

## VIII

### INSPIRATION.

The word<sup>1</sup> means 'breathing into'; properly, men (Genesis ii. 7), not books, are inspired; but we speak of an 'inspired,' as of a 'clever,' book.

Some may be puzzled by views now generally held about the original composition of the books of the Bible; and it may be helpful to such to set down plainly some considerations on the subject.

Not long ago many held (to quote Dean Burgon's words) that 'every syllable, every letter, of the Bible is the direct utterance of the Most High.'

It is scarcely possible for anyone who has really considered the subject to subscribe honestly to this claim. Some reasons are:—

(1) The Bible makes no such claim for itself, and fortunately the Church has never made it. Take a passage sometimes adduced in support, II Tim. iii. 16 (A.V.), 'All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable, etc.' Even as it stands this is far from supporting the theory of verbal (word for word) inspiration. But it should run, 'Every scripture (writing) inspired by God is also profitable, etc.' Whether this or that writing was especially inspired by God (that is, written by someone inspired by God) must be determined on its own merits. And our reason for regarding the books of the New Testament as written by inspired men is that from early days the Church, the living body of Christians, has marked them out and held them as such.

(2) Can we honestly think that God by direct action gave out four lives of our Lord with their large repetitions and their various inconsistencies—not, indeed, that these latter are of any vital importance?

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<sup>1</sup> 'A word which never has been and never can be accurately defined.'—C. Bigg.

One life, occupying no more space than the four, might have more than doubled our knowledge of what he did and taught. And would there have been passages so hard to interpret?

(3) That there was dictation word by word to the writers<sup>1</sup> is in flat contradiction to what St. Luke tells us in his first chapter, third verse. Others, he says, had drawn up narratives of our Lord's doings; and he had thought it good, having made all possible enquiries and collected all available information (exactly as a modern historian does), to add to the number of then existing gospels. Most of these have disappeared; St. Luke's survives. Why? The Christians of early days rated it higher is the probable answer. But many of these gospels may have, as far as we can tell, accidentally perished. Probably but a small part of the letters which St. Paul's care for all the churches drew from his pen have come down to us.

(4) The Dean's contention does not help us greatly unless we had an assurance that every copyist of any part of the N.T. was miraculously kept from making any wilful or unconscious alteration in doing his work. And, even in that case, as most of us have to depend upon translations, every translator must similarly be secured against mistake or error of judgement. Besides, as the notes subjoined to the preceding version sufficiently show, it is now impossible to form an absolutely certain text of the N.T. Copyists might and did alter, omit, or more frequently add, something. Take S. Matt. xxiii. 35, 'Zechariah, son of Barachiah.' It ought to be 'son of Jehoiada' (II Chron. xxiv. 20). Possibly an early copyist added the three words to the bare name 'Zechariah' and his memory played him false. But even if the original writer made a mistake in the name of the martyred Zechariah's father, why should this trouble us?<sup>2</sup> It will, if we choose to make the purely gratuitous assumption that an inspired writer could not possibly have been in error in a matter of chronology, geography, science, history, or the like. To make such an assumption is to create needless

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<sup>1</sup> If they wrote as children from dictation, what need of inspiration at all? <sup>2</sup> It may be asked, Why not quietly correct the error? It would be going outside the province of a translator. To do so would be to make a dangerous precedent, opening a door we know not whither; would, in short, be a 'pious fraud.'

difficulties for ourselves. The four gospels give four differing wordings of the inscription on the cross ; but they are the sort of differences that the best and most truthful witnesses make every day in their accounts of the same transactions. Sensible persons heed them not. There is no foundation for the Dean's contention. If we had St. Luke's gospel only, we should be teaching that Easter Day and Ascension Day were one and the same ; not that St. Luke explicitly says so.

(5) But if there was a strong human element in the origin of the Bible, what fruit of inspiration is left ? This, that the Bible is the best, the most valuable book in the world. More than any other book, or all other books put together, it serves the one purpose for which we must hold that its writers were inbreathed and assisted by God ; to teach us about himself, to raise us to higher levels, to bring us to true knowledge of ourselves and of our relations to him, to guide us into that righteousness of conduct which leads us to our highest well-being here and hereafter. 'What we need (says Newman) and what is given us is not how to educate ourselves for this life ; we have abundant natural gifts for human society, and for the advantages which it secures ; but our great want is how to demean ourselves in thought and deed towards our Maker, and how to gain reliable information on this supreme necessity.' By its fruits, now and in time past, we know the Bible. This, the general test of value, will be more and more applied. Need we fear what answer will be given ? Let us bear in mind, for our stay and comfort, noble words of old time, *Magna est veritas et prævalet.*