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Activity of the Human Agent in Revelation.

by

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Foreward

My interest in the present subject has been elicited, by no means, through a desire to speculate; nor, has it been through any morbid curiosity to pick to pieces a flower of consummate beauty and grace.

In brief, the case is this; The sacred scriptures had always been my trusted guide through the pathless way of life; so trusted, indeed, that I believed them divinely commissioned, and of Divine authority, to lead sinning and suffering souls to God, and to righteousness, and to eternal life. So implicit was my trust, that I asked not to see credential nor did I inquire whether the scriptures were of Divine authority or not; I simply took it as granted. They had led men, as I believed, to God they had led them to perfected lives and had taught them that which seemed, to me, to be the way of life eternal.

A very little real thought and study, however, into the original texts and into the history of the various books of the Old and New Testament and into the history of the church that collected and closed the canon, led me to see the mundane character of my guide, and to question him whom I thot to be a bona fide angel of God. When I found myself prostrated worshiping before the face of my guide, history said to me: "see thou do it not" for he is "of thy

brethern and the prophets worship God." I opened my eyes and it seemed to me that my guide was of the earth earthy; then, of course, I questioned his right to be a guide; his credentials seemed not to be sufficient. I turned him down: Then I was guideless. And I said: "who shall show me the way?" I looked far and near and there was no other guide in sight. I saw my former guide whom I had dismissed, still leading men to God: bringing them to perfection in righteousness and to what seemed to me to be eternal life. I was deeply perplexed; and I said: "I will search out his credentials to the uttermost, to see whether it be of man or of God."

He is again my guide, I rejected his credentials all too hastily. I thought to guide me to God one must surely be an angel from heaven, but I found instead it is God himself who leads me. I believe my course has been, like many another, from blind faith, through honest doubt, to rational faith in an intelligent and loving father. Through sinking sands, I have wandered far, but I have found, what seems to be, the firmer soil for my feet.

Part I

The one who reads, widely, in the current literature and in classic lore what has been written upon the subject of Inspiration will find himself "miserably

brambled" unless he discriminates carefully between the widely divergent meanings which are given to the term inspiration. One writer speaks of inspiration as a content; one as if it were an active verb; one as if a passive verb; one speaks of an inspired book; another of inspired men and still another of verbal inspiration.

Much that has been said is the product of confused and unclear thought and language. The differences between men upon this subject are very largely verbal, rather than real, when they have come to understand themselves and one another. But in all these word wars upon the subject, there have been two general lines of cleavage. One clings to the idea of the activity of the speaker or writer in Revelation; the other holds to his passivity. From the latter come the ideas of "verbal inspiration;" of an "inspired book" and of rhapsodically uttered addresses, etc. This view had its rise in Old Testament times when Rabbi Ben So and So's word was seldom disputed and the greater Prophets spoke "Ex Cathedra" and the view had its culmination in an age of indiscriminating Saint-worship and the adoration of relics. It is the very early view gone mad.

The first view in point of time was that of the activity and not the passivity of the agent. He was not simply an amanuensis having no more to do with the content or form of the Revelation than the stylus with which he wrote; but,

on the other hand, he was an active agent of God; a seer, a prophet, an apostle, a teacher, or a disciple who spoke with Divine authority but was subject to human passions and finite limitations, and even of home-made prejudices. Though their respective ages well knew this, they were still revered as men of God and their words were heeded as the words of Jehovah himself. This was the earliest view of inspiration. The theory of the passivity of the agent through which God spoke or wrote, who could have altered or modified neither the content nor form of the revelation if he had chosen--this theory I say was the product of a later age both in Old and New Testament history. When the prophets became almost deified and the apostles and early disciples became infalliable saints; then the idea of infallibility of the text of sacred scriptures was brought forward; the idea of "verbal inspiration;" of "dictation" and even of an inspired book handed down outright from the sanctum sanctorum of Heaven--all this is the product of uncritical thought and religious enthusiasm that was more reverent than discriminating.

But only a casual knowledge of the history of the books of the Bible reveal some such facts as these;

1. Usage largely determined the selection of the books of the New Testament from the bulky literature of the time.
2. Formal decrees of church councils confirmed this

natural selection of that portion now known as the New Testament.

3. Up until 397 A. D. the New Testament canon was not permanently closed. It was done at that date by the Catholic Church at the Council of Carthage.

4. It will be noted that the church at this time did not claim infallibility for herself. She was in the very throes of intellectual travail on many vexed subjects.

5. Nor has the church been wholly convinced that this council of Carthage included and excluded just the proper books. Eusebius, in (H. S. III-25) 325 A. D. speaks of a dispute over the books of the New Testament canon.

The Canonicity of James, Jude, II Peter, II and III John, Hebrews, and Revelation was doubted by many. St. Augustine, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and many other of the most sincere and scholarly men of their times, and of modern times as well, have not been willing to accept all the present canon of the New Testament.

6. The same test, viz. usage very largely determined the books included in the Old Testament canon. The Old Testament canon was closed at quite a late date. In the times of Christ and in the lifetime of most of the Apostles, the present canon was not yet made authoritative. About 90 A. D. at the Council of Jamnia the present Old Testament canon was settled upon; but there has been no

age since (i.e. of scholars) when some books of the present canon have not been in question by sincere and spiritually minded men. The books of Daniel, Ezra, Nthani, Esther, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, were not all accepted in the times of Christ and some of them have been constantly in question since; while some of the Apocrypha have been considered by most scholars as worthy of a place beside those books which are commonly accepted.

These historical considerations, together with those facts recently brought forward by the scientific study of the original texts of both Old and New Testament, make it increasingly impossible for us to believe in the passivity of the agent. And it will appear still further if together with these foregoing facts we also take into consideration that;

1. The prophetic writings were selected, many of them, from a great mass of prophetic utterance all professing Divine authority;
2. That these were selected not because of any superior external claim to have been Divinely inspired above all others but because of their intrinsic worth to the Jewish nation.
3. That in no place do either the synoptic writers or John profess infallibility in letter or content, or even a superiority over other writers except as they were

eye-witnesses, or immediately associated with the eye-witnesses, of the events of the matchless life, passion and resurrection of the Son of God. When all these facts appear--facts that are admitted by every student of biblical history--the dogma of an "infallible canon" or an "infallible text" or "dictation" and "passive amanuensis" appears in a very high degree ludicrous.

The apostles professes no infallibility and certainly historical data of their lives would not quickly lead us to this opinion. At least the Apostles did not look upon each other as possessing infallibility in speech, and so far as we know, did not consider themselves beyond the possibility of error in writing. The prophets and the Apostles and the early Disciples spoke and wrote as men of God who were thoroughly acquainted with the facts concerning which they witnessed.

The theory of the absolute passivity of the human agent in revelation breaks down entirely under the light of historical and textual data. And the theory that seems the most probable, the most rational and, in fact, the only possible view for rational and intelligent men to take is the view of the activity of the agent.

Part II

I am fully aware this view is not altogether free

from difficulties but the theory at least makes room for rational faith.

God has always been seeking to reveal himself to men. As soon as the fullness of time comes so that they are able to receive the additional light, God is ready to reveal himself. But there must be, at the same time, men with their eyes open heavenward so that they can receive what God has to show them.

The first requisite for God to reveal himself is, then, an age prepared for the revelation. The second is that there be media through which the revelation can come to that age. A man or people with the souls window so open to God that the Divine light can shine in is, to that extent, inspired. The light itself, variously modified by the human agent through which it shines is the content of the revelation to human reason.

All admit that God's revelation to man has been progressive; not as God grew but as man developed and became capable of knowing Him. To Abraham, surrounded by the gross polytheism of times, it was impossible for God to make a complete revelation of the whole system of Divine love. It was enough, if upon his mind these words could be stamped: "I am one God, Jehovah;" and that Abraham's faith should have been strong enough to believe the words of God; "I will make unto thee a great

nation." Was Jehovah at first only a tribal deity to the Hebrew, as Chemosh was God of the Moabite? The time was not yet ripe for God to reveal himself as he did later to Peter at Joppa, and Paul at Antioch, and Cary at London. Did Jehovah honor the sacrificial system of the Jew, the sin offering and the peace offering etc.? The time was not yet come for Him to send forth His own Son in human flesh as the great sin offering and peace offering for all men. That which determined the progress of revelation was the progress of human development itself.

When the light did shine into the soul and men saw truth, its expression was inevitably in human and individual character and bore the impress of the agent himself. Amos was a shepherd and his warning to Israel rings with the clarion note of the shepherd's tone; "Woe unto you kind of Bashan;" "Jehovah roars from Zion;" "The fruitage withers," etc. And Luke tells the story of the life of the master in the words and the expression and the spirit of a physician. So was this true so far as I am able to ascertain of all the Apostles and Prophets. They were not mute harps whose strings were struck by a far off God; they were living singers whose song touched both Heaven and earth; they were enthusiastic preachers who told men of God's anger with sin; they were men whose feet stood upon the earth but their heads were amid the clouds.

Then comes a very cogent question: What then determines the degree of their inspiration?

There are evidently two elements entering into the answer of this question.

1. The degree to which God can reveal himself to any man or nation, is conditioned upon the receptivity of the man or the people. When the sun shines brightly the degree to which the room is lighted depends wholly upon the aperture through which the sun shines into the room.
2. The consequent revelation to the age then depends upon (a) the boldness of the inspired agent. (b) upon his accuracy in the transmission of his message. Jonah at first hesitated to reveal to Ninevah the Divine displeasure with their sins; he undoubtedly was inspired with the message but the revelation of it was delayed. So we can also conceive of a prophet who was able to see clearer than he was able to preach. This seemed to be Moses' case.

This idea of revelation and inspiration may not be wholly satisfactory to everyone. We may wish that we had had (and think that would be ideal) a Bible that was really written in the handwriting and with the autographic signature of Jehovah himself. This I say might seem ideal but whatever we might wish or think in

favor of this idea the plain prosaic fact is this, we have no such revelation. The best that we have is that which has been transmitted through seer and prophet, singer, apostle and teacher. God himself, indeed, lived upon the earth but he has left us no book in which he wrote, no sentence, no word. Through living, acting, human media, through human life that throbs with pain and pleasure, through such, so far as we know God has always revealed himself to men.

But does some one object: This would indefinitely prolong a divine revelation to the world. I thoroughly feel the cogency of this remark. But again let it be asked, when did the revelation of God to man cease? Has it not been true that every age has had its own revelation? They may have all been germinal in the age of Christ, the teaching of the apostles and the prophets; but their application is no less a Divine revelation to each age. And does it not rather exalt faith than minify it, that not only did God speak to men in historic times but he still speaks to them and inspires them?

Again who closed the canon? Naturally, the Old Testament canon closed when Israel ceased to have a national existence, and the bud of Judaism burst into the flower of Christianity. And it is not unfitting

that the New Testament canon should have closed with the Apostolic age. But we should be wide of the mark if we should affirm that God is not still immanent in society and inspiring men as of old. So long as man sins and suffers in soul; and so long as God strives to redeem him and win him to the ways of righteousness-- so long, will God continue a living revelation to living men and so long will men be inspired of God to speak to their respective ages.

But the discussion naturally enough suggests to the mind this question; How are we to tell what is Divine revelation and what is not? What man is inspired and to what extent? All of these questions have cost me blood of my own heart. And I frankly admit that they are not easy questions to answer but a similar question may better help us to understand the question at hand. While I understand that this question by no means solves the difficulty yet it makes us all sharers in it. How was it ascertained in Old Testament times which of the Prophets were inspired? What was Divine revelation and what not? To what extent were the inspired Prophets inspired? Or a question from the modern church may better accomplish the clearing up of the difficulty. Just what is the Divine revelation to the present age? What men are inspired to reveal it? And to what extent are they

inspired? As I have remarked these questions by no means answer the former objection but it may help to break the horns of Moloch. If this sort of a natural selection, to which it would be impossible to give definition, was at work in the latter cases, may it not also be true in the former as well.

The last battle field I will mention is this objection: "It robs the scriptures of much of their supposed authority." To him who has been accustomed to hold the untenable position of verbal inspiration and dictation, this must be conceded. But as this position is shown by history and textual criticism to be untenable, its predicated authority is also untenable. If the truth has seemed to rob the scriptures of their supposed authority, I do not see how it can be helped, if men are still to be men and truth is to be truth and God is to be God. If I have supposed this ring on my hand to be 18 K but upon thorough examination, I find it to be only 16 K. it is indeed a loss to me. But there is no use of my still hugging the exploded notion that it is really 18 K. since I have proven it to be 16. But, if with this discovery, I should also find that 16 K. is very much more suitable to my kind of labor than a softer metal, I am really not the loser that I had supposed myself to have been. I will not

rashly throw away the ring of 16 K. simply because it is not 18 but I will keep it and wear it and prize it.

It should be noted however that there is really a distinct gain for the Bible, in authority, by this theory of inspiration and revelation. Formerly we were obliged to justify many things in the old Testament that were crude and cruel with the workings of a God that was infinite love. This was not always easy to do; and, in reality, it was only a justification in name; and every true student of the scriptures was constantly stumbling at these points; but, nevertheless, we were obliged, if we were to be consistent in our logic, to deny that there is a discrepancy, and that quite marked, between the Jehovah of the Old Testament and the God of the New. But this new idea of inspiration and revelation relieves the embarrassment entirely. The imperfections are human but the essential revelation is Divine. This worked out in detail is a great boon to faith; and instead of robbing the scriptures of their authority, reveal to us their true authority. This theory of inspiration leaves us a Bible that is all together a reasonable book for the intellect, and a Divine book for the soul. Truth has never yet been a destroyer of faith but has always been a conserver of genuine revealed religion. And this truth will make our faith stronger than it has ever been before.