

Inspiration and Biblical Criticism.¹

BY REV. PROFESSOR DAVISON, M.A., RICHMOND.

How far is the doctrine of Inspiration and the Divine authority of Holy Scripture affected by modern Biblical Criticism? Are the ascertained results, not the theories and hypotheses, of a valid, not of a fanciful and speculative criticism, such as to make it necessary in any degree to modify traditional views of the Bible as the Word of God? And if so, how far, within what limits, according to what principles, is such modification to be admitted?

That there is ground for such an inquiry cannot, I think, be denied. A revolution is taking place in the history of theology, and the Bible cannot but be affected by it. Not only are men's views and opinion changing, but their very standpoint is so rapidly being altered that men with twenty-five or fifty years between them hardly understand one another's language or mental attitude. The advance of scientific knowledge, of historical, geographical, archæological discovery; the establishment of the science of textual criticism; the labour and concentrated attention bestowed upon biblical literature—these and other causes have almost metamorphosed Bible study, so that the commentators of half a century ago have become in some respects antiquated, and problems press upon the reverent student of to-day of which our fathers knew and might be content to know little or nothing. Two facts only I name to establish the proposition that there is ground for inquiry: The publication of the biblical articles in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, and the fact that *Lux Mundi* is in its eleventh edition, mainly because of the essay on Inspiration.

If it be answered, as well it may, that all these things do not concern the simple Christian who reverently reads his Bible to find the way to heaven, and that ministers will do well to make that the main factor in their consideration of this matter, the reply at once must be, Perfectly true: it cannot be too strongly insisted on. That is the first truth in this investigation of ours concerning the Bible, and it will be the last; about that there is no controversy. But it must be added that in this, as in all else, the minister must lead his people, and to this end must have his own ideas clear on a number of questions he does not bring directly before them; that, further, a large proportion of his most intelligent hearers keenly feel a number of the difficulties I have hinted at, and

if the minister does not know precisely where he stands in this matter, he will not be a leader at all, or only the blind leader of the blind, both falling into the ditch. There is abundant proof to-day that leadership is needed; men are crying out for it, and many ministers are only regretting their inability to give it as they would.

You do not expect me to lay down any dogma or formulary on this subject. There is none such. In the undivided Church of the early centuries, the Anglican Church, and the Wesleyan Methodist Church, there is a notable absence of definition as to the exact doctrine of Inspiration, as if the Church had been guided by the Spirit of God to abstain from formulating theories which might prove to be untenable. Neither do you expect from me a personal confession of faith which could be of no importance to any one but myself, useful here only as a mark for subsequent speakers to practise shooting at. But I understand that I am asked to offer some suggestions as to the present state of opinion upon a subject as to which even such a writer as Professor Banks states that additional light and leading are not only "desirable" but "necessary." Respectfully, therefore, I ask that my desultory remarks shall be judged as only of the nature of suggestions from one who has pondered, according to opportunity, this most important, most difficult, and, just now, burning question.

The present position, then, seems to be something like this: An ecclesiastical doctrine of Inspiration, of greater or less antiquity, has been in possession of the field among orthodox evangelical Churches, according to which the Bible has been viewed as a compact whole, from end to end the words of God, every part of it Divine in the same sense, infallible in every detail, inspired in every word, accepted as the sole authority on all questions, established in its place as the ultimate arbiter on the evidence of miracles and prophecy, acknowledged as such almost without question by all teachers and members of these Churches. Now, there is an uneasy feeling that this elaborate structure is more or less undermined. It stands erect, apparently uninjured, but there has been much digging and investigation going on at the foundations beneath, so much sapping and mining on the part of what is known as criticism, that it appears as if at any moment a collapse might come and the authority of the sacred Scriptures be shaken to its very base. "What are we to say?"

*

¹ A Paper read at the London Wesleyan Ministers' Meeting, 16th March 1891.

I have been asked again and again by ministers and intelligent laymen, What is the worth and strength of this criticism, and how is the doctrine of Inspiration affected by it?

Is there any inconsistency between an unhesitating belief in the Inspiration of Scripture, so that it may be revered as the Divine Word, an authoritative revelation, the ultimate arbiter of faith and practice, and a reasonable and valid biblical criticism, searching into all possible questions concerning the Books of the Bible? I am strongly persuaded there is no such inconsistency, but much depends on the way in which the subject of Inspiration is approached. Now, I should answer, the doctrine of Inspiration is the very last thing we come to in a time of searching inquiry and unsettlement of foundations. It is not wise to begin with that, and make the authority of the Book the basal tenet of faith. All are agreed that the Bible is Divine and human, pervaded by the influence of the Divine Spirit as is no other volume or volumes, yet human literature, composed and handed down under the conditions of ordinary literature. The theory of Inspiration concerns the precise relation between these, the character and degree of influence exercised by the Divine Spirit over the minds of human writers. We must not begin with that—we cannot. We cannot if we would, and we should not if we could. The question whether the Bible is or contains the Word of God; whether Inspiration be verbal, plenary, dynamic, may be very important: though, so far as I have watched such controversies, they seem too often to degenerate into mere strifes of words.

Far better begin with that which gives to this collection of books its unity, its character, its vitality, its authority, viz. the fact that it contains the record of the Revelation of the Living God—a series of revelations rather, culminating in the one consummate manifestation of God the Father in His Son Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. A long and multifarious record is given us in these books unfolding God's nature, His dealings with man, all within certain limits and for certain ends, but mainly for man's practical guidance and personal salvation; this revelation claiming to be itself supernatural, unique, complete, and all-sufficient for those purposes for which it was given. Inspiration is the name given to the special influence exercised by the Spirit of God in the preparation of that record, and it is clear that it is possible to adopt

1. Too low a view of that influence, not sufficiently recognising the sacredness of the substance;
2. Too high a view, which in its anxiety to preserve that sacredness propounds an untenable doctrine that defeats its own end.

But if we want to get at a satisfactory doctrine, we must not begin with that subject or at that end. It is not well to say "Inspiration *must* imply this or that." Butler has shown how dangerous it is to argue thus, how prone man is to degrade the Divine by endeavouring to exalt it according to his own ideas. We must argue not deductively and *à priori*, but *à posteriori* and inductively. Some may be afraid of so doing lest old landmarks should be lightly removed. On this subject let me quote Dr. Pope: "The Bible is a Divine-human collection of books, the precise relation of human and Divine in which is a problem which has engaged much attention, and has not yet been, though it may be, adequately solved. The Holy Ghost never defines inspiration as applied to the whole body of Scripture; we have to construct our theory from the facts, and our theory must face those undisputable facts as it finds them" (*Comp. Theol.* i. 175, 191).

But in these days we cannot begin so. Criticism is at work, and must neither be ignored or defied. How foolish, how wrong to do either! Criticism means examination; will not the Bible bear examination? Suspicion of criticism may be godly jealousy, but it may mean mere prejudice, an unwillingness to face facts. What we have to be jealous of is a criticism with tacit assumptions concerning the supernatural—criticism only in name, because it hides in its premisses the statements which it afterwards triumphantly produces in its conclusions. There must be the greatest care as to the assumptions of this criticism, its methods, its canons, its hypotheses. An unsound criticism must be met, not by denunciation, but by sound and sober criticism. What is the reason why so much criticism is rationalistic, so that the very name bears with some an ill savour? I fear largely because Rationalism has done so much more minute and thorough work of investigation, and orthodox commentators, while anxious about edification, have not pursued Bible inquiries with the thoroughness or scientific precision which is necessary to-day, if work is to be useful and lasting.

Behind, then, the question of Inspiration, or the kind of Divine influence exerted, come several previous questions:—

1. Are these books genuine, what they profess to be, written by the men whose names they bear?
2. Are they authentic, the stories in them to be believed, or myths, legends, unverifiable traditions?
3. If both, are the writers trustworthy in the details of their narratives, accurate in method, or loose and careless, though honest?

4. Are all the books in the collection deserving of a place here? Why are there so many? Why not more? Are these different from the rest?
5. Then, if all are genuine, all authentic, all trustworthy in minute details, and determined by a satisfactory canon, then we may ask at length, What is the relation between the Divine and the human elements in their composition, so far as that can be determined?

It is by raising these questions that the inquiry of our day has seriously affected the structure of belief in Inspiration, and a large number of difficulties that men have in mind when they vaguely say, "I don't know what to believe about Inspiration," emerge at a much earlier stage, and must be dealt with on other grounds. I may add that many of them emerge at an altogether later stage, and belong properly to the right interpretation of Scripture. These are difficulties caused by mis-translation, misunderstanding of the true scope of the narrative, misunderstanding of the relation between Scripture and physical science and the like—all topics which concern the correct interpretation of a Book which more than any other needs to be used with care.

It is, of course, impossible in five minutes to describe the present attitude of scholarly criticism to the books of the Bible, nor is it necessary to do so. It may, however, be well to sum up the results of the minute and exhaustive investigation and re-investigation given to the sacred books of late, by saying that it has spread all along the line and with somewhat varying results. In some cases there has been triumphant vindication, both of the genuineness and authority of a given book, admitted by hostile critics; in others, the traditional authority has been shown to be untenable, without affecting the substance or value of the book itself; in many cases a measure of doubt still remains, or critics are divided into two or more camps, each preserving its own views. The discussion of the Pentateuch question has more or less clearly demonstrated its composite character, and enabled us to trace the documents which have been interwoven into its structure, while the attempt to bring down the body of the legislation to a period after the Exile remains a speculative theory, full of difficulties and incredibilities, though at present strongly in favour amongst many scholars of repute. Throughout the Old Testament signs of editorial care, of compilation, have been brought to light. In the Psalms we possess a series of collections, the dates of which it is somewhat difficult to trace, the attempt to bring these down to a late date being involved in the Pentateuchal

theory just spoken of. The writings of the prophets are not so largely assailed by criticism, though the Isaianic authorship of the latter part of the book which goes by his name is now given up by the best scholars. Zechariah is thought by many to be composite in structure, and the controversy concerning the date of Daniel is by no means ended. In the New Testament the received dates of the composition of the three Synoptic Gospels is on the whole established, though students are still busy with the problem of the construction of these narratives, how they came to take the form they have, and what is their true relation to each other; while the attack on the genuineness, and therefore on the authority of the Fourth Gospel, has been triumphantly repelled, as shown in the last volume of Bampton Lectures. There are four unquestioned Epistles of St. Paul, and the arguments in favour of the genuineness of the rest have never been answered. The Pauline authorship of Hebrews, like the Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes, is now by most abandoned.

All this is highly controversial matter. The above are not statements of my own opinions, and they would be attacked on both sides by those who think that too much weight has been given to current criticism, and by those who think that not enough weight has been given to it. But it is no object of mine to take up any position on any of these debated topics; I only wish to show what is the actual history of recent discussion, and how the question of Inspiration must be affected while these controversies are going on. It is natural for devout students of Scripture to become somewhat impatient. There are those who would meet all these inquiries as impious. They are completely equipped with a theory of Inspiration, that the whole Bible may be proved apart from these examinations to be Divine from end to end, and that the authority of the Word of God should silence such inquiries and give us peace again. Such persons fail to see (1) that this is impossible. It is the authority of the Book which is in question, and which must be re-established upon a basis good against the unbeliever, as well as for the believer. (2) That none of the inquiries need affect the simple faith of one who reads his Bible for edification, while they are of the highest importance for those whose work it is fully to understand and intelligibly to teach from this Book as the rule of faith and practice. (3) That out of these investigations and controversies, more or less disturbing at the moment, as out of many more battles besides, good will come, if the Church of Christ be faithful. It is that we may learn more concerning the Book of books, understand it better, have larger views of God's Word and ways, that this has been permitted. But to gain this we must be content to wait awhile, begin with the premisses of the argument, not with

its conclusions, make the pyramid rest upon its base, not upon its apex. The Inspiration of Scripture—*i.e.* the everywhere operating influence of the Divine Spirit throughout these books, which are many yet one—is indubitable, undoubted; the precise relation between the Divine and human elements is much more difficult to define, and that topic must be postponed till some others have been satisfactorily settled.

But where rests the authority of Scripture, if we do not begin with its Inspiration and infallibility? We cannot accept the view that it depends on the authority of the Church; still less on the Coleridgean doctrine that the Bible is true because it “finds me,” commends itself directly to my heart and conscience. True, the doctrine of the Bible is connected both with the doctrine of the Church and the doctrine of conscience, but no satisfactory basis of authority is to be found in either of these. If we cannot appeal to the Bible as a standard, it may well be said, Where are we?

The answer is, the Bible is a standard, though not to be appealed to like the Koran, as a message from end to end sent direct from heaven. Its authority rests ultimately not upon the Book as a composition, but upon the revelation recorded in it. In establishing its authority, we must go to the Lord Jesus Christ—make the doctrine of Scripture Christo-centric. True, we can only reach Him through the record, but we can do that, without any elaborate theory as to what Scripture as a whole is. St. Mark’s Gospel and the four unquestioned Epistles of St. Paul are more than enough to bring us into His presence and to enable us to answer the question, What think ye of Christ? As to the question, Do you believe in Christ because you believe in the Scripture, or do you believe in the Scripture because you believe in Christ, the Christian may say, “I cannot well separate the two;” but if I am pressed for a logical answer, it must be the second. I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s Son our Lord, in the revelation there made of the Divine, and from that starting-point I find Christ stretching forth His arms on either side to establish the authority of Holy Scripture. Backwards to the Old Testament to which he constantly appeals as the authority for the Jew, and within certain limits for all men, as the Scriptures which in so many ways testified of Himself, the chief value of which to-day consists in the way they lead up to Him. Forwards to the New Testament as He sends forth His Apostles with the message commissioned by Himself, giving them authority to proclaim that which was afterwards recorded by those whose qualifications and credentials can be freely examined and have been satisfactorily established again and again.

I shall not stay to work out this argument, but ask you to bear in mind how much it contains

when establishing the substantial authority of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. *For those who believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, there is an irremovable basis for the doctrine of Holy Scripture as a sufficient, complete, infallible guide in things pertaining to God, the sole authoritative rule of faith and practice.* When we pass from this to a close consideration of the *form* of the book or books, the precise way in which it has pleased God that this record should be made and come down to us, and the exact degree of influence exercised by His Spirit on the minds of the writers, the true relation of the history, the science, the theology of their own times, it is quite clear that large questions are opened up. If we begin with preconceived ideas of what the Revelation from God must be, many will be disappointed. It is quite clear, for example:—

1. Our Bible is a translation. We cannot imitate the Church of Rome, which, according to the Council of Trent, virtually takes the Vulgate as infallible.
2. It is not altogether easy to reach an accurate text. Both in the Old and New Testaments a minute, scientific investigation, not yet ended, is to determine this.
3. When we have obtained this, the form in which the revelation has come down to us, the form of the books and narratives, what seem gaps on the one hand and repetitions on the other, shows that here we have a human literature, embodying a Divine message not to be discerned at a glance, but which *makes* us think, compare, examine, weigh, judge.
4. In the simplest passages, the history of interpretation shows how many meanings may be attached to them, so that the infallible Book requires an infallible interpreter, if we are to have an infallible guide as Rome understands it. A Protestant who understands the meaning of his own creed should be an ardent and reverent student of the Bible, but not a Bibliolater.
5. The way in which the New Testament writers use the Old Testament shows the complexity of the whole subject. Reverence and appeal to authority are everywhere manifest, but also a measure of freedom for which we are hardly prepared, and an evident desire to dwell on the substantial meaning rather than the form of the record, the spirit rather than the letter of the Word.

When we examine the books more closely, the same need of intelligent discrimination appears at every turn.

(a) He who holds that these books are indeed the Word of God is compelled to examine into

their form and structure, the distinction between poetry, history, and prophecy; to inquire in what sense, to what degree, God may be said to speak, e.g. in the Book of Job, in the speculations of Ecclesiastes, in the visions of the Apocalypse,—he is compelled by the very variety of form and complexity of the questions raised to think and to distinguish, if he would understand and rightly receive the Divine message.

(b) The nature of Inspiration is raised by the acknowledged fact of the *progressive* character of the Divine Revelation herein contained. The unity of the Bible is not mechanical, but organic—represented by the growth and development of the plant, not by the erection of a monolith. The Law is a *παιδαγωγός* to lead us to Christ, and the stages of development can be ascertained, and must be intelligently distinguished. The Book of Genesis and the Book of Chronicles have their places in the history of the kingdom of God, but before we can understand the nature of the guidance given to the writers we must have some insight into the character of the place they occupy.

(c) The meaning of the Canon raises the same considerations. Why are there these books and no others in the inspired Canon; why not Ecclesiasticus as well as Ecclesiastes, Hermas as well as the Apocalypse; why not dispense with Esther or the Epistle of Jude? The answer would be a long one, but investigation shows how the Jews at the end of the Old Dispensation and the Christian Church at the beginning of the New were marvellously guided in the choice of books whose subject, character, or authorship fitted them for a place in the Revelation of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. An "Inspiration of selection" was vouchsafed both to the writers and to the compilers of the sacred Canon of Scripture.

It is needless to say that the view of this Book as a revelation, based on the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, implies the general accuracy and trustworthiness of the writers. There can be no room in a true theory of Inspiration for forgeries, "cooking" of narratives, pious frauds, inventions, myths, the rewriting of history or prophecy to suit the times. This is not to say that the literary habits of all generations are the same; that we take up the Books of Samuel as if reading Macaulay or Carlyle, or Freeman, judge by the same views of history, expect to find the same methods or aims. This is not to say that Ecclesiastes must have been written by Solomon because it contains his name, or that the terms "Moses" and "David" are never used with latitude and freedom for that which David and Moses did not actually write. But it does imply that frauds, however "pious," are utterly out of place in the Revelation of the All-Holy, in any part of the testimony concerning Him who is a Faithful and True Witness. Simplicity,

ignorance, primitive habits of thought and speech may be expected, where such are in place; but if the Bible contains "cunningly-devised fables," though it may be an interesting collection of documents for historians or antiquarians, its authority as a sacred record and as a rule of faith is gone.

Biblical criticism may even point out the existence of much which we should not have expected in Scripture which yet does not interfere with its sacredness or authority. Analysis has been very busy of late years, many think far too busy. Yet it has its place, and synthesis will follow in due course. If, e.g., we are taught to see two or three narratives, where formerly we saw only one; two or three hands at work on a single book, more of what we should call editorial supervision, of compilation, than we should have associated with the sacred documents, we need not be startled or disturbed. When we stand close to a Raphael or a Turner with a hand-glass, we perceive only rough dabs of paint. We may so stand that we can see nothing else, but the masterpiece remains for all that. Many of the critics' conclusions on these points are the merest dreams of a restless literary imagination, some are wildly speculative, some are demonstrably false, not to say self-contradictory. But if some of them that have to do with processes of composition, details of authorship, prove to be true, neither the authority nor the Inspiration of Scripture is necessarily interfered with.

It will be expected that such a record will be preserved free from error. It must imply freedom from such error as would interfere with the object for which the Revelation was given, else it fails to be a Divine Revelation. But will it not mean freedom from all error, absolute infallibility in every detail? We should answer, We must wait to see whether it be so, not begin with the absolute certitude that it is so of necessity, and refuse to give credence to it at all, unless it has been thus preserved from the slightest mistake. For the Bible as a series of records touches on a thousand subjects, and it is a large question how it may please God to deal with human writers as they deal with an immense variety of topics besides the one for which especially they were commissioned to write. Take for example,

Physical Science. Is it to be expected that the sacred writers should anticipate the conclusions of modern times? Most will answer, No; the record would have been unintelligible to their contemporaries. Arguments have been drawn from Scripture against the views of Galileo, of Lyell, of Darwin, it being assumed in each case that whatever seemed to contradict the language of Scripture must be false. Therefore the sun moves round the earth, the universe was created in six days, of twenty-four hours each, evolution in any shape is impossible! It is surely wiser to under-

stand the scope and meaning of Revelation before we assume that it was ever intended to teach physical science. On the other hand, there is a marvellous agreement between the outline of Genesis i. and modern scientific discovery, so that a distinguished scientific teacher has said one would only need to alter a word or two in the Bible account of Creation to harmonise it completely with the latest conclusions of physical science.

The discrepancies of Scripture have been much exaggerated, both as regards their number and importance. Genesis i. and ii. are clearly two narratives, not necessarily discrepant. In the Synoptic Gospels the very variations are evidence of independence; if the narratives had absolutely coincided they would have lost much of their weight. If the accounts of the blind men of Jericho, of Peter and the cock-crowing, of the Synoptics and John as to the day of Christ's death, appear to be discrepant and hard to reconcile, we must remember how often this happens in contemporary narrative till the explanation is known; how scanty is the record and our knowledge of the facts. Still, the perpetual recurrence of difficulties of detail in minor matters should prevent us from dogmatising as to the impossibility of mistake in any single particular.

On questions of history the authority of these books varies according to circumstances. Some are contemporary records, some very early and valuable, others later; all may be shown to be trustworthy. But it would be dangerous to set up a theory of the impossibility of mistake in detail, so that the authority of the Scripture as a whole would be gone, if any such were pointed out. This has been a fruitful cause of scepticism. Especially we should not do so without the clearest evidence from Scripture itself that the writers claimed this absolute and unerring knowledge. We need not then be disturbed by the evidence of clay cylinders, which may very easily be wrong in dates, but which may, on the other hand, be right.

This is not, of course, to say that we are lightly to assume the existence of error. In hundreds of instances the Scripture has been proved correct where for long this has been doubted or strenuously denied. So far from disparaging the accuracy of Scripture in trifles, the more careful and minute our study, the greater will be our marvel at the fidelity of these records in the minor as well as the more important matters with which they deal. Sixty-six books, by so many authors, covering a period of 2000 years, searched through and through by keenest eyes, and pierced by sharpest weapons of criticism, what books like those of Scripture

could so have stood the test? The words of the Lord are pure words: "As silver tried in the furnace of earth, purified seven times." Yet if in the vessel grains of sand or morsels of lead should be found, they do not lessen the value of the mass of pure, white, shining silver, of precious, refined gold. It is a distorted vision that will look upon the specks of alloy till it cannot see the massive, pure metal; it is a mistaken fidelity to suppose that because the sacred treasure is pure gold, therefore the earthen vessel which contains it is itself of gold throughout. The vessel must hold the treasure safely and well; "Heaven soon sets right all other matters."

No attempt has been made here to lay down a theory of Inspiration. I have tried to show the lines on which to rest a faith in the plenary inspiration of Scripture as a trustworthy, adequate, and unerring record of God's revelation of Himself to men, without our being afraid of the fullest inquiry, of any results of sound and valid criticism. Especially does it seem at present important to keep well before us the great end and aim of all Revelation, "That we might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent." Then questions of form, of detail, of vehicle will fall into their own subordinate place. We lose nothing by keeping before us with a single eye the great ends for which the Bible was written—even the Old Testament Scriptures, *δυνάμενα σοφίσαι εἰς σωτηρίαν*, "able to make wise unto salvation" through faith in Christ Jesus. We may lose much by being too eager about the means which we think necessary for securing those ends. Jewish Rabbis were praised for making "a hedge round the Law," but that ended in their paying chief attention to the hedge, and neglecting the spirit of the law it was meant to protect. In forming a theory of Inspiration we cannot be wrong in putting the first things first, and keeping the secondary things second. This will preserve us from many mistakes, and it will keep us from being impatient of inquiries which are as wholesome as they are inevitable, while it enables us to await with calm confidence the answers to some questions for which we may have to wait for some time to come. Thus in spite of the little clouds of dust raised by battles of critics here and there, the chariot of God rolls on its course. "Every Scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness," and "through patience and comfort of the Scriptures" we shall embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of eternal life which is in Jesus Christ our Lord.