

lifted up for the labour which is prayer, and our poverty may come on us apace, and our want—the lack and destitution natural and inevitable to our sinking and neglected condition—may spring upon us like an armed man.

S. Cox.

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### *M. RENAN AND SCRIPTURAL INFALLIBILITY.*

IN the touching and attractive Recollections of Childhood and Youth, in which M. Renan has taken the public into his confidence, one, and that perhaps the most important, passage seems to claim some notice in a Magazine intended to assist students of Scripture; I mean the passage in which he sets forth the causes which brought about his separation from the Church which he so deeply loved and to which he clung as long as his conscience permitted him to do so. M. Renan distinctly states (p. 298 of the French edition) that it was not by any of the mysterious doctrines of the Catholic creed, such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, that he was driven to sever his connexion with organized Christianity: “Nothing that might be open to criticism in the policy and the spirit of the Church, whether in the past or in the present, made the least impression upon me. If I could have believed in the truth of Theology and the Bible, none of the doctrines of the Syllabus would have caused me the least trouble. My reasons were entirely philological and critical, and in no sense metaphysical, political, or moral.” He then mentions as one of the insuperable difficulties which caused him to break with all the associations and prospects of his early life, the question of the contradictions between the fourth Gospel and the Synoptics; and he gives us to understand that,

while the whole current of his inclinations drew him towards Christianity, and even towards the priesthood (Je suis un prêtre manqué—a priest spoiled—is his touching description of himself), he was obliged wearily and unwillingly to turn his steps in the opposite direction, because while orthodoxy<sup>1</sup> bade him to accept without hesitation not only every statement contained in the Scriptures, but even the authorship of the books contained in their traditional titles, the study of the Bible had taught him that such a claim was utterly without foundation. “In a divine book all is true, and, it being impossible that two contradictions should be true at once, there ought to be no contradiction in it. Now the study of the Bible proved to me that this book was no more exempt from contradictions, inadvertencies, and errors, than any other ancient book. It contains fables, legends, traces of quite human composition. It is impossible to maintain that the second part of Isaiah is by Isaiah. The Book of Daniel is an apocrypha composed in 169 or 170 B.C. The attribution of the Pentateuch to Moses cannot be maintained. But one is no Catholic if one diverges on a single one of these points from the orthodox view.”

As regards the personal question, that concerns only M. Renan and the authorities of the Church which he so reluctantly and so honourably left.<sup>2</sup> The brief decree of the Council of Trent on the canonical Scriptures, while it pronounces an anathema on those who do not receive as sacred and canonical, “*libros ipsos integros cum omnibus suis partibus,*” and that in the Vulgate Latin edition, is

<sup>1</sup> p. 292, French edition.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most astonishing feature of the whole case is the indulgent and forbearing treatment which M. Renan met with from his ecclesiastical superiors. On his abandonment of Christianity, as they understood it, they gave him advice and assistance towards his secular studies, and M. Dupanloup, afterwards the celebrated Bishop of Orleans, even offered him pecuniary aid. A less serious aberration from orthodoxy would have been more severely visited at Oxford forty years ago.

yet less stringent than some Protestant confessions. But what is of interest to us as Protestants is the question, How far can criticism go without sapping the foundations of Christian faith? Are we to say, as some still do, that all our hopes and all our faith depend on the infallibility of the Bible, so that if this be shaken nothing remains for us but to go out into the wilderness of Agnosticism? Or may we say with others, that true religion is independent of written documents, and that even if the Bible were reduced to a purely human level, we need not to be the losers, nay, we might find ourselves the gainers in freedom from superstitious reverence for the letter while we gave ourselves up to be led and informed by the Spirit? Must criticism, which on all other subjects is free, whose very essence in other subject-matter is to be untrammelled by *à priori* judgments, approach the Bible with conclusions ready formed, and profess herself the handmaid of dogmatic theology?

There are many who will reply, Criticism may usefully busy itself about the details of Scriptural interpretation; it may within certain limits discuss the age and authorship of the sacred books; it may even throw doubts upon the authenticity of a passage here and there, as the concluding verses of St. Mark, or the heavenly witnesses in St. John: but it must leave untouched the authority of the Bible as a whole, it must accept as an axiom the Inspiration of the Canonical Books. But this is obviously a claim which needs a weighty authority to substantiate it, and such an authority cannot be found in the opinion of an individual, nor even in that of a large number of individuals, however learned and however pious. Nor can it be found in any claim of authority asserted by the Bible itself. Not to insist upon the fact that nowhere does the Bible make any formal claim to Inspiration—the passage 2 Timothy iii. 16, at the utmost refers only to the books of

the old covenant—to base the authority of the Bible on its own assertion would be arguing in a vicious circle from the infallibility of the Bible to its inspiration, and from its inspiration to its infallibility. Clearly, if the Bible is to be exempt from criticism, it must rest upon some authority external to itself which is competent to guarantee its authenticity and authority. If my father or my pastor or the congregation to which I belong places the Bible in my hands as a book possessing unquestionable authority, I may reasonably—nay, I am bound to—ask, From whom did you receive it? If it came to you with such a supernatural sanction as enables you to guarantee it to me, I accept it as soon as I am convinced of your competency and good faith as a witness; but if you received it from another, that only puts the difficulty one stage further off. This need of an external authority has been acknowledged in all ages, and has usually been found in the authority of the Church. The 20th Article of the Church of England, which has been largely adopted in Nonconformist trust deeds and formularies, asserts that the Church is “a witness and keeper of Holy Writ.” The Westminster Confession, indeed, in consequence doubtless of the anxiety of its authors to avoid all assertion of Church authority, declares that “the authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or Church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the Author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.” But here we have simply the authority of the Westminster divines substituted for that of the Church; if they are competent to declare authoritatively that the Book of Esther, or the Song of Songs, or the Second Epistle of St. Peter is “given by inspiration of God,” cadit quæstio: if not, criticism must come in after all. Indeed the same Article afterwards asserts that “our full persuasion of the

infallible truth, and Divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts." And this is the real alternative; the evidence of the Divine authorship of the Bible is either subjective, consisting in "our full persuasion of the infallible truth and Divine authority thereof," or objective, which can be nothing but, in one form or another, the witness of the Church.

What then is the meaning and what the value, to us Protestants of the nineteenth century, of the witness or the authority of the Church as a guarantee for the authenticity and inspiration of the sacred writings?

What is the meaning of the phrase as used by the Church of Rome is easily ascertained. The Tridentine decree already quoted lays down that the Scriptures and unwritten traditions are to be received as having been dictated by Christ or by the Holy Spirit, and preserved in unbroken succession in the Catholic Church. Indeed, in an uncritical age there was no controversy between the Roman and the Protestant Churches on the question of the Church being an adequate "witness and keeper of Holy Writ;" the only point of difference was the unwritten traditions and the Apocryphal books. Probably the idea vaguely present to the minds of men was something to this effect: that the Apostles, before their company was broken up by death, left to the Church the writings which we now call the Canonical Books of the New Testament, "of whose authority," as the Sixth Article naively puts it, "was never any doubt in the Church;" and that these books the Church has faithfully transmitted to us, to be handed down by us intact to the latest posterity. The Westminster Confession indeed seems to recognize no intermediate stage between the writing of Scripture by its Divine Author and its reception by ourselves. "It pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to

declare that his will unto his Church: and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, . . . *to commit the same wholly unto writing.*" But in our all-questioning age the problem assumes a different and a far more complicated shape. We know, as a matter of fact, that a large number of writings of the same kind with the canonical books was in circulation, and that only gradually and by a kind of survival of the fittest was a selection made of those which should be esteemed authoritative; we know that some of our present canonical writings were among the questioned when the rest had been for some time acknowledged; and we know that the Apocalypse in particular so late as the fourth century was esteemed spurious by the majority of the Churches of Asia Minor. The after decisions of councils were but the acknowledgment and registration of the informal selection which had been slowly and unconsciously made by the Christian instinct of the Church. That such a selection was thus made and ratified is an undoubted historical truth; but if the Church is to be accepted as competent to guarantee to us the canonicity, authority, and immunity from error of the books of the Old and New Testament, so as to place them for ever beyond the reach of critical inquiry, it must be on one of two grounds: either (1) the Church is supernaturally inspired and guarded from all error in the selection of the sacred books, or (2) the Church of the first four centuries possessed certain qualifications which are lacking to us for discriminating between writings authoritative and unauthoritative, inspired and uninspired.

That the Church of Christ is the subject of Divine inspiration will hardly be denied by any one who accepts our Lord's promise, "When the Spirit of truth is come, he will guide you into all the truth:" "The Comforter, even the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring to your

remembrance all that I said unto you ;” a promise which fully warrants St. Paul’s strong statement, that the Church of the living God is “the pillar and ground of the truth.” Upon these and the like words have been built the most varying interpretations. Some have seen in them a declaration that the Church, as represented in a General Council, is infallible in matters of doctrine ; others, that out of the germs of truth deposited by our Lord and the Apostles, the Church was to be supernaturally enabled to develop an elaborate system of Theology : others, that the Apostles were inspired to deliver to the Church without error or imperfection what they had received, and that the Church was commissioned to guard and to transmit their writings. But all such hard and fast interpretations seem like attempts to confine within logical boundaries the free Spirit which bloweth where it listeth. It is not a dead and mechanical, but a living and dynamic inspiration that is promised to the Church ; an inspiration of which the end is to help man not so much to know facts and to discern between canonical and apocryphal books as to know Christ and to discern between good and evil. St. Paul’s dictum, “He that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man,” probably supplies us with the best notion we can arrive at of the inspiration of the Church ; a dictum of which the negative side is well expressed in the 21st Article, “General Councils . . . (forasmuch as they be an assembly of men, whereof all be not governed with the Spirit and Word of God) may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God.” In proportion as God’s Spirit dwells in any man or assembly or Church, will there be present a delicate spiritual instinct, a critical or judging power, which will lay hold of and appropriate, not by any formal process, but by a special spiritual sense, whatever is of God, and will reject whatever is not of God. And it is in accordance

with this principle that the earliest testimonies to the New Testament Scriptures in Christian writers are found for the most part in the form, not of direct appeals to their authority, but of partial quotation or (still more frequently) of allusion, such as to make it abundantly clear that the writer's mind is saturated with the teaching of Christ and his Apostles, while at the same time the actual words of the canonical books, as they have come down to us, are by no means scrupulously adhered to.

It is confessedly difficult to construct a satisfactory proof of the authenticity of the canonical books on strictly scientific grounds. Dr. Westcott informs us that the canon was generally recognized at the close of the second century. But this allows from 100 to nearly 150 years, during which the Christian literature was as it were in the cauldron, gradually eliminating foreign elements, and taking the final shape and proportion in which it was to become fixed. What losses, what errors, what interpolations, what forgeries even, might take place in that interval it is difficult for us to conceive, familiar as we are with the rapidity and certainty of the printing press, with the wide publicity and intercourse rendered possible to our generation by the railway and cheap post, and with the critical habits which our literary classes have gained by a wide study of ancient and modern literature. The question therefore is, not what is the result which we find existing when something resembling the present canon emerges at the end of the second century; but by what process, whether of inspired selection, or of critical investigation, or of historical enquiry, the result was arrived at. And to this question no precise or definitive answer can be given. The life of the first age of Christianity, like that of the catacombs which are at once its most impressive monument and its truest symbol, was an underground life; it was the leaven working secretly; we see it when it has worked its way to the



surface, but its processes are for the most part invisible to us. One thing is certain; it was not a critical age; it was not an age that possessed any adequate tests of the authenticity of documents; it was an age in which apocryphal writings easily gained at least a temporary currency. But it was an age of fresh and simple religious instincts, an age therefore which would judge, not by intellectual, but by spiritual tests; an age whose faith would stand not in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. And such an age, while it might be very incompetent to test documents by literary canons, would be able to apply what we may call spiritual tests with an instinctive delicacy which would enable it to fix upon and to guarantee such writings as approved themselves to the Christian consciousness.

When therefore we profess to accept the Canonical Books of the New Testament on the guarantee of the Church, we do so in two senses: first, that historical evidence shews that these books have as a matter of fact held a quite unique position of authority in the Church as far back as we can trace Christian literature; and, secondly, that this authority is based on the informal but very real and weighty sentence of the earliest Christian society, that these writings and no others are the true expression of Christian doctrine, as it was first delivered by the Apostles and Evangelists. It remains to enquire how far this guarantee avails to protect the canonical books from all criticism, and in what sense and to what extent it constitutes them the sole and all-sufficient rule of faith and conduct.

In the first place, it clearly does not extend to the authorship of the books. In deciding the question, Was the Epistle to the Hebrews written by St. Paul? we may legitimately ask at what period and by what Churches do we find the Pauline authorship held? At what period and by what Churches do we find it denied? But we shall

not be justified in saying that the question is closed by any amount of evidence of early opinion in its favour. Even the authorship of the Epistles to the Corinthians, unquestionable as it is, must rest rather on internal evidence than on any consensus of patristic authorities. If a given book is ascribed to a particular author by a writer (say) of the second century, this only raises the question, What special means had this writer of knowing or ascertaining the authorship of this book? Unless we are prepared to concede to the primitive Church either a Divine inspiration which made men independent of ordinary means for forming a judgment, or an acuteness of critical discernment of which there is no evidence in their writings, we cannot refuse to submit the authorship of the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament to the same tests that we should apply to the Annals of Tacitus or the Letters of Pliny. Nor is there any reason why devout Christian people should dread the result of such enquiry. No one reads the Epistle to the Hebrews with less edification because the Pauline authorship is almost universally given up; and even supposing (a much stronger case) that criticism should forbid us to assert with certainty (and further than this we cannot conceive its going) the Johannine authorship of the Gospel according to St. John, yet even in this extreme case we could not cease to find in it the words which are spirit and which are life. Nothing but<sup>1</sup> tradition warrants us in ascribing the first two Gospels to St. Matthew and St. Mark; yet we do not therefore hesitate to accept the Sermon on the Mount or the Parable of the Sower; and though the fourth Gospel comes to us with something of a personal claim to the authorship, yet practically we accept it not altogether on the authority of an individual Apostle,

<sup>1</sup> M. Godet indeed presents some strong circumstantial evidence in favour of the tradition; but it is on tradition, in the first instance, that the authorship rests.

but rather on the authority of the universal Church, which has never ceased to find in it, even more perhaps than in the other Gospels, "the words of eternal life."

And the same principle which we have applied to the authorship holds good no less with regard to the text of the sacred books. In days when men's minds were fettered by the now exploded theory of Verbal Inspiration, textual criticism was impossible, for it would have suggested the fatal doubt whether we possess the actual words which were dictated to the sacred writers. But when we understand that both the ascertaining the genuine text and the determining the true authorship of the canonical books depends not on ecclesiastical authority but on careful and candid investigation, we perceive that here too the appeal lies not to any formal decision of the Church stereotyping for all time a particular text as authoritative, but to that science of textual criticism which, by investigating and comparing and classifying texts, slowly and painfully builds up a *textus receptus*, not indeed claiming to be absolutely final, nor professing to be verbally and literally correct, but still approaching as nearly as may be to a reproduction of the original as written or dictated by Evangelists or Apostles. Nor shall we derive less spiritual nourishment and edification from the Scriptures, when we regard them not as the direct utterance of the Most High, but as the report,<sup>1</sup> delivered to us with more or less of imperfection by "chosen witnesses," of the life which was manifested and which they had seen.

But, it will be said, if you thus reduce the Scriptures from an infallible authority to a human record of a Divine Life and of its workings, from the very Voice of God to its echo as caught and repeated, imperfectly perhaps, by men, what becomes of Scripture as a rule of faith? Can we any

<sup>1</sup> "Not a revelation, but a history of a revelation."—Munger, *Freedom of Faith*, p. 18.

longer appeal with the same absolute confidence to the sacred books, and say, This or that doctrine is declared in Scripture, therefore it is infallibly true? To this question it might be enough to reply by another: To what has the infallible authority of Scripture led us hitherto? Men have agreed that whatever is revealed in Scripture is true; but where is the agreement as to what is revealed in Scripture? Nay, has not the very life of Scripture been distilled out of it by the process of reducing its living truths to dead formulas? Take even so admirable a book as Bishop Pearson on the Creed; who is there nowadays, however he may assent to the writer's conclusions, who does not see in the marshalling of texts, from Old and New Testament alike, to prove each article, a perversion of Scripture from a living literature into a dead text-book of Theology? But not to insist upon this, the true answer to the question above suggested is, that Scripture remains the rule of faith in a higher sense than before, for that if by giving up the appeal to the letter we lose some of the technicalities of theology, we shall gain from the living spirit which pervades the Scriptures a truer insight into those deep things of God which are certainly not expressed in theological dogmas, but "are revealed to us," in our measure, as to Apostles of old in theirs, "by his Spirit."

"In a divine book," says M. Renan, "all is true." Scripture doubtless is a divine book, for it was given—*πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως*—in many portions, and in many manners—by inspiration of God; but it is also a most human book, for God breathed his inspiration into earthen vessels, and we can see the divine thoughts often struggling to find expression in the imperfections of human language and expressions and ideas. Who can fail to recognize a divine inspiration in the Psalms? And yet who does not recognize in them also much that is human, something even that is cruel and vindictive? It is true that even

in Psalms like the 137th we may learn the lesson of a righteous intolerance of evil; yet we are not honouring God by ascribing to Him such expressions as "Happy shall he be that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us." The sixteenth century discovered that God's truth did not rest on an infallible Church; the nineteenth has discovered or is discovering that it does not rest on an infallible Book. In the one case as in the other there may possibly be some inevitable loosening of belief, some drifting away from old moorings into unknown seas; but it cannot be doubted that as before so now again the letter will be replaced by the spirit, and a more genuine and living faith will spring from temporary unsettlement and perplexity. Scripture may cease to be the Rule of Faith in the sense of a store from which theologians may pick out doctrines like the pieces of a puzzle and fit them together into a harmonious whole; it will be the Rule of Faith in a far higher sense when men, believing in God as the Father of Spirits, turn to it as the foreshadowing and the record of his revelation of Himself in Christ. Definitions of Inspiration will not be needed when it is felt that the Revelation of God, like his kingdom, is not in word but in power; old objections to the Bible will lose their force when it is understood that religion does not stand or fall with this or that theory of Scriptural infallibility, and that the testimony of Scripture is addressed primarily "not to them that believe not, but to them that believe."<sup>1</sup> Much of the apologetic literature by which the authority of Scripture has been defended in the past will probably be superseded; but the Bible will be not less but more dear to devout Christians when they are no longer haunted by misgivings as to the ground of its

<sup>1</sup> See this point well brought out in the Rev. J. M. Wilson's admirable Lectures on the Theory of Inspiration, delivered at Bristol, and published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. It may be well to state that the present article was written thus far before the publication of those Lectures.

claim upon their acceptance, and when belief in the Inspiration of the Bible is no longer the antecedent condition but the consequence of belief in Christ.

St. Luke speaks of the work of contemporary writers, and by implication of his own, as "a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us." It is then as a formal statement of the belief already existing in the Church, a statement confirmed by his testimony as an eye-witness, and not as a communication from without, that the Evangelist introduces his work to the believers for whom it was written. And this is probably the idea intended to be conveyed by a sentence which formed one of the articles of accusation against Dr. Rowland Williams in the famous "Essays and Reviews" case, now more than twenty years ago, "The Bible is, before all things, the written voice of the congregation." At that time probably such a statement was shocking or unintelligible to most persons; but it is the same idea which we find more clearly expressed in Mr. Wilson's lecture above alluded to: "The belief in inspiration is not the portal by which you enter the temple; it is the atmosphere you breathe when you have entered." It is useless to speculate on what M. Renan's position might have been if he had not been brought up in the "believe all or nothing" system of the Roman Church; he says himself that he used often to wish that he had been born and educated a Protestant; but there are many minds as naturally Christian as his which may yet be saved from agnosticism or negation by learning that they may be Christians without holding any theory of Scripture infallibility, and that he who is drawn to love Christ by the love wherewith He has loved us holds a far higher place in the kingdom of heaven than he who has given an intellectual adhesion to Christianity on the authority of an infallible Church or an infallible Bible.

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