

Theme Classic: “The Inerrancy of the Original Autographs” (1893)¹



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OUR Lord and his Apostles looked upon the entire truthfulness and utter trustworthiness of that body of writings which they called “Scripture,” as so fully guaranteed by the inspiration of God, that they could appeal to them confidently in all their statements of whatever kind as absolutely true; adduce their deliverances on whatever subject with a simple “It is written,” as the end of all strife; and treat them generally in a manner which clearly exhibits that in their view “Scripture says” was equivalent to “God says.”

Following this example and teaching, the Westminster Confession of Faith calls “all the books of the Old and New Testament,” in their entirety, “Holy Scripture or the Word of God written” (I, 2), “all which,” it affirms, “are given by inspiration of God,” who is “the author thereof,” being himself “truth itself” (I, 4). Accordingly, it declares all these “books of the Old and New Testament,” in their entirety, to be “of infallible truth and divine authority” (I, 5), and asserts that “a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein” (XIV, 2). For the further clearing of difficulties, the Confession distinguishes between translations of Scripture and the originals, and with reference to the originals between the transmitted and the original text (I, 8). Of translations, it declares that they competently transmit the Word of God for all practical purposes. Of the transmitted text, it affirms that it has been providentially kept so pure as to retain full authoritativeness in all controversies of religion. Of the

¹ *The Independent* 45.2312 (March 23, 1893): 2-3. Original style and spelling retained.

original text, it asserts that it was “immediately inspired of God”— a technical term in common theological use at the time, by which the idea of divine authorship, in the highest sense of the word, is conveyed. To this original text alone, therefore, it is to be understood, are attributed, in their fullest sense, the various “qualities” of Scripture which are ascribed to it in the Confession, on the ground of its being the Word of God— such as divine authority, perfection, perspicuity, entire trustworthiness, and the like.

Efforts are at present being made to undermine the historical truthfulness of the scriptural history, in the interests of a school of criticism whose view of the historical development of religious usages and doctrines in Israel is not accordant with that of the biblical writers. The Presbyterian Church has thus been forced, under the constitutional provision of its Form of Government (XII, 5), to remind the churches of its communion of their confessional doctrine of Scripture, which is being attacked and endangered by this advocacy of a historically untrustworthy Bible. In the course of the controversy which has arisen, the phrase which has been placed at the head of this article has somehow been forced to the front, and a strong effort is being made to make it appear the sole “bone of contention.” This is not at all the case. The present controversy concerns something much more vital than the bare “inerrancy” of the Scriptures, whether in the copies or in the “autographs.” It concerns the trustworthiness of the Bible in its express declarations, and in the fundamental conceptions of its writers as to the course of the history of God’s dealings with his people. It concerns, in a word, the authority of the biblical representations concerning the nature of revealed religion, and the mode and course of its revelation. The issue raised is whether we are to look upon the Bible as containing a divinely guaranteed and wholly trustworthy account of God’s redemptive revelation, and the course of his gracious dealings with his people; or as merely a mass of more or less trustworthy materials, out of which we are to sift the facts in order to put together a trustworthy account of God’s redemptive revelation and the course of his dealings with his people. It is of the greatest importance that the Presbyterian Church should not permit its attention to be distracted from this serious issue.

Nevertheless, altho the phrase “the inerrancy of the original autographs” is not an altogether happy one to express the doctrine of the Scriptures and of the Westminster Confession as to the entire truthfulness of the Scriptures as given by God, yet it is intended to express this doctrine, and does, in its own way, sharply affirm it; and the strenuous opposition to it which has arisen, has its roots in doubt or denial of this scriptural and confessional doctrine. It is important here too, therefore, that

the true issue should not be permitted to be confused by the skillful manipulation of a mere phrase. It has therefore seemed proper to call attention to some of the curiosities of the recent controversial use of this phrase with a view to keeping the real issue clear.

It is certainly a curiosity of the controversial use of a phrase, to see the Church's *limitation* of her affirmation of the absolute truth and trustworthiness of the Scriptures in all their declarations, to those Scriptures "as they came from God," represented as an additional strain upon faith. Would these controversialists have the Church affirm the absolute truth of scribes' slips and printers' errors? If we were to take some of them "at the foot of the letter," they would seem to represent it as easier to believe in the infallibility of compositors and proof readers than in the infallibility of God. Everybody knows that no book ever was printed, much less hand-copied, into which some errors did not intrude in the process; and as we do not hold the author responsible for these in an ordinary book, neither ought we to hold God responsible for them in this extraordinary book which we call the Bible. It is *the Bible* that we declare to be "of infallible truth"—the Bible that God gave us, not the corruptions and slips which scribes and printers have given us, some of which are in every copy. Yet a recent writer, with a great show of solemnity, calls upon the Presbyterian Church for "a frank and full disavowal," "of any intention to make the Inerrancy of the Original Autographs (as distinguished from *the Bible as it is*) a test of orthodoxy." But what is it that distinguishes "the Bible as it is" from the Original Autographs? Just scribes' corruptions and printers' errors; nothing else. And so this controversialist would have the Church "frankly and fully" disavow attaching more inerrancy to the Word of God, given by inspiration to men, than to the errors and corruptions of careless or bungling scribes and printers! Taken literally, this demand would amount to a strong asseveration of the utter untrustworthiness of the Bible.

It is another curiosity of the controversial use of a phrase, to find the Church's careful definition of the complete truth and trustworthiness of the Scriptures as belonging, as a matter of course, only to the genuine text [p. 3]² of Scripture, represented as an appeal from the actually existing texts of Scripture to a lost autograph—as if it were the autographic *codex* and not the autographic *text* that is in question. Thus, we have heard a vast deal, of late, of "the first manuscripts of the Bible which no living man has ever seen," of "Scriptures that have disappeared forever," of "original autographs which have vanished"; concerning the contents of which these controversialists are willing to declare, with the emphasis of italics, that they know nothing, that no man knows anything, and that they are perfectly contented with their ignorance. Now, again, if this

² Page number in the original article.

were to be taken literally, it would amount to a strong asseveration that the Bible, as God gave it to men, is lost beyond recovery; and that men are shut up, therefore, to the use of Bibles so hopelessly corrupted that it is impossible now to say what was in the original autographs and what not! In proportion as we draw back from this contention—which is fortunately as absurd as it is extreme—in that proportion do we affirm that we have the autographic text; that not only we but all men may see it if they will; and that God has not permitted the Bible to become so hopelessly corrupt that its restoration to its original text is impossible. As a matter of fact, the great body of the Bible is, in its autographic text, in the worst copies of the original texts in circulation; practically the whole of it is in its autographic text in the best texts in circulation; and he who will may to-day read the autographic text in large stretches of Scripture without legitimate doubt, and, in the New Testament at least, may know precisely at what rarely occurring points, and to what not very great extent, doubts as to the genuineness of the text are still possible. If our controversial brethren could only disabuse their minds of the phantom of an autographic *codex*, which their excitement has raised (and which, apart from their excited vision “no living man has ever seen”), they might possibly see with the Church that genuine text of Scripture which is “by the singular care and providence of God” still preserved to us, and might agree with the Church that it is to it alone that authority and trustworthiness and utter truthfulness are to be ascribed.

Another curiosity of controversy is found in the representation that the Church, in affirming the entire truthfulness and trustworthiness of the genuine text of Scripture, asserts that this text is wholly free from all those difficulties and apparent discrepancies which we find in “the Scriptures as we have them.” Of course the Church has never made such an assertion. That some of the difficulties and apparent discrepancies in current texts, disappear on the restoration of the true text of Scripture is undoubtedly true. That all the difficulties and apparent discrepancies in current texts of Scripture are matters of textual corruption, and not, rather, often of historical or other ignorance on our own part, no sane man ever asserted. We must not, indeed, confuse *real* discrepancies and *apparent* discrepancies, quoting Dr. Charles Hodge’s confession (Syst. Theol., I, 170), of his inability “to account for” some of the difficulties of the Bible, to justify our implication that they may very easily be accounted for—viz., as natural human errors in the genuine text of Scripture. The Church does indeed affirm that the genuine text of Scripture is free from real discrepancies and errors; but she does not assert that the genuine text of Scripture is free from those apparent discrepancies and other difficulties, on the ground of which, imperfectly investigated, the errancy of the

Bible is usually affirmed. The Church recognizes her duty to preserve the text of "the Scriptures of truth" committed to her keeping pure, and to transmit it pure to future generations; it is only that text that she trusts, and only on it will she hang the credit of her teachings. But she does not expect to be freed from the duty of studying this text, or from the duty of defending it against the assaults of unbelief. It would be a miraculously perfect text indeed with which imperfectly informed men could not find fault.

Still another curiosity of the present controversy is found in the constant asseveration which we hear about us, that the distinction drawn by the Presbyterian Church between the genuine text of Scripture and the current and more or less corrupt texts in general circulation, is something new. This is a rather serious arraignment of the common sense of the whole series of preceding generations. What! Are we to believe that no man until our wonderful nineteenth century, ever had acumen enough to detect a printer's error or to realize the liability of hand-copied manuscripts to occasional corruption? Are we really to believe that the happy possessors of "the Wicked Bible" held "Thou shalt commit adultery" to be as divinely "inerrant" as the genuine text of the Seventh Commandment—on the ground that the "inerrancy of the original autographs of the Holy Scriptures" must not be asserted "as distinguished from the Holy Scriptures which we now possess"? Or, that those who read in their copies at 1 Cor. 15:51 (as the possessors of one edition did), "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be hanged," would violently defend "the Bible as it is" against the claims of the genuine text? Of course, every man of common sense from the beginning of the world, has recognized the difference between the genuine text and the errors of transmission, and has attached his confidence to the former in rejection of the latter.

Richard Baxter was speaking no more for himself than for his whole age, and all the ages before him, when he defended the present position of the Presbyterian Church with such direct statements as these: "All that the holy writers have recorded is true (and no falsehood in the Scriptures but what is from the error of scribes and translators)"; "No error or contradiction is in it, but what is in some copies, by the failure of preservers, transcribers, printers and translators"; and many more passages of the same purport. In exactly similar manner Calvin and Luther repeatedly assign special difficulties to the corrupt form of transmitted Scripture as distinguished from the genuine text—no doubt sometimes without sufficient warrant; but that is so far from being the question that it is an additional evidence of their full recognition of the distinction in discussion. The fathers, because they were dependent on manuscript (as distinct from printed) texts, in which corruption was unavoidably greater, were even more free in assuming that difficulties which they could not explain

were due to corruption of text, rather than to lack of insight, on their part, and much more rather than to aboriginal error in Scripture. Augustine's statement fairly represents the judgment of the patristic age:

"I have learned to defer this respect and honor to the canonical books of Scripture alone, that I most firmly believe that no one of their authors has committed any error in writing. And if in their writings I am perplexed by anything which seems to me contrary to truth, I do not doubt that it is nothing else than either that the manuscript is corrupt, or that the translator has not followed what was said, or that I have myself failed to understand it."

From these facts alone, it is already apparent how seriously erroneous it is to say, as has been recently said, that the Westminster divines never "thought of the original manuscripts of the Bible as distinct from the copies in their possession." They could not help thinking of them. I fancy I see John Lightfoot's face, on some one making that remark to *him*, just after he had risen from the composition—say of his "Harmony, Chronicle and Order of the New Testament." And I should vastly like to read his account of the remark and of his answer to it, as he might write it to one of his friends—say to "the great Mr. Selden, the learnedest man upon the earth," or to "the all-learned Mr. Wheelocke, to whom nothing is too difficult or unattainable," or to "the admirable Dr. Usher, the magazine of all manner of literature and knowledge"—who was just then helping Walton in the preparation of his great polyglott. I should like to see how such a remark would affect Samuel Rutherford, while the ink was still wet on the pages of his controversy with John Goodwin on the very point of the relation of the inspired autographs to the uninspired but providentially cared-for transmission. Why, this was the burning question as to the Scriptures in the Westminster age. Nobody in that circle doubted the plenary inspiration and absolute errorlessness of the genuine text; the question in discussion was in what sense and to what extent could there be posited a divine superintendence of the transmission, and how far could the current copies and translations be depended on as vehicles of the Word of God. The Westminster men took high ground in the controversy; and their writings are full of the echoes of it.

It is, therefore, thoroughly misleading to represent the distinction made in the Westminster Confession between the "*immediate inspiration*" of the original text of Scripture and the "*providential supervision* of the transmission as either accidental or meaningless. The historical doubt really is not whether it may not mean less than is now attributed to it, but whether it must not mean more. And the declaration of the Presbyterian Church that her Standards teach that "the inspired Word as it came from God is without error," is a simple affirmation of the obvious meaning of

those Standards, and certainly is accordant with the teachings of the Bible and within the limits of common sense.

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