

Constructive Theology.

IX. Authority in Matters of Religious Belief.

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THE great Conferences on the Faith and Order of Christendom held at Lausanne and Edinburgh revealed, amongst the Churches and denominations there represented, and constituting what may be called for our present purposes the non-Roman half of Christendom, a gratifying measure of agreement on the question, 'What are the fundamental ideas of the Christian faith?' even though this was coupled with considerable diversity of opinion in respect of their correct interpretation. If to this agreement be added the uniform and steadfast witness of the half of Christendom which was not represented at these conferences, that is, the Roman Communion, the *consensus* of Christendom so manifested becomes a sufficiently impressive phenomenon, even in these days of secularism and materialism. But it is to be noted that the question of the 'authority' on which these ideas are, or ought to be, held received comparatively little discussion. Yet all these various bodies of Christians, Roman and non-Roman alike, would concur in the statement that the Bible is invested with 'authority,' in the sense of being a source of reliable information about God and His will for man. Here, then, is a fixed point in which the 'constructive theologian' may find a *πῶς ὁρᾶ*.

The highest estimate of the Bible as the supreme and sole authority for the contents of the Christian religion is embodied in Chillingworth's famous aphorism 'The Bible, and the Bible only, is the religion of Protestants.' This position, which was the foundation of the classical Protestant scholasticism, was intelligible enough in days when the literal inerrancy and verbal inspiration of the Scriptures were taken for granted, and when the 'orthodox' (the term is used for brevity and convenience, and not in order to beg any questions) doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation were so generally accepted that they appeared to be 'proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture,' in the sense of following as conclusions from trains of syllogistic reasoning which took particular proof-texts as their premises. It is obvious that the constructive theologian of to-day could not, even if he would, make these assumptions his own. Not merely do natural science, archaeology, anthropology, and historical criticism compel him to

admit the presence in the sacred volume of large elements of legend, folklore, and idealized history, but his moral consciousness is stirred to revolt by such terrible stories as those of Lot's incest or Samuel's ritual murder of Agag, stories of which the inclusion in the Scriptural Canon could now only be justified as illustrative of the barbaric horrors from which revelation has delivered, or was meant to deliver, mankind. However much he may wish to continue the use of the old language about 'proving' doctrines from Scripture, he cannot project himself back into a state of mind which made it seem natural for Galileo's judges to 'prove' the geocentric cosmology from 'Joshua's moon in Ajalon,' or to the Puritan colonists of America to justify harsh treatment of its native inhabitants by the example of the massacre of the Canaanites. Still less will he wish to have recourse to the allegorical method of interpretation by which any text may be made to 'prove' anything that the interpreter desires; and he will recognize that such 'proofs' of the doctrine of the Trinity as were founded upon the story of the three men who appeared to Abraham at Mamre, or the word uttered by the Father and the descent of the Spirit on the occasion of the baptism of Christ, were not really 'proofs' at all, in any intelligible sense of the term, but rather mystical interpretations of the narratives in question, which read into them a doctrine already accepted on other grounds.

It is natural for the constructive theologian who has prepared himself for the study of the authority of the Bible by long training in historical research to regard the Scriptures primarily as an historical record, embodying in one volume the documents which narrate and illustrate the age-long process of revelation culminating in Jesus Christ. From this purely historical point of view, the authority of the Bible, interpreted in the light of modern knowledge as a collection of materials from which we can construct a reliable picture of (a) the preparation in history for Christ, (b) the life and teaching of Christ Himself, and (c) the development of primitive Christianity, may be said to be approximating—after a period of some uncertainty and confusion, due to the shock produced by the

discoveries of the last hundred years—to a relatively stable and assured position. But its authority, in the strictly historic sense, is not always to be construed as reliable testimony to a given set of facts; even where it purports to be this, critical research has shown that it should rather be regarded as authority for the ideas which prevailed at a given stage of the Judæo-Christian development. The writings of the Chronicler cannot be regarded as providing us with a minutely accurate account of the deeds of David and Solomon; but they constitute admirable evidence for the conceptions of ceremonial correctness entertained by the post-exilic priestly class; and it will not be an unsafe generalization if we observe that (abstracting from the cardinal events of the life of Christ) the history of the evolution of religious ideas contained in the Bible is of far greater importance, and perhaps of greater reliability, than its strictly factual narratives, those, that is, which are concerned with the doings of particular patriarchs, tribes, and kings.

It is here that the constructive theologian comes face to face with a difficulty, when he endeavours to build upon the 'historical authority,' which, as interpreted above, most reasonable persons would willingly concede to the Bible, some conception of *doctrinal* authority. The knowledge that the opinions actually held by the Jewish and Christian Churches have in fact passed through such and such successive phases does not *per se* give us any information as to which of these phases is to be regarded as the nearest approximation to ideal or transcendental truth. It is doubtless true that, in the case of the Old Testament, it is not difficult in the light of the New to distinguish those passages and documents which embody glimpses of the ever-deepening light of revelation from those which are still shadowed by the heathen darkness, into which the light of the primitive revelation to the patriarchs first came. But we do not now use these passages as 'proofs' of our most fundamental beliefs, but rather as means for deepening our spiritual and moral apprehension of truths of which we are on other grounds already convinced. We are not monotheists *because* Deutero-Isaiah puts into the mouth of Yahweh the majestic words 'I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God,'¹ nor do we believe in the resurrection of the body because the pseudonymous author of Daniel promises that 'many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt.'² Such sayings as these

¹ Is 44⁶.

² Dn 12².

are shining milestones on the great high road of the *Præparatio evangelica* which runs through Israelitish history, leading up to the temple of Christian faith; but they are not, in a strictly logical sense, foundation-stones of that temple.

Of that temple, 'other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.'³ He, and none other, is the primary authority for Christian belief, and the Old Testament Scriptures are precious in our eyes because 'these are they which bear witness of me.'⁴ But we have still to find a secondary authority which is to give us reliable information with regard both to the contents of the teaching of Christ and to its correct interpretation. It would be agreed by all Christians that such an authority is in some sense to be found in the New Testament. But in what sense? It is, indeed, obvious that as an historical authority for the life and teaching of Christ the New Testament stands alone; the doubtful Josephus-passage,⁵ and the scanty collection of *Agrapha* which is all that Resch⁶ can assemble after ransacking pseudepigrapha and ancient Fathers, even when reinforced by the few 'Logia' recovered from the papyri, add nothing substantial to our knowledge of Him. But, even if we consider the New Testament merely as an historical authority, it is no longer possible to take every part of it at its face value with quite the same simple and unquestioning confidence as was practically universal amongst Christians until about a hundred years ago. If we leave the more extravagant types of criticism, *formgeschichtliche* and others, out of account, it is reasonable to claim a fairly solid *consensus* of agreement for the following statements: (1) That the Synoptic Gospels, in the main, provide reliable evidence for the beliefs that Jesus lived and died, and for the general outlines of His public ministry and teaching; (2) That the Acts give us, on the whole, a not untrue picture of the development and expansion of the nascent Church; (3) That, of the Pauline *corpus*, at least eight Epistles are the authentic work of the great Apostle whose name they bear, and contain what is for our purposes an adequate summary of his characteristic interpretation of Christianity. Here, at least, would seem to be a solid rock on which to build. But it must at the same time be borne in mind (1) that the Birth narratives are held by many, as belonging to the latest *stratum* of the evangelic record, to be of insufficient strength, considered purely as historical evidence, to bear the weight of the stupendous miracle which they record; (2) that both the

³ 1 Co 3¹¹.

⁴ Jn 5³⁹.

⁵ *Ant.* xviii. 3. 3.

⁶ *Texte u. Unters.*, N.F. XV. 3-4.

authorship and the historical character of the Fourth Gospel are still subjects of strenuous debate; (3) that the questions whether the Pauline presentation of Christ and His Gospel is the legitimate development of, or an adventitious accretion upon, the mind of the Master Himself is still answered by different schools of critical theologians in diametrically opposite senses. Where, in this welter of open questions, can we find 'most certain warrants of holy Scripture' whereby to 'prove' the convictions that we hold?

The problem is at first sight rendered more difficult by the recognition, forced upon us by modern critical candour, that, whereas the ethical teaching given by Jesus has been preserved in a more or less static form (in the strings of memorized sayings eventually combined into Q, and so embodied in the Synoptic Gospels), the doctrinal teaching given about Him by His followers has undergone a process of evolution, in which certain phases can be clearly distinguished. The literary records of each of these phases might well, if taken severally and in isolation, form bases for differing types of Christological and theological construction. If we were to confine our consideration to the early speeches of Acts, taking them alone as authoritative, we might well be able to 'prove' an 'Adoptianist' view of Christ's Person. If we take our premises from the Epistles of St. Paul's missionary period, we may, indeed, deduce from them a much higher estimate of Jesus as 'the Lord'; even so, however, the conception of His position implied in 1 Corinthians seems to be far too subordinationistic to satisfy Nicene standards, and the prophecy 'Then cometh the end, when he shall deliver up the kingdom . . .'¹ seems irreconcilable with the Nicene affirmation 'Whose kingdom shall have no end.' In the Epistle to the Philippians, the attributes of 'the Lord' now connote 'equality with God,'² though no explanation is given as to how this conception is compatible with monotheism. Implicitly in Col 1¹⁵⁻¹⁷, and explicitly in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel, the problem is solved by the identification of Jesus with the Logos of God, and in these latter positions we can trace clearly the beginnings of the orthodoxy of the Creeds and the Œcumenical Councils; though, even so, they can hardly be deemed in themselves strictly to necessitate the metaphysical concepts either of 'three Persons in one Essence' or of 'one Person with two Natures.' Of the three doctrines—Adoptianist, Origenist, and Nicene—which seem to be suggested by different sets of Scriptural passages, which can be said, in an

absolute sense, to be 'proved' by the New Testament? It may be urged that the last-named, as emerging at a later time than the others, should be considered as the culmination of the development of which they are imperfect phases; but the New Testament itself nowhere lays down an exegetical canon to this effect, nor would such a canon be *a priori* self-evident, for the later stages of a development may represent degeneration as well as perfection. Even the New Testament, therefore, though unique as an historical authority, seems to refer us beyond itself for our ultimate doctrinal authority. 'Understandest thou what thou readest? . . . How can I, except some one shall guide me?'³

We may summarize the foregoing line of thought by the statement that, in the light of modern knowledge the Bible is no longer regarded as an armoury of proof-texts but as a *dossier*—a collection of sources for the history of Redemption. Bound up in this *dossier* we find material from every period of the two thousand years which it covers, characterized by every degree of moral quality, ranging from barbaric ferocity and vindictiveness to the loftiest spirituality, and exhibiting the great ideas of our religion in process of evolution, not in finished form, embodied in imperfect and tentative versions which are not always harmonious one with the other. It is natural, under these conditions, to speak of the Bible as containing, rather than as being, the Word of God. We do not so much 'prove' our doctrines from it, in the sense of scholastic or mathematical demonstration, but rather, already holding those doctrines, go to the Bible for historical information concerning their genesis, for assurance that they were actually held in embryonic form by the saints and friends of God, and for the consolation and spiritual exaltation which are to be derived from meditation upon their most perfect literary embodiments. If this view appears to any reader so unfamiliar as to be paradoxical, let him consider the attitude of modern orthodox scholars to the Gospel narratives of our Lord's Birth. Few would claim that their belief in the supernatural character of that Birth was based as directly and exclusively upon the early chapters of Matthew and Luke as the belief in Hannibal's passage of the Alps is based upon the narratives of Livy or Polybius; but, already believing on other grounds in the virginal conception, they are then able to approach the 'Gospel of the Infancy' with confidence in its generally veridical character (though this does not exclude the application of a strictly objective criticism to

¹ 1 Co 15²⁴.² Ph 2⁶.³ Ac 8³¹.

such subordinate questions of detail as the historicity of Luke's census or Matthew's 'Star in the East') and to drink unmeasured consolation and joy from its pure, serene, and passionless pages.

But what, then, is the ultimate authority behind themselves to which the Scriptures refer us? If I am presented with the *dossier* of some vitally important series of events, I naturally inquire (if I do not already know)—Who compiled this? and can I rely upon his trustworthiness, in such a way as to be sure that he has included all the essential documents? *Prima facie*, at least—that is, before I have examined, tested, and verified its component documents—the authority beyond itself to which a *dossier* refers me is that of its compiler. Doubtless it is a conspicuous tribute to the intrinsic qualities of the Bible that for so many centuries it should have been taken for granted as authoritative, despite the fact that it contains no explanation or definition of itself, no divinely-penned preface or *imprimatur* attesting its supernatural origin or character. But, in modern times, the question of its compiler must sooner or later be raised, by any inquiring mind; and the history of the formation of the Canon of Scripture may well give us the clue to the authority of which we are in search. We shall, indeed, discover no responsible individual compiler, either in the case of the Old Testament or of the New; for each of these Canons came into being by slow crystallization within the general diffused mind of the Church, the former during its Jewish and the latter during its Christian phase. In both cases, the motive, conscious or unconscious, which moved that diffused mind to select, from the mass of literature which it had from time to time produced, certain documents, which it recognized as containing the purest, most authentic and 'inspired' formulation of its own fundamental ideas, was that of self-preservation. The Law and the Prophets came to be canonized, after Israel's political sovereignty had been extinguished and prophecy had ceased, in order to conserve the life of the scattered nation and safeguard it from absorption into heathendom by embalming in written form the essentials of its worship and faith, that is, of the real, though imperfect, revelation with which it had been entrusted. So also, in the second half of the second century of our era, after the coming of the completed revelation, the Christian Church, after living for a hundred years with no 'Bible' other than the Jewish Scriptures, was led to bind up with these a selection of the writings of its own greatest men, and to ascribe to them the same inspiration and authority as it recognized in the Law and the Prophets, in order to protect its

own character and the fundamental ideas of its faith against the vast, creeping, impalpable menace of Gnosticism. And in both cases the type of authority ascribed to the contents of each Canon, when first formed, would seem to have been primarily historical; the collection of sacred books constituted a kind of photograph of the revelation in its earliest form, held by its primitive recipients and depositaries, and this photograph was used to vindicate the identity and continuity of the revelation as proclaimed by the later Church with the revelation as it had been given in the beginning. So the Jewish Scriptures could be used by the orthodox Jew against Hellenizing Sadducees, to show that the austere version of Judaism which he maintained, and which excluded this or that pagan corruption, was identical with the word which God had revealed in the beginning, which also excluded the same corruptions; and the Scriptures of the New Covenant were canonized in order that they might demonstrate the continuity and identity of the Christian faith as held by the Church of the second century with the Gospel proclaimed by Christ and His Apostles, as against the Gnostic claim that the true version of Christ's teaching was a mass of theosophic lore, transmitted by a secret succession of adepts. In much the same way the traveller on the Continent, whose identity is challenged, produces the little photograph inserted into his passport in order to show, by a comparison of it with his own features, that he is the person whose name is mentioned in the passport. If the traveller happens to be the possessor of a great estate, he can prove by means of the inset photograph that he is the person who is entitled to the benefits of the estate; but the passport does not *propria vi* confer the estate upon him, for he was, presumably, in possession of it before he procured the passport. The Christian Church did not derive its faith from the New Testament (for it existed, and preached the Gospel, before a line of the New Testament was written), but directly from Christ and His first followers; nevertheless it canonized the chief surviving writings of those first followers in order to prove that the faith which it preached at the end of the second century was the same as that which He and they had proclaimed before the middle of the first.

It is, from one point of view, not unfair to describe the Bible as the history of the people of God: at any rate, the sacred community is always present in or presupposed by every page, as the permanent background of the changing flow of events. It was to this people, and not primarily to any written document, that the 'oracles of

God¹ were in the beginning entrusted; it was in its bosom that the Christ was born, and through its mediation (after it had assumed its new, potentially universal or catholic form) that the Apostle 'received of the Lord that which,' later, he 'also handed on to'² his Gentile converts. The Greek word which he uses for 'to hand on,' *παράδοσθαι*, suggests its derivative verbal substantive, *παράδοσις*, generally Englished as 'tradition': and St. Paul has no scruple about describing his own teaching as 'the traditions' (1 Co 11², 2 Th 2¹⁵ 3⁶).³ The term 'tradition' may arouse antagonistic reactions: and assuredly no Christian theologian should use it without remembering that the word 'tradition' appears in the Gospels only as the object of a withering condemnation, called forth by the Halakic casuistry of the scribes. Yet *abusus rei non tollit usum*; and if it be understood that, in a Christian context, the word refers to nothing other than the continuous, corporate mind and memory of the people of God, still bearing the indelible impressions made by the great redemptive acts which that people has witnessed, from Sinai down to Calvary and Olivet, the idea of a central 'tradition' which preserves the Word of God (amidst whatever temporary accretions or obscurations) instead of 'making it of none effect,' will not appear impossible. Certainly the central tradition of the Christian Church exists as a pædagogic factor, as the psychological cause of belief: for each one of us, as a child, learnt his Christian faith in the first instance, not by deducing it for himself from a scientific study of the Bible, but through the impact upon him of the central Christian tradition, mediated through his parents, his teachers, his pastors, and all the suggestive influences of a Christian home, environment, and worship. And æsthetic appreciation, patriotism, and morality will furnish us with analogies for a psychological cause of the acceptance of certain standards which is at the same time the logical

¹ 1 Ro 3¹.

² 1 Co 11².

³ It should be mentioned that the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians has been questioned—in the present writer's opinion, on quite insufficient grounds.

ground of those standards. It is, surely, to the invisible, yet real, weight and pressure of the central Christian tradition, rather than to an indefinite series of coincidences in the construction of inferences from the written page, that the unity of belief manifested at Lausanne and Edinburgh is due. And, whilst mere posteriority in time is in itself no guarantee that a particular phase of religious thought is more authoritative than the phases which have preceded it, the conception of the corporate mind of the people of God, slowly growing through the centuries and clarifying the fundamental ideas of its revelation under the guidance of that Spirit who leads men into all truth, will provide us with a clue to the tangled history of Christian theology and with criteria whereby 'false starts' and 'blind-alley developments' in the interpretation of the deposit of faith may be distinguished from the true and Divinely-intended course of dogmatic evolution.

Does this line of thought make the Scriptures otiose, or reduce them to the position of a mere combination of historical record and devotional anthology? Far from it. If Scripture is a photograph of the central tradition as it was when first committed to the guardianship of the people of God, then no belief or doctrine can claim to form part of that central tradition unless at least its beginnings can be discerned in Scripture: it is, therefore, on the view just outlined, as true as ever it was that 'Holy Scripture containeth' (explicitly or implicitly) 'all things necessary to salvation.' Moreover, inasmuch as the body of the Christian revelation consists in part of events and their interpretation, the history of those events can sometimes be used to refute false interpretations of them; so, for instance, the story of Gethsemane rules out Patripassianism and Monophysitism alike. In other words, whilst it may not be possible directly to 'prove' (in the sense of 'demonstrate') orthodoxy from the Scriptures by themselves, it is, at least in some cases, possible so to disprove heresy; and the disproof of all heresies with regard to a given point may constitute an indirect proof of orthodoxy, as the only remaining hypothesis.

Literature.

ANCIENT JERICHO.

THE important results of Professor Garstang's excavations on this site, which have hitherto appeared in numerous reports, mainly of a technical nature, in the 'Liverpool University Annals,' have

now been put into popular form and made accessible to the general reader. In *The Story of Jericho*, by John Garstang and J. B. E. Garstang (Hodder & Stoughton; 8s. 6d. net), we have a most interesting description of the discoveries made, beginning with the Neolithic Age, when the first Settlement took