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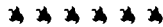
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and truly supernatural Providence is controlling the development of the material universe, shaping the forms of living organisms, guiding the processes of history, dealing with the infinite variety of human experience, answering the prayers of the faithful, and bringing in the kingdom of God.

It is hard to define the supernatural. The course we have so far pursued has led us to thoughts which amount to a relative and preparatory definition. For the rest, we must leave the idea to shape itself as our minds deal with the facts and doctrines presented by the Christian revelation. The purpose of the present effort to discuss this difficult question is, however, not so much to arrive at a consistent philosophical doctrine as to show that Christianity satisfies human needs just because of its supernatural character, and that for the same reason it supplies us with the best possible treatment of those vast problems which in all ages compel, and yet elude, the grasp of the mind of man.



### **Canons of Historical Criticism : their Application to the Four Gospels.<sup>1</sup>**

BY THE REV. CANON GIRDLESTONE, M.A.

**I**N studying several books of a more or less sceptical nature, written during the last half-century, I have been struck by the absence of any preliminary inquiry into the rules or canons of historical evidence. On what grounds are we persuaded of the general truth of past history? Whence have we drawn our chronology? How are we sure that certain authors wrote certain books? Great historians such as Muir, Grote, and Mommsen generally give an account of their materials and of their methods. Niebuhr was a familiar name in my youth; so was Sir George Cornewall Lewis, whose "Credibility of Ancient History" was a standard work, though it had certain

<sup>1</sup> A paper read at the Midland Clerical and Lay Union, Derby, and at the Clergy Home Mission Union, London, 1905.

defects. There was also Isaac Taylor the elder, who wrote the "History of the Transmission of Ancient Books" and the "Process of Historical Proof." Then came Professor Rawlinson, to whom we owe so much; and in later days there was a paper on the "Rules of Evidence as Applicable to the Credibility of History," by Dr. Forsyth, Q.C., and a chapter on the same subject in Dr. Kennedy's little work on the "Resurrection of Christ." Last year I asked one of His Majesty's Judges what book there was on the value of testimony which might be called "up to date," and he lent me a work on "Circumstantial Evidence," edited by Mr. Justice Wills.

These works, so far as I have been able to learn, agree with one another in the main, and I will presently summarize their conclusions; but there is an idea in the air that there are "modern methods of historical criticism" which throw into the shade all such rules as have been acted upon hitherto. Of these, Professor Gardner, of Oxford, may be taken as an exponent, as may be seen in his interesting "Exploratio Evangelica," and in his Jowett Lectures, called "A Historic View of the N.T.," published in 1904, in which he compares the main tenets or doctrines of Christianity to worn-out garments unsuited to the activities or even the decencies of modern life. Before yielding to Professor Gardner's enchantments, I bethought me of another professor, Professor Ramsay, who is usually considered a product of the best modern school, well up to date, and possessed of an independent and fearless mind. Turning to his "Paul the Traveller" (p. 3), I read as follows:

"Great historians are the rarest of writers. Thucydides stands highest. All must be subjected to free criticism. The fire which consumes the second-rate historian only leaves the real master brighter and stronger. The critic in his turn requires high qualities; he must be able to distinguish the true from the false; he must be candid, unbiassed, open-minded. There is no class of literary productions in our century (1902) in which there is such an enormous preponderance of error and bad judgment as in that of historical criticism. To some of our critics Herodotus is the Father of History, to others an inaccurate reproducer of uneducated gossip. One writer, at portentous length, shows up the weakness of Thucydides, another can see no fault in him. . . . I venture to add one to the number of critics by stating

in the following chapters reasons for placing the author of the Acts among historians of the first rank."

Professor Ramsay writes scathingly of the modern "Redactor" theory and of the "Tendency" theory (pp. 11, 12). In discussing Paul's two names, he says :

"See what is made of the scene by the critic who sits in his study and writes as if the men of this book were artificial figures and not human beings. The late author (says a critic) used two earlier authorities, one of whom called his hero Paul, and the other Saul."

In another part of the book he frankly expresses his own change of view on the subject of the supernatural :

"The marvels described in the Acts do not add to, but detract from, its verisimilitude as history. They are difficulties; but my hope is to show, first, that the narrative apart from these is stamped as authentic; second, that they are an integral part of it. Twenty years ago I found it easy to dispose of them, but nowadays probably not even the youngest of us finds himself able to maintain that we have mastered the secrets of nature and determined the limits which divide the unknown from the impossible. . . . You cannot cut out the marvellous from the rest, nor can you believe that either Paul or the writer was a mere victim of hallucinations" (p. 87).

Our business to-day is not with the Acts, but with the Gospels; still, the method of treatment ought to be the same. Let us first compare their literary position with that of the best classical writings. I understand that, speaking broadly, the oldest complete extant Virgil is of the fourth century A.D.; the oldest Homer of the fifth; the oldest Livy of the sixth; the oldest Plato of the eighth; the oldest Euclid of the ninth; the oldest Sophocles of the tenth; the oldest Thucydides of the eleventh. Our Gospels professedly rank in the first class. Secondly, it appears that the interval between the extant MSS. of the Gospels and the originals is very short compared with what is the case with most of the classics. See on these points the "Antiquity and Genuineness of the Gospels," published by Allen.

It is worth while, in the third place, to compare the number of Gospel MSS. with those of the classics. There are, I believe, about fifteen MSS. of Herodotus, very few being at all old, and this is, I believe, about the average number of MSS. of classical writers. Of the Gospels there are a hundred times

as many. It was reckoned by the late Mr. Norton that 60,000 copies of the Gospels and Acts were in circulation by the end of the second century, but not one of these has come down to us. When we consider the attack made on them by the Emperor Diocletian and others, the wonder is not that we have so few ancient MSS. of the Gospels, but that we have any at all. No such attack, so far as I know, was ever made on the classical writings.

We must now turn to the question of the age and authorship of the original writings. Authorship is known either by a direct statement of the writer, or by a name being prefixed to the book, like a label on a bottle, or by tradition; and the results can be checked by internal scrutiny. The interval between the time when a book was written and the mention of the name of the author, as such, will often be a long one, especially in such a case as that of the Gospels which are constantly quoted by early Christian writers, with the formula, "the Lord said," or "the Lord did," without naming the evangelist. In spite of this, the evidence for the authorship of the Gospels stands high as compared with many of the classical writers. So far, I think we may say that the literary evidence for the authenticity of the Gospels is exceptionally good. The late Professor Smyth, formerly Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, went so far as to affirm that "all the writers of antiquity put together do not possess a hundredth part of the external proofs of genuineness which the single volume of the N.T. possesses" ("Evidences of Christianity," p. 180).

But we have to look more narrowly into the question of authorship, for much depends on it. All the Gospels are, properly speaking, anonymous, but the names of the writers have come down from the second century with unvarying consent. For ordinary purposes this ought to be enough. The case of the fourth Gospel is specially interesting to us owing to the fact that Professor Drummond, of Manchester College, a Unitarian, brought up at the feet of Dr. Martineau, after a most

rigorous scrutiny, has yielded to the force of testimony, internal and external, and has given in his adhesion to the view that John is the author. As he forcibly says in his work on the subject (p. 192) :

“ If John did not write it, who did ? None whose works have survived were capable of writing it. Is it likely that there lived and died among them, entirely unknown, a man who throughout the century had absolutely no competitor in the wealth, originality, and depth of his genius ? And if there were such a man, is it credible that he would have allowed his book to be received as the work of the Apostle ? I know that critics think that no stupidity is too foolish, no forgery too criminal, for an early Christian, but for my part I cannot believe in these *moral monstrosities*.”

You will bear in mind that the question of authorship is far harder to solve than the question of age or date. Professor Drummond considers that the early date of the fourth Gospel is a settled matter, thanks to the numerous quotations made from it in the earliest days of Christianity. No one can bear direct testimony to authorship unless he has seen with his own eyes the author writing it, but everyone can tell whether he read a book when he was young or not.

“ Critics,” says Professor Drummond, “ speak of Irenæus as if he had fallen out of the moon, paid two or three visits to Polycarp’s lecture-room, and never known anyone else. In fact, he must have known all sorts of men of all ages, and among others his venerable predecessor Pothinus, who was upwards of ninety at the time of his death. He must have had numerous links with the early part of the second century, and he must have known perfectly well whether the Gospel was older than himself or not.”

But with regard to authorship he adds :

“ All we can justly say is that the work was almost universally regarded as John’s, and that this was the traditional belief of our first informants. As the tradition is widely spread, *and there is no other*, I think we are further justified in concluding that the Gospel must have been received as John’s from the time of its publication. If (as Schurer supposes) its style and doctrine were opposed to John’s, that must have been far more obvious at the time than now, and the disciples, including Polycarp, would have indignantly protested against this attempt to misrepresent their teacher ” (p. 348).

Taking it, then, for granted that the traditional view of the four Evangelists is the true one, we are in a position to answer the question of questions, namely, May we trust the

Gospels as records of what was actually said and done by the Lord Jesus Christ? We seek not absolute demonstration, which is, of course, out of our reach, but moral certainty.

First, we must give the writers the credit due to them, and not start with universal doubt. Dr. Forsyth rightly says that it is part of the constitution of human nature that we should confide in the veracity of others, and he adds that our social life goes on the tacit assumption that men generally speak the truth. Similarly, Isaac Taylor says that, however much of falsification and of error there may be in the world, there is yet so great a predominance of truth that anyone who believes indiscriminately will be in the right a thousand times to one oftener than anyone who doubts indiscriminately. Some modern criticism, on the other hand, seems to me to be possessed by a spirit of distrust. Secondly, we have not only to count our witnesses, as I have already done, but to weigh them; to consider what they say, and how they say it; to take into account all that went before and all that has followed after; to estimate the characteristics of the national mind, and the style and method of the prophetic and apostolic writers. This task involves thought, inquiry, and judgment. Strange to say, it is often altogether ignored by the modern critic, who deals with the Gospels as if they were written by four University professors of, say, the nineteenth century.

Now we come to the rules of evidence laid down by the legal and historical experts whose names I began with. They are very simple, and they approve themselves to the average lay and clerical mind. In order to ascertain the truth of an event, or of a series of events, we should obtain if possible the evidence of two or three eye-witnesses. Even one is sometimes enough, for the old adage *Testis unus testis nullus* is rightly rejected by Mr. Justice Wills. The record of contemporaries, even if not eye-witnesses, comes second in value. Thirdly comes the evidence of the generation which overlaps and succeeds that of the eye-witnesses. This is what Sir George Cornwall Lewis called oral or hearsay evidence,

which is admissible if the witnesses had the opportunity of coming in contact with the men of the previous generation.

These are the three strands of evidence for ancient history. More than this we cannot ask for, and for a large portion of history we have much less, being content to take it on the affirmation of the writer, whose trustworthiness we can occasionally test. Leading events we must verify; subsidiary events we take on trust.

There is, however, confirmatory evidence to ancient history—*e.g.*, all that goes under the name of archæology, and all that bears on local colouring and contemporary history; then there is the testimony of experience and of the general analogy between history, ancient and modern, human nature being much the same in all ages, and exceptional events calling for exceptional evidence. Again, there is undesignedness, when one writer, without intending it, throws light on some statement made by another; and lastly, there is convergence, when history, philosophy, and experience are found to harmonize.

Now, look at the wealth of evidence which the Four Gospels possess.

Do you want eye-witnesses? You have them in St. Matthew and St. John. Do you want men who associated with eye-witnesses? You have them in St. Mark and St. Luke. In addition, you have the evidence of the Acts and of the Epistles. Do you want the testimony of archæology, of contemporary history, of Palestine and its people? You have it in rich abundance. What does experience say to the Gospel narrative? You can answer for yourselves. The best remedy for doubt, after all, is to read the Gospels and pray over them.

Further, special attention ought to be directed to the spirit of the writers; to their candour, especially in such matters as the denial of our Lord by St. Peter; to the self-repression with which they narrate both the mighty works and the sufferings and the Resurrection of the Master; also to the extraordinary fact that the teaching of Christ as recorded in their writings is pre-Christian, and not such as would have fallen from the lips of



any of the Apostles after the Day of Pentecost. Those who are keenly alive to the divergence between Peter, Paul, and John, have to face this phenomenon : the Gospels, which are commonly supposed to have been written later than most of the Epistles, record a kind of teaching which is earlier than that of any of the Epistles, including St. John's first Epistle.

I have left out many points of interest—*e.g.*, the bearing of the Old Testament on the matter ; the failure of any counter theory to explain the subsequent history of the Church, including the institution of the Lord's Supper and the change of the day of rest from the seventh day to the first ; the notoriety of the main facts in early days when they could easily have been tested ; and the persecution which befell believers, first from the Jews and subsequently from the Romans. Reviewing the evidence as a whole, I venture to say that every historical test which is applied to the Gospels will bring out a satisfactory result ; the testimony is convergent, and it is conclusive.

Our trust in these precious Books will extend not only to the things which Christ did, but to the words which He said. If it be asked, How could the Evangelists remember the utterances and addresses which they record ? I answer, first, they were Jews (three, if not all four of them). The Jew has the best memory in the world. Secondly, the words of Christ were peculiarly impressive, and like seed which at first seems to die but subsequently rises up. Thirdly, God brought all things to their remembrance, as He did in the case of Jeremiah (see chap. xxxvi.). In a word, the Evangelists had an enlightened mind and a quickened memory, according to Christ's promise (John xiv. 26), and this is what we mean by inspiration.

There are only two serious objections, so far as I know, which stand in the way of an absolute confidence in the Gospel narrative. One is the presence of variations in the Gospels amounting sometimes to inconsistencies ; the other is the presence of the supernatural element throughout.

The puzzle of the Gospels is that they are so like and yet so rich in minute variations. Fifty years ago the resemblances

were accounted for by the supposition of an original Gospel from which the evangelists copied *ad libitum*, each in his own style. But, as Professor Drummond says in his work on St. John :

“the plan of creating a new Gospel when we are in a difficulty is not true criticism. Why was such an important document allowed to perish? . . . It is self-deception to conjure up an unknown figure and fancy we escape all difficulties by attributing to it whatever we please.”

Most of us would agree with this utterance ; yet modern methods of dealing with the Synoptics are largely based on some such plan, to the neglect of a more excellent way—a way which I dare not attempt to define in this short paper.

With regard to the greater number of the discrepancies, they arise not from our poverty, but from our wealth of material, and in part from our habit of ignoring the methods and aims of the Evangelists. Even four narratives written a hundred years ago by four Oxford professors on the subject of Lord Nelson's life, victories, and death, would leave room for criticism ; how much more four memoirs, which give only glimpses of the grace and truth which were manifested in Christ ? If we knew exactly which of our Lord's addresses were uttered in Hebrew, and which in Greek, the path of the harmonist would be easier. As matters stand, I do not believe that we know enough to enable us to unravel all Gospel difficulties. Mr. Justice Wills points out<sup>1</sup> that actual occurrences must form a consistent whole, though we may not be able to reconcile the accounts. The greater the number of details introduced, so much the more certain are we to find omissions and variations.

“Variations in respect of unimportant circumstances are not necessarily indicative of fraud or falsehood provided there be substantial agreement in other respects” (p. 379).

“True strength of mind (he continues) consists in not allowing the judgment, when founded upon convincing evidence, to be disturbed because there are immaterial discrepancies which cannot be reconciled. When the vast inherent differences in individuals relating to natural faculties and acquired habits of accurate observation, faithful recollection, and precise

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<sup>1</sup>I ought, perhaps, to mention that this writer is dealing with ordinary circumstantial evidence without the remotest reference to the Gospels.

narration, and the influence of intellectual and moral culture are duly considered, it will not be thought surprising that entire agreement is seldom found amongst a number of witnesses as to all the collateral incidents of the same principal event" (p. 380).

Let me put it plainly : if witnesses agree in the main, but vary in the minutiae, this tells not against them, but for them. To use the words of the great Lord Ellenborough, "where there is a general accordance of all material circumstances, the credit of a story as a whole is confirmed rather than weakened by minute diversities in the evidence"; and, as Paley puts it, "a close and minute agreement induces the suspicion of confederacy and fraud." Let us be content with substantial truth, and make the best of circumstantial variety. Is not this a better plan than to suggest that if the Evangelists differ they are not to be trusted, and if they agree they copy one another, and so their agreement is vain ?

I need hardly say that omissions cast no discredit on testimony. When the mind and attention are riveted on a particular fact, they are often withdrawn from concomitant circumstances. This is a very different thing from *suppressio veri*, of which no one can accuse the Evangelists. I would ask, Is it scientific to say that, because St. Mark and St. John say nothing of the Virgin birth of Christ, therefore they did not know of it or did not believe in it ? If it is, then it is equally scientific to say that they did not believe that Christ was born at all, for they do not refer to the fact.<sup>1</sup>

Let me add that we have to be exceedingly careful not to read into the narratives what is not in them by inserting the harmless little word "then," or something to that effect. I could easily show the evil which has thus been wrought not only by

<sup>1</sup> Those who possess Hastings' "Bible Dictionary" will find an amusing instance of this fallacy in the article on Jonah. A critic, having quoted the fact that in February, 1891, James Bartley was swallowed by a large fish, retained for a day, and then delivered from his strange prison, observed that he was found to be in a swoon and needed nursing for three months. But, says the critic, the Book of Jonah does not say that the prophet swooned and was nursed, etc. Therefore he holds that the story of James Bartley throws no light on that of Jonah. Such is criticism !

our Authorized Version, but also by such a modern writer as Professor Gardner.

Miracles block the way more seriously than inconsistencies, and the two are made to play into one another's hands. This can be seen in Professor Gardner's works, which supply fatal instances of exaggeration in the matter of discrepancies, and thus whittle away the evidence for the supernatural. Even Huxley confessed that miracles were not in themselves impossible, and that the whole question is one of testimony. We, on our part, acknowledge that miracles demand special evidence, but we say that they have it. I hope that I have already shown this; but one more observation must be made. The works of Christ were wrought by no ordinary man. His mission is in itself a departure from the ordinary course of human affairs. His teaching is unique; so is His character; so is His influence. Thus His mighty works fit in with the rest of His mission. Gospel miracles are not isolated wonders. The way for them was prepared in the Old Testament, which contains a long series of providential interventions recorded in writings marked by sobriety, spirituality, and candour. A line of purpose may be detected in these Books, culminating in the manifestation of Christ. From the first page to the last, God orders events, times, and places, overrules the actions of men, raises up prophets and kings, and so prepares a way for Christ. Moreover, the nation primarily referred to in these Books is still in existence and reserved, doubtless, for some remarkable destiny, and we have much to learn from them.

To quote once more from Professor Ramsay ("Paul the Traveller," p. 30):

"For those who do not accept the extreme agnostic position, there is no other logical position but that of accepting the general scheme of ancient history in which Christianity is the crowning factor. That gives unity a rational plan to the whole."

This witness is true. But Christianity without the supernatural would be no Christianity. You cannot cut out the supernatural

from the New Testament with a pair of scissors. It is rooted in all the Gospels, and I thank God for it. A day may be coming in which much that now seems supernatural will prove to be part of nature. I do not fight for the word, but for the thing. Christ was not only before the world, but above it, and exercised that sway over nature which belongs to Him as the Son of God. We cannot solve the perplexities raised by our advanced knowledge; but He has the key, and we may trust Him absolutely.

We bless God for the four Gospels. St. Matthew was one of the Twelve. St. Mark was the interpreter of another of the Twelve. St. Luke—we see what he says about himself in the introduction to his Gospel. St. John was “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” Their memoirs have been read in the home and in the Church for eighteen centuries. They are like the four rivers which started from the watershed of Eden, and are constantly bringing life to all nations and tribes and languages.



### The Efficacy of Prayer.

BY THE REV. W. H. DUNDAS, B.D.

**P**RAYER has been described as the “pulse of the soul.” It is a means by which the spiritual condition of the Christian can be gauged. If prayer be frequent and earnest, then the spiritual life is vigorous, and there must be a growth in grace. But if it be seldom resorted to and only formally uttered, then it is a certain sign that such a one is not living in the realization of God’s Presence, and not drawing strength from Him for the work of life.

It must be conceded that the use of the privilege of prayer is not what it should be. The difficulty of drawing people to Divine service is a constant problem. Given an attractive, well-advertised speaker, and a sufficient amount of excitement, crowds in thousands can be brought together to hear preaching