

THE INSPIRATION OF AUTOGRAPHS

by GEORGE I. MAVRODES

THE subject which Professor Mavrodes examines in the following pages has come under fresh scrutiny in recent times, especially in the United States, where there has been considerable use of the term "autographs" in connexion with biblical inspiration. Since Dr. Machen and others who have used this term in a context like that of the quotation on p. 20 knew very well that not all biblical books had autographs in the stricter sense, it is probable that they used the term with wider connotation. That Tertius wrote down the Epistle to the Romans, while Paul was its author, is something that they would have readily acknowledged; they might well have argued that Tertius was—not, indeed, "inspired" (to use the word indicated on pp. 23 and 29)—but providentially preserved from error in his task of copying down at Paul's dictation, so that the resultant text was as much "inspired scripture" as if Paul had written it himself. Biblical inspiration, in fact, is a quality that is lost neither in transmission nor in translation; those who appeal to the wording as originally given do so in order to acquit the authors of responsibility for the mistakes of copyists or translators. One reflection among others provoked by Professor Mavrodes' study is that someone ought to pay more attention than has yet been paid to the bearing of the use of amanuenses on the doctrine of inspiration.

A NUMBER of recent and contemporary theologians who take a "high" view of the doctrine of Biblical inspiration restrict that doctrine very severely.¹ They restrict it, of course, to the Biblical books, but in addition they restrict it to certain manuscripts of those books, manuscripts which they generally call the "autographs" or "original manuscripts".² This restriction, however,

¹ Describing their view as "high" is not very illuminating, but I know of no short and generally accepted characterization of it. The main outlines of their position are, perhaps, well enough identified by reference to some widely known representatives of it, as in n. 2 below.

² Some representative supporters of this restriction are W. H. Griffith Thomas, "Inspiration", *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 118, No. 469 (Jan.-March, 1961), p. 43; James M. Gray, "The Inspiration of the Bible," in *The Fundamentals* (Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1917), Vol. 2, p. 12; J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian Faith in the Modern World* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1947; copyright 1936), pp. 38-39; Archibald Alexander Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949; first published 1860), p. 66; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), Vol. I, p. 71; Loraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), p. 14; Edward J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), p. 55.

appears to engender a number of perplexing *internal* problems, i.e., problems concerned with the meaning or consistency of the doctrine itself, or of its coherence with the theological system in which it is embedded. For example, so far as I know, all of these writers assume, without any discussion whatever, that there was an autograph for each Biblical book. This assumption, indeed, appears to be essential to the development and use of the doctrine. But it is by no means obvious that this assumption is true, *in the required sense of "autograph"*. And if it is not true, then disturbing and unlooked-for consequences follow immediately.

Alternatively, someone might suggest that it is not clear what the required sense is. But to the extent that we do not know what this sense is, we do not understand the doctrine of which it forms a part, and we therefore may not be able to tell whether the use which one theologian or another makes of that doctrine is justified. In this paper, I will discuss what seem to be the two most plausible senses of this term, along with some of the logical consequences attaching to their use in this doctrine.³

I

We may begin with a statement by J. Gresham Machen. "Only the autographs of the Biblical books, in other words—the books as they came from the pen of the sacred writers, and not any one of the copies of those autographs which we now possess—were produced with that supernatural impulsion and guidance of the Holy Spirit which we call inspiration."⁴ One might at first assume that the phrase, "from the pen of the sacred writers", is a figure of speech. After all, one can speak easily of the body of literature which came from the pen of Ernest Hemingway without committing oneself to the view that Hemingway used a pen or, indeed, that he personally did any physical writing at all. In this figurative sense, "from the pen of the sacred writers" would mean something like "authored by the sacred writers". Unfortunately, this sense does not seem to fit well into Machen's sentence. For he does not intend to distinguish one book from another, but to distinguish one manuscript from another manuscript of that same book. And it is not easy to see how authorship could furnish such a distinction. If we interpret the phrase literally, however, the distinction becomes immediately clear. Machen would be referring to a manu-

³ In order to make clearer the relations of the various alternatives and comments, I will use a hierarchical method of designating sections.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39. Cf. W. H. Griffith Thomas, *ibid.*: "This view of inspiration, of course, refers only to the books as they came from the hands of the original writers."

script which was physically written down by the sacred author, one such that, if we had it, we might perhaps say, "There it is, in Paul's own handwriting!" Because this latter sense makes his sentence clear, I suspect that it is the one which we should attribute to Machen here, as his understanding of the term "autograph".⁵ At any rate, it is one plausible candidate for the meaning of this term, and the one which I wish to discuss first. Without intending any prejudice to other opinions of what Machen may have meant here, I will call it, for convenience, the "Machen-literal" sense.

The most interesting thing about this sense is that, in it, not all books have autographs. Many modern books, for example, do not. They are dictated, and the very first written copy consists of the stenographer's shorthand notes. The first "plain-text" copy is her typed transcription of those notes. And all subsequent written copies are also made by typists or printers, not by the author. There is no manuscript in the author's own handwriting, or pecked out with his own finger on the typewriter, which can be sold to collectors. Furthermore, many Biblical scholars, including many conservatives, believe that some Biblical books had no autographs in the Machen-literal sense. They believe, for example, that Paul, and perhaps some other New Testament authors, dictated at least some of the New Testament books to amanuenses who did the actual physical writing.⁶

As I said, many formulations of the doctrine of inspiration limit it explicitly to autographs. If some Biblical books have no autographs, however, it will follow rigorously that those Biblical books are not inspired! And this may be viewed as a disturbing consequence. A theologian who faces it may, however, choose among several alternatives.

(a) He may accept the consequence. I will not, however, explore the implications of this acceptance. This is because I believe that this alternative will appear so repugnant to theologians within evangelical, conservative, and Reformed circles that we can expect it to arouse little interest there.

(b) He may reject the Machen-literal sense of "autograph" and replace it with some other. I discuss this alternative under section II, below.

(c) He may argue that Biblical scholars are wrong about the

⁵ In addition, the latter sense also appears to be the standard dictionary sense of the term.

⁶ See, for example, Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), pp. 239-240.

use of amanuenses, and that every Biblical book did have an autograph in the Machen-literal sense. It is indeed conceivable that Biblical scholars may be wrong on this point, and theological frameworks are conceivable in which that possible fact may be relevant to this topic. However, I believe that it is not relevant within the theological framework we are here considering. For the majority, at any rate, of the theologians we are considering operate within a framework in which only the Bible is recognized as authoritative within the field of Christian doctrine. Within that context, then, no doctrine should be formulated in such a way that its truth depends upon any extra-Biblical fact or alleged fact. The formal way of putting this is to say that no doctrine should entail a proposition whose truth cannot be established by the teaching of Scripture.

Now, even if it should happen to be true that no Biblical author used an amanuensis, it does not seem plausible to suppose that this fact is taught in the Bible. Consequently, it would seem that if the doctrine is formulated in such a way as to restrict inspiration to autographs, and if it uses the Machen-literal sense of "autograph", it will have to allow the possibility that some Biblical books are not inspired, just because it has to allow the possibility that some Biblical books were originally inscribed by amanuenses. (Of course, if some Scriptural teaching could be found to the effect that no amanuenses were ever involved, then this problem could be overcome.)

(d) He may retain the Machen-literal sense, but alter the doctrine of inspiration to include things other than autographs. Here I think there are two plausible alternatives:

1. He may hold that, in addition to autographs, inspiration also extends, in the case of dictated books, to the first copy made by an amanuensis. This amendment of the doctrine has the same effect as the adoption of one alternative sense of "autograph". I will discuss it under section II, below.
2. He may hold that, in addition to autographs, inspiration also extends, in the case of dictated books, to the oral word of the sacred writer, and no further.⁷

This amendment would have at least one theological consequence of perhaps some importance. Some writers specify that the purpose of inspiration is that of providing a special supernatural divine guarantee that some *written* text of the Biblical book would be

⁷ The restriction in the last phrase is necessary to prevent this alternative from collapsing into the preceding one.

inerrant and infallible.⁸ But if this amendment is adopted, then this can no longer be specified as the general purpose of inspiration. For in some cases inspiration will stop with the oral words, so that the very first written text may incorporate errors introduced by the amanuensis. If it is thought desirable to specify a purpose for inspiration, some other must be found. And if it is thought necessary to guarantee that some *written* text of every Biblical book is infallible, then some other way of securing such a guarantee must be provided.

II

If one rejects the Machen-literal sense of "autograph", some other must be substituted for it. The most plausible candidate for this role appears to be a sense which specifies an autograph as being the *first written copy* of a book, regardless of whether that copy was made by the pen of a sacred writer or by the pen of an amanuensis.

This "first-written" sense, as I shall call it, avoids the main difficulty of the Machen-literal sense. For every book which is ever written will have an autograph in this sense.⁹ It seems to have, however, a peculiar difficulty of its own. It requires that, in the case of books written with the aid of an amanuensis, the inspiration of the author is not sufficient.¹⁰ The amanuensis himself must also be inspired! If he were not inspired, then, regardless of the inspiration of the author, the amanuensis might introduce errors into the first written version which would render it unfit to be characterized as inspired.

This may seem a strange consequence. Its strangeness is not, however, easy to evaluate. I think it seems strange because we are accustomed to associate the notion of inspiration with "holy men of God", "sacred authors", etc. Of the amanuenses who may have been involved, however, we know practically nothing. They may

⁸ In fact, some writers seem to maintain that the *primary* application of the term "inspired" should be to the books, and that it may be applied to their authors only in a derivative sense. S. R. L. Gaussen, *Theopneusty* (John S. Taylor & Co., 1844), pp. 60ff., seems to hold this view. Cf. also James M. Gray, *ibid.*

⁹ It is not, however, necessary that it should have just *one* autograph. It is possible that an author might dictate a book to two or more amanuenses simultaneously, so that several copies should, as it were, be "tied" for first place. I do not know if this would seem troublesome to any of these theologians.

¹⁰ When I apply the term "inspired" to men in this discussion, I intend it to mean "subject to whatever special divine influence is necessary to make their writing inspired."

have been quite ordinary believers whose chief recommendation was that they had good handwriting. In fact, for all we know, some of them may not have been Christians at all.¹¹ And it may seem strange to attribute to them, as well as to apostles and prophets, this extraordinary and supernatural divine influence.

On the other hand, I know of no firm reason for denying the possibility that God might act in this special way upon just such men as these. Perhaps the strangeness with which this notion strikes us is merely that of novelty. Theologians and others may be able to evaluate this possibility in a firmer way than I am able to accomplish here.

There is, however, another aspect of this same consequence which seems even more serious. Once we realize that it requires the inspiration of amanuenses, it is hard to avoid the conviction that the first-written sense is restricted in an apparently arbitrary way for which it will be difficult to find a justification. That is, we can hardly avoid asking why it is only the *first* copy produced by an amanuensis which these theologians count as an autograph, and hence as inspired, rather than, say, the first *two* copies. As long as inspiration was thought of as something which happened only to prophets, apostles, etc., this question may not have seemed so pressing. We might think of them as standing in a special relation to God, called to a position of special authority among the people of God, etc. Consequently, it might seem natural to suppose that something special may happen to them which does not happen to copyists, etc., some special influence of the Holy Spirit which makes their handwritten manuscripts inspired.¹² But if we adopt the first-written sense, then we must admit that the very same thing may happen to an amanuensis, who might possibly be a man of no standing at all in the church. But if that is so, why may it not also happen to the copyist who makes the second copy of that book? And so on down to the *n*th copyist who makes the *n*th copy which we have today? If this is allowed, of course, the restrictiveness which was thought an important part of the doctrine will be lost. But it is not easy to think of a justification for interrupting this

¹¹ It is probable, of course, that apostles would prefer to employ fellow-believers as amanuenses. However, this may not always have been convenient, or even possible.

¹² Conservative theological writers appear almost uniformly to take this assumption for granted in their writings. They refer continuously to the inspiration of apostles, prophets, holy men, etc., but not to that of scribes, amanuenses, copyists, etc. It seems very likely that this assumption, which appears to be quite unjustified (unless the Machen-literal sense is adopted), is responsible for their failure to discuss the apparently arbitrary and unsupported nature of the restriction.

sequence at any particular point rather than at some other. Here again, however, a theologian may consider various alternatives.

(a) He might bring forward some *Biblical* teaching to support his use of the first-written sense of "autograph" in his formulation of this doctrine. That is, he might present some Biblical teaching to the effect that, in the case of books written with the aid of an amanuensis, it is the *first* copy, and no other, which is inspired (or is an autograph). I cannot comment on this possibility except to say that I have no idea where such a teaching might be found.

(b) He might deny that the inspiration of amanuenses is necessary, even if the first-written sense is adopted, because the author will proof-read the first copy and correct the errors, etc. This proofing is to be construed as part of the activity of authorship, and so will fall under the protection of the author's inspiration.

We might notice, of course, that one common way of proofing material of this sort will not work here. The author cannot have the amanuensis read back his copy, for complementary errors, one in the writing and one in the reading back, may serve to conceal each other.¹⁸ The author must do the proof-reading without aid, so as to eliminate all possibility of errors being introduced or passed over by uninspired helpers. We may, I suppose, form different opinions on the likelihood that this was always done.

The decisive point, however, is that such opinions, even if they should happen to be correct, cannot be relevant here, for within this theological context no doctrine should depend upon such an opinion. This alternative appears to fail, therefore, for the reason discussed under section I(c) above. So far as I know, there is no Biblical teaching to the effect that Biblical authors always did proof-read manuscripts in the special way required (or, indeed, in any way at all).

(c) He might argue that the purpose of inspiration is to bring it about that *some* manuscript of each Biblical book has special characteristics, such as inerrancy, etc. The *minimal* way to guarantee this, however, is to apply the special influence to the writing of the *first* manuscript. Some principle of parsimony might then be invoked to justify constructing the doctrine in such a way as to envisage *only* the minimal satisfaction of the requirement.

The principle of parsimony may be questionable, but I will not

¹⁸ Complementary errors need not be coincidental or unlikely. The writer may hear and understand a dictated sentence perfectly well, but may leave out a word in writing it. In reading back, his memory of the dictated sentence may induce him to re-insert the omitted word without noticing that it is lacking in his text.

discuss it here, for I think this alternative contains something both more interesting and more perplexing. It is a mistake to suppose that the inspiration of the *first* copy is the minimal way to achieve the inspiration of *some* copy. The minimal way to achieve that is to inspire *one* copy, but it does not matter which one it is. The inspiration of the second copy, or of the *nth* copy, is just as economical as the inspiration of the first copy.

Once we think of this, however, a further perplexity arises. We have been wondering whether we could justify the restriction of inspiration (or of being an autograph) to just *one* of the manuscripts produced by amanuenses, copyists, etc. But now we must wonder, even if that were justified, whether the first-written sense of "autograph" identifies the *right* manuscript as being the inspired one. What reason could be given for supposing that it was always the *first* copy, rather than some other, that was inspired?

Suppose, for example, that an inspired apostle dictates a book to an uninspired amanuensis who introduces several errors. Nevertheless, this copy is sent to its destination, some church. There a copy is made and sent to another church, where another copy is made, etc. Suppose now that the fourth copyist in this line is inspired, and eliminates the errors of the original amanuensis, along with any others which may have crept in (i.e., a special divine influence prevents him from writing anything which is in error or not according to the original oral words of the apostle). In what important way is the effect produced by this sequence of events different from that which would have been produced if the original amanuensis had been inspired and the fourth copyist uninspired?¹⁴ I can think of only three which might be thought to be of consequence.

1. In one case the first church receives a copy which contains errors while the fourth church receives an inerrant copy. In the other case, this situation is reversed.

This is true, but I am unable to see any further interesting implication to which it leads. In both cases an inerrant copy has been produced. I cannot see why it should be thought necessary, or better, or more important, that the first church should receive an inerrant copy than that the fourth church should receive one, nor do I know of any Scriptural teaching to that effect.

2. It might be thought that since the first manuscript is bound to be the (possibly remote) "parent" of more copies than will any

¹⁴ And what reason do we have for believing, as a matter of Christian doctrine, that this was not the actual course of inspiration in the case of some biblical book?

other, any good characteristic (such as infallibility) present in the first would have a greater effect than if that characteristic were present only in one of the others. Consequently, it would be more "efficient" to inspire the first copy than to inspire any other single copy.

I do not know what role considerations such as those of efficiency should play in our treatment of doctrine. Fortunately, it is not necessary to decide this question here, for this line of argument contains a different mistake. It is true, of course, that the first copy will appear in the lineage of all the other manuscripts of that book, and therefore will appear in the lineage of more manuscripts than will any other. However, this by no means guarantees, or even makes probable, that the infallibility of the first copy will be more influential on later manuscripts than would the infallibility of the fourth copy. It is the *distribution* of the manuscripts on the "family tree" which is crucial. For example, if more manuscripts are derived from the fourth copy than are derived from the first copy *independently* of the fourth (a situation which may easily arise), then the infallibility of the fourth would be of more effect than would the infallibility of the first.¹⁵ I know of no reason to suppose that the actual pattern of derivation of manuscripts for any Biblical book was such as to make the inspiration of the first written copy of more effect than would be the inspiration of some other single copy.

3. It might be thought that textual scholars in later times, working from derived manuscripts which are corrupt in various ways, will recover (or approximate) the text of the first written copy. But if this is not the inspired copy, they will not then be recovering or approximating the inspired text which was, presumably, the aim of their work. Therefore, it would be better to inspire the first written copy, at which textual scholars will aim, rather than any other single copy.

Two things may be said about this line of argument. In the first place, it is not clear to me that its premise is true. I am not sure that textual scholars must approximate, or aim at approximating, the first written copy. I suppose that would depend upon what techniques they used. Let us assume the hypothetical situation I des-

¹⁵ The reader may easily verify the principles involved here by constructing some simplified models of manuscript trees, and assuming that each uninspired manuscript introduces, on the average, the same number of errors. He can then experiment with the effect of inserting one inerrant manuscript into various positions on the tree. He will find that the tree must be constructed in a rather special way if the first position is to be the position of greatest effect.

cribed above. If textual scholars use a technique designed (and effective) for approximating the inspired text on the basis of uninspired derivatives, then it will be the fourth copy, not the first, which they will approximate. For it is the fourth copy which is specified as being the inspired one. If, on the other hand, they use a technique designed to recover the apostolic words they will again approximate the fourth text, for that is the one which preserves those words uncorrupt. It seems to me that we can expect an approximation of the first written text only if the textualists use a technique designed for that end. But why should they use that technique rather than some other designed for another end? If theologians could assure them that the first written text was the inspired text that would, of course, be a good reason for the textualists' practice. But theologians cannot use the practice of textualists as the reason for believing that the first written text is inspired. That would be an inversion.

Perhaps it will be replied that the textualists either do not or cannot have any technique which does not aim at the earliest written manuscript. Even if this happens to be true, however, it would seem an inversion of the proper order of things to make it a basis or criterion for the doctrine of inspiration. I at any rate supposed that the conditions under which textual scholars worked were not determinative of doctrine, but rather that doctrine determined the significance which we attached to the scholars' results. When the scholar publishes his latest text, closer to the first written text than ever before, it is the task of the theologian to say whether there is reason to suppose that this text is closer to the *inspired* text than ever before. To do this he must decide, presumably upon other grounds, whether there is reason to suppose that the inspired text is identical with the first written text. But that is the question we have been discussing throughout this section.

The restriction of inspiration to the autographs, then, appears to involve one in a dilemma. The Machen-literal sense of "autograph" corresponds well with an assumption which theologians often make explicitly,¹⁶ and almost universally make implicitly, in their discussion of this topic, the assumption that inspiration happens only to men such as prophets and apostles. But the Machen-literal sense

¹⁶ E.g., "The ability to teach and write the faith in an inspired form . . . was an apostolic prerogative," J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1958), p. 66, and "It [inspiration] is limited to the authors of Holy Scripture," Henry C. Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), p. 107.

also makes it very probable that some Biblical books never had any autographs, and that therefore, in accordance with many modern formulations of this doctrine, these Biblical books are not, and never were, inspired. The first-written sense, on the other hand, appears to guarantee that every book had an autograph. It also requires, however, that some men who may not even have been believers, not to say apostles or prophets, must be recognized as inspired. While this recognition might not involve any deep theological revision, it is bound to raise the question of how, in the apparent absence of any Biblical teaching on the subject, we are to justify the restriction of inspiration to the first amanuensis rather than, say, to the third copyist. Theologians who wish to include some reference to autographs in their formulation of this doctrine might therefore ask themselves whether it is possible to provide a definition of this term which avoids, or at least minimizes, these difficulties.

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