

THE LOGIC OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

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One of the problems that arises from the evangelical preoccupation with the doctrine of Holy Scripture is that it encourages the deeply mistaken belief – so congenial to those outside the evangelical fold – that it is some sort of novelty; that our doctrine of Scripture is a sectarian super-addition to the faith once delivered to the saints. We need to be reminded of some words which, if they are repeated often enough, will play their part in exploding this particular myth. They were written at the height of the so-called Fundamentalist controversy of the early part of the century by that distinguished New Testament scholar who in matters theological was almost eccentrically Liberal, Kirsopp Lake, in an aside in his fascinating little book, *The Religion of Yesterday and Tomorrow*, which forms a kind of companion piece to Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism* as a popular manifesto from the other side. Lake says this:

It is a mistake, often made by educated men who happen to have but little knowledge of historical theology, to suppose that Fundamentalism is a new and strange form of thought. It is nothing of the kind: it is the partial and uneducated survival of a theology which was once universally held by all Christians. How many were there, for instance, in the Christian churches, in the eighteenth century, who doubted the infallible inspiration of all Scripture? A few, perhaps, but very few. No, the Fundamentalist may be wrong; I think he is. But it is we who have departed from the tradition, not he, and I am sorry for the fate of anyone who tries to argue with a Fundamentalist on the basis of authority. The Bible and the *corpus theologicum* of the church is on the Fundamentalist side.¹

1. Kirsopp Lake, *The Religion of Yesterday and Tomorrow*, Boston, 1926, pp. 61,2

Lake forcefully recognises the authenticity of the orthodox tradition and its corollary – the substantial *ina*uthenticity of the tradition which has arisen in its place as the voice of mainstream Christianity. But he recognises also something else of at least equal importance, the *logic* of orthodoxy; the inter-relation of orthodox doctrine generally and an orthodox doctrine of Holy Scripture. This, from the point of view of method, is the question to which we now turn. It may be further illuminated with Lake's assistance. Of the new theological movement of the nineteenth century which formed the intellectual context of the challenge to orthodoxy in his day – much as it does in our own – he writes as follows:

Since the Reformation, there has been no intellectual movement in Christianity which can compare in importance with the storm which began in the first half of the nineteenth century, and is still unabated. It has produced a general unsettlement of mind with regard to all traditional doctrine, because it has broken up the authority of the Revelation on which doctrine is based. That Revelation gave a complete account of man's history and future lot, beginning in the Garden of Eden and ending in Heaven or Hell, and this account has become completely discredited at every point where it can be reached.²

His candour is to be admired! He can see and will admit what is hidden from so many who would prefer to cast themselves in more moderate roles, but who are in fact simply less consequent in their thinking; that the new theology has 'broken up the authority of the Revelation' and thereby dislodged the structure of Christian doctrine 'based' upon it. That is because of the function of Holy Scripture. Listen again to Lake:

The historic faith of the church ... is a perfectly clear and consistent whole. It is to be taken or rejected. Nothing

2. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

THE LOGIC OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

is gained by the device of cutting out, for instance, the Virgin Birth, but accepting the doctrine of the Incarnation, or doubting the judgement to come, but insisting on the Trinity. The Incarnation is a far more difficult thing to believe than the Virgin Birth.... *The basis of this faith was not thought to be discovery by human logic but revelation by the act of God, and this revelation is to be found in the Bible, which is infallible.*³

And, he goes on, if this is indeed the case,

the Bible is a direct and infallible source of knowledge, co-ordinate with reason, not subject to its criticism. What the Bible states is true, because the Bible says so; therefore if the Bible says that Jesus is the Incarnate Logos the matter is settled....

The only alternative is that the Church of tomorrow will frankly accept the 'Experimentalist' position ... in the sense that [religion] will be based on observation, not on authority, on the facts of religion, as perceived by the individual, not on biblical or ecclesiastical revelation.⁴

The principal point, for which we are indebted to the clarity of Kirsopp Lake's exposition, is that in whatever terms the contemporary debate about the integrity of Holy Scripture is couched – and at different times swords have been drawn at the mention of inerrancy, or infallibility, or verbal or plenary inspiration – the issue to which these watchwords have been intended to draw attention is as central as it could be.

Of course, this has long been argued by advocates of the so-called domino theory – that once the doctrine of Scripture has gone the rest will fall in turn – although the credibility of this

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 79, 80; our emphasis.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 145,6; 158.

kind of analysis has been put in question in the common mind by the fact that doctrinal dominos have a curious capacity to resist the dynamics of theological change. The Liberals of the 1920's – and none more than Kirsopp Lake, who was a domino theorist before his time – would have been taken aback to discover the unwonted durability of Christian doctrine in the face of assault. While the theological work of our generation has cast everything into doubt, the major denominations have remained substantially and surprisingly orthodox – including those which took the Liberal path in the years of fundamental struggle towards the end of which Lake and Machen were writing. By the same token, many have found it difficult to predicate of those who have the appearance of being evangelicals just like us, an incipient abandonment of all that they hold dear on the ground that they formulate their doctrine of Holy Scripture in a seemingly slightly different fashion. Which is not to say that the theory is mistaken, but that it needs to be advanced with more sophistication than has sometimes been afforded, taking full account of the effect of credal and confessional traditions at one remove from Scripture, and, from another perspective, of the remarkable grace of God towards his church.

But our argument is at another level. It concerns not the survival of particular doctrines, but rather the very possibility of Christian doctrine, that is, of the reception and appropriation by the church of the knowledge of God. Kirsopp Lake's contention is that the foundations of Christian doctrine in the Word of God have been discredited, such that the only remaining option is a religion based not upon revelation at all, but on what he calls 'discovery', empirical observation, the general means by which human knowledge is advanced in place of any special means. The option of revelation has been foreclosed.

Is the choice of alternatives with which Kirsopp Lake presents us finally valid? Are these the only logical options in theology? Insofar as there has been any consensus in modern Protestant

THE LOGIC OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

theology, it has had the effect of denying Lake's argument, asserting rather a middle way in which theological endeavour can result in the knowledge of God without resort either, on the one hand, to a concept of mere human discovery as the ground of religious authority or, on the other, to the orthodox doctrine of Holy Scripture.

Henry Longueville Mansel was an Oxford philosopher of the middle nineteenth century. Though not an evangelical, he emerged as a potent defender of the heartland of Christian orthodoxy in those years of ferment to which Kirsopp Lake was later to refer. It was, alas, the case, that while the mid-Victorian years were something of an evangelical hey-day in Britain, the Tractarian controversy in England absorbed many of the best evangelical energies, and left other – and ultimately more significant – questions to go largely by default. Certainly the best defences of orthodoxy which mid-Victorian England produced were not the work of evangelicals. So it was with Henry Longueville Mansel.

Mansel was invited to deliver the famous Bampton Lectures in the year 1858. The Bampton were – and are – an annual series, delivered in Oxford, established in the later part of the eighteenth century for the defence of Christian orthodoxy by the late Canon John Bampton. Canon Bampton had a keen grasp of the fallenness of human nature, and particularly of the human nature of which theologians partake, since in his determination to get the lectures published every year he decreed that not only was publication a condition of the appointment of the lecturer, but the fee – a substantial fee – would not be paid until the lectures were in print. It is a comment on the practical wisdom of the man and the truth of the doctrine that in virtually every year of some two hundred, publication has taken place; sometimes, as in the case of Henry Longueville Mansel, in the same year as that in which they were delivered, though we may not say whether in the case of Dean Mansel this should be attributed to a surfeit of the virtue of diligence or of the vice of

avarice. To possess them both in good measure would certainly be an advantage in a Bampton Lecturer.

Mansel was a philosopher who wrote on theology and also on church history, but he won particular acclaim amongst his colleagues for his gifts in another direction still, as a writer of humorous verse – the kind of humorous verse which only an Oxford don would write. An excursion into this less arcane area of his work will not, as should later emerge, be altogether without profit. Perhaps its highlight is to be found in his dramatic poem the *Phrontisterion*; which term means a place of learning. Mansel was much concerned about the impact of German philosophy and theology upon Oxford, and the classical chorus to the drama is supplied by a group introduced in the *dramatis personae* as 'Cloudy Professors' from Germany. The chorus make three interventions. First they introduce themselves:

Professors we,
From over the sea,
From the land where Professors in plenty be;
And we thrive and flourish, as well we may,
In the land that produced one Kant with a K
And many Cants with a C.

Then we have this:

Theologians we,
Deep thinkers and free,
From the land of the new Divinity;
Where Critics hunt for the sense sublime,
Hidden in texts of the olden time,
Which none but the sage can see.
Where Strauss shall teach you how Martyrs died
For a moral idea personified
Where Feuerbach shows how Religion began
From the deified feelings and wants of man,
And the Deity owned by the mind reflective,

THE LOGIC OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

Is Human Consciousness made objective.
Presbyters, bend,
Bishops, attend;
The Bible's a myth from beginning to end.

And, in their final contribution, as follows – and here in fact we make a beginning – as does Mansel – with the subject which he addresses in his Bampton Lectures, as may be evident:

The voice of yore,
Which the breezes bore
Wailing aloud from Paxis's shore,
Is changed to a gladder and livelier strain,
For great God Pan is alive again,
He lives and reigns once more.

Mansel's Bampton Lectures for 1858 bore the inauspicious title, *The Limits of Religious Thought*, but in this title he has already asked his fundamental question. What are the proper limits to the capacity of man to engage in religious thinking?

Mansel's starting-point is contained in the question, Is the revelation of God open to assessment and evaluation by man? His argument is found in his answer. This can be so only insofar as it is possible for the unaided human reason to construct its own philosophical knowledge of God, apart from his revelation. That is, it is unreasonable to believe these two things at the same time: (1) that a comprehensive knowledge of God is impossible apart from his revelation, and (2) that it is appropriate for the human mind to criticise particular elements within the revelation itself. In Mansel's words,

If Revelation is a communication from an infinite to a finite intelligence, the conditions of a criticism of Revelation on philosophical grounds must be identical with those which are required for constructing a Philosophy of the Infinite.... Whatever impediments, therefore, exist to prevent the formation of such a

Philosophy, the same impediments must likewise prevent the accomplishment of a complete Criticism of Revelation.⁵

This does not mean that the claims of religion are not open to critical assessment. Mansel's point is that

the legitimate object of a rational criticism of revealed religion, is not to be found in the *contents* of that religion, but in its *evidences*.⁶

The proper task of the mind of man is to decide whether what claims to be a revealed religion *is* a revealed religion. It is not to start sifting through the contents of what it has already decided *is* a revealed religion in an effort to discover whether or not they are true.

Mansel was of course writing in the context of the often naive evidential apologetics of the first half of the English nineteenth century. Whether or not we would place ourselves in the reconstructed evidentialist tradition is not germane to the argument, because all that needs to be meant by the 'evidences' of a religion is the answer that would be given to the question, Why do you believe this religion to be true?

Mansel acknowledges that it is of course possible to regard the 'contents' of a religion as *among* its 'evidences'. But such

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5. H. L. Mansel, *The Limits of Religious Thought*, London, 1858, pp. 27,8. The *Phrontisterion* will be found in full in H. L. Mansel, *Letters, Lectures and Reviews, including the Phrontisterion*, London, 1873. Mansel's thought is discussed more fully in the present writer's *On the Interpretation of Scripture. Infallibilism and Higher Criticism in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Lewiston, New York, 1987. His position is applied in a different fashion in 'Universalism and the Logic of Revelation', forthcoming in the *Evangelical Review of Theology*.
6. Mansel, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

THE LOGIC OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

scrutiny of 'contents' has as its purpose a decision on whether or not the revelation is genuine. Once scrutiny has taken place a decision must follow for or against. What purports to be a revelation from God either is or is not what it claims. The decision to accept or to reject terminates discussion of the authenticity of the particulars. That is,

the objections urged against a religion are not like the weights in a scale, which retain their full value, even when outweighed on the other side: – on the contrary, they become absolutely worthless, as soon as we are convinced that there is superior evidence that the religion is true. We may not say, for example, that certain parts of the Christian scheme are unwise or unrighteous, though outweighed by greater acts of righteousness and wisdom: – we are bound to believe that we were mistaken from the first in supposing them to be unwise or unrighteous at all. In a matter of which we are so ignorant and so liable to be deceived, the objection which fails to prove every thing proves nothing: from him that hath not, is taken away even that which he seemeth to have. And on the other hand, an objection which really proves any thing proves every thing. If the teaching of Christ is in any one thing not the teaching of God, it is in all things the teaching of man: its doctrines are subject to all the imperfections inseparable from man's sinfulness and ignorance....⁷

That is to say, the human mind is not equipped to 'divide God's Revelation'. Indeed, Mansel writes,

Many who would shrink with horror from the idea of rejecting Christ altogether, will yet speak and act as if they were at liberty to set up for themselves an eclectic Christianity.⁸

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 246,7.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 249,50.

And in the phrase 'an eclectic Christianity' we come to the heart of his critique. The claim that we can accept some elements in the Biblical revelation while rejecting others

rests on a far less reasonable basis than the firm belief which accepts the whole thing, or the complete unbelief that accepts nothing.⁹

That is, 'Rationalism', by which Mansel refers to the eclectic theological method,

if it retains any portion of revealed truth as such, does so, not in consequence, but in defiance, of its fundamental principle. It does so by virtually declaring that it will follow reason up to a certain point, and no further; though the conclusions which lie beyond that point are guaranteed by precisely the same evidence as those which fall short of it.¹⁰

Conversely,

Many a man who rejects isolated portions of Christian doctrine, on the ground that they are repugnant to his reason, would hesitate to avow broadly and unconditionally that reason is the supreme arbiter of all religious truth; though at the same time he would find it hard to point out any particular in which the position of reason, in relation to the truths which he still retains, differs from that which it occupies in relation to those which he rejects.¹¹

9. *Ibid.*, p. 252.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 10,11.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

THE LOGIC OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

Since a 'direct intuition of the infinite is unattainable by human consciousness',¹² the human mind is incompetent to make any such distinctions within the body of revelation itself.

The conclusion, which an examination of the conditions of human thought unavoidably forces upon us, is this: There can be no such thing as a positive science of Speculative Theology; for such a science must necessarily be based on an apprehension of the Infinite; and the Infinite ... cannot be positively apprehended in any mode of the human Consciousness.... We can test the progress of knowledge, only by comparing its successive representations with the objects which they profess to represent: and as the object in this case is inaccessible to human faculties, we have no criterion [by which to judge.... Such a criterion] can obviously have no place in relation to those truths, if such there be, which human reason is incapable of discovering for itself.¹³

Mansel's analysis of *The Limits of Religious Thought*, the inescapable boundaries of the human mind in its attempt to grapple with religious questions, is an eloquent demonstration of the contention with which we began, that an assault on Biblical authority is less a challenge to particular doctrines than it is to the possibility of Christian doctrine. We turn now to the implications of this thesis for theology, in two distinct conclusions: first in respect of the authoritative role in which the church has always sought to cast Holy Scripture; and, secondly, in respect of our fundamental understanding of the mode of apprehension of God.

12. *Ibid.*, p. xxvi, introduction to fourth edition (1859).

13. *Ibid.*, p. 258.

Conclusions

1. *The Canonicity of Holy Scripture*

It is not without interest that the closing chapter of the Bible is devoted in part to this question, in particular, verses 18 and 19. In the *New International Version* they stand as follows:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

It would, of course, be appropriate for us to interpret this text of more than the Revelation to John alone. Its providential placing at the close of the canon of Holy Scripture is an invitation so to do, to treat it as a programmatic statement about the entire volume which, all but for two verses, it closes. But we have no need to argue in this way, since the significance of this statement may be held to lie not in its specific relevance to its context in the Revelation to John, nor in its placing at the end of the canon itself, but as a statement about the role of the Revelation to John as revelation; and, by extension, as a statement about revelation as such.

What these verses say is of course very simple. We are not to add to the book, we are not to take away from it. The man who does either of these things will fall foul of God, whose book it is and whose words it carries. It is a fundamental statement of the canonical principle, and the function of the statement is to assert and safeguard canonical authority.

That is, there are essentially two ways in which the authority of a document can be compromised. It can be added to, and it can be subtracted from. In the case of a substitution of new words for those that are original both subtraction and addition take

THE LOGIC OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

place simultaneously. Those purposes for which the document has been written will be frustrated if such tampering is effected, because, of course, the upshot of adding words is to place them in the mouth of the author; the upshot of subtracting words is to take them out of his mouth: the net result of either is to subordinate the authority of the author which the document carries to the authority of whosoever has effected the tampering. The author ceases to speak with his own voice, and becomes instead a puppet in the hands of another. It is an exercise in the usurpation of authority.

And it is this which the reader of the Revelation to John the Divine is warned not to do. In one sense, of course, the warning is superfluous. Any authoritative statement carries such a declaration by implication. Without such an implication there could be no such thing as a statement with authority. If addition and subtraction are options for the interpreter then the idea of an authority that can be conveyed in words is void. But there is nothing superfluous about the awesome curses which attend the warning, and it is worth noting that they are said to apply specifically to those who interpret Holy Scripture. A heavy weight of responsibility rests on the shoulders of exegetes, theologians and every expositor of Holy Scripture. We have this document to interpret, but it has been written by another.

Now, it is one of the features of the debate about the Bible that conservatives have found themselves labelled as defenders of many things, and, now, of inerrancy. But that one fundamental doctrine which all our apologetic is intended to support receives hardly a mention: the canonicity of Holy Scripture. Denials of inerrancy matter not because they are denials of inerrancy, but because they are thereby denials at a principial level of canonical authority. The effect of the propaganda which makes out that we are interested only in dotting i's and crossing t's – tithing Bibliological mint and cummin – has been so great that it has even succeeded in convincing *us* – or some of us – that we are fighting in some distant outpost of empire, when it is the

motherland of Biblical authority, the church's acceptance of the Bible as canon, which is under attack.

2. *The Incomprehensibility of God*

If the formal victim of the denial of a comprehensive Biblical authority is canonicity, its material concomitant is the incomprehensibility of God. That is to say, the eclectic use of Holy Scripture is logically dependent upon the possibility of what Mansel calls 'Speculative Theology' of 'a Philosophy of the Infinite'; of knowledge of God gained not by revelation, but by the normal, empirical channels whereby we investigate the phenomena of the world of experience.¹⁴ What he calls the 'dividing' of God's revelation can only proceed upon the hidden assumption that revelation is in fact unnecessary; that all that revelation does is to re-publish what we already knew or could have found out for ourselves. Only if all theology is natural theology can the mind of man be given free rein in the evaluation of the contents of the revelation of God.

This point becomes clearer when we use an analogy, a close analogy to which we are actually directed by the verses in Revelation chapter 22 which we have already examined.¹⁵ The writer of Revelation describes the book as a prophecy, and while some of the Biblical books have a particular prophetic character the entire revelation of Holy Scripture may be considered under a prophetic head. Let us suppose we meet a prophet; at least, a man who claims to be a prophet. We weigh up his claims – and there are principles given to us in Scripture to help us in the task. And we come to a conclusion: he is a false prophet, subverting the truth of God, or he is a true prophet, proclaiming it. If we decide that he is speaking on behalf of God, we attend to what he says. We are simply

14. The implications of this for the doctrine of eternal punishment are discussed in 'Universalism and the Logic of Revelation', *art.cit.*

15. I am grateful to my friend Dr Peter Jones of Aix-en-Provence for pointing this out with particular clarity.

THE LOGIC OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

unable to judge of the veracity of any individual statement as he makes it. Indeed, the significance of his claiming to be a prophet and our recognising him as one lies precisely in this, that he is pretending to authority over us and we are setting ourselves beneath it. It is implied in the nature of the relationship that while we may have competence to recognise a true prophet we do not have competence to weigh his every claim; else, prophet or not, he would not be telling us anything we did not know or could not find out for ourselves by the normal means of enquiry open to us.

That is to say, a claimed competence to judge of the individual elements in a revelation from God entails a competence as broad as the matter of which the revelation treats. Yet such a competence must render the revelation redundant. Only if God is comprehensible to man by nature could the mind of man properly choose to believe *this* of God while rejecting *that*, in exercise of the faculty of critical perception with which the world of man's own immediate experience is assessed.

The challenge to the authority of Holy Scripture should therefore be seen as ultimately destructive of the church's use of Holy Scripture as the canon by which she defines herself, and thereby of her identity as the community founded upon God's self-revelation. An eclectic use of Scripture as authority is only possible upon the assumption – as foreign to the tradition of the church as it is to Holy Scripture – that God may be known without revealing himself, in the same fashion in which we perceive those other objects of our empirical experience. If such were true, of course, it would cease to be significant to speak in terms of revelation, since the logically alternative category of 'discovery', as Kirsopp Lake proposed, would have become the point of departure instead. The notion of a 'revelation' which does no more than state that which can be 'discovered' anyway is one verging on collapse in self-contradiction. Whatever term is employed, God has become by nature comprehensible. He is an empirical object, part of the

natural order and the world of common human experience, essentially continuous with and not other than all such objects.

The denial of canonical authority with its concomitant in the implicit denial of the incomprehensibility of God must finally mean the re-establishment of natural religion, that religion which has dogged the footsteps of God's programme of salvation-history from its first beginnings.

Which is why Henry Longueville Mansel so singularly places his finger upon the essence of the new theology in those final lines which we quoted from the *Phrontisterion*. We quote them again:

The voice of yore,
Which the breezes bore
Wailing aloud from Paxo's shore,
Is changed to a gladder and livelier strain,
For great God Pan is alive again,
He lives and reigns once more.