

THE WITNESS OF HISTORY TO THE INSPIRATION OF THE WORD.¹

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IT is a familiar statement, and as true as it is familiar, that all the religions in the world have their sacred books. It would seem as if a religion were impossible without a book. Tradition is uncertain and truth cannot be handed down by word of mouth to successive generations without becoming involved in error. For this reason the old saying is both true and pertinent, *littera scripta manet*, "the word abides."

The Bible has occupied a special place through all the Christian centuries, and this constitutes our present topic, "The Witness of History to the Divine Character of Scripture." It will only be necessary to appeal to facts, for those matters which are capable of verification by all.

I. The most important evidence is that which is afforded by the Christian Church. Starting from to-day we can see what this means in all the ages of Christianity. The Bible is found everywhere to-day in connection with Christian life and work. It is used for preaching and teaching, in connection with commentaries, books and articles, and as the court of appeal for the various aspects of Christian truth.

When we work backward we can see the same thing during the four centuries or more in which we have had a printed Bible. No one can question the unique place occupied by the Bible throughout this period. Then behind the printed Word there are various versions of the Middle Ages, especially that of Wycliffe. The authority of the Scripture was equally evident then. From this time we can work back to the age of the manuscripts in the fourth century. Of these, which are very numerous, there are three very important ones. There is Codex Vaticanus in Rome, Codex Sinaiticus in Petrograd, and Codex Alexandrinus in London. Scarcely less important is the Freer manuscript now in America. From the same century come no fewer than ten catalogues of New Testament books, six of these being identical with ours and the other four, while

¹ An address given at a Conference on Fundamentals held in Philadelphia.

omitting some of ours, do not include any books not found in the present New Testament.

Further back still, there are quotations by various writers representing both the Eastern and Western branches of the Church, quotations that afford clear testimony to belief in the divine authority of Scripture. Then in the second century there are versions like the Latin and Syriac, and this brings us to within fifty years from the time of the Apostle John. In the first century there is the evidence of the well-known and representative Jew, Josephus, whose testimony clearly proves the identity of the Old Testament of his day (our Lord's time) with that of ours.

These are a few of the important points made in that old but (in this respect) still valuable book, Paley's *Evidences of Christianity*. And it shows that all through the centuries the Church has regarded the Bible as an unique book, as the record of divine revelation, and therefore the voice of God for human life. There is scarcely anything more impressive than the unanimity of belief in divine character of the Scripture in the early centuries. Westcott in his *Introduction to the Study of the Gospels* points out how, amid varieties of attitudes, influences, temperaments and places, with differences of education and character, the essential agreement of the Fathers of the first three centuries is all the more remarkable. There was "one great idea of inspiration in the scattered societies of ancient Christendom" (p. 417).

II. Another witness is that of Heresy, for every erroneous idea asserting itself to be Christian claimed to be based on Scripture. In the second century Gnosticism appealed in this way, and one heretic, Marcion, drew up his own list of New Testament books, rejecting everything that did not agree with his own views. The same testimony is seen in the Sabellian heresy of the third century and the Arian of the fourth. So it has been ever since, errors of various kinds, ancient and modern, claiming their warrant from Scripture and thereby testifying to the uniqueness of the Bible in Christianity. Swedenborgianism, Christian Science, Russellism, Theosophy, Spiritualism and the like, all call attention to the Bible and attempt to justify their positions from the Word of God. These things clearly indicate what the Bible is in the eyes of those who wish to prove that their views are in harmony with Christianity.

But at this point comes the inquiry as to wherein lies the authority

of the Bible. Some say the Bible was given by the Church and that on this account the authority consists in the volume as handed down through the ages. But another question at once emerges: When did the Church do this, and what Church did it? History will be sought in vain for any action of a church council settling the Bible. When, for the first time, in the fourth century, the Church as a whole dealt with this subject, it was not to settle by decision what was to be the New Testament, but simply to bear witness to what beliefs already existed in the various churches regarding these books. The separate books had their own authority from the moment they were written and issued by properly qualified men, and the Church in the fourth century in its corporate capacity testified to the way in which these books had long ago received authority from Christian people. The reason why these writings were regarded as authoritative was the belief that they contained divine revelation. Thus when Jeremiah wrote the contents of chapter xxvi., the truth was at once recognised as authoritative because of authority behind it. And so also when Paul wrote Romans it was immediately authoritative and would have continued to be so, even though it had never been included in a volume. The inclusion into a volume did not give authority to what did not before possess it, but merely recognised the existence of that authority. The gathering of all the separate books is called canonisation, and as some one has truly said: "Canonisation created a book, not a revelation." The collection into a volume was inevitable, especially in view of the example of the Old Testament, but it must never be forgotten that the gathering together into one volume did not for the first time constitute the books authoritative. The heart of this whole question has been well put in words that deserve special emphasis and careful consideration: "*the New Testament is not an authorised collection of books, but a collection of authorised books.*" The authority lies in the books, not in the collection. For this reason when heretics collected their books, the Church naturally bore testimony to what it believed to be the inspired and authoritative Scripture.

III. There is the witness of other books. It is well known that a number of other books "hovered" on the verge of the canon of the Old and New Testaments for some time, but were finally rejected. Thus the books of the Apocrypha though closely associated with the Old Testament, were never recognised by the Jews as part

of their Bible, and the fact that they are now included in the Scripture by the Church of Rome was largely due to the ignorance of Hebrew on the part of Augustine. Men like Origen and Jerome made no mistake, and always differentiated between the Old Testament and the Apocrypha. So also in regard to the New Testament, certain books like the Epistle of Barnabas were set aside because of the proofs that they did not come from apostolic sources and were therefore lacking divine authority and inspiration. The bearing of this on our present subject can be seen from some words of that great scholar, Professor Gwatkin, of Cambridge, England: "There is no more striking contrast in the whole range of literature than that between the creative energy of the apostolic writers and the imitative poverty of the sub-apostolic. The difference of the canonical and uncanonical, so studiously ignored by some of the literary critics, is not a fiction of some church authority but a fact which no serious reader can fail to notice. . . . We miss the spiritual depth and intellectual force and clearness of the New Testament." (*Early Church History*, Vol. I, 98, 99.)

This contrast shows what the early Church and indeed what the Church of all ages has felt as to the uniqueness of the books contained in our Bible. As another profound scholar, Dr. George Salmon, Provost of Trinity College, Dublin, remarked: "The Scriptures by their own weight . . . crushed all rivals out of existence."

IV. The evidence of opponents of Christianity is another point of importance. Their attacks have invariably been centred on the Bible as the citadel of the faith, for they evidently realised that the destruction of holy Scripture would involve the destruction of the Christian religion. Thus in the second century, Celsus attacked the truth of the New Testament, in the third century the Roman imperial authorities significantly ordered all sacred books to be given up for destruction, and in the fourth century Porphyry concentrated his opposition on the book of Daniel because of its predictive and therefore supernatural element. And so it has been ever since; men have attacked the Bible because of its place and power in Christianity, and this fact is one of the striking testimonies to it as a book of divine authority and inspiration.

V. The explorations in Eastern lands can also be brought forward in support of the uniqueness of the Bible. For over sixty years there have been wonderful discoveries in Babylonia, Egypt,

Palestine and Asia Minor, and these have shed singular light on the contents both of the Old and also of the New Testament. Indeed it is a remarkable and profoundly impressive fact that not one of these discoveries has proved the inaccuracy of the Bible, but on the contrary, many of them have confirmed the truth of the Scripture in regard to facts of history and customs of ordinary life. Very much in support of this contention can be derived from *The Deciding Voice of the Monuments*, by Dr. M. G. Kyle.

VI. A comparison of the Bible with the sacred books of other religions is another proof of what history says of the Christian Scriptures. During recent years much attention has been given to the comparative study of religion, and this method is capable of producing very valuable results, because the more Christianity is studied in comparison with other faiths the more it will be seen to be, as Dr. Joseph Parker once said, not a comparative, but the superlative religion. We have only to look at other books making the same claim as the Bible to see the vast difference. Max Muller translated some of the sacred books of the East, but was compelled to omit great sections because of the absolute impossibility of reproducing these books verbatim into English. When people now read these translations and observe their interest and beauty, their truth and purity, they forget, if indeed they know, that sections of very different character have been omitted. But the fact of an expurgated edition tells its own tale.

To the same effect is the evidence of another great authority, the Oxford scholar, Sir Monier Monier-Williams, whom I heard several years ago say that the fundamental difference between all those books of the East and the Bible is that the former taught salvation by works and merit, while the latter teaches it as coming by grace through faith.

And the results of these books on human life, as compared with what the Bible has done and is doing, is a strong and striking proof of the divine power of the Word of God. If you want to see what other books can do, look at the countries where they have been influential. If you want to know what Hinduism can do, look at India. If you want to know what Buddhism can do, look at India and Japan. If you want to know what Confucianism can do, look at China. If you want to know what the Koran can do, look at Turkey and Egypt. We have no fear about the comparison. We

feel perfectly certain that every comparison will show the infinite superiority of the Bible over all these books of the various religious systems.

VII. Last of all, and crowning everything else, is the circulation of the Bible. Bible societies in various countries are circulating the Scripture in whole or in part in over 600 languages and dialects. There is no book in the world as widely translated and distributed. Not only so, but there is no book so capable of proper translation. Many books cannot be adequately rendered from the original language into another, for the "flavour" becomes lost. We have only to think how much of Shakespeare would be left if one of his soliloquies were rendered (say) in Chinese. But the Bible loses very little by translation, and its message of salvation finds expression, at once adequate and satisfying, in every tongue into which it is rendered.

And the effects of all this circulation of the Bible are apparent everywhere. The war alone has done much to prove the power of Scripture over human life. It is not too much to say that the Bible House in New York and the Bible House in London are among the finest evidences of Christianity.

Surveying this summary of history in relation to the Bible, three things stand out.

First. *The Singularity of the Scripture.* It is unique. There is no other book in the world of which these things can be said. There is no real alternative: either this book is divine or else there is no other.

Second. *The Sufficiency of the Scripture.* In the Bible we have a little book, easily obtained and quickly read. It has transformed individuals, uplifted communities, permeated literature, influenced philosophy, faced empires, dominated civilisation and demands attention wherever it goes.

Third. *The Supremacy of the Scripture.* History shows that the Christian revelation and the Bible go together and that Christ never reveals Himself fully apart from the Scripture. The Bible is supreme over human reason because reason is only a channel, not a source of truth; an opportunity for testing revelation, not the creator of it. And Scripture is supreme over the Church, because the Church was created by the Word of God, first spoken and afterwards written. We do not set aside either reason or Church, but simply say that for

the purest, clearest, fullest revelation of Christ as our supreme authority we have to turn to the Bible. It is our final court of appeal, and contains the last and supreme word on everything connected with the spiritual life. We cannot imagine any book giving us the last word on astronomy, geology, biology or any of the other sciences, because there is always something new to be discovered and stated. But here is a book nearly 2,000 years old which contains the best and last teaching about God, sin, redemption and eternity. And for this reason some of us rejoice in these words of one of the Articles of the Episcopal Church: "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation, and so that whatsoever is not read therein or may be proved thereby is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of the faith or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation." This is what David Livingstone meant when, speaking to Stanley, he said, "Stanley, I read the Bible through four times while I was waiting at Manyuema. All that I am I owe to Christ Jesus, revealed to me in His divine Book. Oh, Stanley, Stanley! here is the source of strength and transforming power."

Among other testimonies to the same fact, the words of President Grant may be given: "Hold fast to the Bible as the sheet-anchor to your liberties. Write its precepts in your heart and practise them in your lives. To the influence of this Book we are indebted for all the progress made in true civilisation, and to this must we look as our guide in the future."

In the Louvre in Paris, there is a picture of the great Council of Constantinople, 381, which dealt with the heresy of Macedonius in regard to the deity of the Holy Spirit. The bishops present are depicted as seated in a semi-circle and in the centre is a throne, with a roll on it indicating Scripture as the final appeal. And at another Council, that of Chalcedon, 451, the Gospels were placed similarly in the centre for the same purpose.

And so we say to every one: examine these facts of history and experience, sift them to the very last possibility, and without a doubt the conclusion will be: "Thy Word is true from the beginning"; "Thy Word is very pure"; "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet"; "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the Word of our God shall stand for ever."