is the Spirit’s act of ordering creaturely history and being to the end of acting as *ancilla Domini*” (Webster 2003, 26–28).

## **The Faith Community and Scripture**

Many scholars and ministers will argue that Scriptures are a communal product, which is actually correct. Scriptures are the joint work of the Spirit and the people who made up the people of God. So, the word of God becomes the source of

6 Martin Mordechai Buber (born 1878 in Vienna, died 1965 in Jerusalem) was an Austrian-Israeli Jewish religious philosopher and thinker, political activist and educator. He is best known for his book, “Ich und Du” (1923) (*I and Thou*), which distinguishes between “I-Thou” and “I-It” modes of existence (Philosophy, s. v. “Martin Buber”).

knowledge and revelation of God and his salvific plan. The revelatory effort of God was processed by the faith community to be interpreted by the same community then and now.

Gonzales reminds us that the Bible is not made for reading in private, but rather, God is speaking to the community of faith (Gonzales 1990, 85). He also correctly points out that the reading of Scripture should be done in the “vocative, as the living Word of the living God, giving not so much information about correct doctrine or about times past as direction as to who we are in our present time” (Gonzales 1990, 87). As to the present time, the text reveals the mystery to the reader (cf. Eph 3:1–6), i.e. the Church; which is the first step to understanding and the second step to the goal—faithful performance of the theodrama. Note here that Scriptures are not a script which should be followed to the letter. It is a narrative to help the Church understand God’s ultimate plan for creation and the proper place of his Church in that grand eschatological scheme. This includes Scriptures as the norm and judge for the Church’s conduct and actions. In accomplishing the divine *telos*, the Holy Spirit continues his work of inspiring and breathing (new) life into the faith community. At the same time, by living out God’s story the Church becomes a display or a demonstration of this “newness and strangeness” of the Scripture’s world to the fellow creature. Riceour talks about the “world of the text,” which wants to break out faithfully outside the Word in our present world. An eschatological world that breaks through into the present and transforms it per the texts’ world (Hicks 2016).

### **Concluding Statement**

The inspiration of God’s word was never an issue, the argument was always about the mode and range of inspiration. Subsequently, the message of God’s word is truthful, purposeful and Spirit-filled. The Bible, under the illuminating work of the Spirit, continues to be a loyal companion in our journey towards achieving God’s plan. Accordingly, the Father through the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit continues spilling his eternal life in the believer and the faith community, his beloved bride. Believers throughout history and the present time have “found this book a wind and source and energy for the fullness of the true life lived unafraid” (Brueggemann 2005, 23). We conclude with great joy and certainty that God’s supernatural life continues through the work of the Holy Spirit with the support of the Holy Scriptures which assists the Church in faithful interpretation of God’s drama and in its daily practice. In the words of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews: “For the word of God is alive (living) and active!” (4:12).



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## Živa Riječ

### Sažetak

Biblija, koja se neosporno smatra nadahnutom Božjom riječju, napisana je pod nadahnućem Svetog Duha. Čovjek je, poput zemljane posude, upotrijebljen od Svetoga Duha da zapiše otkrivenje Božje istine u Isusu Kristu. Sveto pismo su “bogoduhe” riječi upućene Crkvi i ključne su za tumačenje i ispunjavanje Božjeg telosa za stvorenje. Cilj ovoga rada jest naglasiti i istražiti kritičnu ulogu Svetog Duha u Svetom pismu. Usljed nadahnjujuće uloge Duha, Božja riječ nije mrtvo slovo, nego životvorna riječ koja izliva novi život u vjernika i u Crkvu. Upravo ova povezanost Duha i slova izdvaja Sveto pismo kao živo i aktivno te prenosi željenu transformativnu dimenziju za vjernike, kao pojedince i za zajednicu vjere.