

IV.—THE PRESENT PROBLEM OF INSPIRATION.

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THE title of this paper is not intended to imply that the Christian doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures has been brought into straits by modern investigation, and needs now to adapt itself to certain assured but damaging results of the scientific study of the Bible. Our purpose is not (as Mr. Gore says his was*) “to succor a distressed faith.” The situation is not one which can be fairly described as putting the old doctrine of inspiration in jeopardy. The exact state of the case is rather this : that a special school of Old Testament criticism which has, for some years, been gaining somewhat wide-spread acceptance of its results has begun to proclaim that, these results having been accepted, a “changed view of the Bible” follows which implies a reconstructed doctrine of inspiration, and, indeed, also a whole new theology. That this changed view of the Bible involves losses is frankly admitted. The nature of these losses is stated by Dr. Sanday in a recent very interesting little book† with an evident effort to avoid as far as possible “making sad the heart of the righteous whom the Lord hath not made sad,” as consisting chiefly in making “the intellectual side of the connection between Christian belief and Christian practice a matter of greater difficulty than it has hitherto seemed to be,” in rendering it “less easy to find proof texts for this or that,” and in making the use of the Bible so much less simple and less definite in its details” that “less educated Christians will perhaps pay more deference to the opinion of the more educated, and to the advancing consciousness of the Church at large.” If this means all that it seems to mean, its proclamation of an indefinite gospel eked out by an appeal to the Church and a scholastic hierarchy, involves a much greater loss than Dr. Sanday appears to think,—a loss not merely of the Protestant doctrine of the perspicuity of the Scriptures, but with it of all that that doctrine is meant to express and safeguard—the loss of the Bible itself to the plain Christian man for all practical uses, and the delivery of his conscience over to the tender mercies of his human instructors whether ecclesiastical or scholastic. Dr. Briggs is more blunt and more explicit in his description of the changes which he thinks have been wrought. “I will tell you what criticism has destroyed,” he says in a recent article. “It has destroyed many false theories about the Bible ; it has destroyed the doctrine of verbal inspiration ; it has destroyed the theory of inerrancy ; it has destroyed the false doctrine that makes the inspiration depend upon its attachment to a holy man.”‡ And he goes on

* “Lux Mundi.” Ed. 10, p. xi.

† “The Oracles of God” (Longmans, 1891), pp. 5, 45, 76.

‡ The article appeared in *The Christian Union*, but we quote it from *Public Opinion*, Vol. X. No. 24 (March 25, 1891), p. 576.

to remark further "that biblical criticism is at the bottom" of the "reconstruction that is going on throughout the Church,"—"the demand for revision of creeds and change in methods of worship and Christian work." It is clear enough, then, that a problem has been raised with reference to inspiration by this type of criticism. But this is not equivalent to saying that the established doctrine of inspiration has been put in jeopardy. For there is criticism and criticism. And though it may not be unnatural for these scholars themselves to confound the claims of criticism with the validity of their own critical methods and the soundness of their own critical conclusions, the rest of us can scarcely be expected to acquiesce in the identification. We have all along been pointing out that they were travelling on the wrong road ; and now when their conclusions clash with well-established facts, we simply note that the wrong road has not unnaturally led them to the wrong goal. In a word, it is not the established doctrine of inspiration that is brought into distress by the conflict, but the presently fashionable school of Old Testament criticism.

Nevertheless, though the strain of the present problem should thus be thrown upon the shoulders upon which it belongs, it is important to keep ourselves reminded that the doctrine of inspiration which has become established in the Church, is open to criticism, and is to be held only as, and so far as it is, critically tested and approved. And in view of the large bodies of real knowledge concerning the Bible which the labors of a generation of diligent critical study have accumulated, and of the difficulty which is always experienced in the assimilation of new knowledge and its correlation with previously ascertained truth, it is not out of place to inquire whether this doctrine is really being endangered by any assured results of recent Biblical study. For such an inquiry we must start, of course, from a clear conception of what the Church doctrine of inspiration is, and of the basis on which it is held to be the truth of God. Only thus can we be in a position to judge as to how it can be affected on critical grounds, and as to whether modern Biblical criticism has reached any assured results which must or may "destroy" it. The Church, then, has held from the beginning that the Bible is the Word of God in such a sense that its words, though written by men, and bearing indelibly impressed upon them the marks of their human origin, were written, nevertheless, under such an influence of the Holy Ghost as to be also the words of God, the adequate expression of His mind and will. It has always recognized that this conception of co-authorship implies that the Spirit's superintendence extends to the choice of the words (verbal inspiration), and preserves its product from everything inconsistent with a divine authorship (inerrancy). Whatever minor variations may now and again have entered into the mode of

statement, this has always been the core of the Church doctrine of inspiration. And along with many other modes of commending and defending it, the primary ground on which it has been held by the Church as the true doctrine, is that it is the doctrine of the Biblical writers themselves, and has therefore the whole mass of evidence for it which goes to show that the Biblical writers are trustworthy as doctrinal guides. Now if this doctrine is to be assailed on critical grounds, it is very clear that, first of all, criticism must be required to proceed against the evidence on which it is based. If a fair criticism evinces that this is not the doctrine of the Biblical writers, then of course it has "destroyed" the doctrine which is confessedly based on that supposition. Failing in this, however, it can "destroy" the doctrine, strictly speaking, only by undermining its foundation in our confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture as a witness to doctrine. The possibility of this alternative must, no doubt, be firmly faced in our investigation of the phenomena of the Bible ; but the weight of the evidence, be it small or great, for the general trustworthiness of the Bible as a source of doctrine, throws itself, in the form of a presumption, against the reality of any phenomena alleged to be discovered which make against its testimony. No doubt this presumption may be overcome by clear demonstration. But clear demonstration is requisite. For, certainly if it is critically established that what is sometimes called, not without a touch of scorn, "the traditional doctrine," is just the Bible's own doctrine of inspiration, the real conflict is no longer with "the traditional theory of inspiration," but with the credibility of the Bible. The really decisive question thus is seen to be, "What does an exact and scientific exegesis determine to be the Biblical doctrine of inspiration."

The reply to this question is scarcely open to doubt. The stricter and the more scientific the examination is made, the more certain does it become that the authors of the New Testament held a doctrine of inspiration quite as high as the Church doctrine. This maybe said, indeed, to be generally admitted by untrammelled critics, whether of positive or of negative tendencies. Thus, for instance—to confine our examples to those who do not personally share the doctrine of the New Testament writers—Archdeacon Farrar is able to admit that Paul "shared, doubtless, in the views of the later Jewish schools—the Tana'im and Amora'im—on the nature of inspiration. These views . . . made the words of Scripture co-extensive and identical with the words of God."* So also Otto Pfleiderer allows that Paul "fully shared the assumption of his opponents, the irrefragable authority of the letter as the immediately revealed word of God."† Similarly, Tholuck recognizes that the application of the Old Testament made by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, "rests on the strictest view

* "Life of Paul," ii, 47.

† "Paulinism," I, 88.

of inspiration, since passages where God is not the speaker are cited as words of God or of the Holy Ghost (i : 6, 7, 8 ; iv: 4, 7 ; vii : 21; iii : 7 ; x : 15).”^{*} This fact is worked out also with convincing clearness by the writer of an odd and sufficiently free Scotch book published two or three years ago,[†] who formulates his conclusion in the words: “There is no doubt that the author of Hebrews, in common with the other New Testament writers, regards the whole Old Testament as having been dictated by the Holy Ghost, or, as we should say, plenarily, and, as it were, mechanically inspired.”[‡]

A detailed statement of the evidence is scarcely needed to support a position allowed by common consent. But, as our object is rather to remind believers in the Scriptural doctrine of inspiration of the reason for the faith that is in them, than to rebut gainsayers, it will not be improper to adjoin a brief outline of the grounds on which the common consent rests. In the circumstances, however, we may venture to dispense with an argument drawn up from our own point of view, and content ourselves with an extract from the brief statement of the grounds of his decision given by another of those critical scholars who do not believe the doctrine of verbal inspiration, but yet find themselves constrained to allow that it is the doctrine of the New Testament writers. Richard Rothe[§] seeks, wrongly, to separate Christ’s doctrine of the Old Testament from that of the Apostles; our Lord obviously spoke of the Scriptures of his people out of the same fundamental conception of their nature and divinity as his Apostles. But he more satisfactorily outlines the doctrine of the Apostles as follows:

We find in the New Testament authors the same theoretical view of the Old Testament and the same practice in its use, as among the Jews of the time in general, except that in the handling of the same conceptions and principles on both sides, the whole difference between the new Christian spirit and that of contemporary Judaism exhibited itself with great sharpness. Our authors look upon the words of the Old Testament as *immediate* words of God, and put them forward as such, even those of them which are not recorded as direct declarations of God. They see nothing in the sacred volume which is simply the word of its human author and not at the same time the very word of God himself. In all that stands “written” God himself speaks to them, and so entirely are they habituated to think only of this that they take the sacred word written itself, as such, to be God’s word, and hear God speaking in it *immediately*, without any thought of the human persons who appear in it as speaking and acting. It is altogether foreign to them to look upon their Bible *historically*. Therefore they cite the abstract ἡ γραφή or αἱ γραφαί or γραφαὶ ἁγίας (Rom. i: 2), or again τὰ ἱερὰ γράμματα (2 Tim. iii: 15), without naming any special author, as self-

^{*} “Old Testament in the New” (*Bibliotheca Sacra* xi. 612.)

[†] “Principles of Christianity,” by James Stuart (1888), p. 346.

[‡] Compare also Kuenen, “Prophets,” p. 149; Reuss, “History of Christian Theology in the Apostolic Age,” I, p. 352 *sq.*; Riehm, “Der Lehrbegr. des Hebräerbriefes,” I, pp. 173, 177, etc.

[§] “Zur Dogmatik,” p. 177 *sq.*

evidently God's word, *e. g.*, John vii : 30, x : 85, xix : 36, 87, xx : 9; Acts i : 16; James ii : 8; Rom. ix : 17; Gal. iii : 8-23, iv : 30; 1 Pet. ii : 6 ; 2Pet. i : 20, etc.; and introduce Old Testament citations with the formulas, now that God (Matt. i : 22, ii : 15; Acts iv : 25, xiii : 34; Rom. i : 2), now that the Holy Spirit (Acts i : 16, xxviii : 25; Heb. iii : 7, ix : 8, x : 15; cf. also Acts iv : 25; 1 Pet. i : 11; 2 Pet. i : 20) so speaks or has spoken. The Epistle to the Hebrews, in an incredible way, adduces passages with a ὁ θεὸς λέγει and the like, in which God is spoken of in the third person (1 : 6, 7, 8, *sq.*, iv : 4, 7, vii : 21, x : 30) and even (i : 10) cites a passage in which, in the Old Testament text, God himself (according to the view of the author it is, however, the Son of God) is addressed, as a word spoken by God. In 2 Tim. iii : 16 the *ἱερά γράμματα* (verse 15) are expressly called *θεόπνευστα*, however the sentence may be construed or expounded; and however little a special theory of the inspiration of the Bible can be drawn from an expression of such breadth of meaning, nevertheless this *datum* avails to prove that the author shared in general the view of his Jewish contemporaries as to the peculiar character of the Old Testament books, and it is of especial importance inasmuch as it attributes the inspiration wholly, unambiguously, directly to the writings themselves, and not only to their authors the prophets. No doubt in the teaching of the Apostles, the conception of prophetic inspiration to which it causally attributes the Old Testament, has not yet the sharp exactness of our ecclesiastical-dogmatic conception ; but it stands, nevertheless, in a very express analogy with it. . . . Moreover, it admits of no doubt that the apostolical writers, although they nowhere say it expressly, refer the prophetic inspiration also to the *actus scribendi* of the Biblical authors. Their whole mode of treatment of the Old Testament text manifestly presupposes this view of this matter, which was at the time the usual one in the Jewish schools. With Paul particularly this is wholly uncontrovertibly the case. For only on that view can he, in such passages as Rom. iv : 23, 24, xv : 4, 1 Cor. ix : 10, x : 11—in which he distinguishes between the occurrence of the Old Testament facts, and the recording of them—maintain of the latter that it was done with express teleological reference to the New Testament believers, at least so far as the selection of the matter to be described is concerned ; and only on that view can he argue on the details of the letter of the Old Testament Scriptures, as he does in Gal. iii : 15, 16. We can, moreover, trace the continuance of this view in the oldest post-apostolical church. . . . So far as the Old Testament is concerned, our Ecclesiastical-Dogmatic Doctrine of Inspiration can, therefore, in very fact, appeal to the authority, not indeed of the Redeemer himself—for he stands in an entirely neutral attitude toward it—but no doubt to the Apostles.”

A keen controversialist like Rothe does not fail, of course—as the reader has no doubt observed—to accompany his exposition of the Apostolic doctrine, with many turns of expression designed to lessen its authority in the eyes of the reader, and to prepare the way for his own refusal to be bound by it; but neither does he fail to make it clear that this doctrine, although it is unacceptable to him, is the Apostles' doctrine. The Apostles' *doctrine*, we say. For even, so bald a statement as Rothe's will suffice to uncover the fallacy of the assertion, which is so often made, that the doctrine of verbal inspiration is based on a few isolated statements of Scripture to the neglect, if

not to the outrage, of its phenomena,—a form of remark into which even so sober a writer as Dr. W. G. Blaikie has lately permitted himself to fall.* Nothing, obviously, could be more opposite to the fact. The doctrine of verbal inspiration is based on the broad foundation of the carefully ascertained *doctrine* of the Scripture writers on the subject. It is a product of Biblical Theology. And if men will really ask, “not what do the creeds teach? what do the theologians say? what is the authority of the Church? but what does the Bible itself teach us?” and “fencing off from the Scriptures all the speculations, all the dogmatic elaborations, all the doctrinal adaptations that have been made in the history of doctrine in the Church,” “limit themselves strictly to the theology of the Bible itself,”—according to the excellent programme outlined by Dr. Briggs†—it is to the doctrine of verbal inspiration, as we have seen, that they must come. It is not Biblical criticism that has “destroyed” verbal inspiration, but Dr. Briggs’ scholastic theories that have drawn him away in this matter from the pure deliverances of Biblical Theology. The real issue is thus brought out plainly and stringently. Are the New Testament writers trustworthy guides in doctrine, or are we at liberty to reject their authority, and frame contrary doctrines for ourselves? If the latter pathway is taken, certainly the doctrine of verbal inspiration will not be the only one that is “destroyed,” and the labor of revising our creeds may be as well saved, and the shorter process adopted of simply throwing them away.

It will be observed, of course, that we have touched only upon the New Testament doctrine of the inspiration of the Old Testament, and have left unmentioned the witness of either Testament to its own inspiration. Our space is limited, and we have held ourselves strictly *ad rem*, according to the terms of the present discussion, which concerns the results of criticism in the sphere of the Old Testament. But the other lines of inquiry indicated would supply us only with harmonious results. It will be enough here, however, to remark that as Christians we will naturally go first to the New Testament even for our doctrine of the inspiration of the Old ; and that apart from the rich mass of proof for the equal inspiration of the New Testament, culminating in the paralleling by the New Testament writers themselves of the New Testament books with those of the Old Testament, as equally and in the same sense Scripture with them (1 Tim. v : 18; 2 Peter iii : 15), the *a priori* argument *a minori ad majus*, that the Scriptural doctrine of the verbal inspiration of the Old Testament carries with it with even greater certainty, the like inspiration of the New seems stringent.‡

* Letter to the Rev. Andrew A. Bonar, D.D., etc. (Edinburgh, 1890).

† “The Edward Robinson Chair of Biblical Theology in the Union Theological Seminary, New York.” (1891.) Pp. 5, 6.

‡ Cf. Philippi, Glaubensl. I., 161 ; Cunningham, Theological Lectures, 365.

What, then, are we to do with the numerous phenomena of Scripture inconsistent with verbal inspiration, which, so it is alleged, "criticism" has brought to light? Challenge them in the name of the New Testament doctrine, and ask for their credentials. They have no credentials that can stand before that challenge. No single error has as yet been demonstrated to occur in the Scriptures as given by God to his Church. And every critical student knows that the progress of investigation has been a continuous process of removing difficulties, until scarcely a shred of the old list of "Biblical Errors" remains to hide the nakedness of this moribund contention. To say that we do not wish to make claims "for which we have only this to urge, that they cannot be absolutely disproved" is not to the point; what is to the point is to say, that we cannot set aside the presumption arising from the general trustworthiness of Scripture, that its doctrine of inspiration is true, by any array of contradictory facts, each one of which is fairly disputable. We must have indisputable errors—which are not forthcoming. The difference here is mainly a difference in point of view. If we start from the Scripture doctrine of inspiration, we approach the phenomena with the question whether they will negative this doctrine, and we find none able to stand against it. But if we start simply with a collection of the phenomena, classifying and inducing from them alone, it may easily happen with us, as it happened with certain of old, that meeting with some things hard to be understood, we may be ignorant and unstable enough to wrest them to our own intellectual destruction, and so approach the Biblical doctrine of inspiration, set upon explaining it away. The value of having the Scripture doctrine as a clue in our hands, is fairly illustrated by the ineradicable inability of the whole negative school to distinguish between *difficulties* and *proved errors*.