

COLERIDGE

SAMUEL

TAYLOR

CONFESSIONS OF AN
INQUIRING SPIRIT AND
SOME MISCELLANEOUS
PIECES

Samuel Coleridge

**Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit
and Some Miscellaneous Pieces**

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Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit and Some Miscellaneous Pieces

INTRODUCTION

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born on the 21st of October, 1772, youngest of many children of the Rev. John Coleridge, Vicar of the Parish and Head Master of the Grammar School of Ottery St. Mary, in Devonshire. One of the poet's elder brothers was the grandfather of Lord Chief Justice Coleridge. Coleridge's mother was a notable housewife, as was needful in the mother of ten children, who had three more transmitted to her from her husband's former wife. Coleridge's father was a kindly and learned man, little sophisticated, and distinguishing himself now and then by comical acts of what is called absence of mind. Charles Buller, afterwards a judge, was one of his boys, and, when her husband's life seemed to be failing, had promised what help he could give to the anxious wife.

When his father died, Samuel Taylor Coleridge was but eight years old, and Charles Buller obtained for him his presentation to Christ's Hospital. Coleridge's mind delighted in far wandering over the fields of thought; from a boy he took intense delight in dreamy speculation on the mysteries that lie around the life of man. From a boy also he proved his subtleties of thought through what Charles Lamb called the "deep and sweet intonations" of such speech as could come only from a poet.

From the Charterhouse, Coleridge went to Jesus College, Cambridge, where he soon won a gold medal for a Greek ode on the Slave Trade, but through indolence he slipped into a hundred pounds of debt. The stir of the French Revolution was then quickening young minds into bold freedom of speculation, resentment against tyranny of custom, and yearning for a higher life in this world. Old opinions that familiarity had made to the multitude conventional were for that reason distrusted and discarded. Coleridge no longer held his religious faith in the form taught by his father. He could not sign the Thirty-nine Articles, and felt his career closed at the University. His debt also pressed upon him heavily. After a long vacation with a burdened mind, in which one pleasant day of picnic gave occasion to his "Songs of the Pixies," Coleridge went back to Cambridge. But soon afterwards he threw all up in despair. He resolved to become lost to his friends, and find some place where he could earn in obscurity bare daily bread. He came to London, and then enlisted as a private in the 15th Light Dragoons. After four months he was discovered, his discharge was obtained, and he went back to Cambridge.

But he had no career before him there, for his religious opinions then excluded belief in the doctrine of the Trinity, and the Universities were not then open to Dissenters. A visit to Oxford brought him into relation with Robert Southey and fellow-students of Southey's who were also touched with revolutionary ardour. Coleridge joined with them in the resolve to leave the Old World and create a better in the New, as founders of a Pantisocracy—an all-equal government—on the banks of the Susquehannah. They would need wives, and Southey knew of three good liberal-minded sisters at Bristol, one of them designed for himself; her two sisters he recommended for as far as they would go. The chief promoters of the Pantisocracy removed to Bristol, and one of the three sisters, Sarah Fricker, was married by Coleridge; Southey marrying another, Edith; while another young Oxford enthusiast married the remaining Miss Fricker; and so they made three pairs of future patriarchs and matriarchs.

Nothing came of the Pantisocracy, for want of money to pay fares to the New World. Coleridge supported himself by giving lectures, and in 1797 published *Poems*. They included his "Religious Musings," which contain expression of his fervent revolutionary hopes. Then he planned a weekly

paper, the *Watchman*, that was to carry the lantern of philosophic truth, and call the hour for those who cared about the duties of the day. When only three or four hundred subscribers had been got together in Bristol, Coleridge resolved to travel from town to town in search of subscriptions.

Wherever he went his eloquence prevailed; and he came back with a very large subscription list.

But the power of close daily work, by which alone Coleridge could carry out such a design, was not in him, and the *Watchman* only reached to its tenth number.

Then Coleridge settled at Nether Stowey, by the Bristol Channel, partly for convenience of neighbourhood to Thomas Poole, from whom he could borrow at need. He had there also a yearly allowance from the Wedgwoods of Etruria, who had a strong faith in his future. From Nether Stowey, Coleridge walked over to make friends with Wordsworth at Racedown, and the friendship there established caused Wordsworth and his sister to remove to the neighbourhood of Nether Stowey.

Out of the relations with Wordsworth thus established came Coleridge's best achievements as a poet, the "Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel." The "Ancient Mariner" was finished, and was the chief part of Coleridge's contribution to the "Lyrical Ballads," which the two friends published in 1798.

"Christabel," being unfinished, was left unpublished until 1816.

With help from the Wedgwoods, Coleridge went abroad with Wordsworth and his sister, left them at Hamburg, and during fourteen months increased his familiarity with German. He came back in the late summer of 1799, full of enthusiasm for Schiller's last great work, his *Wallenstein*, which Coleridge had seen acted. The *Camp* had been first acted at Weimar on the 18th of October, 1798; the *Piccolomini* on the 30th of January, 1799; and *Wallenstein's Death* on the 10th of the next following April. Coleridge, under the influence of fresh enthusiasm, rapidly completed for Messrs. Longman his translation of *Wallenstein's Death* into an English poem of the highest mark.

Then followed a weakening of health. Coleridge earned fitfully as journalist; settled at Keswick; found his tendency to rheumatism increased by the damp of the Lake Country; took a remedy containing opium, and began to acquire that taste for the excitement of opium which ruined the next years of his life. He was invited to Malta, for the benefit of the climate, by his friend, John Stoddart, who was there. At Malta he made the acquaintance of the governor, Sir Alexander Ball, whose worth he celebrates in essays of the *Friend*, which are included under the title of "A Sailor's Fortune" in this little volume. For a short time he acted as secretary to Sir Alexander, then returned to the Lakes and planned his journal, the *Friend*, published at Penrith, of which the first number appeared on the 1st of August, 1809, the twenty-eighth and last towards the end of March, 1810.

Next followed six years of struggle to live as journalist and lecturer in London and elsewhere, while the habit of taking opium grew year by year, and at last advanced from two quarts of laudanum a week to a pint a day. Coleridge put himself under voluntary restraint for a time with a Mr. Morgan at Calne. Finally he placed himself, in April, 1816—the year of the publication of "Christabel"—with a surgeon at Highgate, Mr. Gillman, under whose friendly care he was restored to himself, and in whose house he died on the 25th of July, 1834. It was during this calm autumn of his life that Coleridge, turning wholly to the higher speculations on philosophy and religion upon which his mind was chiefly fixed, a revert to the Church, and often actively antagonist to the opinions he had held for a few years, wrote, his "Lay Sermons," and his "Biographia Literaria," and arranged also a volume of Essays of the *Friend*. He lectured on Shakespeare, wrote "Aids to Reflection," and showed how his doubts were set at rest in these "Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit," which were first published in 1840, after their writer's death.

H. M.

Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit

LETTERS ON THE INSPIRATION OF THE SCRIPTURES

LETTER I

My Dear Friend,

I employed the compelled and most unwelcome leisure of severe indisposition in reading *The Confessions of a Fair Saint* in Mr. Carlyle's recent translation of the *Wilhelm Meister*, which might, I think, have been better rendered literally *The Confessions of a Beautiful Soul*. This, acting in conjunction with the concluding sentences of your letter, threw my thoughts inward on my own religious experience, and gave immediate occasion to the following Confessions of one who is neither fair nor saintly, but who, groaning under a deep sense of infirmity and manifold imperfection, feels the want, the necessity, of religious support; who cannot afford to lose any the smallest buttress, but who not only loves Truth even for itself, and when it reveals itself aloof from all interest, but who loves it with an indescribable awe, which too often withdraws the genial sap of his activity from the columnar trunk, the sheltering leaves, the bright and fragrant flower, and the foodful or medicinal fruitage, to the deep root, ramifying in obscurity and labyrinthine way-winning—

In darkness there to house unknown,
Far underground,
Pierced by no sound
Save such as live in Fancy's ear alone,
That listens for the uptorn mandrake's parting groan!

I should, perhaps, be a happier—at all events a more useful—man if my mind were otherwise constituted. But so it is, and even with regard to Christianity itself, like certain plants, I creep towards the light, even though it draw me away from the more nourishing warmth. Yea, I should do so, even if the light had made its way through a rent in the wall of the Temple. Glad, indeed, and grateful am I, that not in the Temple itself, but only in one or two of the side chapels, not essential to the edifice, and probably not coëval with it, have I found the light absent, and that the rent in the wall has but admitted the free light of the Temple itself.

I shall best communicate the state of my faith by taking the creed, or system of *credenda*, common to all the Fathers of the Reformation—overlooking, as non-essential, the differences between the several Reformed Churches, according to the five main classes or sections into which the aggregate distributes itself to my apprehension. I have then only to state the effect produced on my mind by each of these, or the *quantum* of recipiency and coincidence in myself relatively thereto, in order to complete my Confession of Faith.

I. The Absolute; the innominable *Ἀὐτοπάτωρ* et *Causa Sui*, in whose transcendent I Am, as the Ground, *is* whatever *verily* is:—the Triune God, by whose Word and Spirit, as the transcendent Cause, *exists* whatever *substantially* exists:—God Almighty—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, undivided, unconfounded, co-eternal. This class I designate by the word *Στάσις*.

II. The Eternal Possibilities; the actuality of which hath not its origin in God: *Chaos spirituale*:—*Ἀπόστασις*.

III. The Creation and Formation of the heaven and earth by the Redemptive Word:—the Apostasy of Man:—the Redemption of Man:—the Incarnation of the Word in the Son of Man:—the Crucifixion and Resurrection of the Son of Man:—the Descent of the Comforter:—Repentance (*μετάνοια*):—Regeneration:—Faith:—Prayer:—Grace—Communion with the Spirit:—Conflict:—Self-abasement:—Assurance through the righteousness of Christ:—Spiritual Growth:—Love:—Discipline:—Perseverance:—Hope in death:—*Μετάστασις*—*Ἀνάστασις*.

IV. But these offers, gifts, and graces are not for one, or for a few. They are offered to all.

Even when the Gospel is preached to a single individual it is offered to him as to one of a great household. Not only man, but, says St. Paul, the whole creation is included in the consequences of

the Fall—τῆς ἀποστάσεως—so also in those of the change at the Redemption—τῆς μεταστάσεως, καὶ τῆς ἀναστάσεως. We too shall be raised *in the Body*. Christianity is fact no less than truth. It is spiritual, yet so as to be historical; and between these two poles there must likewise be a midpoint, in which the historical and spiritual meet. Christianity must have its history—a history of itself and likewise the history of its introduction, its spread, and its outward-becoming; and, as the midpoint abovementioned, a portion of these facts must be miraculous, that is, phenomena in nature that are beyond nature. Furthermore, the history of all historical nations must in some sense be its history—in other words, all history must be providential, and this a providence, a preparation, and a looking forward to Christ.

Here, then, we have four out of the five classes. And in all these the sky of my belief is serene, unclouded by a doubt. Would to God that my faith, that faith which works on the whole man, confirming and conforming, were but in just proportion to my belief, to the full acquiescence of my intellect, and the deep consent of my conscience! The very difficulties argue the truth of the whole scheme and system for my understanding, since I see plainly that so must the truth appear, if it be the truth.

V. But there is a Book of two parts, each part consisting of several books. The first part (I speak in the character of an uninterested critic or philologist) contains the relics of the literature of the Hebrew people, while the Hebrew was still the living language. The second part comprises the writings, and, with one or two inconsiderable and doubtful exceptions, all the writings of the followers of Christ within the space of ninety years from the date of the Resurrection. I do not myself think that any of these writings were composed as late as A.D. 120; but I wish to preclude all dispute. This Book I resume as read, and yet unread—read and familiar to my mind in all parts, but which is yet to be perused as a whole, or rather a work, *cujus particulas et sententiolas omnes et singulas recogniturus sum*, but the component integers of which, and their conspiracy, I have yet to study. I take up this work with the purpose to read it for the first time as I should read any other work, as far at least as I can or dare. For I neither can, nor dare, throw off a strong and awful prepossession in its favour—certain as I am that a large part of the light and life, in and by which I see, love, and embrace the truths and the strengths co-organised into a living body of faith and knowledge in the four preceding classes, has been directly or indirectly derived to me from this sacred volume—and unable to determine what I do not owe to its influences. But even on this account, and because it has these inalienable claims on my reverence and gratitude, I will not leave it in the power of unbelievers to say that the Bible is for me only what the Koran is for the deaf Turk, and the Vedas for the feeble and acquiescent Hindoo.

No; I will retire *up into the mountain*, and hold secret commune with my Bible above the contagious blastments of prejudice, and the fog-blight of selfish superstition. *For fear hath torment*. And what though *my* reason be to the power and splendour of the Scriptures but as the reflected and secondary shine of the moon compared with the solar radiance; yet the sun endures the occasional co-presence of the unsteady orb, and leaving it visible seems to sanction the comparison. There is a Light higher than all, even *the Word that was in the beginning*; the Light, of which light itself is but the *shechinah* and cloudy tabernacle; the Word that is Light for every man, and life for as many as give heed to it.

If between this Word and the written letter I shall anywhere seem to myself to find a discrepancy, I will not conclude that such there actually is, nor on the other hand will I fall under the condemnation of them that would *lie for God*, but seek as I may, be thankful for what I have—and wait.

With such purposes, with such feelings, have I perused the books of the Old and New Testaments, each book as a whole, and also as an integral part. And need I say that I have met everywhere more or less copious sources of truth, and power, and purifying impulses, that I have found words for my inmost thoughts, songs for my joy, utterances for my hidden griefs, and pleadings for my shame and my feebleness? In short, whatever *finds* me, bears witness for itself that it has proceeded from a Holy Spirit, even from the same Spirit, *which remaining in itself, yet regenerateth all other powers, and in all ages entering into holy souls, maketh them friends of God, and prophets*. (Wisd.

vii.) And here, perhaps, I might have been content to rest, if I had not learned that, as a Christian, I cannot, must not, stand alone; or if I had not known that more than this was holden and required by the Fathers of the Reformation, and by the Churches collectively, since the Council of Nice at latest, the only exceptions being that doubtful one of the corrupt Romish Church implied, though not avowed, in its equalisation of the Apocryphal Books with those of the Hebrew Canon, and the irrelevant one of the few and obscure sects who acknowledge no historical Christianity. This somewhat more, in which Jerome, Augustine, Luther, and Hooker were of one and the same judgment, and less than which not one of them would have tolerated—would it fall within the scope of my present doubts and objections? I hope it would not. Let only their general expressions be interpreted by their treatment of the Scriptures in detail, and I dare confidently trust that it would not. For I can no more reconcile the doctrine which startles my belief with the practice and particular declarations of these great men, than with the convictions of my own understanding and conscience. At all events—and I cannot too early or too earnestly guard against any misapprehension of my meaning and purpose—let it be distinctly understood that my arguments and objections apply exclusively to the following doctrine or dogma. To the opinions which individual divines have advanced in lieu of this doctrine, my only objection, as far as I object, is—that I do not understand them. The precise enunciation of this doctrine I defer to the commencement of the next Letter.

Farewell.

LETTER II

My Dear Friend,

In my last Letter I said that in the Bible there is more that *finds* me than I have experienced in all other books put together; that the words of the Bible find me at greater depths of my being; and that whatever finds me brings with it an irresistible evidence of its having proceeded from the Holy Spirit. But the doctrine in question requires me to believe that not only what finds me, but that all that exists in the sacred volume, and which I am bound to find therein, was—not alone inspired by, that is composed by, men under the actuating influence of the Holy Spirit, but likewise—dictated by an Infallible Intelligence; that the writers, each and all, were divinely informed as well as inspired. Now here all evasion, all excuse, is cut off. An infallible intelligence extends to all things, physical no less than spiritual. It may convey the truth in any one of the three possible languages—that of sense, as objects appear to the beholder on this earth; or that of science, which supposes the beholder placed in the centre; or that of philosophy, which resolves both into a supersensual reality. But whichever be chosen—and it is obvious that the incompatibility exists only between the first and second, both of them being indifferent and of equal value to the third—it must be employed consistently; for an infallible intelligence must intend to be intelligible, and not to deceive. And, moreover, whichever of these three languages be chosen, it must be translatable into truth. For this is the very essence of the doctrine, that one and the same intelligence is speaking in the unity of a person; which unity is no more broken by the diversity of the pipes through which it makes itself audible, than is a tune by the different instruments on which it is played by a consummate musician, equally perfect in all.

One instrument may be more capacious than another, but as far as its compass extends, and in what it sounds forth, it will be true to the conception of the master. I can conceive no softening here which would not nullify the doctrine, and convert it to a cloud for each man's fancy to shift and shape at will.

And this doctrine, I confess, plants the vineyard of the Word with thorns for me, and places snares in its pathways. These may be delusions of an evil spirit; but ere I so harshly question the seeming angel of light—my reason, I mean, and moral sense in conjunction with my clearest knowledge—I must inquire on what authority this doctrine rests. And what other authority dares a truly catholic Christian admit as coercive in the final decision, but the declarations of the Book itself—though I should not, without struggles, and a trembling reluctance, gainsay even a universal tradition?

I return to the Book. With a full persuasion of soul respecting all the articles of the Christian Faith, as contained in the first four classes, I receive willingly also the truth of the history, namely, that the Word of the Lord did come to Samuel, to Isaiah, to others; and that the words which gave utterance to the same are faithfully recorded. But though the origin of the words, even as of the miraculous acts, be supernatural, yet the former once uttered, the latter once having taken their place among the phenomena of the senses, the faithful recording of the same does not of itself imply, or seem to require, any supernatural working, other than as all truth and goodness are such. In the books of Moses, and once or twice in the prophecy of Jeremiah, I find it indeed asserted that not only the words were given, but the recording of the same enjoined by the special command of God, and doubtless executed under the special guidance of the Divine Spirit. As to all such passages, therefore, there can be no dispute; and all others in which the words are by the sacred historian declared to have been the Word of the Lord supernaturally communicated, I receive as such with a degree of confidence proportioned to the confidence required of me by the writer himself, and to the claims he himself makes on my belief.

Let us, therefore, remove all such passages, and take each book by itself; and I repeat that I believe the writer in whatever he himself relates of his own authority, and of its origin. But I cannot find any such claim, as the doctrine in question supposes, made by these writers, explicitly or by implication. On the contrary, they refer to other documents, and in all points express themselves as

sober-minded and veracious writers under ordinary circumstances are known to do. But perhaps they bear testimony, the successor to his predecessor? Or some one of the number has left it on record, that by special inspiration *he* was commanded to declare the plenary inspiration of all the rest? The passages which can without violence be appealed to as substantiating the latter position are so few, and these so incidental—the conclusion drawn from them involving likewise so obviously a *petitio principii*, namely, the supernatural dictation, word by word, of the book in which the question is found (for, until this is established, the utmost that such a text can prove is the current belief of the writer's age and country concerning the character of the books then called the Scriptures)—that it cannot but seem strange, and assuredly is against all analogy of Gospel revelation, that such a doctrine—which, if true, must be an article of faith, and a most important, yea, essential article of faith—should be left thus faintly, thus obscurely, and, if I may so say, *obitaneously*, declared and enjoined. The time of the formation and closing of the Canon unknown;—the selectors and compilers unknown, or recorded by known fabulists;—and (more perplexing still) the belief of the Jewish Church—the belief, I mean, common to the Jews of Palestine and their more cultivated brethren in Alexandria (no reprehension of which is to be found in the New Testament)—concerning the nature and import of the θεοπνευστία attributed to the precious remains of their Temple Library;—these circumstances are such, especially the last, as in effect to evacuate the tenet, of which I am speaking, of the only meaning in which it practically means anything at all tangible, steadfast, or obligatory. In infallibility there are no degrees. The power of the High and Holy One is one and the same, whether the sphere which it fills be larger or smaller;—the area traversed by a comet, or the oracle of the house, the holy place beneath the wings of the cherubim;—the Pentateuch of the Legislator, who drew near to the thick darkness where God was, and who spake in the cloud whence the thunderings and lightnings came, and whom God answered by a voice; or but a letter of thirteen verses from the affectionate *Elder to the elect lady and her children, whom he loved in the truth*. But at no period was this the judgment of the Jewish Church respecting all the canonical books. To Moses alone—to Moses in the recording no less than in the receiving of the Law—and to all and every part of the five books called the Books of Moses, the Jewish doctors of the generation before, and coëval with, the apostles, assigned that unmodified and absolute *theopneusty* which our divines, in words at least, attribute to the Canon collectively. In fact it was from the Jewish Rabbis—who, in opposition to the Christian scheme, contended for a perfection in the revelation by Moses, which neither required nor endured any addition, and who strained their fancies in expressing the transcendency of the books of Moses, in aid of their opinion—that the founders of the doctrine borrowed their notions and phrases respecting the Bible throughout. Remove the metaphorical drapery from the doctrine of the Cabbalists, and it will be found to contain the only intelligible and consistent idea of that plenary inspiration, which later divines extend to all the canonical books; as thus:—“The Pentateuch is but *one Word*, even the Word of God; and the letters and articulate sounds, by which this Word is communicated to our human apprehensions, are likewise divinely communicated.”

Now, for ‘Pentateuch’ substitute ‘Old and New Testament,’ and then I say that this is the doctrine which I reject as superstitious and unscriptural. And yet as long as the conceptions of the revealing Word and the inspiring Spirit are identified and confounded, I assert that whatever says less than this, says little more than nothing. For how can absolute infallibility be blended with fallibility?

Where is the infallible criterion? How can infallible truth be infallibly conveyed in defective and fallible expressions? The Jewish teachers confined this miraculous character to the Pentateuch.

Between the Mosaic and the Prophetic inspiration they asserted such a difference as amounts to a diversity; and between both the one and the other, and the remaining books comprised under the title of *Hagiographa*, the interval was still wider, and the inferiority in kind, and not only in degree, was unequivocally expressed. If we take into account the habit, universal with the Hebrew doctors, of referring all excellent or extraordinary things to the great First Cause, without mention of the proximate and instrumental causes—a striking illustration of which may be obtained by comparing

the narratives of the same event in the Psalms and in the historical books; and if we further reflect that the distinction of the providential and the miraculous did not enter into their forms of thinking—at all events not into their mode of conveying their thoughts—the language of the Jews respecting the *Hagiographa* will be found to differ little, if at all, from that of religious persons among ourselves, when speaking of an author abounding in gifts, stirred up by the Holy Spirit, writing under the influence of special grace, and the like.

But it forms no part of my present purpose to discuss the point historically, or to speculate on the formation of either Canon. Rather, such inquiries are altogether alien from the great object of my pursuits and studies, which is to convince myself and others that the Bible and Christianity are their own sufficient evidence. But it concerns both my character and my peace of mind to satisfy unprejudiced judges that if my present convictions should in all other respects be found consistent with the faith and feelings of a Christian—and if in many and those important points they tend to secure that faith and to deepen those feelings—the words of the Apostle, rightly interpreted, do not require their condemnation. Enough, if what has been stated above respecting the general doctrine of the Hebrew masters, under whom the Apostle was bred, shall remove any misconceptions that might prevent the right interpretation of his words.

Farewell.

LETTER III

My Dear Friend,

Having in the former two Letters defined the doctrine which I reject, I am now to communicate the views that I would propose to substitute in its place.

Before, however, I attempt to lay down on the theological chart the road-place to which my bark has drifted, and to mark the spot and circumscribe the space within which I swing at anchor, let me first thank you for, and then attempt to answer, the objections—or at least the questions—which you have urged upon me.

“The present Bible is the Canon to which Christ and the Apostles referred?”

Doubtless.

“And in terms which a Christian must tremble to tamper with?”

Yea. The expressions are as direct as strong; and a true believer will neither attempt to divert nor dilute their strength.

“The doctrine which is considered as the orthodox view seems the obvious and most natural interpretation of the text in question?”

Yea, and nay. To those whose minds are prepossessed by the doctrine itself—who from earliest childhood have always meant this doctrine by the very word Bible—the doctrine being but its exposition and paraphrase—Yea. In such minds the words of our Lord and the declarations of St. Paul can awaken no other sense. To those on the other hand who find the doctrine senseless and self-confuting, and who take up the Bible as they do other books, and apply to it the same rules of interpretation—Nay.

And, lastly, he who, like myself, recognises in neither of the two the state of his own mind—who cannot rest in the former, and feels, or fears, a presumptuous spirit in the negative dogmatism of the latter—he has his answer to seek. But so far I dare hazard a reply to the question—In what other sense can the words be interpreted?—beseeching you, however, to take what I am about to offer but as an attempt to delineate an arc of oscillation—that the eulogy of St. Paul is in nowise contravened by the opinion to which I incline, who fully believe the Old Testament collectively, both in the composition and in its preservation, a great and precious gift of Providence;—who find in it all that the Apostle describes, and who more than believe that all which the Apostle spoke of was of Divine inspiration, and a blessing intended for as many as are in communion with the Spirit through all ages. And I freely confess that my whole heart would turn away with an angry impatience from the cold and captious mortal who, the moment I had been pouring out the love and gladness of my soul—while book after book, law, and truth, and example, oracle, and lovely hymn, and choral song of ten thousand thousands, and accepted prayers of saints and prophets, sent back, as it were, from heaven, like doves, to be let loose again with a new freight of spiritual joys and griefs and necessities, were passing across my memory—at the first pause of my voice, and whilst my countenance was still speaking—should ask me whether I was thinking of the Book of Esther, or meant particularly to include the first six chapters of Daniel, or verses 6–20 of the 109th Psalm, or the last verse of the 137th Psalm? Would any conclusion of this sort be drawn in any other analogous case? In the course of my lectures on Dramatic Poetry, I, in half a score instances, referred my auditors to the precious volume before me—Shakespeare—and spoke enthusiastically, both in general and with detail of particular beauties, of the plays of Shakespeare, as in all their kinds, and in relation to the purposes of the writer, excellent. Would it have been fair, or according to the common usage and understanding of men, to have inferred an intention on my part to decide the question respecting *Titus Andronicus*, or the larger portion of the three parts of *Henry VI.*? Would not every genial mind understand by Shakespeare that unity or total impression comprising and resulting from the thousandfold several and particular emotions of delight, admiration, gratitude excited by his works?

But if it be answered, “Aye! but we must not interpret St. Paul as we may and should interpret any other honest and intelligent writer or speaker,”—then, I say, this is the very *petitio principii* of which I complain.

Still less do the words of our Lord apply against my view. Have I not declared—do I not begin by declaring—that whatever is referred by the sacred penman to a direct communication from God, and wherever it is recorded that the subject of the history had asserted himself to have received this or that command, this or that information or assurance, from a superhuman Intelligence, or where the writer in his own person, and in the character of an historian, relates that the *word of the Lord came* unto priest, prophet, chieftain, or other individual—have I not declared that I receive the same with full belief, and admit its inappellable authority? Who more convinced than I am—who more anxious to impress that conviction on the minds of others—that the Law and the Prophets speak throughout of Christ? That all the intermediate applications and realisations of the words are but types and repetitions—translations, as it were, from the language of letters and articulate sounds into the language of events and symbolical persons?

And here again let me recur to the aid of analogy. Suppose a life of Sir Thomas More by his son-in-law, or a life of Lord Bacon by his chaplain; that a part of the records of the Court of Chancery belonging to these periods were lost; that in Roper’s or in Rawley’s biographical work there were preserved a series of *dicta* and judgments attributed to these illustrious Chancellors, many and important specimens of their table discourses, with large extracts from works written by them, and from some that are no longer extant. Let it be supposed, too, that there are no grounds, internal or external, to doubt either the moral, intellectual, or circumstantial competence of the biographers. Suppose, moreover, that wherever the opportunity existed of collating their documents and quotations with the records and works still preserved, the former were found substantially correct and faithful, the few differences in nowise altering or disturbing the spirit and purpose of the paragraphs in which they were found; and that of what was not collatable, and to which no test *ab extra* could be applied, the far larger part bore witness in itself of the same spirit and origin; and that not only by its characteristic features, but by its surpassing excellence, it rendered the chances of its having had any other author than the giant-mind, to whom the biographer ascribes it, small indeed!

Now, from the nature and objects of my pursuits, I have, we will suppose, frequent occasion to refer to one or other of these works; for example, to Rawley’s *Dicta et Facta Francisci de Verulam*. At one time I might refer to the work in some such words as—“Remember what Francis of Verulam said or judged;” or, “If you believe not me, yet believe Lord Bacon.” At another time I might take the running title of the volume, and at another the name of the biographer;—“Turn to your Rawley! *He* will set you right;” or, “*There* you will find a depth which no research will ever exhaust;” or whatever other strong expression my sense of Bacon’s greatness and of the intrinsic worth and the value of the proofs and specimens of that greatness, contained and preserved in that volume, would excite and justify. But let my expressions be as vivid and unqualified as the most sanguine temperament ever inspired, would any man of sense conclude from them that I meant—and meant to make others believe—that not only each and all of these anecdotes, adages, decisions, extracts, incidents, had been dictated, word by word, by Lord Bacon; and that all Rawley’s own observations and inferences, all the connectives and disjunctives, all the recollections of time, place, and circumstance, together with the order and succession of the narrative, were in like manner dictated and revised by the spirit of the deceased Chancellor? The answer will be—must be—No man in his senses! “No man in his senses—in *this* instance; but in that of the Bible it is quite otherwise; for (I take it as an admitted point that) it *is* quite otherwise!”

And here I renounce any advantage I might obtain for my argument by restricting the application of our Lord’s and the Apostle’s words to the Hebrew Canon. I admit the justice—I have long felt the full force—of the remark—“We have all that the occasion allowed.” And if the same awful authority does not apply so directly to the Evangelical and Apostolical writings as to the Hebrew Canon, yet the

analogy of faith justifies the transfer. If the doctrine be less decisively Scriptural in its application to the New Testament or the Christian Canon, the temptation to doubt it is likewise less. So at least we are led to infer; since in point of fact it is the apparent or imagined contrast, the diversity of spirit which sundry individuals have believed themselves to find in the Old Testament and in the Gospel, that has given occasion to the doubt;—and, in the heart of thousands who yield a faith of acquiescence to the contrary, and find rest in their humility—supplies fuel to a fearful wish that it were permitted to make a distinction.

But, lastly, you object that—even granting that no coercive, positive reasons for the belief—no direct and not inferred assertions—of the plenary inspiration of the Old and New Testament, in the generally received import of the term, could be adduced, yet—in behalf of a doctrine so catholic, and during so long a succession of ages affirmed and acted on by Jew and Christian, Greek, Romish, and Protestant, you need no other answer than:—“Tell me, first, why it should not be received!

Why should I not believe the Scriptures throughout dictated, in word and thought, by an infallible Intelligence?” I admit the fairness of the retort; and eagerly and earnestly do I answer: For every reason that makes me prize and revere these Scriptures;—prize them, love them, revere them, beyond all other books! *Why* should I not? Because the doctrine in question petrifies at once the whole body of Holy Writ with all its harmonies and symmetrical gradations—the flexile and the rigid—the supporting hard and the clothing soft—the blood *which is the life*—the intelligencing nerves, and the rudely woven, but soft and springy, cellular substance, in which all are imbedded and lightly bound together. This breathing organism, this glorious *panharmonicon* which I had seen stand on its feet as a man, and with a man’s voice given to it, the doctrine in question turns at once into a colossal Memnon’s head, a hollow passage for a voice, a voice that mocks the voices of many men, and speaks in their names, and yet is but one voice, and the same; and no man uttered it, and never in a human heart was it conceived. *Why* should I not?—Because the doctrine evacuates of all sense and efficacy the sure and constant tradition, that all the several books bound up together in our precious family Bible were composed in different and widely-distant ages, under the greatest diversity of circumstances, and degrees of light and information, and yet that the composers, whether as uttering or as recording what was uttered and what was done, were all actuated by a pure and holy Spirit, one and the same—(for is there any spirit pure and holy, and yet not proceeding from God—and yet not proceeding in and with the Holy Spirit?)—one Spirit, working diversely, now awakening strength, and now glorifying itself in weakness, now giving power and direction to knowledge, and now taking away the sting from error! Ere the summer and the months of ripening had arrived for the heart of the race; while the whole sap of the tree was crude, and each and every fruit lived in the harsh and bitter principle; even then this Spirit withdrew its chosen ministers from the false and guilt-making centre of Self.

It converted the wrath into a form and an organ of love, and on the passing storm-cloud impressed the fair rainbow of promise to all generations. Put the lust of Self in the forked lightning, and would it not be a Spirit of Moloch? But God maketh the lightnings His ministers, fire and hail, vapours and stormy winds fulfilling His word.

Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the Lord; curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof—sang Deborah. Was it that she called to mind any personal wrongs—rapine or insult—that she or the house of Lapidoth had received from Jabin or Sisera? No; she had dwelt under her palm tree in the depth of the mountain. But she was a *mother in Israel*; and with a mother’s heart, and with the vehemency of a mother’s and a patriot’s love, she had shot the light of love from her eyes, and poured the blessings of love from her lips, on the people that had *jeopardied their lives unto the death* against the oppressors; and the bitterness, awakened and borne aloft by the same love, she precipitated in curses on the selfish and coward recreants who *came not to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord, against the mighty*. As long as I have the image of Deborah before my eyes, and while I throw myself back into the age, country, circumstances, of this Hebrew Bonduca in the not yet tamed chaos of the spiritual creation;—as long as I contemplate the impassioned, high-souled, heroic woman in all

the prominence and individuality of will and character,—I feel as if I were among the first ferments of the great affections—the proplastic waves of the microcosmic chaos, swelling up against—and yet towards—the outspread wings of the dove that lies brooding on the troubled waters. So long all is well,—all replete with instruction and example. In the fierce and inordinate I am made to know and be grateful for the clearer and purer radiance which shines on a Christian's paths, neither blunted by the preparatory veil, nor crimsoned in its struggle through the all-enwrapping mist of the world's ignorance: whilst in the self-oblivion of these heroes of the Old Testament, their elevation above all low and individual interests,—above all, in the entire and vehement devotion of their total being to the service of their divine Master, I find a lesson of humility, a ground of humiliation, and a shaming, yet rousing, example of faith and fealty. But let me once be persuaded that all these heart-awakening utterances of human hearts—of men of like faculties and passions with myself, mourning, rejoicing, suffering, triumphing—are but as a *Divina Commedia* of a superhuman—O bear with me, if I say—Ventriloquist;—that the royal harper, to whom I have so often submitted myself as a *many-stringed instrument* for his fire-tipt fingers to traverse, while every several nerve of emotion, passion, thought, that thrids the flesh-and-blood of our common humanity, responded to the touch,—that this *sweet Psalmist of Israel* was himself as mere an instrument as his harp, an *automaton* poet, mourner, and supplicant;—all is gone,—all sympathy, at least, and all example. I listen in awe and fear, but likewise in perplexity and confusion of spirit.

Yet one other instance, and let this be the crucial test of the doctrine. Say that the Book of Job throughout was dictated by an infallible intelligence. Then re-peruse the book, and still, as you proceed, try to apply the tenet; try if you can even attach any sense or semblance of meaning to the speeches which you are reading. What! were the hollow truisms, the unsufficing half-truths, the false assumptions and malignant insinuations of the supercilious bigots, who corruptly defended the truth:—were the impressive facts, the piercing outcries, the pathetic appeals, and the close and powerful reasoning with which the poor sufferer—smarting at once from his wounds, and from the oil of vitriol which the orthodox *liars for God* were dropping into them—impatiently, but uprightly and holily, controverted this truth, while in will and in spirit he clung to it;—were both dictated by an infallible intelligence?—Alas! if I may judge from the manner in which both indiscriminately are recited, quoted, appealed to, preached upon by the *routiniers* of desk and pulpit, I cannot doubt that they think so—or rather, without thinking, take for granted that so they are to think;—the more readily, perhaps, because the so thinking supersedes the necessity of all afterthought.

Farewell.

LETTER IV

My Dear Friend,

You reply to the conclusion of my Letter: “What have we to do with *routiniers*? *Quid mihi cum homunculis putata putide reputantibus*? Let nothings count for nothing, and the dead bury the dead! Who but such ever understood the tenet in this sense?”

In what sense then, I rejoin, do others understand it? If, with exception of the passages already excepted, namely, the recorded words of God—concerning which no Christian can have doubt or scruple,—the tenet in this sense be inapplicable to the Scripture, destructive of its noblest purposes, and contradictory to its own express declarations,—again and again I ask:—What am I to substitute?

What other sense is conceivable that does not destroy the doctrine which it professes to interpret—that does not convert it into its own negative? As if a geometrician should name a sugar-loaf an ellipse, adding—“By which term I here mean a cone;”—and then justify the misnomer on the pretext that the ellipse is among the conic sections! And yet—notwithstanding the repugnancy of the doctrine, in its unqualified sense, to Scripture, Reason, and Common Sense theoretically, while to all practical uses it is intractable, unmalleable, and altogether unprofitable—notwithstanding its irrationality, and in the face of your expostulation, grounded on the palpableness of its irrationality,—I must still avow my belief that, however fittingly and unsteadily, as through a mist, it *is* the doctrine which the generality of our popular divines receive as orthodox, and this the sense which they attach to the words.

For on what other ground can I account for the whimsical *subintelligitur*s of our numerous harmonists—for the curiously inferred facts, the inventive circumstantial detail, the complemental and supplemental history which, in the utter silence of all historians and absence of all historical documents, they bring to light by mere force of logic? And all to do away some half score apparent discrepancies in the chronicles and memoirs of the Old and New Testaments—discrepancies so analogous to what is found in all other narratives of the same story by several narrators—so analogous to what is found in all other known and trusted histories by contemporary historians, when they are collated with each other (nay, not seldom when either historian is compared with himself), as to form in the eyes of all competent judges a characteristic mark of the genuineness, independency, and (if I may apply the word to a book), the veraciousness of each several document; a mark, the absence of which would warrant a suspicion of collusion, invention, or at best of servile transcription; discrepancies so trifling in circumstance and import, that, although in some instances it is highly probable, and in all instances, perhaps, possible that they are only apparent and reconcilable, no wise man would care a straw whether they were real or apparent, reconciled or left in harmless and friendly variance. What, I ask, could have induced learned and intelligent divines to adopt or sanction subterfuges, which neutralising the ordinary *criteria* of full or defective evidence in historical documents, would, taken as a general rule, render all collation and cross-examination of written records ineffective, and obliterate the main character by which authentic histories are distinguished from those traditional tales, which each successive reporter enlarges and fashions to his own fancy and purpose, and every different edition of which more or less contradicts the other? Allow me to create chasms *ad libitum*, and *ad libitum* to fill them up with imagined facts and incidents, and I would almost undertake to harmonise Falstaff’s account of the rogues in buckram into a coherent and consistent narrative. What, I say, could have tempted grave and pious men thus to disturb the foundation of the Temple, in order to repair a petty breach or rat-hole in the wall, or fasten a loose stone or two in the outer court, if not an assumed necessity arising out of the peculiar character of Bible history?

The substance of the syllogism, by which their procedure was justified to their own minds, can be no other than this. That, without which two assertions—both of which *must* be alike true and correct—would contradict each other, and consequently be, one or both, false or incorrect, must itself be true. But every word and syllable existing in the original text of the Canonical Books, from the

Cherethi and *Phelethi* of David to the name in the copy of a family register, the site of a town, or the course of a river, were dictated to the sacred *amanuensis* by an infallible intelligence. Here there can be neither more nor less. Important or unimportant gives no ground of difference; and the number of the writers as little. The secretaries may have been many—the historian was one and the same, and he infallible. This is the *minor* of the syllogism, and if it could be proved, the conclusion would be at least plausible; and there would be but one objection to the procedure, namely, its uselessness. For if it had been proved already, what need of proving it over again, and by means—the removal, namely, of apparent contradictions—which the infallible Author did not think good to employ? But if it have not been proved, what becomes of the argument which derives its whole force and legitimacy from the assumption?

In fact, it is clear that the harmonists and their admirers held and understood the doctrine literally. And must not that divine likewise have so understood it, who, in answer to a question concerning the transcendent blessedness of Jael, and the righteousness of the act, in which she inhospitably, treacherously, perfidiously murdered sleep, the confiding sleep, closed the controversy by observing that he wanted no better morality than that of the Bible, and no other proof of an action's being praiseworthy than that the Bible had declared it worthy to be praised?—an observation, as applied in this instance, so slanderous to the morality and moral spirit of the Bible as to be inexplicable, except as a consequence of the doctrine in dispute. But let a man be once fully persuaded that there is no difference between the two positions: “The Bible contains the religion revealed by God,” and “Whatever is contained in the Bible is religion, and was revealed by God,” and that whatever can be said of the Bible, collectively taken, may and must be said of each and every sentence of the Bible, taken for and by itself, and I no longer wonder at these paradoxes. I only object to the inconsistency of those who profess the same belief, and yet affect to look down with a contemptuous or compassionate smile on John Wesley for rejecting the Copernican system as incompatible therewith; or who exclaim “Wonderful!” when they hear that Sir Matthew Hale sent a crazy old woman to the gallows in honour of the Witch of Endor. In the latter instance it might, I admit, have been an erroneous (though even at this day the all but universally received) interpretation of the word, which we have rendered by *witch*; but I challenge these divines and their adherents to establish the compatibility of a belief in the modern astronomy and natural philosophy with their and Wesley's doctrine respecting the inspired Scriptures, without reducing the doctrine itself to a plaything of wax; or rather to a half-inflated bladder, which, when the contents are rarefied in the heat of rhetorical generalities, swells out round, and without a crease or wrinkle; but bring it into the cool temperature of particulars, and you may press, and as it were except, what part you like—so it be but one part at a time—between your thumb and finger.

Now, I pray you, which is the more honest, nay, which the more reverential proceeding—to play at fast and loose in this way, or to say at once, “See here, in these several writings one and the same Holy Spirit, now sanctifying a chosen vessel, and fitting it for the reception of heavenly truths proceeding immediately from the mouth of God, and elsewhere working in frail and fallible men like ourselves, and like ourselves instructed by God's word and laws?” The first Christian martyr had the form and features of an ordinary man, nor are we taught to believe that these features were miraculously transfigured into superhuman symmetry; but *he being filled with the Holy Ghost, they that looked steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel*. Even so has it ever been, and so it ever will be with all who with humble hearts and a rightly disposed spirit scan the sacred volume. And they who read it with *an evil heart of unbelief* and an alien spirit, what boots for them the assertion that every sentence was miraculously communicated to the nominal author by God himself? Will it not rather present additional temptations to the unhappy scoffers, and furnish them with a pretext of self-justification?

When, in my third letter, I first echoed the question “Why should I not?” the answers came crowding on my mind. I am well content, however, to have merely suggested the main points, in proof

of the positive harm which, both historically and spiritually, our religion sustains from this doctrine.

Of minor importance, yet not to be overlooked, are the forced and fantastic interpretations, the arbitrary allegories and mystic expansions of proper names, to which this indiscriminate Bibliolatry furnished fuel, spark, and wind. A still greater evil, and less attributable to the visionary humour and weak judgment of the individual expositors, is the literal rendering of Scripture in passages, which the number and variety of images employed in different places to express one and the same verity, plainly mark out for figurative. And lastly, add to all these the strange—in all other writings unexampled—practice of bringing together into logical dependency detached sentences from books composed at the distance of centuries, nay, sometimes a *millennium* from each other, under different dispensations, and for different objects. Accommodations of elder Scriptural phrases—that favourite ornament and garnish of Jewish eloquence; incidental allusions to popular notions, traditions, apologues (for example, the dispute between the Devil and the archangel Michael about the body of Moses, Jude 9); fancies and anachronisms imported from the synagogue of Alexandria into Palestine, by or together with the Septuagint version, and applied as mere *argumenta ad homines* (for example, the delivery of the Law by the disposition of angels, Acts vii. 53, Gal. iii. 19, Heb. ii. 2),—these, detached from their context, and, contrary to the intention of the sacred writer, first raised into independent *theses*, and then brought together to produce or sanction some new *credendum* for which neither separately could have furnished a pretence! By this strange mosaic, Scripture texts have been worked up into passable likenesses of purgatory, Popery, the Inquisition, and other monstrous abuses. But would you have a Protestant instance of the superstitious use of Scripture arising out of this dogma? Passing by the Cabbala of the Hutchinsonian School as the dotage of a few weak-minded individuals, I refer you to Bishop Hacket's sermons on the Incarnation. And if you have read the same author's life of Archbishop Williams, and have seen and felt (as every reader of this latter work must see and feel) his talent, learning, acuteness, and robust good sense, you will have no difficulty in determining the quality and character of a dogma which could engraft such fruits on such a tree.

It will perhaps appear a paradox if, after all these reasons, I should avow that they weigh less in my mind against the doctrine, than the motives usually assigned for maintaining and enjoining it.

Such, for instance, are the arguments drawn from the anticipated loss and damage that would result from its abandonment; as that it would deprive the Christian world of its only infallible arbiter in questions of faith and duty, suppress the only common and inappellable tribunal; that the Bible is the only religious bond of union and ground of unity among Protestants and the like. For the confutation of this whole reasoning, it might be sufficient to ask: Has it produced these effects? Would not the contrary statement be nearer to the fact? What did the Churches of the first four centuries hold on this point? To what did they attribute the rise and multiplication of heresies? Can any learned and candid Protestant affirm that there existed and exists no ground for the charges of Bossuet and other eminent Romish divines? It is no easy matter to know how to handle a party maxim, so framed, that with the exception of a single word, it expresses an important truth, but which by means of that word is made to convey a most dangerous error.

The Bible is the appointed conservatory, an indispensable criterion, and a continual source and support of true belief. But that the Bible is the sole source; that it not only contains, but constitutes, the Christian Religion; that it is, in short, a Creed, consisting wholly of articles of Faith; that consequently we need no rule, help, or guide, spiritual or historical, to teach us what parts are and what are not articles of Faith—all being such—and the difference between the Bible and the Creed being this, that the clauses of the latter are all unconditionally necessary to salvation, but those of the former conditionally so, that is, as soon as the words are known to exist in any one of the canonical books; and that, under this limitation, the belief is of the same necessity in both, and not at all affected by the greater or lesser importance of the matter to be believed;—this scheme differs widely from the preceding, though its adherents often make use of the same words in expressing their belief. And this latter scheme, I assert, was brought into currency by and in favour of those by whom the operation

of grace, the aids of the Spirit, the necessity of regeneration, the corruption of our nature, in short, all the peculiar and spiritual mysteries of the Gospel were explained and diluted away.

And how have these men treated this very Bible? I, who indeed prize and reverence this sacred library, as of all outward means and conservatives of Christian faith and practice the surest and the most reflective of the inward Word; I, who hold that the Bible contains the religion of Christians, but who dare not say that whatever is contained in the Bible is the Christian religion, and who shrink from all question respecting the comparative worth and efficacy of the written Word as weighed against the preaching of the Gospel, the discipline of the Churches, the continued succession of the Ministry, and the communion of Saints, lest by comparing them I should seem to detach them; I tremble at the processes which the Grotian divines without scruple carry on in their treatment of the sacred writers, as soon as any texts declaring the peculiar tenets of our Faith are cited against them—even tenets and mysteries which the believer at his baptism receives as the title-writ and bosom-roll of his adoption; and which, according to my scheme, every Christian born in Church-membership ought to bring with him to the study of the sacred Scriptures as the master-key of interpretation. Whatever the doctrine of infallible dictation may be in itself, in *their* hands it is to the last degree nugatory, and to be paralleled only by the Romish tenet of Infallibility—in the existence of which all agree, but where, and in whom, it exists *stat adhuc sub lite*. Every sentence found in a canonical Book, rightly interpreted, contains the *dictum* of an infallible Mind; but what the right interpretation is—or whether the very words now extant are corrupt or genuine—must be determined by the industry and understanding of fallible, and alas! more or less prejudiced theologians.

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