

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php

WHO GUARANTEES THE BIBLE?¹

CARDINAL NEWMAN used to say that it was a mortal sin to read the Bible for its literary value. Perhaps he jested, but one can see that from a Catholic point of view he was right in his main idea. The Bible is the inspired word of God and not to be put in the same class with merely human productions. The present Bishop of London, Dr Wand, has recently undertaken to teach his people what to think about the Bible, and it may be worth while comparing what he says with the teaching of the Church. The views he puts forward are no doubt held by large numbers of devout Anglicans and in places show signs of a debt to Papal teaching. Thus one is pleased to notice the echo of Pius XII's *Divino afflante* in the paragraph (p. 11) which the Bishop writes on the kinds of literature in the Bible. 'We should have recognized that, to mention only three types, poetry, history and law belong to three different *genres* of literature; they contain very different kinds of truth and are subject to different canons of interpretation.'

There have been Anglicans, such as the Dean of Wells (R. H. Malden), who rejoiced that their church has never defined what it meant by inspiration. Writing on *The Authority of the New Testament* in 1937, he said: 'Our Church has never attempted to define Inspiration. We may be thought to have come dangerously near doing so in the Ordinal . . .' (p. 8). The Bishop does make the attempt in his sixth chapter, starting from empirical facts, by asking what impression the Bible makes upon its reader, and how that impression differs from that made by ordinary books. This enquiry ends in an assumed general agreement that nobility of thought and beauty of phrase distinguish the Bible from other works. But it is just here that the sceptic will have a difficulty. Is not the beauty seen primarily in the translation which is most familiar to the reader, and in any case, can one honestly say that St Paul's jerky disconnected phrases are more beautiful, *as Greek*, than the finely-chiselled dialogues of Plato? And are the pedigrees of the Patriarchs more ennobling to read than the pages of Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*? The Bishop takes refuge in the total effect of the Bible, rather than that of single parts or books, but, even allowing that the Bible does make one literary whole for the ordinary reader, he does not seem to have left himself anything to say to the pagan lover of literature who might say to him: 'I find all I want in Vergil and Marcus Aurelius. I cannot stomach the crudities of the Old Testament.' To a disciple of Confucius, of course, the argument from the esthetic superiority of the Bible would make no appeal at all. If the Bible is to be valued because

¹ *The Authority of the Scriptures* by J. W. C. Wand, Bishop of London. (Mowbrays). 1949. 3s. net.

it is the occasion by means of which God speaks to the heart, then everyone will have a different Bible. One lady who was converted from the Jewish faith to Catholicism in recent times has declared that God first spoke to her heart as she was reading Dostoevsky.

No Catholic could rest content with such an empirical approach to a definition of Inspiration. He knows from the teaching of the Church that the Bible is the Word of God, that God is its author, and that men somehow shared with God this work of authorship. Guided by the theologians and in particular by the recent teaching of Pius XII, he would go on from this certain fact to investigate what can be made of this two-fold authorship. How can God be principal author of the Bible, leaving to men their human faculties while using them as His instruments? Here he would come face to face with the mystery of Inspiration—for it is a mystery—and might be helped by the comparison (a comparison which has been adopted by Pius XII in *Divino afflante*, par. 41) of the written Word of God with the Incarnate Word. In all this, the centre of gravity has shifted from the written product to the producer, but Dr Wand himself recognizes that this shift is generally accepted to-day. 'We do not call a writer inspired because he has written an inspired book, but we call a book inspired because it has been written by an inspired writer' (p. 60). It is a pity that he did not make this his starting point for an enquiry into the nature of Inspiration.

The analogy of the Incarnation is helpful in preserving the Catholic from two opposed tendencies in regard to the inspired books. He must not take them to be free from all human defects, any more than Christ was free from the pains, the weariness and the other burdens of human existence. One factor alone stood out from His humanity, the fact of His sinlessness. Just so, there is one characteristic of the written word of God, for all its human nature; it is free from error. From the other side, the tendency to look on Christ as divided, so that one can attribute this act solely to the Son of God and this other to the Carpenter of Nazareth, as if they were two persons, has its counterpart in the treatment of the Bible. Does God supply the ideas and leave the human author to work them out into language of his own choosing? This was a common theological view in the early part of this century, but its pre-supposition, that words and thought are psychologically separable in the human awareness of the writer, has not yet been proved. The Biblical Commission (*Denzinger*, 1998 and 2178) permitted the view that a secretary had taken part in the composition of the Epistle to the Hebrews and certain parts of the Old Testament. This would show, if the secretary himself is not inspired (as many hold), that the final wording was separable from the original inspiration because it was the product of an uninspired mind. But the question of what took place in the mind of the inspired human author would still remain: did he

receive from God imageless thoughts or a thought-content already clothed with some mantle of imagery? Perhaps the best guide here is the experience of the mystics in their visions where, according to St Teresa's testimony in her *Interior Castle*, some imagery remained in her most elevated experiences.

Appealing again to the analogy of the Incarnation for further light on this problem, one might recall that there were divine operations in Christ and also those which theologians call *theandric*, but there was no division of these two powers, just as they were not confounded and mixed into one. How Christ's human will followed the divine will, not resisting nor struggling but subject to the all-powerful divine will, as the Council of Constantinople taught in 681, is a mystery; but one mystery may help to the apprehension of another, and so it is here. The Spirit of God and the human author of a scriptural work are not so closely united that they become one person, as Christ was one person; they remain two, but with such unity that the resulting work has the sureness of knowledge of the Spirit of God while such human foibles as Luke's predilection for Greek words drawn from the Septuagint remain fully operative. What adds to the mystery is that the human author was in some cases conscious that he was being inspired, but in other cases quite unaware that any such stress was upon him. Dr Wand says that this idea of unconscious inspiration is more pagan than Jewish or Christian (p. 59), but there is a difference. The Platonic inspiration was a trance in which the inspired woman spoke in a manner similar to that of a medium at a *séance*, unconscious all the time what she was saying. The Christian idea of making writers the reeds of God is not this, but a process by which God works in and through their faculties without their awareness but also without their loss of consciousness. The Christian writers of the second century use St Paul's word $\Theta\epsilon\delta\pi\nu\epsilon\upsilon\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$ to describe the process, and it is a word of new minting, not used by pagan writers before this time. (The use of the word by Plutarch, to which Liddell and Scott make reference, is in reality an instance of the word being used by a much later writer, whose work was mistakenly accepted as Plutarch's until recent times.)

Had the Bishop been able to make this distinction between receiving inspiration unawares and going into a trance upon its receipt, he would not have argued that: 'The various authors did not claim for themselves any immunity from common error on the grounds of inspiration. Rather were they content to use the ordinary methods open to every investigator when they wished to make certain of their facts' (p. 58). When Luke was inspired to set about writing his gosepl, God did not so invade his conscious life that he came forth from ecstasy crying: 'Thus saith the Lord'. But none the less surely God had control of Luke's faculties, using circumstances round about him, such as the

enforced inactivity of Luke which was due to Paul's imprisonment at Cæsarea, and no doubt the urging of friends, to get him to start the work, and guiding him while he did it as surely as the angel guided Philip to the eunuch.

One is not surprised, after all this, to find the Bishop saying: 'It was once regarded as necessary to an inspired book that it should be free from every kind of error whether of historical fact or scientific statement', and then going on to conclude: 'The sacred writers enjoyed no gift of infallibility' (pp. 57-60). More distinctions are needed here. No one would claim that the Bible taught physical science or that God put into the minds of Mark or Luke the latest details of atomic theory. But equally, no one would want to say that where God is the author, the work produced can be an untruth. Using the analogy of the Word Incarnate again, one can assert with the Church that what the human authors put forward as true statements in the Bible are true, not merely those which declare dogmatic truths but also those which professedly make assertions about historical facts. It is of course to be remembered that the human characteristics of the writers were respected by divine inspiration, and that such Hebraic mannerisms as the spiral form of narrative (in which a story is gradually unfolded, the same event in it being adverted to several times, each time with an added detail not mentioned before) are not removed by the action of the Holy Spirit. It has also been noted of the Jews that they see everything in extremes, as if their colour vision was confined to blacks and whites and could not take in the greys and the half-tones. Now for a man of such mentality to indicate uncertainty there is no way so natural as to say: 'I know this', and then to add: 'I know it not'. Black and white make up the grey that is required. One has to take the single statement in a wide context to see whether it has been qualified by the writer before he had done with his theme. Admittedly the use of such principles makes the interpretation of the Scriptures harder and not easier; but then, the Church has never claimed that they were easy.

The inequality of inspiration is a subject on which the Church has not pronounced. The Jews had three grades of it for the three categories into which they divided the Old Testament, but no Christian writer save Theodore of Mopsuestia seems to have taken up this idea. Fr Lagrange thought it had been excluded by Trent, but the words of the Council: *Omnes libros . . . pari reverentia suscipit . . .* merely mean that the Bible and Tradition are to be held in like reverence, as the Acts of the Council make abundantly clear. There is no thought of putting each of the books of the Bible on the same level as regards the manner of their inspiration. Dr Wand however, argues from the varying degrees of certainty, which he thinks belong to the different parts of the Bible, to the inequality of their inspiration. 'If all have not the same certitude,

they cannot all have the same inspiration. Once the belief in the equality of inspiration is broken, we are able to recognize that some passages and even some books are more inspired than others . . . This is especially important in any attempt to assess the value of the Apocrypha' (p. 56). Dr Wand seems anxious to justify the place allowed to the Apocrypha (such as I and II Macchabees) by Article VI of the Anglican Church, which declared that they may be read for example of life but not used to establish any doctrine. But if he justifies this separation between books on the ground of a difference of inspiration and allows each man to judge degrees of inspiration, then he will not be able to stop a modern follower of Marcion, who out of hatred of the Jews wishes to throw out the Old Testament and parts of the New and to keep only Luke's gospel and ten epistles of Paul. The only valid test whether a book is inspired is the teaching of the Church that it is (or is not) inspired. Once that criterion is left behind, then subjective choice reigns supreme.

The Bishop gives (pp. 43-6) a very fair account of the origin of the formation of the Anglican canon of the Scriptures and their rejection of books such as Tobias and Judith. 'At the Reformation it was seen that the Apocrypha contained suggestions that were in line with some of the doctrines attacked by the Continental Reformers. This put the Apocrypha out of favour with the followers of reformed views.' The editors of the original Douay version in 1609 said as much, in their preface to Tobias :

'Some thinges in these bookes are so manifest against their opinions that they have no other answeere but to reject their authoritie : an old shift, noted and refuted by S. Augustin touching the Booke of Wisdome, which some refuted, pretending it was not canonical, but in deede because it convinced their errors.'

He does, however, omit any discussion of the question whether the Jews of Palestine, in differing from their brethren of Alexandria and in their cutting down the list of inspired books to some twenty-four, were actuated by any motive of opposition to Christianity. Long ago, Herbert Loewe assigned this opposition as the probable cause of the drawing up of the Canon of Jamnia by the Jews after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. Certainly Rabbi Akiba had much to do with it as he had with opposition to Christianity and the narrower Canon appears just at the time when the Jews found it necessary to introduce prayers against the Minim and warnings against heretical writings. That some of their own writings should have been sacrificed in the process may have been due to the wide use made of some of these by Paul and others in controversy with the Jews, or it may come from the fact that the Rabbis at Jamnia drew their line so far back in the past as to exclude from the Canon all the latest in date of Old Testament writings as well as the new Christian gospels, such as that of Matthew, which were beginning to circulate amongst Jews to the detriment of orthodoxy.

The treatment of the Canon of the New Testament is not so good or so accurate. The Bishop has made a slip where he says that the Muratori fragment (which actually quotes the opening of John's first Epistle as being by John) does not include in the Canon the first Epistle of John. He also says that Origen is the first who explicitly regards the writings of the Old Covenant and of the New as being on the same level, but Melito of Sardis, who died before Origen was born, had already spoken in express words of 'the Old Testament', thereby implying that he ranked a New Testament with it as its counterpart. In the fragmentary state of second century evidence, this remark by Melito is all that the most critical could wish for. Doubts about the Apocalypse and the Epistle to the Hebrews are often represented, as here, as arising before these writings had achieved canonical status, but it is certainly the case that Justin accepted the Apocalypse as inspired scripture a century before Denis of Alexandria was minded to put forward his doubts on its position. Indeed the eccentric Turmel regards the Apocalypse as one of the few canonical writings he can allow to the early Church without question. That Hebrews was in similar case may be argued from its prominent position in the Chester Beatty papyrus, where it was found to occupy a place of honour in the Pauline *corpus*, to the surprise of all the critics.

A passing suggestion made by Dr Wand that the Apocalypse may consist of separate pieces, 'distributed as leaflets by the underground movement in the reign of Nero', recalls the idea cherished by the late Fr Eric Burrows that St John wrote short accounts of his visions on what bits of papyrus he could get in the quarries of Patmos and had these smuggled out to the mainland one at a time as occasion offered. Another remark worth attention is to the effect that modern scholars are afraid to say who the author of the Fourth Gospel was (though the Bishop himself thinks John the Apostle quite a possible candidate). This sentence was presumably written before the publication of the admirable defence of John's authorship by the late Bishop of Gloucester, which he left as a legacy to posterity.

J. H. CREHAN, S.J.

Heythrop College, Chipping Norton, Oxon.