

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE VIII.

NOTES.

VALUE OF THINGS NOT CERTAIN.

NOT all that has importance for us can be well known, and we may not dismiss from consideration matters about which we have not the materials for an opinion. To rely only on what is certain is to confine ourselves to the commonplaces of life. Men's greatest thoughts and activities are on the outskirts of knowledge, and it is a question what we can rescue from the realm of conjecture. The knowledge that we may have of the incomprehensible has worth, and still more the conduct founded on it.

While we cannot be certain, for example, of one's character from his face, the value of expression is yet great. Business men rely on slight indications for their judgments. A leader must know men, which he does from their doubtful disclosures. A detective can, from slight appearances, pick out a criminal in a crowd; a credit man can predict a customer's success; and practical conduct in all lines proceeds largely on indications that are not reduced to science.

In buying a horse one acts on information which is not conclusive. He studies indications, and may be mistaken when he does his best; but the indications furnish points enough for a decision. To be confident only when sure is to have little decision. The practical man acts and trusts when in doubt, risking all on things not proven.

The African explorer cannot know if a given fruit is poisonous; he must try it; yet it would be irrational to make no ventures on indications. One must take many steps which may be disastrous. Progress comes from ventures on the uncertain.

The sportsman locates game at a venture. He cannot know

where the deer are ; but he studies the depths of the forest, the proximity of streams, and the abundance of pasture ; and while, with all these, he is in ignorance, he will yet act. To wait for a solution of his doubts would be to let his opportunities pass. The certain things are all taken up by commonplace men, who are satisfied with small results, and between whom the competition is over-great.

The prospector who sinks a well for oil does it in doubt. Experimenters make a guess from a few indications, and know that they may fail. But the way to success is through uncertain steps. Every great business is a venture, which may yield a fortune or a failure. Yet men do not sit idle because they do not know. They break through their ignorance, taking advantage of such indications as they can get. For, one is not wholly ignorant who is ignorant ; he knows something, and that something may disclose the rest. Discoveries are all made from partial ignorance, and remove some ignorance.

Miners have reduced indications to a science, systematizing and using uncertainties as much as they do ores. They work in the dark, as much as do their laborers who dig beneath the earth. Prospectors start on probabilities, and continue on them. Their knowledge is not worthless because it is uncertain ; they make use of things unreliable, and build their fortune on them.

Our business men are nearly all speculators, trying to guess something that is unknown. They have some indications, but not enough for confident opinions. The successful man is he who uses most skillfully the pointers which all may have. Men speculate on the seasons, the crops, and the amount of meat that will be marketed on a given day. They anticipate prices, and contract for shipments far ahead. They build on the uncertain, and try to bring about what they want.

Statesmen and diplomats work mostly with the uncertain. They cannot know what foreign states will do ; but they act on the best guess they can make ; and much depends on whether they use well their materials for a guess. Bismarck

did not shut his eyes because he could not see clearly. He estimated what was probable in the vast wilderness of uncertainties and acted on that. While ordinary men would have despaired because none could tell what would happen, he figured on what was most likely to happen, and where the best work could be done in reference to it. He could not have guided the world had he not some confidence about where it was going. There must always be men who know what is likely to happen and prepare for it. Their thought is the greater because they have not all the desired elements for thinking. The greatest opinions are those formed when one lacks some of the means of forming an opinion. He who makes up in thought what is wanted in data molds the great events of the world.

None can know which of two armies will succeed in a coming battle; yet much depends on guessing the result. To provide for what will happen one must think as hard as the scientist does on his facts, putting the same reasoning at work on the indications as on the certainties. Statesmen may not let great events occur unforeseen; they must know them first as probable. Speculations of this kind are all made with some knowledge and some ignorance; and there may be knowledge enough, if rightly used, to clear up the ignorance.

In exact science we make great use of uncertainties. Our working theories are not fully established. We make discoveries by projecting in thought what may be true, anticipating before we know, and coming up to things through much ignorance. The Nebular Hypothesis, though never fully proven, is made to explain the greatest phenomena, and to unify our knowledge. Our systems of Natural Philosophy are all predicated on it; and we may not ignore it because we have not all the materials for an opinion on it. The greatest thoughts of science circle about the uncertainties.

In religion many think that because they cannot, in the full light of reason, be certain, they may dismiss the subject; and many are accordingly indifferent. But, as it is the greatest subject we have, and its issues are the greatest known,—duty

and eternal life,—we ought to make the best judgment we can on it. Even if we know that we cannot be sure, we should find the greatest probability. We must accept or reject religion; and it is no more rational to reject than to accept when we are uncertain. If we do not know we have no right to say it is false, any more than that it is true. It is our duty to be right; and we are not justified in having an erroneous view when we may have a correct one. If we cannot decide we should know why we cannot, and know how near we can come toward deciding. It is our duty to learn how to act on uncertainties, since we must use them so much, and to make the most of things partly known.

Men must act when they know they may fail, and must decide when they know they may err; and nothing so great should be dismissed because we cannot master it. That we may make a mistake is reason, not for refusing to act, but for studying the subject more. Men must venture in religion as in trade, by taking advantage of the indications, and considering them in their imperfections; and one should learn to act when he has not enough to act on, as when he has not enough to decide on. As he must continue in his uncertainty, and even in his darkness, he should take chances, and do the best he can with the little that he has. He may not know till death if he is right; but, as it is all he can do, he should not complain of the inadequacy of his opportunities. He should rather do the best he can with poor materials, making the most out of the least. If one acts only when he can be certain, and believes only when he has full proof, he will let most of the great values of life escape.

Chicago, Ill.

AUSTIN BIERBOWER.

ALLEGED DISCREPANCIES OF THE BIBLE.

IN Proverbs xxvi. 4 is the injunction not to answer a fool according to his folly, lest we be like unto him. In the next verse we are enjoined to answer a fool according to his folly,

and an excellent reason is added for sometimes taking this course. The two verses illustrate the wise popular proverb "Circumstances alter cases." Whether the person who calls them irreconcilable contradictions should be answered or not answered, let each one judge from the circumstances of the particular case in hand.

So when Paul, in the seventh chapter of First Corinthians, advises the unmarried to remain so on account of the imminent distress, and on the other hand, in 1 Timothy iv. 14, strongly recommends them to marry and rear children, it simply shows that Paul knew as well as any modern poet that "new occasions bring new duties."

Matthew and Luke tell us that when Jesus sent out the twelve on an urgent mission of evangelization and healing, he bade them, among other things, to go without a staff. Mark tells us he said go with a staff only. Both reports may be correct. There were twelve of them, and they were to go without delay. Their haste was to be so great that they were not to linger on their mission for polite greetings to acquaintances in the way. They were not to tarry till they could find a wallet or a second coat. If one had a staff, that was enough. If another had no staff, he was not to wait to find one, but must go at once as he was. Thus different specific directions to different individuals yielded the same universal impression of urgent haste.

It is not the purpose of this note to propose a revised edition of the valuable book on this topic compiled by Haley more than thirty years ago. Rather it is a protest against lightly belittling the Bible by declaring that diverse accounts in the Bible are absolutely irreconcilable. An experience had not long ago with a class in History will show that it is very unsafe to declare that two or more accounts of an event, taken from condensed narratives like those of the Bible, are irreconcilable, even though they seem on their face directly contradictory.

The class in History was studying the French Revolution, using a condensed text-book and having the run of a good

library. When the time of Louis XVI.'s execution was reached, the pupils were told to look up the matter in the history alcove, and report next day by what vote the king was condemned. Nearly half the class reported that the vote was unanimous. A considerable portion of the remainder protested vigorously that there was but one majority. A few said that the majority was a hundred and forty-five in a vote of seven hundred and twenty-one. How utterly irreconcilable these reports seemed! Yet for each the authority of reputable historians could be given. In fact, all were true, and the full truth was a combination of all three. The first vote taken was on the question "Is the king guilty?" Some did not vote on this question, but no one voted No. Some historians tell of this vote, and have not room to detail the further voting on the question of punishment. Each deputy was required to mount the rostrum and give his penalty with such explanations and reasons as he saw fit. Some said imprisonment, some banishment, some immediate death, some death after peace had been made with Austria or after the people had confirmed the penalty by a plebiscite. When all the votes for death at some time were added together, the majority was one hundred and forty-five. But the votes for immediate death were only three hundred and sixty-one over against three hundred and sixty for some other penalty, or for delay in the execution.

If we had full details of all the facts, perhaps all the still unsolved problems of Scripture harmony would be as clearly explained as this problem in French history. A book that has stood such tests as the Bible can rightly be given the benefit of the doubt in every case. Its veracity does not need to be proved with such arguments that no one can find any cavil against them. Rather the Bible is to be believed until it is shown that it cannot by any possibility be accepted.

Olivet, Mich.

W. E. C. WRIGHT.