

The Inspiration of the Bible

(Concluded)

NOW we must consider perhaps the most difficult question connected with this study. Is the Bible the Word of God? Of course, the obvious answer is that it all depends what you mean by "Word." It will be of value if we consider the Old Testament use of this idea. The word of God was creative (e.g. the divine fiat at creation); the word of God was revelational, in that it always showed an aspect of God's Person and character; the word of God was reproofing (*Jonah* i. 1 and iii. 1f.); and the word of God was renewing (*Ez.* xxxvii., especially v. 14). The phrase is often used where we should just say "God".

It is fairly plain how it was that our Lord came to be described in the terms of the Logos doctrine in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel. Whatever his debt to Philo, the author is clearly dealing with Old Testament ideas. The word of God is creative (*Col.* i. xvi. and 17), revelational (*Jn.* xiv. 9 and *Col.* i. 15a), reproofing (*Jn.* iii. 19) and renewing (*2 Cor.* v. 17). In fact, the Bible shows us in its entirety what the author of the Fourth Gospel shows us in brief span, that Jesus was the Word made flesh, and that the Word was God. Therefore, in the theological sense of the term "word" the Bible cannot be the Word of God, because that is only accurate when applied to Christ. For, although the Bible can both reveal God and reprove man, it can neither create nor renew of itself. We ought to speak of the Bible as the record of the Word of God rather than as the Word of God. Yet perhaps the latter expression is useful, as it reminds us that the "thought" of God is made known to us through the Bible which contains the "words" of God. But it is doubtful if a strong argument may be presented for applying the term "Word" to the Bible in a primary sense.

Principal Cunliffe-Jones applies the term "Word of God" to the Bible in a primary sense, because it is from the Bible that we claim our total knowledge of Jesus Christ. Yet almost immediately afterwards he is forced to make the point that of course we do not preach the Bible. He goes on: "The Bible is the word of God because it is the abiding testimony of the Christian church that the divine revelation is made known in the Gospel declared in scripture." (*Authority of the Biblical Revelation*, p. 104).

Dr. Rowley says: "To me the Bible is the word of God. This

does not mean that in all its parts it attains a uniform level of revelation or that we are justified in thinking that because a passage is in the Bible it gives us exact knowledge of history or science, or absolute insight into the nature and will of God. Christ alone is the Word of God that gives perfect insight into his nature and will, for in him alone is the absolute revelation of the heart of God." (*Relevance of the Bible*, pp. 24-25). It is plain that Dr. Rowley wants to keep the term "word of God" for the Bible, but realizes that really it is only properly applied to our Lord. The use of the capital does a little to simplify the confusion, but more careful use of the term may perhaps help to keep our view of the Bible in proper proportion.

As we work towards the inspiration of the Bible it is obvious that sooner or later we must mention the *Unity* which marks the relation of the Testaments to one another and makes it possible for us to call the Bible a book and not a collection of books. In referring to the Word of God we have demonstrated the unity which is shown by our Lord's fulfilment of the Old Testament, and we need not spend much time in elaborating the point in such a journal as this—how the old covenant of God with Moses and Abraham was fulfilled in the establishment of the church as the New Israel, a new chosen and elect people; how the law, which for so long had governed the behaviour of the Jews, was fulfilled in the freedom and discipline of the Spirit; how the fine insight of the Suffering Servant Songs was fulfilled by the Passion and Death of Christ; how the idea of the character of God and the place of man is fundamentally the same in both Testaments, and so on. Dr. Rowley's Whitley Lectures on this theme will make rewarding study for those interested; while the many parallels shown by scholars to exist between Old and New Testament passages reveal how steeped in the history and literature of the Jews the early Christian writers were.

AUTHORITY

We have passed through the stages of Literature, Religious Literature, Historicity, Uniqueness, Subject Matter (Revelation and the word of God) and Unity. Now, on the basis of all that has gone before, we assert the *Authority* of the Bible. Each of the points mentioned before provides a different kind of authority. A great many analyses of Biblical authority have been proposed, but the one which is used most frequently and has recently gained the approval of Mr. C. S. C. Williams in his revision of McNeile's Introduction to the New Testament is that which sees two kinds of authority in the Bible—*potestas* and *auctoritas*. The former is dogmatic authority, often of an official nature, like a government order on housing or rationing; the latter is the authority of an individual because he is an expert in a certain field, e.g. Bertrand Russell on

matters philosophical or Anthony Hopkins on matters musical. The Bible has both kinds of authority clearly enough; its writers were men of keen spiritual insight, experts in the field of theology (in the proper sense of the word), while the Church has accorded to it dogmatic authority, regarding the Scriptures as the basis of all Christian doctrine and practice and as "containing all things necessary to salvation." Speaking of *auctoritas*, Mr. Williams says: "The New Testament is a collection of masterpieces of spiritual music. Its authority is that of spiritual experts, and we treat it as we should treat the authority of any supreme expert on his own subject" (p. 478).

We are here dealing with an authority intrinsic to the nature of the book, quite apart from any appeal it may have for us individually. This we may call the "objective" authority of the Bible, although we cannot apply the word in its strictly philosophical sense. This "objective" or dogmatic authority may be what Principal Cunliffe-Jones has in mind when he speaks of a Final Authority in Scripture, i.e. right and power united. It is the acceptance of this authority which is the source of man's true freedom. (*Authority of the Biblical Revelation*, p. 13).

In Dr. Dodd's scholarly and devotional work, *The Authority of the Bible*, we find the same distinction as in Mr. Williams' work, but it is expressed in a slightly different manner. There is the authority of truth itself which needs no justification and is its own evidence, and there is the authority of persons who may reasonably be supposed to know the truth and are able to pass it on. On the former Dr. Dodd comments: "If the Bible has authority as a revelation of truth it is in some sense which is not incompatible with its human imperfection" (p. 18). Unfortunately, Dr. Dodd deals mainly with the second kind of authority, as do most of the modern writers on this subject. In fact a remark on page 30 almost rules out the *potestas* altogether in favour of the *auctoritas*: "It is not their words that are inspired, as one might say perhaps of 'automatic writing'—it is the men who are inspired. Their powers of mind, heart and will are heightened beyond the common measure."

We have done no more than raise a problem, far too profound and involved for an answer to be attempted here, but the younger generation of Christian students will have to find an answer for themselves.

In the first quotation from Dr. Dodd the Word *Truth* was used. It is essential to say something about that word, for the "objective authority" for which we have been arguing is closely linked with the question of the truth of the Bible. This question has perplexed countless ordinary Christian people as well as the scholars. "Is the Bible true?" Again, it all depends what you mean by true. There is a sense in which the *Genesis* creation story is true, although

obviously it is not a scientific account of the coming into being of the material universe. In a different sense the common-sense injunctions of *Proverbs* are true, although they cannot be said to have all the marks of the philosophical moral judgment. In a third sense the parables are true, although it is not necessary to suppose that the people and events in the stories are historical. Again, the Gospel is true, but that does not commit one to the view that every single item in the New Testament concerning the life of our Lord must be believed at all costs. The difference between historical fact and spiritual truth is one we have been very slow to learn, and this accounts for much of the difficulty experienced in the handling of the Fourth Gospel. If we try to say it is true in the sense of being historical fact we not only miss the main point of the writing, but we create problems which need never worry us. When one sees violent attempts to use the long discourses of this Gospel as sheer history one can only wonder what the author himself would think of a so-called enlightened age which could so miss the point of what he has to say. If we concentrate on the two main senses of truth, historical fact and spiritual truth, we may safely say that the Bible is true in both senses, sometimes in one, sometimes in the other, sometimes in both. There may be another sense in which the Bible is true for us, tested by experience, but that belongs properly to our next point and not to what we have called the "objective" aspect of authority.

The Bible has authority, from the "Thus saith the Lord" of the prophets to the "I say unto you" of our Lord. In it we find the authority of men of genius, but also the command and oracles of God; from the Ten Commandments with their negative application to the two positive commands of the New Testament; from the old stories handed down in *Judges* where men are superhuman and heroic, raised up to defeat the enemies of the Lord, to the searching parables, where men are sinners, but are prepared to defy all the powers of earth to witness to the change made in their lives by the Gospel; from the picture of God as supreme in creation in the *Genesis* story to the picture of God as supreme at the end of the world in the vision of *Revelation*.

This authority, we maintain, is there in the Bible whether we accept it or not; it is there even for the non-Christian person. Here we must part company with Principal Child who implies that the best way to demonstrate the authority of the Bible is to let it speak for itself by reading it "receptively, Christologically, critically and ecumenically." (Cf. article in *The Fraternal*, April, 1954). All these imply the subjective approach, relevant only for those who are already Christian. We close this section with the noble words from the Coronation service when the Queen was presented with the Bible: ". . . we present you with this book, the most valuable

thing that this world affords. Here is Wisdom, here is the royal Law : These are the lively Oracles of God."

RELEVANCE

Until now we have endeavoured to follow a line of thought from the realm of literature through to the question of authority. We can go no further on that line, for the academic approach leaves us just short of the goal we seek. We cannot make another step without introducing the subjective factor into our reckoning. This may be called the *Relevance* of the Bible, using that portmanteau term to cover the whole realm of Christian experience, individual preference, personal consideration and private devotion. Many more profound things might have been said on the "objective" side, but there would still have come a point where the subjective would have to be given due weight.

Christian people will approach the Bible in a different spirit from others. They will form attachments to some parts of it; and naturally so. As long as those personal likings are not used as academic arguments, well and good. A devotional approach to the Bible will reveal great wealth for us. Some parts will lead us closer to God than others. But then, "The dramatist does not put the whole, or necessarily, any part of his direct meaning into the words spoken by this or that character." (H. Wheeler Robinson, *Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit*, p. 170).

The relevance of the Bible for our own day must be tested by experience. Only then shall we learn how much we depend upon it. Well may Billy Graham write: "For without the Bible this would indeed be a dark and frightening place, without signpost or beacon." (*Peace with God*, p. 14). While we could not accept the sentiments of the context of this remark, the section on the Bible is worth consideration as showing the influence of Scripture on the Christian life. The situations of the Bible are those of our own day. Who knows for certain that the Lord is not using the materialistic forces in the world today to chastise the slackness of his Church? (cf. letter in *Methodist Recorder*, May 13th, 1955, where Rev. F. Ockenden discusses this point in relation to the hydrogen bomb.) Assyria was seen as the rod of Yahweh's anger in ancient times; there are plenty of things in the world now which may be fulfilling precisely that function.

Emil Brunner has a brilliant illustration about the Bible in *Our Faith*. He says it is possible to buy a record with the trade name of "His Master's Voice," and be told that if you play it you will hear the master, Caruso's, voice. So you will, or at least you will hear a record of it; but there will be other noises as well. The needle may scratch the record, and it is possible to concentrate so fiercely on the scratching that the effect of the master's voice is completely lost

on you. (p. 19). Perhaps we may extend the illustration a little to complete the picture. If the needle does scratch slightly, there is not much to worry about, but if the scratching is really bad, there is no point in saying that it is a good record; far better admit that the master's voice can be heard despite the recording.

In church, in private reading, on the radio, or in almost any other way, the Bible can come home to us. God will use the words of the Bible to make His will known to us. If we may use one other idea from Dr. Dodd, this time from *According to the Scriptures* (p. 131-2) we may show how important this subjective side really is for a strong modern interpretation of the Bible. He is speaking of prophecy, but his remarks admit of a wider application. "The ultimate significance of prophecy is not only what it meant for the author, but what it came to mean for those who stood within the tradition which he founded or promoted, and who lived under the impact of the truth he declared . . . the meaning of the writings cannot remain static while the life to which they belong changes with the centuries."

So we have two main points: the long line of thought bringing us to the point of Authority, which we claim is "objective," and the point of Relevance. On the strength of these two positions we must state our claim that the Bible is inspired. The final step cannot be argued. Its logic depends on what has been said on the two previous points. By the inspiration of the Bible we mean its elevation or animation by supernatural means. With the writer of 2 *Tim.* iii. 16 we would agree that God has inspired the production of the written word. The very nobility, antiquity, history and veneration of the Bible lead us to suspect that it is inspired. The knowledge we have of it, mediated by the Holy Spirit, confirms these thoughts.

After discussing the Bible as the Word of God for some four pages, Dr. Brunner closes with these searching words: "Now, are there any other questions? It is my opinion that if this is the way the matter stands, there is only one conclusion to be drawn: Go now and began at last to listen attentively to the Master's voice." (*Our Faith*, p. 20).

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