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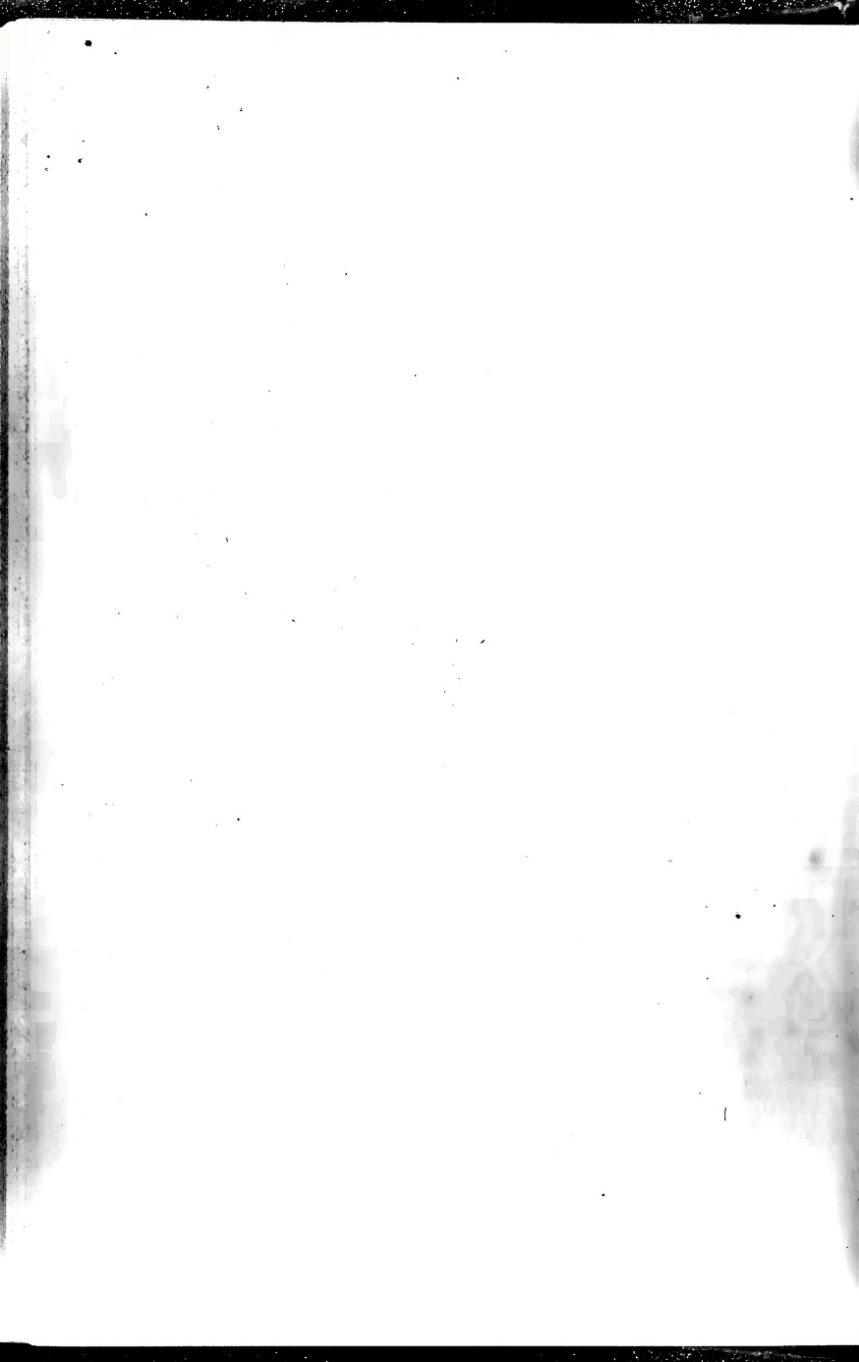
A WOMAN'S LETTER.



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A WOMAN'S LETTER.

MY DEAR FRIEND,—You have expressed much surprise, and no little sorrow, at the opinions held by me on the subject of Bible inspiration, opinions which, however, are fast gaining ground amongst educated women in the present day.

Will you allow me briefly to lay before you some of the reasons which have induced me to form those opinions, contrary as they are to the teaching and training on such subjects, received in early youth. Perhaps I may at least be able to convince you that they are not the wild and impious theories that many suppose them to be, but the natural result of honest, unprejudiced, and impartial investigation.

There is an idea very prevalent, though seldom plainly stated,—that it is unbecoming in a woman to think for herself at all, except on such subjects as may directly affect her household interests. Politics, science, art, and, above all, religion, are held to be matters beyond her sphere, and her ideas (if she have any) on these subjects are to be received without question from her nearest male relatives; or, failing these, from the man who gains the greatest influence over her. Where this view is not so clearly expressed, it still appears under a more veiled form in the axioms we daily hear, that “men may reason, women must trust;”—that “faith is woman’s privilege,” and others of a similar character. Now it is quite clear that to a certain extent this is true. Without an education

far superior to that she generally receives, a woman cannot verify for herself the truth of gravitation, nor investigate the theories of light and sound. Neither can she form an opinion on the currency, or on free trade, without a political education such as she seldom enjoys. In such matters she must take her views from those about her best qualified to judge, and refrain from obtruding her second-hand ideas on those who are able to form an independent judgment. It is clear, however, that in this case, the faith or reliance on others that she is obliged to exercise, is the result of a defect in her mental training, and adds in no way to her grace or virtue. She would be nobler, wiser, and happier, were she able to come to a reasonable conclusion, thinking out the subject for herself, rather than taking the bare word of others who are themselves liable to error. If this be true in science or art, it is doubly so in religion. Here none can presume to claim superior knowledge or more unerring judgment. The Book which is received as the sole text-book of religion, is open to all, and the most learned divines agree that its teaching is so plain that "a wayfaring man, though a fool, shall not err therein." You hold the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible, but is such a doctrine tenable if none but the wise and learned can comprehend its pages? Or of what use would be a revelation from God to man if none but scholars were entitled to search out its meaning? You cannot really mean that the command "Search the Scriptures" only applies to University men in Holy Orders, and that none but these, or persons of equal learning, have any right to investigate the truth for themselves! There is a strange inconsistency in checking the spirit of enquiry amongst educated women in England, whilst encouraging it amongst ignorant savages abroad. *Here* you urge the principle that safety lies in accepting without question, or as it is called,—in simple faith,—whatever has been taught us in infancy, *there* you

press on every hearer the duty of investigating the nature of his idols, and of doubting the assertions and pretensions of his priests. Nay, nearer home, by what right can you send missionaries to sow doubt in the hearts of your Roman Catholic brethren, if you yourself hold that doubt, and the spirit of enquiry that leads to doubt, is a deadly sin? If "simple faith" in her early teaching be the proper limit to woman's religious thought, then, to be consistent, we must leave undisturbed the belief of a Hindoo widow in the efficacy of Suttee, nor seek to interfere with the religious training of Harem or Zenana. Still less can we assume the right to arouse a spirit of enquiry in those who have been taught from infancy to believe in doctrines which, though more nearly resembling our own, we still hold to be full of fatal error. The Reformation would have been impossible had its leaders never shaken off the yoke of "simple faith," and fairly measured their strength against their teachers. Go further back, and Christianity itself would never have arisen had its Founder or his apostles shrunk from the responsibility of shaking off the trammels of early religious training. Remember that we are as responsible for our own belief, as for our own conduct,—by these we shall be judged, and neither the faith nor the life of others can excuse or justify our own. It cannot surely be presumptuous to exercise the reason God has given us, in the examination of doctrines we have hitherto received with a faith which, if applied to the commonest worldly transaction, would be called by some less attractive name.

There is an objection sometimes made to the spirit of religious enquiry amongst women, a purely sentimental one, and almost unworthy of serious notice. Still it influences many. I may call it the æsthetical objection. There is an idea that religious doubt is unbecoming, ungraceful, and contrary to all established poetic con-

ceptions of female character, that were it to supplant faith, both painters and poets would lose their favourite themes, and that on the whole,—as a lady once expressed herself to me,—“men wouldn't like it.” I will fain hope that men are not responsible for half the foolish sentiments attributed to them, and that this, amongst others, is a false and distorted idea of their real opinion. Of one thing I am sure,—that no honest man will ever do otherwise than respect honest enquiry,—and that a very small exercise of courage will enable the most timid of women to face the censure of those whose only conception of womanly grace is drawn from the imaginative works of the artist. The true beauty of woman's character is to be found rather in a pure, simple honest-hearted search for truth, than in any number of poems and pictures.

There is another objection which meets every one whose mind is first aroused to religious enquiry. It is this! “Am I prepared to face the possible consequences of free investigation?” “Whither will it lead me?” “Would it not be wiser not to embark on a voyage whose end I cannot foresee?” To this the answer is plain. Our duty is simply to ascertain the truth as it *is* without bias as to what we may *wish* it to be. We must not grumble, if, in our search for truth, we find her of different aspect from what we had imagined or hoped, and God will most surely not hold us responsible for what we may discover during our honest, single-hearted enquiry, though He may justly condemn us for neglecting to investigate those subjects which are at the root of our spiritual life. I grant that the shock may be rude when we find our preconceived ideas to have no solid foundation; when the beliefs and fancies, and imaginations which have grown with our growth, prove hollow and insecure, but painful as it may be, we are safer, wiser, more near to God than when a mist of falsehood hung between us and Him.

How many poetic fancies of our childhood have been dispelled by the more accurate knowledge of later years! And yet do we not feel that we are the gainers by our loss? The child who thinks the rainbow a path for angels to tread, may grieve to find his dream a delusion, but does not his maturer knowledge of the cause of that glorious arch, show him far more clearly the wisdom and the power of God than any such poetic fancy could do? If you ask me what will supply the place of old beliefs and cherished creeds should you be compelled to relinquish these, I can offer you but one substitute—but that an all-sufficing one; viz:—the consciousness that you have earnestly and honestly sought for truth, and that God will give His blessing on the search.

And now, having touched upon some of the difficulties thrown in the way of every woman who wishes to analyse the religious teaching she has received, I will frankly tell you what are the chief conclusions at which I have arrived during my examination. The key-note to all such religious teaching, the stand-point from which all doctrinal points are decided, is the Inspiration of the Bible. What does the word mean? Teachers interpret it variously; some maintaining that every phrase and expression was directly dictated by God to the authors of the various books, others that He put the general idea, as it were, into their minds, leaving them to express it as they pleased, with their own glosses, and often with their own errors; while a third party consider that part of the scriptures was dictated by God to the writers, and part is simply the expression of their own sentiments.

How this Inspiration, or mental dictation, is performed, or by what means we can recognise its operation, is never explained. Let me now point out to you why these three views of the Inspiration of the Bible appear to me alike untenable. That the God of the universe should have directly dictated every

word and line of the whole scriptures is so preposterous an idea that it seems impossible for any reasonable being to hold it. Can we conceive the Creator of all things, the Spirit whom we must worship in the spirit, dictating from His throne on high pages upon pages of frivolous directions about the ceremonial of worship, the vestments of priests, the adornment of the tabernacle, without one precept, one promise, for the guidance or comfort of men's souls? Is it possible that taches of gold, almonds, and knops, spoons and snuffers, can be in His eyes subjects worthy of being specially dictated in wearisome detail, while the deeper matters of righteousness are passed over? Can we conceive an unerring and omniscient Being dictating errors in facts, errors in numbers, errors in physical science, or more incredible still, commanding the practice of cruel, revengeful and immoral laws, which the Founder of Christianity, far from recognising as divinely inspired, dismisses from his notice with the contemptuous phrase, "It hath been said by them of old time?" Besides, if every line of the Bible is alike inspired by God, there can be no degrees or gradations in that inspiration, every precept must be of equal weight, alike perfect as becomes His word, and true as He Himself is true. We have no right to press upon one command which pleases our moral sense, and to pass over another which may offend it. I confess I can not believe that God ever inspired the command that a man who beats his man-servant or maid-servant to death, provided the victim does not die within forty-eight hours, shall go unpunished, (Ex. xxi. 20, 21,) nor that a wilful boy shall be "stoned with stones that he die," (Deut. xxi. 18-21,) for the faults probably produced by the over indulgence of his parents. Take the law as written in the Pentateuch, and see whether your mind does not recoil from many of its precepts. Legislation for slavery, legislation for polygamy, cruel enactments against the

impossible crime of witchcraft, superstitious trial by ordeal, these we find in its pages, and if the Bible be the word of a God who cannot change, we dare not pass these passages by, as being obsolete, as being ephemeral utterances of no permanent value. If you say that these unjust and vindictive laws were given by God to the Jews in the infancy of their civilisation, what is it you lay to His charge, but this : that He inspired degrading precepts and enactments because the people to whom He spoke were degraded !

I will not ask you how I am to believe that the Creator of all things knew so little about his own creations as to suppose that the sun moved, or that the shadow on the dial could move backwards without the destruction of our planet and the convulsion of our system. Neither will I enquire whether He whose lesser works are so marvellous, could have inspired a writer with the idea that rabbits and hares chew the cud. Nothing but a determination to shut our eyes to clear plain fact, will enable us to avoid the impossibility of reconciling such statements with the doctrine of verbal inspiration.

But perhaps you hold that the general idea only was inspired by God, and that the writers were left to express this idea in their own manner and with their own interpretation. Would this be a revelation at all ? What should we think of the report of a speech in the House of Commons, by which the reporter should have expressed his own ideas about what Mr Gladstone or Mr Disraeli wished to say, introducing his own glosses into the text, and mixing up his own mistakes as to names, dates, and figures, with the real facts given by the speaker ? Would not either of these orators indignantly repudiate such a version of his speech ? And yet this is what such a view of Bible inspiration results in. Far better that God should never have spoken, than that He should speak merely to be mis-interpreted. It is difficult to see of

what use would be the pure spring of divine truth, if it flowed through so foul and corrupt a channel that its waters, ere they reached us, were tainted by the conduit. Clearly, from this stand-point, you can never appeal to the Bible as to an infallible authority ; for if the writers have misconstrued the word of God in one place, there can be no security against their having done so in another.

The third opinion as to the inspiration of the Bible held by some is, that part of the volume is a purely human production, and part God's own dictation. Thus they consider the minute directions for the temple service to have been the work of a Jewish legislator, while they accept the ten commandments, and other moral precepts as the word of God himself. The chapters of useless genealogies and lists of names they attribute to the uninspired mind of the writer, while those passages which treat of higher themes are supposed to have divine authority. They do not, however, explain how the difference can be distinguished, when trivial and frivolous matters are mingled with those of greater importance ; and the same objection applies to this, as to the preceding view of inspiration, viz : that it stultifies the very purpose of a revelation. A book which is partly composed of human remarks and observations, and partly of the words of a supreme Being,—the whole appearing in one form—clothed with the same authority, and with nothing to indicate the varying value of its contents, would be indeed, a fatal gift from God to man. Surely He cannot be imagined to make a special revelation of His will—and then render it unintelligible by allowing it to be mingled with a mass of purely human inventions ! If a revelation were needed to teach us His will, then most certainly it would have been given to us in plain terms, and we should not have been left to sift the wheat from the chaff,—relying on our intuitive sense of right alone to decide which we should retain and which cast away.

I have now briefly told you some of the reasons which prevent me from accepting the Bible as a Divinely inspired book.

I have of course, only glanced at the considerations which weigh most in my own mind, and even though you should think them valueless, still you may perhaps grant that they deserve at least examination.

As a storehouse of Jewish learning, as a record of the sublime truth of monotheism,—a truth held firmly amidst opposing influences by a despised people—as a collection of noble precepts and struggling aspirations, the Bible remains to me, though my better nature revolts from the idea that the falsehood, cruelty, and immorality contained in its pages can be the inspired word of Him who is truth and mercy and purity. It is often assumed that without the Bible, we should be unable to form for ourselves any just estimate of right and wrong, and that our moral perceptions would become distorted without constant reference to the precepts contained in its pages. But is this so? Is not this mistaking its power? Surely it is our innate moral feeling which enables us to admire the beautiful and reject the base in the Bible, and not the Bible itself which confers this power of discrimination. It cannot be the Bible alone which teaches us the true knowledge of God, if our own unaided views of Him are higher and holier than many of those contained in its pages. When we find this to be the case, we are certainly justified in preferring those which do Him most honour, to those which claim to be divinely inspired. Again, when two passages in Scripture directly contradict each other, we must, from our own conception of God, decide which is most likely to be true, which most likely to be His will. But this cannot be called an infallible revelation, an inspired Bible, if private judgment must be trusted to decide on its merits.

How one inspired dogma can be totally opposed to

another inspired dogma, people do not trouble themselves to enquire, but are content to receive each, separately and by turns without question. Thus they will at one time speak of the many beautiful passages which show us one, true, divine Being, sharing His glory with none,—and at another time they dwell on verses which show a second, and even a third Divinity dividing the empire and sharing His attributes. From one passage they teach that God is love, ready to forgive, waiting to pardon,—from another they teach that His pleasure is to create men who are to suffer agonizing torture for ever. Here is set forth that the highest reward for virtue, is length of days and honour, and prosperity,—there—that we must despise the glory of this world, and esteem happy the poor and the sorrowful.

Sects have thus arisen, professing the most opposite doctrines, each practising rites and ceremonies esteemed abomination by others, yet all basing their creed on some portion of the writings they hold to be infallible. Now I cannot really suppose that God said at one time what He contradicted at another, neither can I conceive the irreverent idea which some people hold, that He is capable of having “repeated,”—altered His plan,—*improved* His doctrine as it were, from the rough, rudimentary teaching of early times, to the later, purer doctrine of the Gospels. Surely the words “development,” “improvement,” “progress,” so often used by preachers when dwelling on the superiority of *New* to *Old* Testament teaching,—imply some previous error and imperfection. But how without blasphemy, can they attribute this imperfect, this erroneous teaching to the direct word and inspiration of a Being who cannot err? Would it not be more honest to acknowledge that where two passages in the Bible give irreconcilable views of God's will, His word, or His works,—they cannot both be infallible? Most certainly it would,—but this admission cannot be made, if,—at all

hazards,—at any sacrifice of truth,—the claim for the infallibility must be maintained ;—for if one passage be proved false, in a book declared to be inspired by God,—false in doctrine, or false in facts,—then that passage invalidates the claim of such a book to be the pure and unerring exponent of His will. I believe there are, not one only, but hundreds of passages in the Bible, where even those unlearned in Hebrew or Greek may discover for themselves discrepancies and errors which would prevent any unprejudiced mind from accepting it as an authority which admits of neither doubt nor appeal ; and yet those who hold it to be their sacred duty to study its pages,—to become familiar with its most trivial expressions, and to extract from them a meaning they were never meant to bear,—resolutely close their eyes, and refuse to see the truth because it is not such as they desire it. All I would urge is, the duty of fulfilling in honesty and simplicity, the precept “Search the Scriptures.” This is not done by perusing a few verses daily as a kind of talisman to guard us from physical or moral evil, nor by reading its pages in a spirit of blind assent to whatever construction we may have been taught to put on them. To examine closely, to analyse carefully, to sift and separate the good grain from the bad, to enquire on what reasonable evidence our belief is grounded,—this is the duty of every humble follower of the command.

Perhaps you will ask me on what are we to frame our lives if we should no longer be able to accept the Bible as infallibly true, or its teaching as divinely inspired ; what moral guide will remain, if this is not a lamp sent from Heaven expressly to light our path.

Enough remains to be our guide and our comfort,—its precepts none the less admirable, its promises none the less consoling, The eternal truths of true religion are still there, the purer for being freed from the tangled weeds that choked them,—and we are able to

gather in the sound and wholesome wheat, without being forced to garner with it the tares also. Were the scriptures themselves to be destroyed to-morrow, our foundation would still be firm. Faith in a God, whose mercy, and truth, and justice, we see in all His works, love and adoration of His perfection, a sincere desire to do His will by ministering as far as lies in our power to the wants of our fellow-creatures, and lastly a humble hope of a better life beyond the grave, these would remain to us, a heritage for ever.

I have now very briefly stated some of my principal reasons for holding opinions on Bible inspiration differing widely from those taught and held by most of those with whom I am thrown in contact,—I fear that my task has been too badly performed to convey to you any similar convictions, but I shall be contented if you acknowledge that they are not the result of any presumptuous spirit, but the honest conclusions arrived at in a course of humble enquiry.

I remain,

Sincerely yours.