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Anglican Evangelical Views of the Bible, 1800-1850

BY ARTHUR POLLARD

AT first sight the reader may wonder whether there is really anything to be said on the subject of this paper. Surely the Evangelicals believed the Bible, every word of it, and there is no more to it than that. Surely, all of them, as Bishop J. C. Ryle asserted of some, "taught constantly *the sufficiency and supremacy of the Holy Scripture*. The Bible, whole and un mutilated, was their sole rule of faith and practice. They accepted all its statements without question or dispute. They knew nothing of any part of Scripture being un-inspired. . . . They never flinched from asserting that there can be no error in the Word of God".¹ Moreover, in believing every word, they were not unlike the orthodox in general. Reacting to the publication of *Essays and Reviews* a century ago, Dean Burgon declared: "The Bible is none other than the voice of Him that sitteth upon the throne. Every book of it, every chapter of it, every verse of it, every word of it, every syllable of it (where are we to stop?), every letter of it, is the direct utterance of the Most High."² The position of the Evangelicals is not, however, as simple as it may seem. There are interesting individual differences and there are significant reactions to differences in the climate of theological thought.

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The first of the Anglican Evangelicals whom we must consider is Thomas Scott of Aston Sandford (1747-1821), the commentator. Scott's spiritual autobiography, *The Force of Truth* (1779), recounts his remarkable progress of religious opinion as Socinian, Pelagian, Arminian, and, finally, under the influence of John Newton, moderate Calvinist. He wrote against Tom Paine on the one hand (*Vindication of the Inspiration of Scripture, etc., against Paine*, 1796), and Pretyman-Tomline, the Bishop of Lincoln on the other (*Remarks on the Bishop of Lincoln's Refutation of Calvinism*, 1812). His great work, however, was the *Commentary* which was first published in 1796 and went through five editions in Scott's lifetime.

Scott's preface to the *Commentary* is the classic statement of the Evangelical position on our subject. He begins with the assumption that man needs a revelation and that God alone can give it. He then goes on to assert the divine inspiration of Scripture, as distinct from its mere genuineness or authenticity. There follows a statement on the nature of inspiration which must be quoted at length:

"Such a complete and immediate communication, by the Holy Spirit, to the minds of the sacred writers, of those things which could not have been otherwise known; and such an effectual superintendency as to those particulars, concerning which they might otherwise obtain

information, as sufficed absolutely to preserve them from every degree of error in all things which could in the least affect any of the doctrines or precepts contained in their writings, or mislead any person who considered them as a divine and infallible standard of truth and duty. Every sentence in this view must be considered as 'the sure testimony of God', in that sense in which it is proposed as truth. Facts occurred, and words were spoken, as to the import of them, and the instruction contained in them, exactly as they stand here recorded; but the morality of words and actions recorded merely as spoken and done, must be judged of by the doctrinal and preceptive parts of the same book. . . . (The authors) wrote, indeed, in such language, as their different talents, educations, habits, and associations suggested, or rendered natural to them; but the Holy Spirit so entirely superintended them, when writing, as to exclude every improper expression, and to guide them to all those which best suited their several subjects."³

Probable though it may appear from this quotation, Scott was not an adherent of the doctrine of the total infallibility of Scripture. He did admit some few errors and interpolations. He was, for instance, doubtful about the Trinitarian insertion, I John v. 7, although he would have preferred to believe that it had been, not inserted, but restored after being omitted by the Arians.

There are five points to note in Scott's statement. They are as follows :

1. The importance he attaches to the work of the Holy Spirit, who not only communicated, but also superintended the whole process of composition.
2. Scott's view, however, was in no sense "Apollinarian". He believed that there was a definite divine-human encounter, and that the individuality of the writer is to be found in the books of Scripture.
3. But he held a very high doctrine of inspiration. "Every sentence . . . must be considered as 'the sure testimony of God'."
4. He stressed, however, that this must be considered in relation to "that sense in which it is proposed as truth". By this it must not be assumed that Scott was in any way either a medieval allegorizer or a "*Bultmannische*" demythologizer. Fanciful and sophisticated interpretation he avoided, but he did see that some books were not factual. Prophecy he read as prophecy, poetry as poetry; and whilst some of his associations, such as, for example, his identification of the "little horn" of Daniel vii. 8 with, and his application of Revelation xvii to, the Church of Rome may not now be so confidently accepted as they were in his own day, he could recognize real allegory when he saw it. For him the Song of Solomon was the dramatizing of the experience of Christ the Bridegroom and the Church His bride.
5. Lastly, Scott emphasized that what mattered principally was not fact, but doctrine and precept. Like all the Evangelicals, he was essentially practical.

The preface moves from the discussion of inspiration to that of authenticity. Here Scott alleged in support of his argument the testimony of centuries of acceptance, the agreement of the sacred writers among themselves, the miracles (the published reports coming so soon after their accomplishment represented in Scott's view "a public challenge to every man to contradict or disprove them"*) , fulfilled prophecy, the uniqueness of the Bible in its record of "the infinite God speaking in a manner worthy of Himself"⁶ the moral tendency of the Scriptures, the "*actual effects produced . . . (which) evince their divine original*".⁸ "Brevity . . . so connected with fulness . . . that they are a treasure of divine knowledge which can never be exhausted,"⁷ and, lastly, "He that believeth hath the witness in himself".⁸ These arguments are not fundamentally different from, though perhaps more extensive than, those produced by many another apologist of the period.

Finally, in the preface there are the remarks about reception of the revelation. Here faith is supreme, with reason as a necessary assistant. But Scott is his own best interpreter here, and two quotations will suffice. First: "Faith, receiving and appropriating the testimony of God, is to reason, not unlike what the telescope is to the eye of the astronomer who by it discerns objects invisible to all others, and sees clearly and distinctly those things which to others appear obscure and confused"⁹; and, secondly: "The province of reason . . . in respect of revelation, is, first, to examine and decide (with modesty and caution) on the evidence by which it is supported; to understand and explain the language in which it is conveyed; to discern in many things the excellency of the things revealed to us, and to use them as motives, encouragements and rules of obedience; and, in things evidently mysterious, to bow in humble submission to the divine teaching; to receive in adoring faith and love what we cannot comprehend; to rest satisfied with what is revealed; and to leave secret things with God, to whom they alone belong."¹⁰

A word is required about Scott as a commentator. He believed that every passage of the Bible had its own distinct meaning. His method of finding it was by making Scripture a commentary upon itself. As Sir James Stephen remarked, Scott brought "no exact knowledge of Hebrew, Greek, or Latin, no familiarity with the literature or languages of modern Europe, no patristic or medieval learning, no mastery of any moral or political science, and no penetrating critical acumen"¹¹ to his task. In rejecting so much lay Scott's weakness. It meant that his reader has either to reject all that Scott rejected or else to reject much of Scott himself. But therein also lay Scott's strength, namely, what Stephen calls the "saturation of the comment by the spirit of the text",¹² a procedure based on the premises that "God is truth, and His word is truth, and all truth must be consistent with itself".¹³ Scott's Commentary is a vast performance, within its limits sound and of deep spiritual value, but also very dull.

* * * *

Scripture interpreting itself appealed also to Charles Simeon (1759-1836), among Evangelicals especially but also in the Church as a whole

clarum et venerabile nomen.¹⁴ From 1789 to his death over fifty years later he always used "The Self-Interpreting Bible, with explanatory Contents, parallel Scriptures, large Notes and practical Observations, by John Brown, Minister of the Gospel at Haddington; printed in 1778".¹⁵ In other ways also he resembled Scott. He appealed to miracles and prophecy as proofs, and his description of authorship is not unlike that of Scott. He laid great stress upon the supremacy of the Spirit. The Scriptures "were indeed written by men; but men were only the agents and instruments that God made use of: they wrote only what God by His Spirit dictated to them: so that, in reality, the whole Scripture was as much written by the finger of God as the laws were, which He inscribed on two tables of stone, and delivered to His servant Moses".¹⁶ But, as H. D. McDonald has written, "the activity of the writer was not lost in the action of God".¹⁷ The authors were not just "pens", they were also "pen-men". They were preserved by the Spirit from error, but they nevertheless "express themselves in their own way".¹⁸

We must be careful to notice what Simeon means by "error". Simeon was a literalist ("This *literal* method of explication is very justly accounted the *best* way of interpreting Scripture"¹⁹ he declared), but he did not just accept words; he weighed them and gave them their due importance and essential meaning. In his instruction on sermon-composition he stressed the need to grasp "the *sense*, the *character* and the *spirit* of (the) text".²⁰ To the young man who asked him "whether we're to take literally 'which rock followed them'?", Simeon replied, "Oh yes . . . of course, with a hop, skip and a jump".²¹ Both dull verbalists and fantastic novelty-hunters were the objects of his derision. Error begins in a wrong attitude to words. The uncritical and the un-self-critical are likely to be among its first victims. The proper employment of God-given intellectual powers may, however, find error in the Bible. Simeon was not dismayed by this. Had his own attitude been held more firmly and displayed more widely, the consternation which the Church expressed when Higher Criticism attacked the Scriptures might well have been less great. At one of his conversation-parties he declared: "No error in doctrine or other important matter is allowed; yet there are inexactnesses in references to philosophical and scientific matters, because of its popular style".²² Two points are noticeable about this last phrase. One is its hint of Simeon's recognition of the historical situations in which the books of Scripture were written, and the other is his awareness of the general, as distinct from the specialist, audience at which the Bible is directed. The passage as a whole, however, is principally important in its demonstration of a characteristic trait, Simeon's insistence upon the significance of essentials. Keep the faith and leave the details.

Simeon was no friend to systematizers because they were unable to keep the faith in its totality. He bade his readers to "be Bible Christians, and not system Christians".²³ In a sermon on "The Perfection and Sanctity of the Holy Scriptures"²⁴, preached on Revelation xxii. 18, 19, he declared: "It is at our peril to change or modify any part of that system which God has revealed in his word." What

mattered to him was God's system with its paradoxes, not man's with its schematizations. Hence he could not accept either the Calvinist doctrine of irresistible grace or the Arminian of man's free will.⁸⁸ Or, to be more exact, he accepted both and held them in tension. He did not pretend to be able to reconcile them. For him "Christianity is altogether a mystery".⁸⁹ No merely notional assent is therefore sufficient. At a time when orthodoxy rested so strongly upon intellectual conviction, this was a valuable stress. Simeon emphasized the essential activity of the Holy Spirit. "It is not the Word that does good : but the Holy Spirit by the Word."⁹⁰ That is what matters, but what we must not infer from this is that Simeon despised reason and intellect. He did not ; he used them, but he kept them strictly within the province of their competence.

Reason showed him, for instance, the nonsense of eschatological crystal-gazing, that application of prophecy to contemporary events as allegedly indicative of the approaching end of all things. It was a favourite pastime among some Evangelicals of the time. It accounted for some of the prophetic conferences in which a few Evangelicals, among them Simeon's friend, William Marsh, and Hugh McNeile of Liverpool, were found side by side with the later Pentecostalist, Edward Irving. Marsh indeed, by his incessant preaching on the topic became known as "Millennial Marsh", and another of Simeon's friends, E. B. Elliott, became famous by his *Horæ Apocalypticæ*.⁹¹ Such activity Simeon dismissed as the work of "a curious and inquisitive mind".⁹² Simeon would not have approved, either, of that Biblical variant of the *sortes Virgilianæ*, a somewhat amusing example of which is provided by the admittedly eccentric Berridge. He is writing of March 1770 when he was contemplating marriage : "Falling down on my knees before a table with a Bible between my hands I besought the Lord to give me a direction ; then, letting the Bible fall open of itself, I fixed my eyes immediately on these words, 'When my son was entered into his wedding chamber, he fell down and died' (2 Esdras x. 1). This frightened me heartily you may easily think ; but Satan who stood peeping at my elbow, not liking the heavenly caution, presently suggested a scruple that the Book was apocryphal, and the words not to be heeded." Berridge therefore tried a second time and was rewarded with Jeremiah xvi. 2. The prohibition was absolute and the authority irreproachable. "I was now completely satisfied," he writes.⁹³ Simeon revered the Word of God too much to use it as a kind of dip-tub for domestic crises. As his disciple, the founder of the Islington Conference and the Lord's Day Observance Society, Bishop Wilson of Calcutta remarked, he was "one of the most truly scriptural" divines.⁹⁴

* * * *

Daniel Wilson is, in fact, the next writer we must consider. The two volumes of his *Evidences of Christianity* (1828 and 1830) in some respects repeat the views of his predecessors. In Lectures VII to XI, for example, we have the usual arguments in favour of the truth of Scripture, and we also find him insisting upon the extensive superintendence of the Holy Spirit whilst maintaining the independence of

the writers. His work, however, is important in three ways, first for its acceptance of the contribution of scholarship, secondly for its instruction on methods of interpretation, and thirdly for its theory of inspiration.

First, in scholarship Wilson, by contrast with the self-interpreters we have so far discussed, enlists the help of Jewish and heathen writers, especially Josephus, in establishing the "credibility of Gospel history". What is more important, however, is his acknowledgment of his indebtedness to recent scholarship, and not just to evidence-writers like Paley, but also to High Churchmen like Horsley and van Mildert, and, most interesting of all, to the pioneer textual scholars, Michaelis and Marsh. Herbert Marsh, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge and later Bishop of Peterborough, was one of the few English theologians who knew much German. In 1793 he published an annotated edition of Michaelis's *Introduction to the New Testament*, and in 1801 his *Dissertation on the Origin and Composition of the Three first Canonical Gospels*. In this he propounded the theory of a common Hebrew source with Greek translation for the three synoptic gospels, of which he suggested Matthew was first written in Hebrew, the others in Greek. He then went on to propose that the Greek translators of Matthew received help from Mark, and where there is nothing in common with Mark, they used Luke.³³ Marsh was attacked for his theory, but not by Evangelicals. They only objected later to his opposition to the Bible Society. His most notable antagonist was Thomas Randolph, Bishop of Oxford, who asserted that the evangelists had now become "mere copiers of copyists, the compilers from former compilations, from a farrago of gospels, or parts of gospels, of unknown authority every one of them". There is no indication in the *Evidences of Christianity* as to whether Wilson used or even approved of this particular book by Marsh. He may have been referring to help received from some of Marsh's *Lectures on the Criticism and Interpretation of the Bible*, or to other books on the provenance of Biblical texts. Another Evangelical, the first of them to become Archbishop of Canterbury, J. B. Sumner, quoted approvingly from Marsh's *The Authenticity of the Five Books of Moses vindicated* in his *Treatise on the Records of the Creation* (1816). There Sumner wrote that "the account of the creation given by Moses, does not profess to furnish anything like a systematic or elaborate detail of the mode in which the materials of the earth were brought to their actual form and situation".³⁴ What mattered, he claimed, was the need to insist on three points: the revelation of God as Creator, the preceding chaos, and at a period not exceeding 5,000 years ago the divinely-executed inundation of the earth.³⁵ The importance of the references to Marsh lies in the fact that, though he was known as a pioneer textual critic of the Bible, Evangelicals did not feel it necessary either to enter into controversy with him or to refuse to make use of his findings. It is a testimony to their judgment and discrimination.

A similar attitude informs Wilson's methods of Biblical interpretation. "All parts of Scripture are to be received," he wrote. "They are all of equal authority, though not all of equal importance."³⁶ He pointed out, valuably, that the meaning is not to be forced and that

the simplest sense is generally the true one.³⁶ He stressed that the occasion, the historical position, the "temporary, local, and extraordinary" as it applied, for instance, to Old Testament Covenants, must always be taken into account.³⁷ He also insisted that the figurative and poetical parts should be interpreted as such.³⁸ These in his opinion include parts of the Mosaic writings, Isaiah, David, the parables of our Lord, the Proverbs, and the poetical imagery of the Canticles and Job.

Last and most interesting of Wilson's ideas on our subject is his theory of inspiration, for which he was perhaps indebted in some measure to van Mildert's *Inquiry into the General Principles of Scripture Interpretation*.³⁹ Wilson suggested that the degree of divine inspiration varies with the matter, the inspiration of suggestion for prophecy, historical facts beyond human knowledge, and for the great statements on doctrine and practice, the inspiration of direction for history, that of elevation for rebuke, exhortation, and the like, and that of superintendency for incidental matters.⁴⁰ These differing types of inspiration are then defined. By that of suggestion Wilson indicates that the Holy Spirit "suggested and dictated minutely every part of the truths delivered"; by that of direction the Spirit left the writers to describe the matter revealed in their own way, directing only the mind in the exercise of its powers; by that of elevation the Spirit is considered as giving "greater strength and vigour to the efforts of the mind than the writers could otherwise have attained"; and, finally, by that of superintendency is meant the Spirit's "watchful care which preserved generally from anything being put down derogatory to the revelation with which it was connected".⁴¹ In all this, of course, it will be evident that Wilson assumed the activity of reason and intellect in distinguishing the different quality of the various passages.

To move on now to 1847 and to the Bampton Lectures of that year delivered, or part delivered for he died during the course, by Walter Augustus Shirley, Bishop of Sodor and Man, on *The Supremacy of the Holy Scriptures*. This work possesses a two-fold significance. First, as Dr. McDonald has remarked, Shirley "can be said to anticipate the work of the more recent Form Criticism"⁴² in his clear recognition that Christ revealed God's will "by oral teaching and did not during His personal ministration dictate any written document",⁴³ and that the message first spoken by the Lord was "for several years . . . verbally handed on and confirmed to the faithful by those who heard him".⁴⁴ Secondly, Shirley's work is important as an Evangelical statement about authority and divine communication in the context of the Tractarian Movement. There are references to Manning's *The Rule of Faith*⁴⁵ and to those who explain inconsistency in the supposed infallible Church's pronouncement at various times by resort to a theory of development, which, says Shirley, "takes away all fixedness of doctrines, and requires a constant inspiration, completely superseding the written record we possess of the faith once delivered to the saints".⁴⁶ That is why, as his title indicates, Shirley contends for the supremacy of the Scriptures as "the one rule of faith and practice . . . the only divine record we possess, and the one standard of truth

and error, to which all must appeal, and by which all may be guided into truth".⁴⁷

Finally, we return to the name of John Charles Ryle. He, like Shirley and those of whom he himself wrote, also "taught constantly the sufficiency and supremacy of the Holy Scripture". This, Ryle said, was "the first leading feature in Evangelical Religion".⁴⁸ In an era of sometimes undisciplined intellectual speculation about the Bible, Ryle clung to the conservative view of Scripture, rejecting those allegedly "clever, liberal, scientific" theologians who dared to dismiss the Bible as "an uninspired, imperfect, defective Book" at variance with "modern thought".⁴⁹ The excesses of some early Higher Criticism provoked in Ryle and his fellows a reaction, all the more uncompromising for what it had to oppose. Over-simplified and even prejudiced as Ryle's views may appear, to him and others like-minded with him the current resurgence of Biblical theology is, in some part, indebted. They defended Scripture as the Word of God against the assaults that in their day came thick and fast upon it.

What conclusions may we draw? First, they stood upon this single foundation—the Bible is supreme. Nothing else may be set beside it. Moreover, it is not just authentic; it is inspired, the God-given testimony. It declares the mind of God on the things which matter, namely, doctrine and precept. They were sometimes diverted, not always remembering their Matthew Henry, that "the Scriptures were written not to make us astronomers, but to make us saints",⁵⁰ but the very passion with which they contended for often indefensible positions derived from their highest virtue, their clear recognition that their "great object as Christian teachers" was "to bring men back to the Bible as the record which God has given them, and by which they must be judged at the last day".⁵¹

¹ *The Christian Leaders of the Last Century*, 1873, p. 26. Quoted by H. D. McDonald, *Ideas of Revelation (1700-1860)*, 1959, p. 212, a useful book on the whole question of revelation in this period.

² Quoted by Alan Richardson, *Preface to Bible Study*, p. 25.

³ Preface, reprinted as *Introduction to the Study of the Bible*, Hatchards, 1881, p. 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹¹ *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, 3rd ed. 1853, II, p. 139.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁴ S. C. Carpenter, *Church and People, 1789-1889*, 1933, p. 26.

¹⁵ Simeon's copy is now in the Library of Ridley Hall, Cambridge.

¹⁶ *Horæ Homileticæ*, 1833. Sermon 2133.

¹⁷ *Ideas of Revelation*, 1959, p. 231.

¹⁸ Simeon, *op. cit.*, Vol. XIX, p. 72, Sermon 2257.

- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. XXI, p. 330.
²⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. XXI, p. 307.
²¹ Letter of C. W. Lohr to Bp. Handley Moule, quoted in *Let Wisdom Judge : University Addresses and Sermon Outlines*, ed. Pollard 1959, p. 16.
²² W. W. Brown, *Recollections of the Conversation-Parties of the Rev. Charles Simeon*, 1863, p. 100.
²³ *Ibid.*, p. 269.
²⁴ Sermon 2535.
²⁵ See, e.g., Preface to *Horæ Homileticæ*, p. xxv.
²⁶ *Horæ Homileticæ*, Vol. II, p. 105, Sermon 165.
²⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. X, p. 284, Sermon 1204.
²⁸ On this subject see G. W. E. Russell, *A Short History of the Evangelical Movement*, 1915, pp. 77-79.
²⁹ W. Carus, *Simeon*, 1847, p. 460.
³⁰ Works, pp. 508f.
³¹ Carus, *op. cit.*, p. 847.
³² See V. F. Storr : *The Development of English Theology in the Nineteenth Century : 1800-60*, 1913, p. 184.
³³ *Op. cit.*, I, p. 269.
³⁴ *Ibid.*, I, p. 272.
³⁵ *Ibid.*, II, p. 510.
³⁶ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 490, 510.
³⁷ *Ibid.*, II, p. 491.
³⁸ *Ibid.*, II, p. 495.
³⁹ The Bampton Lectures of 1814.
⁴⁰ *Op. cit.*, I, pp. 505-8.
⁴¹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 508, Note.
⁴² McDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
⁴³ Shirley, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
⁴⁵ *E.g.*, p. 19.
⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71.
⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25.
⁴⁸ *Knots Untied*, ed. C. S. Carter, 31st edn., 1954, p. 10.
⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.
⁵⁰ Quoted by R. Abba, *The Nature and Authority of the Bible*, 1958, p. 306.
⁵¹ Shirley, *op. cit.*, p. 7.