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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Inspiration in the Light of Versions

(Written in 1879 when the Revised Version was begun).

H. B. TRISTRAM.

THERE are sometimes periods in the history of religious thought when questions which at other times have agitated the Church have lain so long dormant that men's beliefs, while still sound dogmatically, have become, as it were, practically fossilized and lifeless. Such has been (I am speaking only of its action on the general untheological mind) the subject of the inspiration of the Word of God, its mode and its limits. Few of our ordinary lay Churchmen would be able to explain, even if they cared to think, what is the exact meaning of the term *Inspiration*. Practically, in quiet times, this may not be of much consequence. So long as the Bible is received as the voice of God speaking to man, so long as each definite statement is accepted when it comes to us under the sanction of that Book, it may be well to pass over the *mode* of inspiration, while simple faith receives the message with undoubting reverence and acceptance. A Church which had been ignorant of heresies throughout the whole period of its existence might not require the Nicæan expansion of the Apostles' Creed, and might be only bewildered and perplexed by the refinements and dogmatic niceties of the Athanasian formulary. Now, for two centuries and a half the Authorized Version has been the sole text-book of the English-reading student of the Bible. Launched without legislative or ecclesiastical enactment, it has, by its own intrinsic merits, absolutely superseded and supplanted every predecessor, not only in the Church of England, but in every English-speaking Protestant community in the world. Not one of the many other versions can now be procured, excepting as typographical curiosities, and almost all of them at prices which no other printed books save Shakespeare, have ever reached.

This universal acceptance of the one version has not been without its effect on the popular mind, in its impressions of

the meaning of Inspiration. Familiarity for generations with the *ipsissima verba* of the Authorized Version has led to an unconscious acceptance of the English words as being themselves literally inspired. Very often the preacher who suggests an interpretation differing from the received one is half suspected of irreverent audacity, or of "free-handling." How many popular errors are founded on half-texts wrested from their context, and twisted to suit the prevalent view! The passage, "Know ye not that your bodies are the temples of the Holy Ghost?" is continually appealed to as a proof of the necessity for assurance of personal salvation. In a series of lessons on Confirmation, published forty years ago, under the sanction of an eminent prelate, every passage in which the word "confirming" or "confirm" occurs in the New Testament was adduced as a proof of the Apostolic authority of the rite of Confirmation. "At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow" is appealed to as commanding an outward obeisance, in utter contradiction to the letter and spirit of the original (*ἐν*). But it is needless to multiply instances.

Now, we may reasonably anticipate that in the forthcoming Revision many archaisms will be modified, as well as mistranslations corrected, while we may well trust the learned divines, who have been so long employed on this work, not needlessly to change the form of sentences, or in any way to modernize the diction, so as to impair the dignity and noble simplicity of the grand old English Bible. But still changes there must be. How will these affect the popular belief? To many they may prove a rude shock; but yet, I believe, a shock which will be productive of much ultimate benefit, and will establish faith upon a firmer basis. Even as it is, not the uneducated alone are apt to pin their faith to their own interpretation of the words of the Authorized Version, and even in disputed interpretations of historical records to maintain their own view as though it were a matter of orthodoxy connected with the soul's salvation. This surely is none other than an exhibition of the same spirit which persecuted Galileo. On the universality of the flood, for instance, the common belief that it covered the entire earth, founded simply on the rendering that it covered "all the high hills that were *under the whole heaven*," loses all its support from Scripture, when we find that the same Hebrew words are used elsewhere in a very limited

sense, as in Deut. ii. 25, where "under the whole heaven" can only possibly mean Canaan and the nations immediately adjacent. Had the original, instead of the Authorized Version, been appealed to, the elasticity of the Hebrew expressions would, as soon as recognized, have prevented many an apparent conflict between Revelation and Science. In all these difficulties as to the interpretation of Scripture, the controversialist much needs to offer up the prayer of St. Augustine, when perplexed as to the meaning of the inspired writer, "Do Thou, O Lord, either reveal that same sense to us, or whatever other true one pleaseth Thee, that whether Thou discover the same to us, as to that Thy servant, or some other by the same words, *Tu tamen pascas nos, non error illudat.*"

Now, if the Revision had been presented to the English public at a period of stagnation, or of tacit and indifferent acceptance of religious truth, the new rendering might in the course of a generation or two have become thoroughly naturalized and familiar to all classes, and have come into general acceptance without stirring any incidental questions. We can scarcely expect such results at present. The Bible is generally and fiercely, if not indiscriminately, attacked by avowed opponents on very different grounds, all, however, converging to one point—viz., that it is *inaccurate*—whether it be in its history, its science, its moral teaching, matters not. We of the Clergy must, to meet these foes, and to meet the difficulties they will raise, while unfurling the standard of Inspiration, know very clearly what we mean by it, and we must bring the subject before our people far more prominently than many of us have heretofore done. We must enable every man to give a reason for the faith that is in him. In the first place, we must beware that Christians be not led away by the plausible but pernicious sophistry that the Bible *contains* the Word of God. We maintain, on the contrary, that it *is* the Word of God. To hold otherwise, would be to admit the pruning-knife of every self-constituted arbiter, whose "higher criticism," "inner-consciousness," or "historical theories," would lead him to excise passages, chapters, verses—aye, and whole books—and to arrange and rearrange authorships and chronology so as to suit his preconceived theories. It would give full scope to the shallow and unscholar-like captiousness of a Colenso, and

to the ingenious audacity which mutilates and transposes the prophecies—*e.g.*, of Isaiah or Daniel—and thereby changes prediction into annalistic records.

We maintain not the Inspiration of a version, and, so far as the English reader is concerned, *verbal* Inspiration is impossible, but we must maintain *plenary* Inspiration. And this can be held as much of a carefully revised version as of an original. We welcome the new version if it casts light on disputed passages, and corrects the inappropriate expressions which have been already referred to. We shall be glad that it shall not be left to each scholar, preacher, or orator, to decide, *e.g.*, whether the text be right which says, "Thou hast increased the nation, and *not* increased the joy," or the margin which reads "and hast increased its joy."

Again, there is a sense in which, I presume, few will contend for the *verbal* Inspiration of the whole original, or that a Divine Providence watched over the transcribers of MSS. and prevented a mistake of a point or a comma. The vast numbers of various readings, increased as they are by the exhumation of each newly-discovered MS., would at once render this impossible. But the *plenary* does extend to the *verbal* when the word is important to the sense, and especially to the doctrinal teaching; and in such cases when find we ever a discrepancy? Look at Gal. iii. 16, where Inspiration has guided the word "*seed*," not "seeds."

There are three leading views of Inspiration. First, that every idea and *every* word is inspired, or directly indited by the Holy Spirit's influence. This seems scarcely tenable without hedging it with so many limitations and safeguards as to transcription, as to render it scarcely the simplest mode of setting forth the doctrine. Second, that the ideas but not the words were inspired. This seems even more perilous, and however hedged and defined, must leave open the door to every subtle device of unbelief and false doctrine. Third, that **every idea is inspired, and every sentence and word so far as to prevent anything being written which is inconsistent with truth.**

This last definition appears to present fewest difficulties, and to be the most easily definable—not that it is without its difficulties. The *mode* of Inspiration must ever be a difficulty and a mystery. If it were not a mystery it would not be Inspiration, it would not be divine. In maintaining

this latter view, we maintain that this inspiration is *plenary*, and that it is *superintendent*.

By *plenary* we understand that the person inspired was superhumanly guided, not so as to lose his personal identity, shown in his diction or his mode of thought, but to express only what the Holy Spirit dictated in words which, if his own, yet were superhumanly directed to enunciate the matter; and that the writer was so guided even when in many cases he but dimly guessed, or had no understanding at all, of the true meaning of what he wrote. (1 Peter i. 10, 11.)

By *superintendent* we understand, that when recording facts, as the story of creation, the description of battles, the records of nations or of families, the writer was so guided as to be preserved from writing anything contrary to historic truth, and that therefore historic error has no place in the narrative. That in recording speeches or letters, such as the speeches of Job's friends, of Gamaliel, of Tertullus, or the letter of Claudius Lysias, the sacred penman was both divinely directed to indite them, and was guided to indite them truly and accurately.

And if we are, as we must be, perplexed by difficulties under any view about solitary and isolated expressions which are not verbally accurate, but which convey truth—*e.g.*, "the setting of the sun"—we must remember that the Bible had, while necessarily using human language, and clothing eternal truths in the ideas current in each writer's time, to fulfil an impossible condition—impossible for man and possible only for God—it had to belong to all generations, and to speak intelligibly to men of every stage and diversity of culture and civilization. This it still does. It still has its lessons for rich and for poor. It still exercises the same power, whether to raise from stolid brutishness the fishing Indian of Western North America, or to resist and correct the tendency of every form of higher civilization to exhaustion and decay.

If our new Revision brings us nearer, not only to this idea but to the correct idiom of the original, so far as Oriental phraseology can be naturalized in Occidental expression, it will be a gain to every Christian student; and among its incidental benefits not the least will be that it will compel us of the Clergy to train our flocks in clear and definite views of the meaning of Inspiration; that they may have an answer to give to him that asketh them.