

THE BIBLE AND NON-INSPIRED SOURCES

by JOSEPH A. HILL

Unity Christian High School

It is well known that the writers of the biblical books sometimes depended for their knowledge of facts on ordinary sources of information, such as public registers, official chronicles and journals, genealogical lists and other documents. Some of the genealogies and historical data found in the Bible were undoubtedly copied verbatim from such sources. Matthew Henry in his comments on the complex genealogies of I Chronicles 8 presumed that "Ezra took them as he found them in the books of the kings of Israel and Judah" and that "he copied them out as they came to his hand."

The writers of the Old Testament books of Kings and Chronicles mention several sources of historical data from which they evidently drew information. Among these sources are the following: "the book of the acts of Solomon," "the chronicles of the kings of Judah," "the chronicles of the kings of Israel," "The history of Samuel the seer," "the history of Nathan the prophet," "the history of Gad the seer," "the prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite," and "the visions of Iddo the seer" (See I Kings 11:41; 14:29; 15:31; I Chron. 29:29; II Chron. 9:29). "The book of the kings of Israel" is mentioned seventeen times (for all kings except Jehoram and Hoshea) and "the book of the kings of Judah" is cited fifteen times (for all but five of Judah's kings). The history recorded in Kings and Chronicles covers a span of more than four centuries. That being the case, the writers could not have had firsthand knowledge of all that they relate, but had to rely on earlier documents.

II Chronicles 20:34 is a typical notation of the writer's source: "And the rest of the affairs of Jehoshaphat, early and latter, behold, they are written along with the affairs of Jehu the son of Hanani, which are inscribed in the book of the kings of Israel" (Translation is my own).

The frequent occurrence of such references indicate a rather large measure of reliance upon extra-canonical documents on the part of those who composed and wrote these books of the Bible. The use of non-inspired materials poses a problem for the Bible-believing Christian. The problem is brought to a focus in the question raised by Dr. Everett F. Harrison in *Revelation and the Bible* (C.F.H. Henry, ed., Baker Book House, 1958, p. 249): "Does inspiration require that a Biblical writer should be preserved from error in the use of sources?"

Our present concern with this question is occasioned by an outspoken denial of the inerrancy of the Bible, in certain orthodox circles, on the ground that some of the writers of the biblical books used non-biblical sources of information, from which they copied historical and genealogical data. The argument is simply that since some of the historical and genealogical data in Scripture is taken from non-inspired sources, we cannot regard these data as infallible. Support for this position has been drawn from the writings of James Orr, Matthew Henry and Everett F. Harrison. We shall not repeat the quotations of these men in full (see January issue of *Torch and Trumpet*), but we shall summarize briefly the view of Orr and Matthew Henry, as follows: Inspiration does not eliminate the biblical writers' need of dependence on documentary sources. And where sources of information fail or where there are omissions, blots, erasures, errors or other defects, supernatural information is not given by inspiration to supply the lack or correct the defect or error.

The implication of this position is clear: The errors which corrupted the non-inspired sources were brought over into Scripture. The Bible is not infallible at those points where errors were copied from the documentary sources.

What shall we say of this argument? Does the use of non-inspired materials by the writers of Scripture destroy the infallibility of their writings? It may readily be granted that the documents which they used as sources of information may have been corrupted by errors and defects, but does it necessarily follow the Scriptures were corrupted by these same errors and defects?

Before venturing to answer these questions we would point out that this argument proceeds on grounds which are not compatible with Christian theism. The Christian who believes that the Scriptures are God's Word cannot consistently hold that the Scriptures were originally corrupted by errors. To deny the truthfulness of God's Word amounts to a denial of the truthfulness of God. Aside from this, however, the argument in question impresses us as a rather flimsy one which is based on what amounts to nothing more than an opinion. What it comes down to is this: The Bible contains errors in historical details because it includes erroneous historical data. This amounts to saying that the Bible contains errors because it contains errors. The point cannot be proved by chasing one's tail logically, i.e., by assuming that the writers of the Bible copied errors. Such a procedure begs the question, since the conclusion is assumed to be true from the start.

All argumentation, to be sure, proceeds on certain assumptions, but the only valid argumentation, from the standpoint of Christian theism, presupposes God as the ultimate reference point for man's interpretation of things (2 Peter 1:20,21). With reference to the present discussion this means that God has given an absolutely authoritative revelation and that, to be absolutely authoritative, this revelation must be true at every point. The least bit of falsehood inserted into the autographa would break the Scriptures as an authoritative revelation. Hence there are only two alternatives: either God speaks truth everywhere in Scripture or there is no authoritative revelation and therefore no true interpretation of things to be found anywhere.

Christian faith requires that we begin with the former proposition. We learn from Scripture that the Scriptures are God's Word and then we say that the Scriptures are true because they are God's Word. If it be said that we reason in a circle no less than others we will reply that we begin our argument with God. This way of reasoning is perfectly consistent with the Christian faith; rather, it is the only way of reasoning that is consistent with the Christian faith. Both faith and reason require that we presuppose that God *is* and that He speaks to us in the Bible. This is but another way of saying that Scripture as God's Word must be self-authenticating; it must bear witness to its own divine origin (as in II Timothy 3:16, Exodus 20:1, etc.).

If, on the contrary, we should predicate error of any part of Scripture, we should be rejecting thereby the testimony of God with respect to His own Word. That this is a very serious matter Dr. John Murray shows with compelling logic when he says,

"In the Old Testament we find a great deal of evidence that bears directly upon the divine character and authority of what is written. Much that is written by the prophets, for example, is, by introductory statements such as 'Thus saith the Lord,' asserted to be divine in origin, content and authority. In the most express way the divine seal is attached to what is written. Obviously, if error could be discovered in or predicated of any of the passages bearing this seal, then there are only two alternatives. The claim to be the Word of the Lord must be rejected or fallibility must be predicated of the divine utterance. . . . The adoption of this [latter] alternative means the abandonment of the witness of Scripture as the basis of Christian doctrine. If the witness of Scripture is not accepted as the ground of the doctrine, if it is not reliable in this department of doctrine, then by what right can

its witness be pleaded as the authority in any department of truth? (*The Infallible Word*, p. 17).

We see, then, that the whole of the Christian faith is bound up with the truthfulness of the Scriptures. For this reason we insist that in our study of the Scriptures we must begin with assumptions that are consonant with Christian faith. Our assumption that God speaks truth everywhere in Scriptures is consonant with Christian faith. The contrary assumption that the Scriptures may contain error is hostile to Christian faith. It is of the utmost importance that we keep this in mind when we study portions of the Bible containing data gathered from outside sources. If one begins by assuming that the Scriptures are the Word of the living God and then immediately finds fault with that Word he is taking a position that is inconsistent with supernatural Christianity.

The question before us is whether the inspired writers of Scripture were kept from error when they used non-inspired sources of information. Our answer to this question will be consonant with supernatural Christianity only if it is in harmony with the testimony of Scripture as to its own origin.

The inspiration of Scripture as a whole requires that divine supervision was exercised in connection with the entire process by which the Word of God was inscripturated. If it be granted that the writers of Scripture were divinely guided in the actual composition of the autographs, then it can hardly be denied that they were led by the Holy Spirit also in their research and in their selection of trustworthy source materials.

Furthermore, the fact that the sources were non-inspired does not imply that the historical or genealogical data taken from them were necessarily erroneous. James Orr, in the quotation to which reference has already been made, states that the sources used by certain Old Testament writers were "good" and "trustworthy" and that Luke composed his gospel by means of "accurate research"; but then Dr. Orr inconsistently supposes that numerous errors corrupted these good and trustworthy documents and that these defects were transcribed into Scripture. Matthew Henry takes the same position, but adds that the defects which make the genealogies obscure to us were "plain and easy to them then (who knew how to fill up the deficiencies)." If these matters were "plain and easy" to the inspired writers, there is no reason to suppose that they could not have recognized and corrected any mistakes which would render the inscripturated Word unreliable.

Before we draw hasty conclusions about the original manuscripts of the Old Testament we must take into consideration the critical problem of the extent to which our *present* Old Testament text has been corrupted by alterations and errors made by scribes in their copy work. This problem is the more critical because our present text is far removed from the autographs. In fact, no extant Old Testament manuscript is older than the 10th century A.D. except a minor fragment, the Nash Papyrus (150 A.D.), containing only the Decalogue and the text of Deuteronomy 6:4; also, the recently discovered Dead Sea Scroll containing the entire text of Isaiah, dating from the 2nd century B.C. (A few other manuscripts of the biblical text were also found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, but we have not yet learned all the results of a critical study of them.)

We do not deny that there are numerous and very perplexing difficulties in the genealogical and historical passages of the Bible. Many of the difficulties, however, having been studied in the light of all the available facts bearing on them, have yielded to explanation and harmonization. Some remain unresolved because all the

facts are not known. If all the facts were known in each instance, the solution to the remaining problems would also be apparent. Meanwhile, it seems best and in keeping with the nature of Christianity to accept the testimony of Scripture that God's Word is truth. To proclaim dogmatically the presence of error in the Bible is to arrogate to oneself a wealth of knowledge which he does not actually possess. Many of the relationships in the ancient genealogies are unknown, the methods of reckoning are often intricate, and the family histories are obscure. How, then, can we speak with such positiveness concerning these things, that we can infallibly point out what is error and what is not?

Although it is not possible, due to our complete ignorance of many of the relevant facts, to resolve all of the difficulties concerning the genealogies found in the Old Testament, it is possible, on very reasonable grounds, to resolve many of the difficulties.

One difficulty which is connected with ancient genealogical lists is the unusual method of reckoning which was sometimes employed. This accounts for some of the divergences which we find in parallel lists of names given, for example, in Genesis 46, Numbers 26 and I Chronicles 8. In the Genesis list Benjamin has ten "sons", some of them being in fact grandsons but reckoned as sons. A recognition of this method lessens considerably the difficulty of harmonizing these widely divergent genealogies.

Another difficulty in these same genealogies arises from typographical changes of names, due to the close resemblance of certain Hebrew letters, e.g., *mem* and *shin*, *daleth* and *resh*. Thus, Muppim (Genesis 46:21) is Shuppim in I Chronicles 7:12; Huppim (Genesis 46:21) is Hapham in Numbers 26:39, and Huram in I Chronicles 8:15.

A third type of difficulty is due to possible mistranslation on the part of copyists. Philip W. Crannell, whose article "Genealogy" in the International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia is excellent, cites I Chronicles 8:1 as an example of such mistranslation. Here Benjamin's son Becher is omitted while Bela and Ashbel, other sons of Benjamin, are listed as in Genesis 46 and Numbers 26. It is possible, according to Crannell, that the words "And Benjamin begat Bela his firstborn, Ashbel" are a mistranslation, due to a copyist's taking the words *bekher we' ashbel* (Becher and Ashbel) for *bekhoru 'ashbel* (his firstborn, Ashbel). The Hebrew words are the same in either case, except for vowel points, which the copyist would have to supply. If this explanation is correct, the verse in question would begin, "And Benjamin begat Bela, Becher and Ashbel," and it would then be in harmony with the list given in Genesis 46. This explanation, however, while it might solve one problem in the text, creates another one of even greater difficulty. If the Becher was mistranslated as "firstborn", then how are we to account for the designation of subsequent "sons" as those whom Benjamin begat "second", "third", "fourth" and "fifth"?

These are but a few of the endless difficulties which burden our study of the Scriptures. Hence, in conclusion, a word of caution is in order. The apostle who charges Timothy to study to show himself approved unto God, able rightly to divide the Word of truth, also warns that same young servant of Christ against "endless genealogies" such as, to quote the Berkeley Version, "furnish disputes rather than acceptance by faith of God's administration (I Tim. 1:4). Certain false teachers among the Jews of the early church were apparently perplexed by the many intricate problems in the genealogies of the Scriptures and were fascinated by them to a point beyond edification. Perhaps their interest in these matters was stimulated by a desire to discover from what tribe of Israel they were descended. In any event, their
(cont. on p. 92)

scholars had concluded either that the Biblical text was corrupt, or that it was historically untrustworthy. Thiele, operating on the principle that the record was truthful, though obscure, showed quite satisfactorily that it involved two methods of reckoning that changed without notice in the text. While he did not solve all the problems of chronology immediately, his simple explanation reconciled the conflicting figures and confirmed the existing account. Accepting the presupposition of essential truthfulness led to fuller investigation and to sounder conclusions.

The recognition of these limitations is not a plea for obscurantism, but for more persistent research. Where the Bible seemingly disagrees with history, we need to probe deeper into the available evidence and to be ready to rearrange our thinking, if necessary. Hypotheses may come and go; understanding may be imperfect; but truth is eternal, and is available to those who will pay the price for it.

The Bible and Non-Inspired Sources (cont. from p. 81)

study of genealogies kept them from the truth of the gospel. Accordingly, that same apostle who teaches us that "all Scripture is . . . profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" also warns us against the perils of inordinate speculation, admonishing us in Titus 3:9 to "shun foolish questionings, and genealogies . . . for they are unprofitable and vain."

Today's Critics (cont. from p. 88)

and ultimately combined into the Pentateuch about 400 B.C. (cf. also Gottwald, pp. 16 ff.).

The position that a critic takes regarding the Scriptures is basic. Either he regards them as reliable, authoritative and a trustworthy basis for his treatment of the biblical period or he rejects it as trustworthy.

Once the critic has decided this basic question he should consider the Bible as literature, evaluate it in its cultural tradition and as a record of a religious encounter. Interpretations throughout, of course, will be directly effected by his basic presupposition.

The tools of the critics fundamentally are the same: the text in the original language, grammar, dictionaries, archaeology, history, geography, and other studies that shed light on the Scriptures. Methodology likewise is similar and varies only as it is determined by the basic presupposition of the critic. His attitude toward the validity of Scripture is paramount.
