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ARE WE DISHONEST?

THE PURPOSE of this article is to carry on where some others have left off. We take for granted that the Bible claims full inspiration for itself, and that the Lord Jesus Christ and the early Church used it as the authoritative and accurate Word of God. When we attempt to use it in a similar way today, we are often accused of a dishonesty which ignores plain facts, methods of ancient literary style, and the findings of modern scholarship.

Perhaps a personal word should preface this article. At school I acquired a considerable knowledge of the Old and New Testaments for examination purposes, using, of course, the modern approach. It did not occur to me that the Bible was inspired or accurate to any special degree. After my conversion at 19 the whole Book came alive as the Word of God, and I did not see any sensible way of drawing distinctions between accuracy in points of faith and accuracy in points of fact. At least it was worth testing the Bible's claims, and assuming as a working hypothesis that, if God controlled the writers in unfolding through them the truth about Himself, and the way to Himself, then His control extended to all points.

Recently I came across a legal pronouncement made by the Earl of Halsbury in 1900, in which he said: 'It is a canon, and a just canon, that instead of assuming that people are perjuring themselves, you should, if there is a view by which you reconcile all the testimony, prefer that to the view which places people in the position of contradicting each other, so that they must necessarily be swearing what is false.' This canon is relevant for biblical interpretation. I have always looked for the view which reconciles all the testimony, and time and time again I have been able to find it. Thus one recognizes that the revelation has come through diverse means and through diverse people, with their own outlook and approach, so that they set out things from different points of view: but, inasmuch as they were chosen vessels who set down what is true, their statements must ultimately agree with one another and with what actually occurred.

In spite of much modern writing, we need not take the line that it is impossible to set down a perfectly accurate record of what actually occurred. If we take the Exodus, for example, it is surely not sufficient to say that the Israelites rightly interpreted the deliverance from Egypt as due to the mighty acts of God, and to set aside the historical record of the mighty acts as *myth* (in the theological sense). If I related a wonderful story of a direct answer to prayer, you might be impressed; but if I then told you that it did not really happen like this, but that I was sure that God had overruled my life, the whole significance of the story would fade away at once.

The difficulty, of course, is that the majority of stories in the Bible can neither be proved nor disproved. To one who starts with the assumption that miracles cannot happen, anyone who tries to defend the miracles of the Old and New Testaments must appear to be dishonest. To one who assumes that miracles of healing are fairly likely but nature miracles unlikely, anyone who takes the story of the floating axe head seriously is being dishonest. Yet, while the former person may argue that he is being consistent with what is known about the growth of folk-stories, the second may reply that he is at least taking account of certain modern trends towards recognizing the operation of forces other than material. The field of parapsychology does not prove a single miracle in the Bible; but at least it must make us pause before we write off strange happenings as unlikely or impossible. The same

is true of detailed predictive prophecy; it is thoroughly unscientific, and even dishonest, automatically to regard it as written after the event. This cannot be expanded here; but the writer would refer to his book, *What is Man?* (Paternoster Press), for evidence that most non-conservative theologians overlook.

Again, we are thought to be dishonest because we try to explain away double accounts, especially where these contradict one another in points of detail. One of the best known examples is the story of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis xii and xx. and Isaac and Rebekah in Genesis xxvi. Why should we dismiss the Bible's own statement in xx. 13 that Abraham planned the same scheme on more than one occasion, and consider it unlikely that Isaac followed his father's example? The point about doublets is that similar situations will bring about similar reactions, as everyone knows who considers real life and looks beyond the scissors-and-paper ideas of some scholars. Thus the large company of Israelites in the wilderness would need miraculous supplies of water more than once, and Moses, once the Hebrews in Egypt had rejected him, would need a second revelation of the Name of Yahweh (Ex. iii. vi). That is how people behave.

Even a biblical and non-biblical doublet is perfectly understandable. It is possible to dismiss the story of Moses in the bulrushes as legend, on the ground that a similar story is told of Sargon of Agade 1,000 years earlier. An equally honest explanation is the very human one that Moses' mother knew the story of Sargon, and hoped that similar good fortune would befall her child if she acted in the same way.

The last word has not yet been spoken on the synoptic narratives. A great healer handles many similar cases. A great preacher and teacher repeats himself, amplifying and condensing on various occasions. As the records came together, both in an oral and a literary form, the variations on some particular occasion could be faithfully preserved. It is perfectly feasible that Matthew's *Sermon on the Mount* and Luke's *Sermon on the Plain* are really two separate sermons. Much play is made over Matthaean additions to the history, but one at least clears up a problem that book critics have overlooked: that is, how the disciples brought the unbroken colt through the Passover crowds. Matthew tells us that they brought the mother with it; this is a more honest explanation than the idea that Matthew did not understand the Hebrew parallelism of Zechariah.

Recently Gabriel Hebert has written *Fundamentalism and the Church of God* (S.C.M. Press). Since this is a kindly rebuke of the I.V.F., one would have expected to find some really powerful examples of facts which make it impossible to accept the full accuracy of the Bible; but the few examples are of a trivial nature, and it is clear that Hebert grounds his objection first and foremost upon subjective beliefs about how God can reveal His will to mankind. Naturally he makes some play of the treatment of the opening chapters of Genesis in *The New Bible Commentary*, but part of his complaint is that insufficient guidance is given about the proper method of their interpretation (p. 80). The fact is that it would be most foolish to commit ourselves to a plain statement that such-and-such an interpretation is the correct one. Most of us have one or two hypotheses about how the Genesis record, which is brief and scanty, links on to what is known through the physical sciences and archæology, but there are still so many unresolved hypotheses of these sciences that a conservative rightly preserves a reverent agnosticism for the time being. Some of the possibilities have been set out well by Bernard Ramm in *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Paternoster Press). If, for example, I held that Cain married a pre-Adamic woman, I might be right or I might be wrong, and I certainly could not make this a matter of dogma. Here, as elsewhere (e.g. with the date of the Exodus), the conservative may suspend judgment for a time until further facts, both internal and external, come to light. Since I began my theological course I have seen light thrown upon so many puzzling things that I do not despair of seeing other big problems cleared up in my lifetime.

When I was asked to do this article, it was hoped that the phrase 'as originally given' would be discussed. A phrase of this kind is inevitable in view of variant MS readings. If there are variants, it is obvious that we must aim at recovering the original text if it is possible to do so. We may hold that any difficulty which is caused over a name or a number may be due to error in transmission. A belief in *verbal inspiration* does not necessarily mean that the same truth cannot be conveyed in other words, and that doubt

about a variant word, or variant case, overthrows the whole belief. Meaning is commonly conveyed through groups of words, and variations of single words need not affect the total meaning. Certainly no primary doctrine of revelation rests solely upon a doubtful reading. There is, for example, no doubt about the omission of the trinitarian statement in 1 John v. 7 (AV), and the doctrine of the Trinity was not drawn from this verse.

If we ask why God has not preserved the copyists from error, there is no answer. One can only draw a slight analogy from the created order and from the Incarnate Word. The created order was originally perfect, but has been marred in transmission, and contains difficulties and apparent discrepancies. Similarly the Lord Jesus Christ is perfect God and perfect Man, but the Church has not been protected from error and misunderstanding concerning His Person.

To sum up: the conservative cannot hold a double view of truth. If historical and scientific research establish something as true, then this will be identical with biblical truth. For myself I can only say that my great interest in the discoveries of science, archaeology, psychology, and parapsychology, is for the light that these subjects throw upon the interpretation of the Bible. The conservative, like all Bible students, knows that the Bible must be interpreted, and that external facts have their part to play, as, for example, in the date and extent of the Flood, or over the identity of Darius. The conservative, however, has an advantage; he starts with a foundation which provides reliable evidence. Thus the question of the priority of Ezra is not an open question; the conservative admits the problems, but believes that they are capable of solution in line with the biblical position; he can employ all the methods of problem-solving, admit the strength and weakness of the arguments of the other side, and in the end can emerge with an honest defence of the biblical position.

Tyndale Hall, Bristol.

J. STAFFORD WRIGHT, M.A.