

The Inspiration of Scripture— A Received Tradition ?

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FOR many centuries the church simply assumed that the Bible was the fully inspired word of God. But like many other traditional doctrines the meaning of inspiration is now the subject of lively theological debate. Every so often the debate comes to the boil. The publication of the first edition of the *New Bible Commentary* in 1953 and more dramatically the mission of Billy Graham highlighted the growing influence of evangelicals in Britain in the 1950's. This phenomenon led to a lively correspondence in *The Times* and to a book by G. Hebert *Fundamentalism and the Church of God*. Many writers betrayed a woeful ignorance of what evangelicals really believed, and in '*Fundamentalism*' and *the Word of God* (1958) J. I. Packer tried both to clarify the issues and to launch a counter-attack on liberal views of scripture.

In the 1960's Roman Catholic interest in the Bible grew enormously. Urged on by Vatican II, many more laymen began to read the Bible for themselves and catholic scholars made a notable impact in the world of biblical scholarship. In the process the doctrines of biblical inspiration to which the Roman church had been traditionally committed came up for discussion. Now the issues which have long perplexed Protestants are Rome's as well. In consequence future debates about the Bible can no longer be parochial affairs but concern every branch of the church.

1970 saw the publication by the Inter-Varsity and Tyndale presses of a revised edition of the *New Bible Commentary* and an *Introduction to the Old Testament* by R. K. Harrison. The autumn issue of *The Churchman* carried sympathetic reviews of both volumes by scholars who would not describe themselves as conservative evangelicals. The *Commentary* is reviewed by the Bishop of Liverpool and the *Introduction* by A. Gelston. Both reviewers pick on weak points of detail in the volumes concerned but naturally devote a good deal of space stating their objections to the general approach adopted by the *Commentary*

and Harrison. In their comments the reviewers betray certain misunderstandings of the evangelical position which for the sake of future debates ought to be clarified now.

Both the bishop and Mr. Gelston subscribe to a general view of biblical inspiration. They regard the religious message of the Bible as valid, but they deny that it is true in its historical details. They argue that conservative evangelicals who subscribe to the view that the Bible is infallible are relying on received traditions and ignore the facts. A Christian view of inspiration must take account of the empirical data of biblical scholarship as well as the explicit dogmatic statements of scripture about itself. 'Surely a truly biblical theology of the inspiration and authority of scripture will be based on *all* the data—not only the theological statements on the subject in the Bible, but also the rest of the evidence for what the Bible is.'

Evangelicals undoubtedly subscribe to the last statement. See for example J. I. Packer in *The Churchman* 81 (1967), pp. 14ff. But they weigh the factors rather differently. For instance the presence of textual corruption in the text of the Old Testament does not mean that the corruption is inspired on the one hand or on the other that the earlier text could not have been inspired and accurate. The presence of textual corruption does to be sure introduce an element which must be taken into account in a precise definition of infallibility. But such a blurring at the edges is present in every human discipline from photography to philosophy. However corrupt the text of Samuel may appear to be in comparison with Deuteronomy it is incomparably better preserved than most other documents of antiquity.

The bishop and Mr. Gelston both correctly appreciate why evangelicals affirm the infallibility of scripture: because they believe this to be the teaching of Christ. It is here that there is a basic cleavage of opinion. Whereas evangelicals affirm that Christ was both God and man and that his claims to teach with complete divine authority must be accepted, the reviewers emphasise the humanity of Christ. 'Our Lord is most genuinely divine when He is most completely human—subject to the accidents of human kind.' I take the bishop to mean by this that by virtue of his incarnation Christ was subject to the misapprehensions of his contemporaries. This is certainly a common view today. But though evangelicals agree that Jesus was a first-century Jew and therefore shared many first-century Jewish views, they do not admit that this invalidates his teaching, but rather the reverse. Where Christ endorsed the views of his contemporaries, he confirmed them. The same problem arises in the study of the Old Testament. Some laws, for example, are evidently based on earlier non-Israelite customs, but this only confirms the divine authority for such customs. It does not undermine the inspiration of the Old Testament writers who took them over.

Undoubtedly such an affirmation of the values and ideas of an

ancient culture is an affront to modern man. But what is the alternative? Jesus affirmed the truth of his teaching in no uncertain terms. (e.g. Matt. 7:24ff; Mark 13:31.) If we do not accept his teaching about the Old Testament, because he was a man of his time, there is little reason why we should accept his teaching about the nature of God or the forgiveness of sins, and no reason at all to press these views on others. Evangelism can no longer be thought of as the authoritative word from God commanding men to repent but simply as a personal recommendation to follow Christ, a Christ who is not to be found in the gospels. Thus evangelicals believe that behind the arguments about inspiration soteriology is at stake, just as in the debates of the early church about the person of Christ. It was argued that unless Jesus was both fully God and fully man, he could not have saved us. So too today, evangelicals believe that unless his teaching is recognised as fully divine as well as fully human, we have no more reason for trusting him for salvation than Mao Tse-Tung.

But this is not to demand blind acceptance of every traditional view about the Bible. While the inspiration of Scripture cannot be denied without casting doubt on Christ's authority, this does not mean that received human interpretations of the Bible are always correct, nor that there are not many difficult problems about the authorship of certain books and understanding historical events. Criticism is indeed very important, precisely because faith is not a leap in the dark, but depends on events of history and historical records. All of us find it easier to be schizophrenic Christians affirming the religious truth of the Bible but sitting loose to its history. But if we are to be honest before God and effective in dealing with unbelievers' problems, we must wrestle with the historical issues until we find answers that satisfy not only well-disposed evangelicals but the church at large.

For this reason the technical deficiencies in Harrison's *Introduction* must be acknowledged and not glossed over, but they should act as a spur to further work by evangelicals, since it is obviously impossible for one man to master the whole field. Unlike the bishop of Liverpool, I have little doubt that the Inter-Varsity Press will continue to produce new one-volume commentaries in the future. They are far too profitable, financially as well as spiritually, to give up. But it is to be hoped that IVP and other evangelical presses will sponsor less popular and more erudite lines, so that Christian learning and apologetic may grow in depth as well as in breadth. Only then will there be hope for a deeper understanding of biblical inspiration unshackled by traditions whether conservative or liberal.