

Inspiration and Canonicity.

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THE questions which have been brought forward so prominently in recent years in connection with the scientific treatment of religious problems are such as sometimes occasion uneasiness to those who are loyal to the fundamental principles of the Christian faith; and perhaps there is no subject which causes greater anxiety than that which affects the position of the Bible as studied in the light of modern criticism. A suspicion sometimes exists that critical methods are necessarily synonymous with vagueness and indefiniteness in the statement of Christian belief. It is hoped that the following pages may be of help to those who are conscious of perplexity when considering the respective claims of faith and scientific accuracy.

What is "of faith" as to the inspiration of the books of the Bible? This is a question which men are bound to ask themselves when brought face to face with the results of modern criticism. "Inspiration," "Canonicity,"—is there not frequently a difficulty in drawing a line of demarcation between the two ideas? And perhaps it is a lack of definiteness in regard to the real meaning of the terms that is responsible for much of the perplexity which is experienced in attempting to estimate the value of the results, as in acknowledging the claims, of the critical method. That the two terms are so intimately bound together as, in many respects, to be almost interchangeable, is so true that it requires a considerable mental effort accurately to distinguish between those circumstances in which they may be looked upon as synonymous, and those in which it is of vital importance to draw a distinction between them. Does "Inspiration" of necessity imply "Canonicity?" and, *vice versa*, must a canonical book necessarily be regarded as "inspired"?¹ Specu-

¹ The term "inspired" is, of course, here used loosely and in its popular, though, strictly speaking, inaccurate sense. Obviously, while it is easy to understand what is meant by an inspired *man*, it is difficult to think of an inspired *book*—except, perhaps, on a theory of absolute verbal inspiration.

lately, at least, it may be granted that a book may be "inspired," which may yet not be "canonical"; but, on the other hand, it would be difficult to regard a book as "canonical" which has not some special claim to inspired authorship; and the nature of this claim is a fit subject for investigation.

The difficulty of determining the precise ground on which a book may be admitted to the Canon of Holy Scripture is one which has been keenly felt by theologians. The confessedly varying degrees of religious value attaching to canonical writings has frequently necessitated changes of view as to the import of the term "Inspiration." While at no time has any definite statement as to the nature and extent of inspiration been made authoritative by the Church, yet there have been theories prevailing in different epochs, which have for a time held the field so as to have become practically identified with the body of ecclesiastical dogma. These, again, have been modified from time to time, so that they might be brought into line with the predominant thought of particular schools, and it is not uncommon to find the same author expressing different, and even contrary, views on the same subject. From the very earliest times there have been those who did not think it necessary to inquire even the names of the various writings since the Holy Spirit was the actual author of them all, and their human writers merely passive instruments which might be compared to a lyre or harp in the hands of a musician; then there have been those who admitted that the individuality of the writers was preserved in such matters as style, language, etc.; others, again, have, at one time, asserted the absolute verbal infallibility of the writings, and, at another, have shown a disposition to recognize the human element in them.¹

Up to the time of the Reformation, however, it may be said that the theory generally maintained as being most in accordance with the language of the Fathers of the Church, was that each

¹ The matter is fully discussed by Bishop Westcott in his "Introduction to the Study of the Gospels," Appendix B., on the "Primitive Doctrine of Inspiration."

and every book of Holy Scripture was written directly under the special guidance of the Holy Spirit, and that, consequently, contradictions, and other inconsistencies, were either merely *apparent*, and not real, or were to be attributed not to the original writers, but to a variety of other circumstances, such as the faults of copyists, or to their occasional, but profane desire to add what they considered to be explanatory matter.

The rise of Scholasticism had, indeed, brought forward questions which hitherto had been but little discussed. The object of the Schoolmen being to bring about a reconciliation of theology and philosophy, or, rather, to state theology in the terms of philosophy, and to recognize the claims of reason in the formulation of a theological system, necessarily originated many new theories in every sphere of religious knowledge ; and once it was admitted that it was possible to view Christianity not merely as a cataclysmic effect of divine revelation, but as the logical outcome of all true and sound knowledge—even of knowledge humanly acquired—it will easily be seen that the way was opened to innumerable questions as to the foundations of belief, and, consequently, as to the Inspiration of the Bible, as being not the least important of them.

With the Revival of Letters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, came the hitherto neglected study of Greek and Hebrew, and this newly-acquired knowledge naturally set men to look behind the Vulgate and the Traditions of the Church to the Greek and Hebrew Scriptures for a more complete understanding of the precise nature and value of the Sacred Texts. So long, however, as the Roman Church held full and undisputed authority, it was natural that no controversy of great moment should have arisen ; but with the first movements of the Reformation, questions which had long lain in abeyance sprang into prominence, and there was opened up a field of speculation and inquiry which has ever since been the scene of the greatest activity, and which promises to be even more so in the future. Nor was the Roman Church herself unaffected by the general spirit of inquiry. The effect of

such questionings as the revolutionary character of the times tended to raise, was to draw from some of her most eminent theologians theories of inspiration which indicated a tremendous departure from those prevalent in earlier times.¹ The fact that such theories could be formulated, even though they were felt to be out of harmony with Tradition and the Tridentine decrees, is adduced not as evidence either for or against them, but simply as a proof that the nature of Inspiration was still an open question, which it was possible to discuss while remaining faithful to the severest traditional form of dogma.

It is very commonly believed that the doctrine taught by the Reformers was that of verbal, literal, inspiration—that against the Catholic doctrine of the Scriptures interpreted by the tradition of the Church, they set up the authority of the Bible alone as an infallible guide. This is a view which, though common enough, contains grave inaccuracies, and is decidedly misleading. That there were various opinions amongst the Reformers, and that many of them do appear to have countenanced such an extreme view, may be admitted; but of most of them—and particularly of Luther and Calvin—it is true to say that they worked on critical lines so far as they understood criticism, neither recognizing nor formulating any explicit doctrine on the subject of Inspiration, but simply taking the Scriptures as the principal evidence on which the facts concerning a divine revelation rest, and, for the most part, clearly keeping in view the important distinction between the “revelation” and the “record,” the “matter” and the “form,” while they emphasized a fact which is hardly fully and adequately recognized even in these

¹ *E.g.*, the “Propositions” of Lessius and Hamel at Louvain in 1586:

(i.) That for a book to be Holy Scripture it is not necessary that every word of it be inspired by the Holy Ghost.

(ii.) It is not necessary that every truth or sentence be immediately inspired into the writer by the Holy Ghost.

(iii.) A book (such as perhaps the second book of Maccabees) written by human industry, without the assistance of the Holy Ghost—if the Holy Spirit afterwards testify that nothing false is contained in it—becomes Holy Scripture.

(See Cardinal Manning, “Temporal Mission of the Holy Ghost,” chap. iii.)

The reference to the second book of Maccabees is based on the words in 2 Macc. ii. 23-32.

days—namely, that not all Scripture is inspired in an equal degree, but that some parts have a far greater religious value than others, and that their degree of inspiration is to be measured by their effectiveness in setting forth the personality of Jesus Christ, whether, as in the case of the Old Testament, by preparing the way for the fulness of the revelation to be given in Him ; or, as in the case of the New Testament, by interpreting His character and the effect of His life and work. That we may dissent from many of the conclusions at which they arrived, and *must* dissent from the language in which those conclusions were oftentimes expressed, does not detract from the importance of the fact that they recognized and exercised the right of criticism, and made the Christian consciousness—the *sensus communis* of the faithful—the highest criterion of inspiration. And this they did without formulating any precise and hard theories to pass on as a *damnosa hereditas* to their later disciples, and if the doctrine which characterized the Protestant Orthodoxy of a later day was, what is best described and summed up in that maxim of Chillingworth, “ The Bible and the Bible only is the religion of Protestants,” it can only be said that such a doctrine was due not to an adherence to, but to a distinct departure from, the principles enunciated by the Fathers of the Reformation.

The fact, then, that no one dogma as to the nature and extent of Inspiration has ever obtained a general and permanent place in Christian thought, leaves us free to consider the question from a point of view which permits due regard to be paid to such conclusions as are arrived at on a basis of sound scholarship, and it is noteworthy that the position to-day in regard to the entire question is almost identical with that of the Church during the first four centuries ; that is to say, opinion is practically unanimous as to the position which is to be given to certain books of both Testaments, “ of whose authority there was never any doubt in the Church ” ; and also as to the liberty to determine by the canons of literary criticism that of others, and of portions of those “ commonly received,” when there is reason

to believe that they do not form parts of the original documents. Regarded from this standpoint, it will be evident that the idea of "Inspiration" is closely allied to that of "Canonicity," and, further, that Canonicity, like Inspiration, admits of a recognition of degrees, as, for instance, when we speak of some books as Proto-, others as Deutero-Canonical, and others, again, as Ecclesiastical and Apocryphal.

It was very natural—indeed, almost inevitable—that Jewish views of Inspiration and Canonicity—so far as the latter term had any equivalent in Jewish thought—should have had an incalculable influence in determining the attitude of the early Christian Church towards Holy Scripture in general, and particularly towards the Old Testament; for, as Hebrew learning was, to all intents and purposes, the exclusive possession of the Jews, Christian scholars, like St. Jerome, were very largely indebted to their traditions in determining questions of authenticity, though, of course, as might be expected, the influence of the LXX was undoubtedly very great. Now for Israel, the Torah—the law of the Pentateuch—was the Canon *par excellence*. It was of supreme divine authority, and in this respect was what we may term the Proto-Canon, so that when, in the interests of Alexandrian Judaism, the Hebrew Scriptures began to be translated into Greek, it was the Torah which alone was considered of sufficient importance to engage the labours of "The Seventy." The formation of a Second, and even of a Third, Canon gradually grew up from the writings of the Prophets, and from the collection of the Psalms, the "Wisdom," and other literature, so that when the Canon was at last completed, the natural division was one according to religious importance and historical value.¹

¹ The division of the Hebrew Bible is as follows:

I. *The Law* (Tōrāh), comprising the Pentateuch—the "Five Books of Moses."

II. *The Prophets* (Nēbī'im), including:

(a) *The Former Prophets*, viz., Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.

(b) *The Latter Prophets*, viz., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Book of the Twelve (Minor Prophets).

III. *Writings* (Kēthūbim), called by the Greeks "Hagiographa," viz., Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Canticles, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles.

In this division the Law stood first and alone ; it was written on a separate roll ; while the Prophets and other books, though regarded as inspired, were valued only in so far as they were "authoritative interpretations and applications of the Law, and in strict conformity with it."¹

But while Palestinian Judaism was rigidly conservative in regard to the strictly national character of its sacred literature, and limited its Canon to writings which were of purely Hebrew origin, Alexandrian Judaism, from being brought into contact with the influences of Greek thought, adopted a wider outlook, and showed a disposition to regard as inspired—though in an inferior degree—books which are known to us under the general term "Apocrypha." So, when, owing to the missionary endeavours of the Apostles, and particularly after the fall of the Jewish State, Christianity passed beyond the boundaries of Palestine, and made its home in Greek-speaking countries, it was this Greek Version which became the Bible of the Church, and consequently we find a frequent and indiscriminate use made of the "Apocryphal" writings, which are sometimes quoted as though they belonged to the Canon proper, and are even referred to by writers of the New Testament itself. There is nothing in this which need occasion surprise or difficulty when it is remembered that those writings were held in high veneration by the Jews of the Dispersion, with whom the Church had now principally to deal ; and the fact that New Testament writers show an acquaintance with them is no more an indication that they placed them on a level with the strictly Hebrew Canon, than that they so placed those pseudepigraphical works from which quotations may actually be found in the New Testament.²

It must be said, however, that, "in defining the number and limits of the sacred books, the Jewish doctors started with a false idea of the test and measure of sacredness. Their tradition, therefore, does not conclusively determine the question of the Canon, and we cannot permanently acquiesce in it without subjecting their conclusions to a fresh examination by sounder tests" (Professor Robertson Smith, "Old Testament in the Jewish Church," p. 147).

¹ See Professor Robertson Smith, "The Old Testament in the Jewish Church," pp. 146, 159, etc.

² The Apocrypha and pseudepigraphical Jewish books are not cited in

What is of significance, however, is that as soon as the scholarship of St. Jerome was brought to bear upon them with the definite purpose of re-editing and revising the old Latin version, those books were consigned by him to a position greatly inferior to those of the Canon as received by the Jewish Church according to the testimony of the Rabbis.¹

Now practically the same process is noticeable in regard to the manner in which the Canon of the New Testament became finally settled. Like the Jewish Canon, that of the New Testament was the result of gradual development. Writings which claimed high authority on account of their reputed authorship, and from other circumstances, such as local associations, were read in the churches, and it is well known that many which are now by common consent rejected as uncanonical, were frequently read and referred to as Holy Scripture, such, *e.g.*, as the Epistles of Clement and Barnabas, and the Shepherd of Hermas.²

the New Testament as Scripture, and with the exception of St. Jude v. 14 (Enoch i. 9) are not *directly* cited at all, although in the Eschatological portions of the New Testament (particularly in the Apocalypse) allusions to Jewish Apocalyptic are frequent and obvious; this is clear from such works as Dr. R. H. Charles's "Eschatology."

¹ On this question Bishop Gibson, "The Thirty-Nine Articles," says: "Especially important is the testimony of St. Jerome. He gives a complete and accurate list exactly coinciding with our own, and ends by saying, 'Whatever is without the number of these must be placed among the Apocrypha' ('Prologus Galeatus'). Contemporary with Jerome was Augustine, and it is to his varying and uncertain language that the claim of the Apocrypha to be ranked as Canonical must be traced. Not only does he freely quote (as others had done before him) books of the Apocrypha as Scripture, but (as others had *not* done before him) when formally enumerating the books contained in the Canon of Scripture, he includes these books without drawing any distinction between them ('De Doctr. Christ.,' II., viii.), although elsewhere he seems occasionally to use language which implies that he recognized a distinction ('De Civ. Dei.,' xviii. 33; 'C. Faustum,' xii. 43), from which it has been inferred that possibly he differed from Jerome only in language" (Bishop Gibson, *op. cit.*, vol. i., art. vi., pp. 256 *et seq.*)

² In some of the Fathers there is a distinction between "Apocryphal" and "Ecclesiastical" books. Rufinus, *e.g.*, classed among the former those to be wholly rejected; among the latter, those which were read in the Churches. His division, therefore, falls into three parts: *Canonical*, those which are now received into the canon; *Apocryphal*, those which were altogether rejected; *Ecclesiastical*, amongst which he reckons Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Tobit, Judith, Maccabees, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the like. Other writers make a like distinction, though some of the Fathers make only

Jewish ideas of Inspiration having been largely inherited by the Church, it was natural that the Gospels—the narratives of the Life of our Divine Lord, containing, as it were, the Law of the New Covenant—should, like the Pentateuch, though of later date than other portions of Scripture, form a kind of Proto-Canon, round which writings of an exegetical character came to be grouped. That the Pentateuch was itself a development, and had been subjected to frequent redactions before it

a twofold division, into Canonical and Apocryphal—*e.g.*, St. Cyril Hier., Cateches. iv., § 35, where he calls all Apocryphal which are not Canonical. (See Bishop Harold Browne, "Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles," p. 183.) This threefold division of Rufinus into "Canonical," "Ecclesiastical" (or "Deutero-Canonical"), and "Apocryphal" is especially useful as applied to the New Testament, since it enables us to classify and place in their relative positions those portions which are undoubtedly authentic; those which are doubtfully so, but are, nevertheless, Canonical—*e.g.*, 2 St. Peter, St. Jude, the Epistles to the Hebrews, the Apocalypse, the last twelve verses of St. Mark's Gospel, etc.; and those, again, which are of admittedly spurious origin—*e.g.*, the statements regarding the Heavenly Witnesses (1 St. John v. 7, Authorized Version), the Moving of the Water (St. John v. 4) and others.

But of paramount importance is the testimony of Eusebius, who gives a list of the writings of the New Testament, classifying them according to their degrees of importance and authority. "First," he says, "must be placed the holy quaternity of the Gospels; following them the Acts of the Apostles. After this must be reckoned the Epistles of Paul; next in order the extant former Epistle of John, and likewise the Epistle of Peter must be maintained. After them is to be placed, if it really seem proper, the Apocalypse of John, concerning which we shall give the different opinions at the proper time. These, then, belong to the accepted writings (*ἐν ὁμολογουμένοις*). Among the disputed writings (*τῶν ἀντιλεγομένων*) which are nevertheless recognized (*γνωρίμων*) by many, are extant the so-called Epistle of James, and that of Jude; also the so-called second Epistle of Peter, and those that are called the second and third of John, whether they belong to the Evangelist, or to another person of that name. Among the rejected writings must be reckoned the Acts of Paul, and the so-called Shepherd (of Hermas), and the Apocalypse of Peter; and in addition to these the extant Epistle of Barnabas, and the so-called Teachings of the Apostles; and besides, as I said, the Apocalypse of John, if it seem proper, which some, as I said, reject, but which others class with the accepted books" ("Hist. Eccl.," Book III., chap. 25).

In the above catalogue no special mention is made of the Epistle to the Hebrews, which is evidently included among the Epistles of St. Paul. In chap. iii. of Book III., however, after speaking of the *fourteen* Epistles of St. Paul, he adds: "It is not, indeed, right to overlook the fact that some have rejected the Epistle to the Hebrews, saying that it is disputed by the Church of Rome on the ground that it was not written by Paul." That this Epistle was not written by St. Paul is, as is generally known, now regarded as absolutely certain.

assumed its final form after the return from the Exile, had not prevented its being regarded as the kernel—the life centre of Judaism. So was it with the Christian Gospels: Writings and oral traditions of anterior date unquestionably gave a “tendency” to the form in which our four Canonical Gospels should finally become the corner-stones of the Christian Scriptures, but the exact position and value of such influences can only be determined as time and circumstances enable scholars to arrive at settled conclusions in regard to them.

In view, therefore, of doubts and difficulties which may be occasioned by questions which arise as to the genuineness of certain passages of supreme doctrinal importance, it is well to remember that “*Inspiration*” and “*Canonicity*” are not to be confounded with “*Authenticity*”—that a book or passage may still properly belong to the Canon of Scripture, the actual authorship of which is open to question, its position in the Canon being due not so much to the belief that it was written by this or that individual, but to the vastly more important circumstance that it expresses and is in consonance with, the doctrine which, at the time of its final redaction, had become the settled faith of the Christian community.

From what has been said it would appear, then, that some books were received with unhesitating consent because the instinct of Christian faith recognized in them a true interpretation of the Person of Jesus Christ. Others there were, however, which gained only a tardy recognition, partly because of doubts as to their origin, and partly because of certain Jewish elements contained in them which were thought to be scarcely consistent with the spirit of Christianity. That such books did eventually obtain Canonical rank goes far towards proving that the Christian consciousness was not fettered by hard or mechanical theories of inspiration, but that that spiritual perception which could penetrate beneath the outward “form,” and recognize in them the “matter” of a true revelation, was the ultimate ground of their acceptance. It came to be felt that Holy Scripture was not merely for all time, but also for all times, and

that for this reason certain books might have a higher religious value for one age than for another, according as lower or higher conceptions of Divine revelation seemed to prevail. The varied sentiments with which the preaching of the first Apostles and Evangelists had been received, were repeated in the case of their writings. The teaching of St. Paul, for instance, had caused a natural revulsion against the narrowness of the Judaizing school of Christians, and it might well be that writings which appeared to favour the one party would be regarded with suspicion by the other. But as the Church slowly emerged from controversies concerning the demands of the "Circumcision" and the "liberty" of the Gospel as interpreted by St. Paul; and as disputes about the binding force of the Law fell into the background, a wider outlook was obtained, and writings which had appeared to an earlier generation as tainted with "Legalism," were, by the clearer light and fuller experience of a larger faith, perceived to be the products of a time of half-lights, when the shadows were dissolving and the rays were breaking through—before the old had fully passed away, and before the new had fully come. Let anyone take the Synoptic Gospels, and diligently compare with them the Gospel of St. John, and he will see what a change the passing of a generation had effected in the conception of the Christ; nor will he any longer wonder that the records by which the progress and development of the conception may be traced, should betray the varying phases through which it had passed; and that as manuscripts multiplied in the hands of the "initiated," glosses and additions should have been inserted with the pious intention of making clear to later times truths which had hitherto been but half comprehended or but half expressed. When this has been said, the solution of many a difficulty may, perhaps, be seen to lie in the fact that the New Testament is, after all, the outcome of the growing faith of the Church from whose hands we have received it; and that since it is, even with its possible developments and emendations, the heaven-inspired message of those whose spiritual perceptions had been quickened by that "anointing which

teacheth all things," and by intimate association with those chosen ones "whose eyes had seen and whose hands had handled that which was from the beginning concerning the Word of Life," it comes to us as the fullest and sublimest expression of Christian belief and experience, and as such will be received so as to become for us the touchstone of our faith and the object of our most reverent love.

