

CHAPTER I

THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE AND THE METHOD OF BIBLICAL STUDY

1. DURING the last fifty years, more or less, a great change has come upon the manner in which Christians regard and study their Bible. In one sense, perhaps, the volume of Scripture is rather less to us at the present day than it was to our fathers; but in every other sense it is a great deal more. If our fathers treated the Bible as the Mohammedans treat their Koran, or as the Jewish Rabbis in the early Christian centuries undoubtedly treated our Old Testament; if, that is, they regarded it as a literally inspired book, in the composition of which the human writer was a mere machine, who wrote word for word what God dictated: then the Bible is less to us than it was to them. But if we have learnt how God actually worked through His human instruments; if we have come to see what inspiration really implied; if we are now able to trace the steps by which, under God's guidance, the Bible very gradually grew to be the volume we have in our hands: then our gain is very great indeed. For, not only has our understanding of its

**Change in
 our treatment
 of the Bible.**

messages vastly increased, but the Scriptures themselves are found to be a much more wonderful volume than our fathers ever supposed. Just as God revealed Himself in and through our own nature, when He took upon Him our flesh and became Man; so His Word, in all ages, came into the world under the conditions of human life, when He spoke to men through His prophets and apostles. The Bible is not a mechanical composition, but a very human document.

2. Some fifty years ago, more or less, the great majority of Christians supposed that our universe and all that it contains was created, in the form in which we now know it, by the spoken word of God, in a very short space of time some six thousand years ago. But Science has compelled us to alter our opinion. And what is Science but the wisdom man has learnt by the use of God's great gift of reason, which he has very properly directed to the studying and understanding of God's work in Nature? We now know that the universe in which we live, including man himself, is the result of a process of development, generally called evolution, which has extended, in its slow operations, through untold myriads of years, and which is to be attributed to the action, and inter-action, of certain dimly understood forces, which are themselves the material expression of God's will. Science does not exclude God from His universe; but she teaches that God's method of working has been very different from what we had imagined. And knowing now how He actually has worked, and is working, the universe has become to us a far more marvellous and majestic thing than we had previously dreamed of.

The history of the composition of the Bible is not

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very different from that of the formation of our universe. We can trace the same process of evolution, spread over a long period of time; we can mark the same action and inter-action of little understood forces, which express the very mind of God. For the Bible has come into being only after the lapse of many hundreds of years, during which it was subject to many kinds of change and all the vicissitudes of fortune; and during which, also, God's mind and will were working their way slowly upwards in the intelligence and conscience of His servants; until, very gradually, and by almost imperceptible steps, His word attained to a clearer expression, and, through His human agents and under human conditions, He was able to reveal Himself fully to His children. When we understand this, God's Book, or rather His Library of Books, becomes to us not a whit less wonderful and beautiful than that other open Book of God, Nature herself.

3. The change which has recently transpired, then, rather lifts the Bible to a higher place in our esteem, than depresses it. For it does not affect the inspiration and religious value of Scripture, except to enhance them in our regard. What it has done has been to affect very deeply our method of study and interpretation, as we have come to grasp more intelligently the means God has chosen to reveal Himself to us. The new method is that known as 'historical.' It is not a method invented by captious critics for the purpose of discrediting the Bible; but it is a method forged by scholars in other fields of research, and now first applied to the Bible, both because of the valuable results which have been derived from it elsewhere, and because it was felt that the Bible could no

The change affects, not inspiration, but method of study.

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longer stand alone, isolated from the whole region of learned research. Now the application of this method, as we shall see, involves treating the Bible as we should treat any other very ancient piece of literature. We may even go further and say that, in proportion as we value the Bible above every other literature, so our study of it will be more rigorous and exact and candid. But this readiness to submit our Sacred Writings to what is called criticism need not shock our sense of reverence. For it is largely in that way that we discover how different the Bible is from every other literature the world has ever seen. The more light we are able to shed upon its pages, from every possible point of view, only brings into greater prominence the fact, which we hold so dear, that the Bible is unlike every other book.

4. That being so, it obviously demands of us a very special reverence in our handling of it. The Christian student can never afford to forget, what is indeed patent in every page of Scripture, that in it we possess the great and final authority in all spiritual matters, the inspired guide to religious feeling and thought, the Divine Truth which reveals to us the Way by which we may obtain Eternal Life, the supreme educator of character and the standard of human morality and righteousness; and, indeed, a great deal more, as all ages of Christian men and women have realised in their own use and experience of it. In short, we shall ever remember that in these days, when it is no longer possible or desirable to confine ourselves to the study of one book, the Bible is still *par excellence* the book; truly human in the manner in which it has come into existence; but, even because of that, for its inestimable and inexhaustible worth, truly Divine.

Great reverence needed in study of Scripture.

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5. This twofold aspect of the Scriptures, the Divine spirit borne by the human form, the treasure which resides in the earthly vessels, leads us on to ask more particularly what Inspiration is, and to discover how it should affect our reading of the Bible. The fact of Inspiration is of very great importance from the religious point of view, but it is one of those things which are exceedingly difficult to define, and which, happily, the Christian Church has not ventured to define. We may, and do, recognise, in our reading of them, that certain books are inspired; and we may feel the full force of that inspiration: but when we attempt to explain how, and in what direction, the inspiration operates, the matter is found mysteriously to elude our mental grasp; so that we can offer no more than an inadequate description of the process.

In the first place, we ought to realise quite clearly that the books of Scripture form the Record of a Revelation. That is to say, the fact of Inspiration is inseparably bound up with that of Revelation. Bearing this in mind, we should probably be right in distinguishing three kinds, or degrees, of Inspiration. There is the Inspiration of Revelation. Now a study of the Bible itself will show us that Revelation is a communication, by God to man, of the things which man may legitimately desire to know, which it concerns him very nearly to know, and which he can never know by his own unaided understanding. It is a communication of the Truth; the truth about God, His nature, His purpose in the creation of the world, His will with regard to man; the truth about man, his sinful nature, his need of Divine help, his destiny; the truth about the relations which exist, or should exist, between God

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and man; and countless other matters of similar importance.

This communication was made, directly or indirectly, to the hearts and consciences of individual men; and, we may add, in some measure to a whole community or society of men, a nation or a church, as such a society came to grasp and recognise the Truth, and to live by it. The revelation was not, indeed, made all at once; but, rather, was it a long process of education. It came in various portions and at different times, as men were capable of receiving it. In the beginning it was very simple, very elementary, very crude; and, naturally, it was almost swamped by the magical superstitions, intellectual errors, and immoral customs, with which it was mingled in those primitive times. But gradually it emerged from that early darkness into daylight, as its force began to be felt, and people responded to its influence, and ignorance was purged away. It expanded in the range of its teaching, it grew to be fuller and deeper and richer, it became more spiritual. And even now our Biblical studies enable us to follow, in part, this slow development of revelation.

Then, with the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ, God suddenly opened, upon that Divinely-Human understanding, the full flood of His personal manifestation of Himself to the human race. Through Him, He declared all that man can ever know of the great realities which lie behind our life here on earth.

And yet, though God's Revelation reached its highest and final limit in Jesus Christ, the process of communication did not altogether cease at that point. For now there arose a

Its gradual progress.

Culminating in our Lord.

Continued through the Apostles.

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succession of apostolic men, and a society which came to be known as the Christian Church, to whom God's Holy Spirit made known the full meaning of what had been shown to man in the Incarnate Son of God. The supremest disclosure of all needed its authoritative interpretation. And this process of interpretation was also gradual, not being completed all at once.

Nor, even, can we arbitrarily close the period of revelation with the inspired writings of the New Testament. For, in a secondary sense, God reveals Himself anew, in all ages, to every devout student of His written Word; unfolding to each the hidden mysteries of the unique revelation made in Christ Jesus, and disclosing yet further wisdom in a book whose meaning is inexhaustible, and which the world will never outgrow.

Thus we discern one, or perhaps two forms of Inspiration; the inspiration of the individual to whom the revelation is made; and the inspiration of him who would receive and understand that revelation. And the experience of the latter verifies the truth of the former.

But there is yet another form of Inspiration, which more directly concerns us here; and that is the inspiration of the various writers, compilers, and editors of the books which were not put into literary form by the actual recipient of revelation; and, we may add, the inspiration of the guardians and trustees of the Sacred Writings through the ages. We may, if we please, identify this kind of inspiration with that of those whom God has so gifted that they are able to appreciate and understand the revelation He has accorded them, through the mouths of others. And yet there is a difference.

(ii.) Inspiration of the reader.

(iii.) Inspiration of selection, recording, and transmission.

When we study the Bible we actually possess, in the light of the very curious and chequered history through which those records of revelation have passed, we cannot fail to realise that the records themselves, the manifold processes which have given them to us, and their transmission from generation to generation, must possess something of the qualities of the original revelation. If we admit, as we do, that, in the Bible, God Himself speaks to us by means of the inspired utterances and experiences of His chosen servants; then are we bound to acknowledge that the men who collected and wrote and preserved these things for us must also have been, in their measure, inspired by God. In other words, God's hand is to be seen not in the initial act only, but in the continuous process.

We may think of the long period of time during which much of what we now possess was handed down by word of mouth, and was thus dependent upon the faithfulness of human memory; we may think of the arduous winnowing of social laws and customs, until their moral fruitfulness came to stamp them with the marks of Divine approval and sanction; we may think of the gradual purification of old-world legends and allegories, until they assumed a form capable of expressing the profoundest religious truth; we may think of the careful process of selection, in the course of which all that was, from a religious point of view, worthless or irrelevant was cast aside, and only that was chosen which appeared to be instinct with Divine teaching; we may think of the laborious care which was bestowed upon the venerable writings, preserving them from the contamination of irreverent hands, and handing them down, pure and intact, to generations to come; and we may think of

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the way in which these books survived, almost miraculously, the long lapse of time, the apathy of men, the fatalities of chance, and the wanton hand of the fanatical persecutor. And, bearing these things in mind, we may then ask whether the discernment, appreciation and knowledge, the diligence, awe and love, of so many successive generations, in a race gifted to a peculiar degree with the genius for religion, were not on a similar footing with the inspiration of the original recipients of God's revelation. And the answer can only be in the affirmative.

6. It is worth while to pause here to consider whether the above statement requires to be qualified in certain respects. It may, for instance, be asked whether, in affirming the inspiration of the Scriptures we thereby deny to inspiration a wider latitude than the Canons of the Old and New Testaments. Or it may be objected that we can hardly be expected to affirm inspiration in the same sense of books so dissimilar in character and value as Leviticus or Chronicles and Isaiah or the Fourth Gospel. Or, again, it may be asked whether there has been no religious progress within the Christian Church since the first century; and if so, whether that does not prove that there is no finality about the revelation recorded in the inspired writings. We must endeavour to meet these questions fairly but briefly.

In the following chapters we shall have occasion to notice that God's revelation to man was not confined to a particular people (cp. Acts xiv. 17), and that the Jewish faith was, to some extent, the product of influences which reached the people from external sources. The example of Balaam is a proof that this conception of the mode of revelation

Possible objections to this statement.

(i.) Inspiration wider than Scripture.

was not foreign to the Hebrew mind. We gather that the prophet was always held to be the medium or channel of the communication of the Divine mind to men; our Lord Himself is spoken of as the Prophet in connection with the unique revelation He came to bring. What was the nature of the prophetic character or temperament is a problem which concerns the psychology of religion; but it is necessary for us to observe that though the institution of the prophet was destined to play a predominant part in the development of the religion of the Old Testament, and though it appeared again in the early history of the Christian Church, nevertheless it was not confined to the Jewish people. All the peoples of antiquity with whom the Hebrews came in contact had their prophets or seers, whose influence was, so far as we can gather, often for good; and there is no reason why we should deny that these men may frequently have been inspired, or that God spoke to humanity through them. Our reverence for the Bible does not constrain us to depreciate the real religious value of the work of a Zoroaster or a Plato; and certain early Christian writers were quick to perceive this fact.

On the other hand there is a finality about the (ii.) Scriptural revelation nevertheless final. revelation of Scripture which the wider view of inspiration does not touch. It is possible that our Hebrew writings are only a fragment of a larger religious literature, much of which has been lost. It is not probable, however, in view of what we know of the habits of the Scribes, that anything of unique or striking value has disappeared with the ravages of time. But even should it be the case that some writings of great importance have vanished, this would not of necessity diminish from the whole of