

The Present Inspiration of the Bible.

THE conflict of faith in our day is sharp and strenuous. We live in an age of intense and vivid mental action, in which every question of religion is being sifted, and the methods of science are creating at once a dissatisfaction with the reasonings of the past and a demand for a more real theology, and a more stringent verification of the facts upon which it is based. "Never before did men so long for the evidence of things not seen, and never before did the road to the unseen appear so impassable and steep."¹ Some are giving up the quest in despair, and are disposed to accept a barren agnosticism; some are vainly seeking to substitute for the faith of the Christian Church a religion which consists of a few scanty spiritual abstractions which have no foothold in man's history, while others hover perpetually between doubt and certitude, always learning, but never coming to a knowledge of the truth. Within our churches and congregations, too, this spirit, so fatal to shams and mere traditions, may be seen actively at work. There are among us, in larger number than at any previous period, two classes which are ever tending to become larger and increasingly influential. The one is composed of young and ingenuous minds, conversant with books, eager after knowledge, reverent toward the religion of their fathers, with a true adoration for the Jesus of history, but beginning to think that many of the old beliefs are unsound and worthless, and who demand, before accepting the Christian faith, that it shall be expressed in new ways and be put in new settings. Then there are in membership with us earnest, open-eyed men and women who, while holding fast the great verities of the Gospel, are outgrowing some of its forms, and are disturbed by misgivings in regard to various doctrines which once seemed to them inseparable parts of the Christian system. Especially are they impressed by the results of modern Biblical criticism, which have shaken inherited traditions about the Bible, and which, if true, compel them in simple honesty to readjust their views of its authority and inspiration, and to recast some of their beliefs even in regard to vital questions. But the task is one from which they are tempted to shrink, through fear of losing that which is good, and through a sense of the difficulty and strain which it would involve. To them there is no short or easy method of settling these high and grave problems. They realise that to distinguish between

¹ E. Paxton Hood, *Poet and Preacher*, p. 46.

the essential, which is eternal, and the husk enclosing it, which is destined to burst and to be thrown aside, to determine where revelation ends and speculation begins, to see through the encumbrances of theological theories, and the cant phrases of religious circles the very face of the living Christ, and the glory of the primitive gospel—that to do this requires the deepest insight, and the effectual aid of the all-discerning Spirit of God. Yet they confess that necessity is laid upon them to make the attempt, and with more or less of confidence and thoroughness they are shaping for themselves a creed which, whatever its defects, has Christ for its centre, and is especially distinguished by this peculiarity that it is content to *leave out* much upon which man in the past has dogmatised with an authority which resented all criticism and disputation.

In this crisis and transition of religious thought, it devolves upon us who are ministers and representatives of the Churches, and who, having passed through this ordeal, have beaten our way, by God's help, to Christian certitude and joyful assurance of the things which are commonly believed among us, to afford what aid we can in the direction of thought and inquiry for those who are struggling amid difficulties, so that they may issue in a living faith. "Christian faith," as Professor Orr says, "in every age must be a battle. That battle will have to be fought, if I mistake not, in the first instance around the fortress of the worth and authority of holy Scripture. A doctrine of Scripture adapted to the needs of the hour in harmonising the demands at once of science and of faith, is perhaps the most clamant want at present in theology."² Sharing that conviction, I propose, as the subject of this article, "The Present Inspiration of the Bible."

All Christians are agreed in maintaining that the Bible is a divinely inspired book; that it was written by holy men of old who spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. It is a book absolutely unique. To compare it with the scriptures of other religions is only to bring out by contrast its divineness, its transcendent majesty, its fulness of revelation, its undimmed purity, and its wonderful adaptation to the diversified needs of man. It was suited to men in the early centuries; it is just as suited to men to-day; it will be equally suited to those who shall come after us. We outlive other books; but the Bible will never be outlived. I take up some book on religion written in the eighteenth century, and I find myself in a different atmosphere from that which it breathes. The whole doctrinal perspective and mode of conception is altered since it was written: a vast range of problems has arisen which did not come within the author's purview. But it is far otherwise with the Bible; it

² *The Progress of Dogma*, p. 352.

has a modern voice; it speaks to me in language which is ever new—the language of the heart; it has a *present* inspiration. And it is all this to men, yesterday, and to-day, and for ever, because it is the eternal word, coming from the heart of God, and speaking in a tongue which all can understand and interpret for themselves.

Excepting, however, *the facts* of this inspiration of the Bible, various questions in regard to the nature and degree, the qualities and the limits of it, are being forced upon us. We are compelled to a change of view by the study of the Bible itself. A few, indeed, still cling to the theory of verbal inspiration, in spite of its being manifestly contrary to fact, and although it is really a low and mechanical conception which robs the Bible of its reality and freshness and manifold exhibition of man's thought and life fructified by the Spirit of God. Others adhere to the term plenary, as if it were a good word to conjure with, but differ in their application of it. But why should we not face the facts and welcome everything which throws light upon the composition and the growth of the Bible? Nothing can change the Bible itself, though we may be led to alter some of our inherited or hastily formed opinions about it. It will bear the strictest, most searching scrutiny, and after criticism has finished its task, the old book loved by our fathers will remain the same—not a truth of it expunged, not a promise deprived of its lustre, not a jot or tittle of it robbed of its intrinsic worth.

There are two distinctions bearing upon this subject, the consideration of which will serve to remove difficulties and to settle doubts. The first is the distinction between revelation and inspiration. Revelation is both higher in its nature and wider in its range than inspiration. It consists in the self-manifestation of God to man, either through the vesture of the visible universe or by the interposition of His hand in the history of nations, and the lives of individuals, or by the communication of His truth and will through men whom He inspires and directs. It is with this last that we have to do. The writers of the Bible are inspired in this unique sense that they reveal to us the thoughts and purposes of God; show us the point where the divine touches the human; make known to us the way of life. Sometimes humbler tasks are set them, such as recording natural facts or portraying the passions and motives of men. Thus the writer of the Books of Samuel relates how Saul in his jealous anger cast a javelin at David; how David feigned madness before Achish of Gath; how, when David was king, his son Absalom conspired against him. So far as he does this he is merely a chronicler, like Herodotus or Caesar, and the value of his narrative depends solely upon its historical accuracy. Or, to cite an instance from the

New Testament, take the passage from one of Paul's Epistles in which he asks Timothy to bring his cloak which he had left at Troas, with the books, and especially the parchments. In making this request there is nothing to distinguish Paul from Cicero or Pliny; and if it should have turned out that his cloak had been left at Ephesus instead of at Troas, it would only prove that Paul's memory in his old age had failed him, and would not invalidate in the least his teaching upon the doctrines of the cross and the resurrection.³ But on reading the books of Samuel and the Epistles of Paul, we find shining upon the history and the argument which they contain a light that comes from heaven. The author of Samuel not only recounts the actions of Saul and David and Absalom, but shows us how God's will was working itself out in their rise or fall, and how the larger ends of His providence were being promoted. Paul fills his letter with authoritative statements about Christ's gospel—the relation of faith and salvation, and the resurrection to eternal life, which were not his guesses at truth, but something which he had received by *revelation of Jesus Christ*. This is the divine element running through the Scriptures which makes the Bible God's word to man, and which separates it from all other books. Its historians and prophets, its psalmists and apostles, were granted an open vision of the eternal. We call them inspired, not because they were men of lofty gifts, but because God made known to them, through faith, His word, and enabled them, amidst idolatry and unbelief, to bear witness of Him and His righteousness to their generation. It is this quality which distinguishes the inspiration of a Samuel, an Isaiah, a Paul, from the so-called inspiration of a Dante, or Milton, or great modern preacher. "A moment's reflection shows us that the word means something quite different when it is employed to express the effect which men of genius produce upon us. We call them inspired because they see more than we *do*, but not more than we *can*. They reveal the unobserved to us, but not the unknown or the unknowable. But we call the Bible inspired because it reveals another order—a Kingdom of Heaven—a view of human nature and of human destiny which lies beyond our ken. There is poetry in the Bible of a high order; but it is not as poets that we call Isaiah or David inspired; it is as revealers of God, of God's purposes, of God's methods. It is not so much the unobserved, it is the unknown, the otherwise unknowable that they reveal to us."⁴

Then there is the distinction between divine revelation and the record of it contained in the Scriptures. The revelation which

³ See Acts vii. 16, where the land purchased by Abraham of Ephron is confounded with that which Jacob bought of Hamor.

⁴ Horton, *Inspiration and the Bible*, p. 12.

God made to the Hebrews consisted of divine interpositions of mercy and judgment; of guidance of the national life through judge and prophet; of promises, warnings, and admonitions, addressed to them sometimes by inspired men, at other times through startling events. God revealed Himself to Abraham by a vision of the night; to the Israelites by the plagues of Egypt and the passage of the Red Sea; at the end of the kingdom by national calamities terminating in the Exile; in these last days by His incarnate Son, Christ Jesus our Lord. In the history of the Hebrews this superintendence of God is clearly manifested. It is not an inference from facts, or an opinion of men of religious genius, but something open, significant, undisputed, and indisputable. And the Bible of the Old and New Testaments is a record of it all, a narrative of the way in which God blessed and chastised His people; a written memorial of what their prophets spoke and their psalmists sang; of what Jesus Christ said and did and suffered.

From this important distinction it follows that revelation is independent of the Scriptures; that it preceded and might outlive them. If the Bible were to be suddenly removed or obliterated it would not affect in the slightest degree the facts which the Bible records, or the truths which it embodies. It may be proved that the books of the Bible are a growth and not the production of single writers; that the authorship of some of them is doubtful; and that the composition of a few, or even of many of them, is of a later date than formerly assumed; but these conclusions do not touch the divine realities and Gospel verities to which it bears witness. Take for example the faithful saying that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. This is an historical fact, embodying a sublime atonement, which no dispute about the authorship or date of John's gospel, or the genuineness of any of Paul's epistles, can disprove or disturb. Suppose it should be demonstrated that the second epistle of Peter is spurious, or that the Apocalypse was written not by John the apostle but by John a presbyter—how would these discoveries militate against the great and glorious fact—the proofs of which are with us and all around us to-day—that Jesus Christ died for our sins? No more than a theory of colour affects the existence of the sun, or a theory of lunar attraction the reality and grandeur of the ocean.

When, however, we turn from God's revelation of Himself in former ages through prophets, and in these last days through His Son, to the record of it contained in the Old and New Testaments we are still on *safe and immoveable ground*. The Bible partakes of the glory and immortality of Him in whose name it speaks, and of whom it bears witness. "There are good men," said the eloquent Professor Elmslie, "who tremble for the Bible

just now. Tremble for the Bible! Tremble for the Ark of God! No, tremble at it, and let us beware of putting up a presumptuous hand to steady it. God can take care of His own." In order to assure ourselves that the Bible is a true record of a veritable divine revelation, all we have to do is to read it; for if we read it we shall be brought face to face with God. For the inspiration of the Bible is not something which belongs only to a long distant past; it is a *present* reality and power. The Bible is not a dead book, containing so many pages of letterpress, but a living voice, the voice of a living God, sometimes terrible as that which shook Sinai, sometimes tender as that which breathed out its love on Calvary.

"In the Bible," wrote Coleridge, in a memorable passage, "there is more that finds me than I have experienced in all other books put together; the words of the Bible find me at greater depths of my being; and whatever finds me brings with it an irresistible evidence of its having proceeded from the Holy Spirit."⁵ "For the word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart."

It has been too common to put the Bible to inferior uses. Either it is studied for the sake of constructing or defending a body of opinions calling itself a system of theology, or selected and brief portions are read as a manual of devotion morning by morning. As a text-book of theology the Bible does not lend itself readily to the builder of systems, and so it has been sadly treated; its poetry turned into prose, its divine pleadings and arguments interpreted in the terms of logic, its separate sayings wrenched from their context to serve the purposes of proof, its divine revelations of truth and life, high as the heavens, manifold as nature, forced into the rigid swathing bands of human creeds, where they look pitiful enough. Much of the glory and beauty and pathos of the Bible perishes under this process. As a manual of devotion the Bible is, indeed, unapproachable, and in this use of it a good end is realised. How many can say with gratitude of this book, "I have found in it words for my inmost thoughts, songs for my joy, utterances for my hidden griefs, and pleading for my shame and my feebleness."⁶ How often has it made the hour of prayer radiant with the light which it sheds upon the soul. At such times we have felt the rapture of the psalmist when he wrote:

How sweet are thy words unto my taste :
Yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

⁵ Coleridge's *Confessions*, 14, p. 74.

⁶ *Confessions*, p. 47.

But the practice of reading short passages, selected from different books of Scripture, which is generally adopted when the Bible is used as a manual of devotion, does not do justice to the sacred volume. It should be read as a whole. Its object is to reveal God's Fatherhood and His purposes of grace in Christ Jesus; to lift human lives into fellowship with God, and fill them with His life, His love, His power; to nurture and train a redeemed humanity that shall be sanctified in spirit, word, and act, and that shall be mighty in the world as witnesses for His truth, and righteousness, and the everlasting Gospel. The inspiration with which it is filled from its opening hymn of creation to its apocalypse of a conquering Saviour, is a present energy which succeeds only as it kindles in men all down the ages a corresponding inspiration. Unless God is real to us through it, as He was to those by whom He speaks to us by their words; unless the Christ whom it unveils is our life, moulding us after the image of His perfect loveliness; unless the forces, moral and spiritual, embodied in Him who is the Spirit of Holiness, are operating powerfully upon our natures—it matters little what is our theory of the book, or whether or not we can pronounce the evangelical shibboleth with exactness. This book is given that it may both tell us how to live, and impart to us the motives and power by which to live. Its truths are not offered as matters for speculation, but as food for the soul. "The words that I speak unto you," said our Lord, "they are spirit and they are life." If we read God's word more simply, with the single-minded object of knowing God, and learning His will, many of its doctrines which appear mysterious would unfold themselves to us; for the truths of the Bible are spiritually discerned and become vital only through personal experience.

Let us put this Book of Books to this its noblest use. It was designed to be a lamp to our feet and a light unto our path. God Himself speaks to us through it. He gives us in it not a system of doctrines so much as glimpses of His glory, insight into His love, revelations of Himself in Jesus Christ. Let us not put the Book between Him and us, but by its help obtain for ourselves that vision of God of which it testifies, and which is "the one thing needful for worship and for conduct."⁷

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⁷ *The Book of Isaiah*, by Principal Sir G. A. Smith, p. 68.