



INSPIRATION AND ERROR

A friend of mine told me recently how he shocked his parents upon returning home from his first year at college. No, he wasn't suspended. He merely related what he had learned in his course on Sacred Scripture. His professor, who is a priest, was teaching what seemed outlandish to the fellow's parents. For example, he was teaching that Jonah was probably never swallowed by a whale; indeed, the whole account of Jonah is probably not historical truth but a parable. Again, said the professor, contradictory accounts of the same historical events are discernible here and there in the *Bible*. These and many other matters taught by the Scripture professor so burnt the ears of my friend's parents that they seriously suggested the priest should be investigated for heresy.

This reaction of the parents only typifies a great problem for many *Bible* readers today. If God, who can neither deceive nor be deceived, has

inspired the writing of the Sacred Scriptures, then how could they contain anything misleading or, what is worse, erroneous? To answer this question adequately we must look into the meaning of inspiration and error. Let us start by clearing away some misconceptions about the *Bible*.

Removing Misconceptions

Many readers of the Scriptures have traditionally viewed the sacred words as something like the product of mechanical dictation by God to His secretaries. Modern Biblical studies, however, have effectively shown this to be false. Yet it is true that in some instances there was a communication between God and man that approaches the dictation idea. This is the case of the true prophet—for example, Isaiah or Jeremiah—when God directly revealed to him a supernatural mystery of faith. Accordingly we can say that God revealed divine truth by dictating it, so to speak, as to a secretary. In most cases, however, the *Bible* contains ideas that are not the product of a revelation spoken by God. Rather the sacred writer has gathered material from his own observations and research. When he committed it to writing, God was present, inspiring him with supernatural help to write exactly what He wanted, nothing more nor nothing less. Hence there is another way, outside of direct revelation, by which God has caused the writing of the Scriptures.

Since we will be dealing with these two types of supernatural influence throughout this article, we will give each a name. The first type we will call "prophetic inspiration," for it is concerned with a prophet in the proper sense: one who receives a direct revelation of God's word. The second type will simply be called "scriptural inspiration."

Through either type of inspiration God unquestionably moves men to communicate precisely what He wants, though in different ways. Now it so happened previous to our modern age that the study of divine inspiration of the Scriptures was chiefly concerned with prophetic inspiration. Furthermore, in considering this type, interest naturally centered around the message revealed while very little concern was given to the human personality involved. The part that a prophet plays in forming the message is relatively small compared to a sacred writer who has collected his own information. Therefore, the truth of the revelation received was the predominate note of interest. However, because of a failure in the past always to make a sharp distinction between the prophet's way of receiving knowledge on the one hand and the ordinary sacred writer's way on the other, every word of Scripture was considered more from the point of view of God's authorship

and little, if any, from that of the human. Thus, the *Bible* as a whole was viewed almost like one divine revelation from God, with all the absoluteness of truth that this implies.

This narrow view of the Scriptures began to wane around the eighteenth century. Studies in history, philology, philosophy and science focused attention more and more upon the human writer, especially with reference to the environment in which he had lived. With the help of these studies traits of the human aspects of the writing were quite discernible. For instance, the study of profane writings of nearby Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures showed that the writers of the *Bible* often used the same literary expressions as these other cultures and in some cases even borrowed whole pieces of literature from them. Alongside these discoveries was a growing awareness of historical inaccuracies in the Scriptures. As a result the *Bible* began to lose that sense of absolute truth. The human element soiled the divine guarantee of a supernaturally inspired account. Too much of man was now seen in the sacred word and not enough of God.

Theorizing about Inspiration

Many and varied theories subsequently sprang up in response to this human element awareness. One very negative response was to swing the pendulum to opposite extreme by denying to the *Bible* any supernatural inspiration at all. Inspiration for supporters of this theory was nothing more than purely natural inspiration, something like a poet would have when he is struck with creative thoughts. This was the theory of the Rationalists which could never be held by a believer, for it takes supernatural influence completely out of the *Bible*.

Another negative approach at attempting to resolve the human factor was the theory of negative assistance. The author in this situation is viewed as writing by his natural initiative alone, while God stands by, so to speak, to insure the writer against any slips of the pen. The trouble with this theory is obvious: no positive influence is accorded to God in composing the *Bible*. The writing is guaranteed to be without flaw, but also guaranteed to be without divine inspiration motivating the writer.

A third negative theory held that the sacred books were written by human authors just as any other books, and at a later time the Church, whose authority derives from God through Christ, approved the books. This is the theory of subsequent approval. But again we see that God's divine authorship is taken away and given over completely to the human author. God, through His Church, only approves the work. Yet we must

say that God has somehow taken a positive part in composing the books.

Besides these negative approaches there were other theories that emphasized God's positive influence in forming the *Bible*. For instance, certain scholars noted that those parts of the *Bible* which did not touch directly on doctrines of faith or morals seemed irrelevant to the story of salvation. Indeed those irrelevant parts were so human in some cases as to contain errors, which would be beneath God's dignity to inspire. They concluded that the divine influx of inspiration extended only to matters of faith and morals while all else in the Scriptures was attributed to the purely natural endeavor of the writer. This theory, however, has outstanding inadequacies. First of all, it limits God's influence to only a portion of the *Bible*, all of which must be held to have received divine inspiration. Furthermore, it implies that one can determine *a priori* what parts precisely pertain to faith and morals, and what parts do not.

Another positive theory, which held great popularity in its day, explained that God inspired the concepts in the writer's mind, but the choice of the words was left solely to the writer. Again, however, this puts a limitation on God's total influence. It is a denial that God's power really extends to the whole writer and hence to the words themselves.

All these theories have been attempts to account for the human characteristics in the sacred writings by limiting the divine influence. As for the Rationalists, they cast divine inspiration out of the *Bible* altogether. This purely naturalistic view proved a strong motive to such men as Père Lagrange for delving deeply into modern Scripture study. He took up the challenge of the Rationalists, the foundation of his courage being his absolute faith in the divine inspiration of Sacred Scripture. With his faith as a springboard he went on to show how the human element does not necessarily do away with the divine in the *Bible*.

Looking at Inspiration

With the help of Père Lagrange and many others who have followed after him a better understanding is now had of divine inspiration. The problem, let us note well, has not been about the *fact* of inspiration; this we hold by faith. The problem has been how to explain it adequately in light of the modern studies in the Biblical field. It seems the proper approach is to look first at the nature of inspiration and then apply this notion to the sacred writings as they are seen by today's critical eye. We realize from the start that the subject of divine inspiration is a mystery of faith

and therefore not fully comprehensible. But some understanding at least can be brought to bear on matters of faith.

We hold by faith that God willed to communicate to us that He truly exists and that He mercifully grants salvation to mankind through His divinely appointed *Messiah*. God wished that these and like truths be written down and handed on to posterity. He could have done this by just giving to the Israelites, or to any other group of people, a book already written. But since God as principal agent usually uses secondary agents in the world to produce His effects, He chose to have certain men compose the books under His divine direction. He did this by bestowing upon certain men a special divine gift—called a *charism*—by which their intellects, wills, and other faculties were strengthened in a supernatural way for this task. They could thus hand on for the good of God's people exactly what God wanted them to hand on.

This special gift of God is a supernatural influence extending through the whole human writer down to the very words themselves. To put this another way, in the cognitive order God not only moved man's intellect to have certain inspired concepts, but He also moved his memory and imagination to visualize the very words to be written. Likewise, in the volitional order God not only moved the person's will to write but also all his other faculties that execute this function, such as his arm and hand.

What we are saying in effect is this: God is the principal author of the Scriptures and man the instrumental author. Now to allege that a rational creature can be used as an instrument presents a problem: his freedom is seemingly taken away. We can tackle this point by first looking at instrumentality in general. Every instrument as such has two capacities: one is to act according to its own innate power and the other, to act according to the principal agent moving it. For example, a saw has its own natural power to cut wood. But when it is an instrument in the hands of a carpenter it has the added power to cut intelligently. In a very real sense one can say that the saw, insofar as it is being used by the carpenter, is an intelligent saw.

This example of a saw is easy enough to see. But if a rational creature is being moved as an instrument of a higher power, how does it retain its freedom? A full response is outside the scope of this article, but it can be said in the main that integral to man's freedom is his intellectual capacity to see things clearly and judge them accurately. The more clearly he sees something and the more accurately he can make a judgment upon it, the freer he is in taking the right course of action.

In reference to the sacred writer, he has his own human capacity to see and judge things more or less clearly according to his personal ability, but as an instrument of divine enlightenment he sees things most clearly and judges them with utmost accuracy. Thus, instead of diminishing his freedom God actually enhances it by an added supernatural light. A confirmation of this freedom is the human element so prevalent in the *Bible*. The writer's work indicates definite signs of his humanly social, intellectual, and physical environment.

Distinguishing Inspiration

Bearing this general idea of inspiration in mind, we wish to look more thoroughly into the two types of inspiration treated earlier, namely, prophetic and scriptural inspiration. In reference to prophetic inspiration God bestows two things upon the prophet: a supernaturally endowed representation and the ability to make a supernatural judgment about that representation. The representation might be an idea bestowed directly on the intellect, or an image in the imagination, or simply an external object for the senses to grasp, such as the handwriting on the wall as recorded in the *Book of Daniel* (5:25). The mind then judges the truth of the representation, and this truth is subsequently communicated to the people. This is strict prophecy, for there is both a representation supernaturally bestowed and a judgment upon it according to a supernatural enlightenment.

Scriptural inspiration, on the other hand, occurs when God gives only the supernatural light to judge. The representations present to the person's mind, imagination, or external senses are what he gathers from his own natural observations. With the supernatural light he forms most accurate judgments, and from these judgments he composes his sacred writings.

There is another type of inspiration, but it is imperfect and can be called inspiration only improperly. This is the kind in which God presents only the representation to man's cognitive faculties. The divine light to judge the representation is bestowed upon another person. This was the case with the Pharaoh who had a dream that he could not understand. It was Joseph, son of Jacob, who interpreted it for him (Genesis 41:1ff). This type of inspiration is not properly inspiration because the definitive element of the charism is the supernatural light to judge. Hence we will consider only the first two types.

Applying the Distinction

If we take inspiration as explained and the two distinct kinds that are

properly inspiration, then it seems we are on the way towards a satisfactory solution to the problem of the human element. According to the nature of inspiration full scope is given to God's supernatural influence in the Scriptures, down to the very words themselves. At the same time scriptural inspiration, as distinct from prophetic inspiration, provides a way of demonstrating how the human characteristics are so much a part of the writer's work.

The human characteristics become even more understandable upon seeing how the *Bible* was actually formed in great part. When a sacred writer handed on what later became a part of the Scriptures, it must not be thought that he was necessarily aware of receiving a divine inspiration. This is especially true of those under scriptural inspiration. Furthermore, each book of the *Bible* is not necessarily the product of one person, but a multitude of persons could have been involved in creating its content and structure.

Concerning this latter point many individual books of the *Bible* were formed only gradually over a long period of time, indeed over a period of centuries in reference to some *Old Testament* books. Also this formation did not always take place through written accounts, for a substantial part of the *Bible* seems to be the product of oral transmissions by different Israelite tribes. In other words, instead of the simple notion that a chronicler was on hand to record events as they transpired or shortly after, it now appears that much of what happened among the Israelites was retained by memory and passed on orally to succeeding generations.

This may sound strange to us in the Western world, where almost everything that is worth keeping for posterity is done so in writing. The people of the Near East, however, were prodigious memorizers by force of circumstances. Being a nomadic people without abundant writing materials, they used their memory as almost the sole way of preserving their tribal and family traditions. Even Biblical scholars who visit the Near East today find that among the nomadic tribes there are certain responsible memorizers in each clan. The clan will be gathered in a group and one of them will begin to reel off the clan's history, naming long lists of families in the process. If the speaker makes a slip in the account another person in the group is quick to correct him. Hence we can easily imagine how the Israelites in ancient Mosaic times must have passed on most of their history and legislation. Only centuries later, when settled in Palestine, did they put their oral accounts into writing.

A final note on these oral traditions is that when they finally came to

be gathered together in writing the compilers often found themselves with varying accounts of the same event. In some cases the accounts varied so much as to be in conflict with one another. But in order to preserve everything the writers and editors would include all the traditions. One obvious example of placing different traditions together is that of the two creation accounts in the book of *Genesis* (chapters one and two).

Considering Error

This notion of oral tradition brings out ever more clearly the human characteristics found in the Scriptures, and scriptural inspiration, as distinguished from prophetic, helps us to understand these characteristics. However, scriptural inspiration alone does not suffice to solve that aspect of the human element which presents the greatest problem of all, namely, the aspect of human error. In many places in the *Bible* the human element is so human that there are contradictions, anachronisms, and conflicting accounts. All this amounts to saying that numerous errors are found in the *Bible*. But since God, who can neither deceive nor be deceived, has inspired the men who wrote the *Bible*, how could they have written anything erroneous?

Let us answer this by first of all putting these errors into two general categories: scientific errors and historical errors. The scientific errors are easily solved, for they are not anything like errors at all. When the sacred writer says that the sun moves across the heavens he is not contradicting the scientific conclusion that the earth moves around the sun. He is only speaking according to the common appearances of things. He is no more in error than the weatherman on television who says the sun will rise and set tomorrow at such-and-such times. In other words, the writers of the Scriptures are not expected to be physicists or astronomers. St. Augustine says somewhere that the Holy Scriptures are not a divine treatise on the celestial bodies, but a celestial treatise of the divine goodness.

The historical errors, on the other hand, cause more of a problem, for the *Bible* is basically a history, a history though of God's salvation of mankind. It is a divinely inspired account of God working out His plan of salvation within the course of a particular historical period centered around the Hebrew people. Accordingly, we can expect the *Bible* to contain true historical accounts.

However, in many places where history is recorded in the Scriptures, inaccuracies and conflicting accounts do exist. A well-known illustration of such an inaccuracy is found in the *Book of Daniel* (5:30), where it is

stated that upon the fall of Babylon Darius, the Mede, took over the throne. But all historical evidence clearly shows that Cyrus of Persia was the successor, and Darius only came later. Likewise, the *New Testament* is not devoid of inaccuracies. For example, there are conflicting accounts of how Peter's threefold denial of Christ actually occurred. Are we to say, therefore, that God has inspired the writer to record error?

Our initial response is that we of the Western world tend to apply our rigid, formalistic notion of history to the Eastern way of treating historical events. Whereas we are concerned with utmost accuracy of detail, no matter how minor it is, the Eastern mind is less rigid in the handling of such matters. As long as the main lines of the event are emphasized, there is little bother about the exactness of the minor supporting material. But since we are not accustomed to treat history in this way, we are quick to charge with error what is really no error to the Eastern mode of thinking.

Dissolving the Error

A more thoroughgoing answer to the above question can be had by investigating again the function of the inspired man's intellect. We said that in all inspiration, whether prophetic or scriptural, the definitive element is the enlightened judgment. Now the intellect of every person is capable of two different kinds of judgment, a speculative judgment and a practical judgment. A speculative judgment simply judges the truth of whatever is being considered. A practical judgment decides not the truth of something but what is the good to be done, what is the right action to be taken.

We can illustrate these two judgments by way of examples. When a scientist discovers that the nature of water consists in two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen, he simply makes the judgment: "This is true." The truth of the thing observed is what forms his judgment, and so it is a speculative judgment. On the other hand a person's intellect will make a practical judgment in the face of something about which he decides some action should be taken. If the captain of a ship sees another ship in distress, he makes a practical judgment about what should be done: "I should go to the aid of that ship." The concern is not with some speculative truth to be gazed upon, but with a good action to be done.

By considering these two kinds of judgment in relation to the inspired authors of Scripture, we can make some fruitful applications. At one extreme we observe that the speculative judgment alone can be at work in the prophet who receives the revelation of an absolute truth. He simply judges

the truth of the divine message. At the other extreme the practical judgment alone can be at work in an inspired writer who is solely concerned with performing a good action. For instance he may see the good of stirring up the people to a holy fear of *Yabweh*. His mind would thus make the practical judgment to write something to accomplish this purpose. It should be noted that the inspiration of a writer's practical judgment alone is an infrequent occurrence in the composition of the Bible.

The most frequent type of inspiration involves neither of these two kinds of judgment taken separately, but rather a combination of both. For in most cases the sacred author does two things: he grasps a religious truth about God's dealings with His people, and he sees the good of recording it for posterity. Therefore, when a sacred writer is recording the salvation history of God's people, his mind is inspired to make an infallible speculative judgment of the truth to be learned from an historical event. But the writer's mind is also inspired to make an inescapable practical judgment that this truth is to be written down, which is a good to be accomplished. Now, the practical judgment accomplishes its good in this instance by serving the speculative judgment in accurately recording the truth at stake. But this truth is not recorded alone as in a vacuum, but in the framework of an historical event. Therefore, the religious truth to be conveyed is the principal object of the speculative judgment, while at the same time the historical circumstances into which the religious truth is woven are chiefly a good end of the practical judgment. Accordingly these circumstances do not make as great a demand upon the writer in the area of absolute truth, and so he handles them rather freely. Indeed he sometimes exaggerates the historical circumstances in order to emphasize the religious truth to be learned.

Since the writer's principal intention is to record a truth of religious significance and not strict history as such, we can readily see that he is not acting as a modern professional historian who looks for complete accuracy in every detail of names, dates, and so forth. He is simply acting as a preserver of the truths of salvation as they have come to be out of the Hebraic culture.

Hence in the *Book of Daniel* (5:30) where Darius, the Mede, is mistakenly named as the new ruler of Babylon, the writer is not overly concerned with the correct name. His main intent is to point out a central truth: *Yabweh* is merciful to His repentant people, for He has freed them from Babylonian captivity through the instrumentality of some pagan military leader. The details of the historical event are of little moment to the

writer's inspired mind. Likewise, in the *New Testament* where the incident of Peter's threefold denial is recorded, the main objective of the various accounts, though conflicting in details, point out the same truth: the fulfillment of Christ's prophecy that Peter was to deny Him three times. Thus in reference to the historical details truth is not the object of the writer's judgment. These are for the most part a practical matter in composing a book.

Besides using historical narrative to convey religious truths, the sacred writers have employed many other literary forms. Thus we find legislative texts, prophecies, prayers, poetry. Even beyond these exegetes point out that many fictional-type literary forms are employed, such as parables, allegories, short stories, fables and the like. One may be tempted to ask whether these fictional-type forms are worthy of inspiration by the God who is all Truth. However, it is not our place to assume *a priori* that God would not make use of these literary forms. It is for us to accept them when we find them being used and then try to understand how they are reconcilable with the inerrancy of divinely inspired writings. We think that the distinction between the writer's speculative and practical judgments is again applicable in making the reconciliation.

Let us approach this by taking the example given by the Scripture professor in the beginning of this article. He told his students that the book of *Jonah* is more than likely a parable, not history, although it is put into an historical setting. The unknown author of this book seems to have lived around the fifth century B.C., a time in which many Jews developed a narrow nationalism that wished to limit the divine salvation to Israel. The author protested against this provincialism by having the protagonist of his story, Jonah, go to Nineveh, a wicked pagan city and persecutor of the Jews, to announce its doom to destruction by God. The city repents and God has mercy by staying His vengeance. Now the speculative truth that God has inspired the writer to judge is the all-embracing mercy of *Yahweh*. The good to be done, which God has also inspired him to judge, is that this lesson should be brought home to the reader by means of a parable. Therefore, we see how even a fictional form of literature can serve to demonstrate truths about God.

Drawing the Conclusion

By considering inspiration and inerrancy according as they are outlined in this article, it seems that many of the present day anxieties over the truth of Scripture can be removed. Inspiration should be understood

as a divine influence extending down through the whole writer to the very words themselves, but at the same time it does not take away the human characteristics of the writer. It leaves him a free human being, a part of his own Semitic culture. Yet he is inescapably moved to write exactly what God wants him to write. If God wants a divine mystery of salvation, or even a natural truth of religion, communicated, then assuredly it will be communicated in all its truthfulness without a whisper of error.

On the other hand, if God only wants the people aroused from lethargy, if He wants to entertain them or put fear into them, if He wants historical details solely for the sake of a central truth, if indeed He merely wants one of the sacred books composed—all these are practical matters. Hence, God inspires the writer's intellect to make practical judgments of how to accomplish these good purposes. Absolute truths are not involved in these matters as such, and we must not look for them if God is inspiring only a good purpose. If inerrancy and inspiration are looked upon in this way, the Scripture professor may not be so suspect of heresy after all.

The notions of inspiration and inerrancy in this article are taken principally from P. Benoit's study entitled "Inspiration," contained in Guide to the Bible, edited by Robert and Tricot, 2nd revised edition (New York: Desclée Co., 1960), vol. I, pp. 9-52.

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