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 distinction 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.

In light, 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. This should not disturb the Bible's own statement in xx. 13 that Abraham planned the same scheme on more than one occasion, and consider it unlikely in Genesis xii and xx. and Isaac and Rebekah in Genesis xxvi. supplies of water more than once, and thereby to help himself, and 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 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.

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