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RECENT VIEWS ON BIBLICAL INSPIRATION. (I)

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Though most of our manuals of Introduction to Sacred Scripture contain what purports to be a dogmatic and apparently final discussion of the nature and extent of inspiration, the great majority of Catholic scholars of the present day will doubtless agree with Father von Hummelauer, S. J., when in a recent essay¹ of great interest and significance, he affirms that in his opinion, the time for a definite treatise on the subject is not yet come. They will feel rather, in endorsing the view of the learned Jesuit, that it has a general application to most of the issues raised by the critical studies of recent times as applied to the Bible.

From the apologetic view-point the Scripture problem is generally recognized to be the burning question of the hour. It is causing perplexity and alarm in many quarters, and not a few anxious souls who are perhaps not fully aware of the number and intricacy of the difficulties involved, are impatiently awaiting peremptory solutions, authoritative as well as scientific. They look expectantly towards authority for a series of dogmatic rulings that will settle once for all certain points of the controversy, and in a similar spirit they demand of the Catholic exegete and theologian clear-cut notions, accurately defined positions or theses supported by clinching, unanswerable proofs. In either case the expectation is premature. It is the well known custom of the Church guided by the Holy Ghost, and wise with the wisdom and experience of ages, to proceed with slow caution in such matters; and a clear indication of her intention not to depart in the present crisis from the same prudent policy may be gathered from the very opportune creation of a permanent Biblical Commission composed of members who are specialists in the field of biblical research, as well as of trained theologians. When one considers the complexity of the topics to be discussed by this tribunal of experts, together

¹ *Exegetisches zur Inspirationsfrage, mit besonderer Ruecksicht auf das Alte Testament, von Franz von Hummelauer, S. J.* Herder, 1904.



with the far-reaching importance of the decisions to which their findings will naturally lead, it is safe to assume that final authoritative pronouncements, at least on certain more difficult points, will not be forth-coming in the near future. Premature likewise, and for similar reasons, is the demand addressed to the theologians and exegetes. Although it is plain that the latter are now in possession of vast stores of information bearing on scriptural questions, which were unknown to the commentators of a century ago, it is none the less certain that the sources of this information are far from being fully exploited.

Historic science has indeed wrought wonders in our own day. With its brilliant discoveries and its searching critical methods it has simply revolutionized our knowledge of antiquity, reclaiming and reconstructing with living detail the tableau of those mighty civilizations of which there had survived only the vaguest and most shadowy remembrance. It will doubtless also be conceded even by the most conservative, that the labors of scholars in the field of textual and higher criticism have contributed not a little to our better knowledge of the Sacred Writings. Yet, in spite of all this—or rather because of all this—it behooves us to be slow and cautious in pronouncing a verdict. History and criticism, although they have achieved so much, are far from having said their final word. There is still more room for fresh advances and new discoveries, no less than for the correction or retraction of some more or less conjectural and fanciful theories. The scholars who are in most constant touch with the labors and results of modern scientific research are agreed in admitting that much of the available evidence is yet to be gathered in, to say nothing of the slow ulterior processes of collating, sifting and weighing. Just at present the new light, instead of elucidating the situation, seems rather to have a dazzling and confusing effect. Indeed, its unexpected projection on the scene is precisely the cause of all the difficulty. Its first effect was naturally to cause our apologists to lose for a moment their bearings, and even now, after some time spent in "orientation," the discussion with regard to many of the important problems at issue, has not yet emerged from the stage of tentative solutions and more or less plausible working hypotheses.

But though the time for definite scientific conclusions is yet in the future, the work of preparing for them is being carried on, and not a little has already been achieved in that direction. That the trend of modern critical investigation, while leaving intact and often confirming the substantial beliefs and doctrines of our

religion, has in many respects run counter to generally received theological and popular opinions concerning the Bible, cannot be denied. But it is well to bear in mind, statements to the contrary notwithstanding, that the opposition is not between faith and science, but between the inferences, more or less scientific, of the critics, and those of the theologians; and no one who is conversant with the history of similar misunderstandings in the past, will have any serious misgivings as to the peaceful issue of the present conflict. When, with the help of the new knowledge and the guiding influence of authority, the respective fields of theology and criticism will have been properly delimited, ample room will doubtless be found for an amicable adjustment of differences. In the nature of the case, this *entente*, involving as it does, mutual concessions, can only be arrived at through the earnest co-operation of men who, being at once and in the true sense of the terms, critics and theologians, approach the questions at issue reverently, in a broad, irenic spirit, and with the trained capacity to understand the positions, and appreciate the arguments and difficulties of both sides.

It is gratifying to note, in contrast with a less promising state of things in the past, that such are, in fact, the qualifications possessed by the most eminent Catholic apologists and scripturists of the present day. Ever deferential to authority and maintaining firmly the just claims of the faith once delivered to the saints, they at the same time accept, without misgiving or *arrière pensée*, albeit in a spirit of keen scholarly discrimination, the facts and inferences of modern criticism on their scientific face value. Thoroughly alive to the need of an adjustment between these facts and certain traditional views, they are earnestly seeking to establish the basis of a more uniform solution of biblical difficulties on principles in harmony alike with the data of revealed truth and the scientific progress of the age. This group of writers who are now recognized as forming among Catholics, as it were, a new school of thought, counts an ever increasing number of adherents. It will suffice here by way of exemplification, to advert to the expressed views and scientific attitude of such eminent and accredited scholars as Lagrange, von Hummelauer, Schanz, Prat, Poels, Gigot and many others, several of whom are members of the Biblical Commission. Though working for the most part independently and in different intellectual surroundings, they have nevertheless been led by their careful investigations to adopt similar conclusions with regard to the main lines

of Scripture apologetics; and it is also a circumstance worthy of note in this connection, that some of these writers began their biblical studies not in a friendly spirit towards the new science, but with the avowed purpose of disproving on scientific grounds those very conclusions to which they afterwards reluctantly subscribed. In the case of others, notably of Father von Hummelauer in his great work on the Pentateuch, a comparison between earlier and later writings reveals a similar marked change of attitude gradually brought about by a prolonged conscientious study of the situation. In fact, there is perhaps no instance worthy of note in the career of contemporary Catholic scholars, at least of the younger generation, in which an honest, painstaking, personal investigation of the problems at issue has not resulted in an increased deference for the substantial claims of scientific criticism, and a heightened esteem for the greater number of its promoters.

Be that as it may, the group of writers here referred to, feel the necessity of rejuvenating the apologetic methods in vogue among Catholics during the last century,¹ and, not indeed in a spirit of independence, but with deep loyalty to the good cause, they have set about drawing up new lines of defence. That their task is an arduous one appears plainly, not only from the complex and exceedingly delicate nature of the problems under consideration, but also from the necessarily reconstructive character of much of their work, for it is a fact of universal experience that those who venture to disturb the quiet atmosphere of received opinions, and set in motion new currents of thought, enter upon a way much like that of the proverbial transgressor. In many an historic instance such work has received a just appreciation only long after the workers had passed away.

Prominent and pioneer as it were, among the writers of the new school is Father M. J. Lagrange, O. P., Founder and President of the Catholic Biblical School of Jerusalem, a member of the Biblical Commission, and Editor of its official organ, *La Revue Biblique Internationale*. Under his able direction this periodical assumed

The weak, wavering tactics of our Catholic apologists during the last century—tactics which have issued in a series of undignified retreats from one position to another in face of advancing science—have been fully described though not without bias, by Houtin in his *Question Biblique au XIXme Siecle*. Of this work an acute contemporary writer justly remarks that it is no less irrefutable in substance than unbearable by the sarcasm of its tone. This latter characteristic is sufficient to explain and justify the censures that have been passed upon the book.

from the beginning a highly scientific character which involved in many respects a departure from the views, methods and tone prevalent in the current manuals and in earlier publications of an apologetic nature. Those principles and theories of criticism which Father Lagrange has recognized as well founded, have been consistently applied by him in his excellent commentary on the Book of Judges¹ the first issued of a series of commentaries projected by the learned Dominican, which, if carried out on the same scientific lines, we desire, for the credit of Catholic scholarship, to see pushed on to a speedy completion.

In 1902 Father Lagrange gave a more systematic and *ex professo* formulation of his views on the biblical question in a series of lectures delivered before the theological students of the Catholic University of Toulouse. They were published later in book form, a second edition appearing in 1904 and bearing the printed sanction of the authorities in Rome as well as in Paris.² In this remarkable collection of essays, which it does not enter our present purpose to analyze or resume, he touches upon nearly all the important issues of the Scripture problem, with special reference, however, to their bearings on the Old Testament, and treats them in a broad, masterly fashion,—in a manner revealing at once the erudition of the critical scholar, and the philosophic acumen of the theologian trained in the School of Aquinas. While all the chapters are interesting and suggestive, the one dealing with the idea of inspiration viewed in the light of Biblical facts has a special claim on our attention, not only because of the fundamental character of the topic itself and its more or less direct bearing on all the others, but furthermore, because views very similar, if not identical with those here set forth, have been advocated also by other eminent scholars,³ and have given rise to a considerable amount of wholesome discussion.⁴

¹ *Le Livre des Juges*, par le P. Marie-Joseph Lagrange des Freres Precheurs. Paris, Lecoffre, 1903.

² *La Methode Historique*, par Marie-Joseph Lagrange. Directeur de l'Ecole Biblique Catholique de Jerusalem. Paris, Lecoffre, 1904.

Many of our readers will be glad to know that an English translation of this work has just been published by the London Catholic Truth Society.

³ See von Hummelauer's remarkable study mentioned at the beginning of the present paper; also two articles entitled "History and Inspiration" in the *Catholic University Bulletin* (Jan. and April, 1905,) by Dr. Henry A. Poels, who, like Father von Hummelauer, is a member of the Biblical Commission.

⁴ See various articles and communications in the London *Tablet* during the last half year, also articles and book-reviews in the *Month*.

It is hardly necessary to say that beyond the *fact* of inspiration, relatively little concerning it has been made the direct object of divine revelation. For Catholics, certain other points such as the canon of the inspired books, the extension of inspiration to all the parts of these books, etc., have been fixed once for all by the infallible teaching of the Church on whose authority they rest. The advantage of the Catholic position on this head is now being recognized by not a few outside the Church, for the farther we recede from the heated controversies which followed upon the rise of Protestantism, the plainer does it become to all, that the fact of inspiration regarding any particular book, or part of a book, is neither self-evident nor even demonstrable by any arguments that may be derived from the consideration of the books themselves.

As regards the nature or the notion of inspiration, nothing has been strictly defined beyond confirming by conciliary decrees the traditional doctrine that inspiration implies divine authorship. The mediæval formula: "*Deus est auctor Scripturæ*," was sanctioned by the Council of Florence, and afterwards by the Council of Trent, which in its decree concerning the Sacred Scriptures, says: "The Synod, following the example of the orthodox Fathers, receives and venerates with an equal feeling of piety and reverence, all the books of both the Old and the New Testament, since one God is the author of both." However, as there are various ways in which it is possible to conceive of divine authorship, this notion leaves much to be determined by way of inference, as well as from direct observation of the inspired writings. The consequent task of completing our knowledge on this point, and rendering it more precise, devolves naturally upon the theologians and the critics, but as these approach the question professionally from opposite standpoints, we find ourselves in presence of two opposing tendencies, both legitimate within proper bounds—both having a claim upon our just consideration. The first—that of the theologian as such—aims at defining the nature and attributes of inspiration more or less exclusively by logical deduction from the revealed fact of divine authorship. The critic, on the other hand, starts with the examination of the ascertainable facts concerning the sacred books as we have them, and proceeds to frame a notion of inspiration with the sole view of making it harmonize with these facts and the inferences warranted by them. While either process is proper in its own sphere, if taken alone and independently, it is inadequate and misleading; each needs to be controlled and checked by the other.

If we proceed to examine the Sacred Writings on a merely rationalistic basis, without thought or pre-occupation as to their supernaturally inspired character, our analysis will naturally lead us to place them in the same category as other merely human productions—with perhaps a difference of degree—for the charisma of inspiration is not a factor experimentally discernible in its effects; it is a quality which eludes the efforts of our critical analysis, just as completely as does the spirituality of the human soul escape the scrutiny of the physiologist. If, on the other hand, we take as our starting point the revealed doctrine of inspiration, viz., that God is the author of the Sacred Volume, and proceed to deduce from this unqualified statement all the logical inferences it will bear, without due regard for the facts observable in connection with the text, it will be easy to arrive at conclusions utterly at variance with the plain, undeniable truth. Such for instance, was the logical conclusion reached by the Purists concerning the alleged classical purity and elegance of the New Testament Greek. Both processes have their respective rights and limitations, their mutual lines of demarcation, and neither should be definitely worked out without due reference to the other. That the subject of inspiration has in the past, like many others, suffered from excessive *a priori* treatment at the hands of well meaning but necessarily ill informed theologians, must be freely granted; but we must also as freely admit that in the heat of reaction a still greater harm might result from a too hasty and injudicious application of the historical and critical methods. Hence, while modern scholars imbued with the spirit of scientific research are naturally impatient, and show a very justifiable readiness to question freely many positions which have long since come to be regarded as settled theological doctrines, we can hardly be surprised, nor should we consider it as a useless hamper on the progress of knowledge, if we find the conservative theologian ever on the alert and quick to assert his prescriptive right of possession. His duty it is to guard jealously the rather ill-defined field of revealed truth with its numerous outposts, and whatever be our personal convictions on a given issue, we should be indulgent, considering the susceptibilities of human nature, if he be found disputing the ground inch by inch, and yielding with ill grace when obliged to surrender a position to the aggressor. Such has ever been the condition attendant upon all scientific progress in the world, and though this opposition of conservatism often appears only as an obstacle, it has at least the advantage of rendering



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our advances more circumspect, and consequently more secure.

To maintain the proper equilibrium between the claims of the two methods in presence of changing scientific conditions is the constant aim of the new School. In any attempt to define the nature and attributes of inspiration the *a priori* form of reasoning has assuredly its place, as Father Lagrange carefully points out, but however legitimate the principle, its application needs to be regulated by the exigencies of the observed facts; and indeed so great and manifold have these accumulated exigencies become within the last half century, that the whole question of inspiration may be said to have entered into a new phase.

The specific theories and principles of solution advanced by these recent writers will be set forth and discussed in subsequent articles.

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