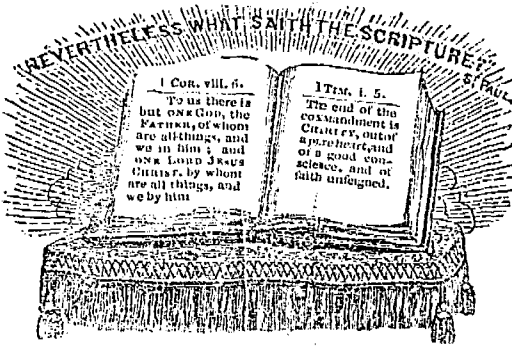


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REMARKS ON THE GENUINENESS OF THE GOSPELS, AND ON MIRACLES.

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In regard to the direct historical evidence for the genuineness of the Gospels, the nature of the case is such, that no evidence of the same character, or of the same weight, can be produced for the genuineness of any other ancient work, which was not, like them, received as an undisputed book of the Christian Scriptures. It is the testimony of a great, widely-spread, and intelligent community to a fact about which they had full means of information, and in which they had the deepest interest. It is their testimony to the genuineness of books, the reception of which as authentic would change the whole complexion of their lives; and might, not improbably, put at hazard life itself, or all that they had before considered as rendering life desirable. It is the testimony of Gentiles to their belief of the genuineness and truth of books derived from Jews,—books regarded with strong dislike by a great majority of that nation; three of which were not in common use among those few Jews who, like them, were disciples of Christ; and all of which were so stamped throughout with a Jewish character, as to be likely, at first view, strongly to offend their prejudices and tastes.

But the peculiar nature and value of this testimony may be laid out of consideration. The fact alone, that the four Gospels were all received as genuine books, entitled to the highest credit, by the whole community of catholic Christians, dispersed throughout the world, admits of no explanation, except that they had always been so regarded. We have begun by reasoning from their reception during the last quarter of the second century; and their reception at that time affords, as we have seen, decisive proof of the estimation in which they must have been held during the whole preceding interval from their first appearance. But, though we may entitle this proof decisive, yet, like all other probable reasoning, it admits of confirmation; and we have seen the confirmation afforded by the evidence of Justin Martyr, who gives direct proof, that the authority of the Gospels was established among Christians before the middle of the second century. I say before the middle of the second century,—for though this was the precise time when he wrote his first Apology, yet his testimony must be considered as relating to a state of things with which he had been previously conversant. We have next remarked the express and particular testimony of Papias to the genuineness of two of the Gospels, and to the estimation in which they were held by Christians. Then, tracing the stream of evidence back to its very source, we have seen Luke's own attestation to the genuineness of his Gospel. And in connexion with this, and with the testimony of Papias, we have attended to the fact, that the acknowledged genuineness of any one of the gospels must have presented an insuperable barrier to the reception of any spurious gospels as a work of like authority. The testimony to the genuineness of any one of the Gospels is virtually a testimony to the genuineness of all; and the testimony to their genuineness is a testimony to their reception by all catholic Christians wherever they had become known.

But, in regard to our present argument, it is unimportant what period an objector may fix upon for the general reception of the Gospels as genuine. The later the period assigned for this event, the more obviously incredible does it become that it should have taken place, on the supposition that the Gospels were not received from the beginning in the character which they afterwards bore.—The longer the Christian community had existed without a knowledge of the Gospels, or without a belief in their genuineness, the more difficult must it have been to produce this belief, and to cause them to be recognized as books of the highest value and author-

ity. Let us suppose that they were not so regarded till the last quarter of the second century. Their general recognition at that period becomes a most remarkable phenomenon.—Some very effective cause or causes must be assigned for it, sufficient to explain how four spurious books, not before known, or known only to be rejected, should suddenly have obtained universal acceptance throughout the Christian world, as containing the truths fundamental to a Christian's belief. No trace of any causes capable of producing this result can be discovered or imagined. In the nature of things, it is impossible that such causes should have existed. The Christians of that age professed to receive the Gospels as genuine and authentic, on the ground that they had always been so regarded. The truth of this fact is the only explanation which can be given of the universal respect in which they were then held.

It appears, therefore, that the evidence of the genuineness of the Gospels is of a very different character from what we are able to produce for the genuineness of any ancient classical work. Very few readers, I presume, could at once recollect and state the grounds on which we believe the epistles to Atticus to have been written by Cicero, or the History of the Peloponnesian War by Thucydides. But should any writer undertake to impugn the genuineness of these, or of many other ancient works that might be named, in the manner in which attempts have been made to weaken the historical argument for the genuineness of the Gospels, he would hardly succeed even in gaining a discreditable notoriety.

But there are objections derived from the Gospels themselves, which are relied upon as doing away the whole force of the historical argument. It is urged that the contents of one Gospel are irreconcilable with those of another, and, therefore, that the Gospel could not be the work of well-informed narrators. By the opponents of Christianity, the errors of theologians are commonly confounded with the truths of our religion; and, so far as the objection just mentioned rests on any tenable grounds, it bears not against the authenticity and genuineness of the Gospels, but against the doctrine that they were written by miraculous inspiration. It would be an extraordinary fact, if these books presented on their face decisive objections to their own credibility which had been overlooked for eighteen centuries by intelligent Christians engaged in their study. To any one, indeed, who is capable of a just apprehension of the proof of the genuineness of the Gospels, afforded by the intrinsic character, nothing can appear more idle than such an attempt to prove from their contents, that they could not have been written by the authors to whom they are ascribed.

But there is another objection drawn from the essential character of the Gospels, which is, in fact, the root, and furnishes the sap and strength, of all others which have been urged against them. They contain the history of a miraculous dispensation; and a miracle, it is asserted is impossible.

This objection, if it can be maintained, is final, not merely in regard to the truth of the Gospels, and the truth of Christianity, but in regard to the truth of all religion.

The assertion, that a miracle is impossible, and, consequently, that such a miraculous intervention of the Deity as Christianity supposes is impossible, must rest for support solely on the doctrine, that there is no God; but that the universe has been formed and is controlled by physical powers essential to its elementary principles, which, always remaining the same, must always produce their effects uniformly according to their necessary laws of action. This being so, a miracle, which would be a change in these necessary laws, is, of course impossible.

But when we refer the powers operating throughout the universe to one Being, as the source of all power, and ascribe to this Being intelligence, design, and benevolence, that is, when we recognize the truth, that there is a God, it becomes the extravagance of presumptuous folly to pretend, that we may be assured, that this Being can or will act in no other way than according to what we call

the laws of nature; that he has no ability, or can have no purpose, to manifest himself to his creatures by any display of his power and goodness which they have not before witnessed, or do not ordinarily witness.

The assertion, therefore, that a miracle is impossible, can be maintained by no coherent reasoning, which does not assume for its basis, that all religion is false; that its fundamental doctrine, that there is a God, is untrue. The controversy respecting it is not between Christianity and atheism; it is between religion, in any form in which it may appear, and atheism.

One may, indeed, give the name of God to the physical powers operating throughout the universe, considered collectively, or to some abstraction, as the moral law of the universe, for example, or to some conception still more unsubstantial and unintelligible, and thus contend that he does not deny the existence of God. But there is but one view which an honest man can take of the deception which in this and other similar cases has been attempted through a gross abuse of words, by which their true meaning is razed out, and a false meaning forced upon them. In contending with irreligion, we have a right to demand that we shall not be mocked with the language of religion.

But the fact has been overlooked, that, supposing the proposition to be admitted, that a miraculous intervention of the Deity is impossible, it would have no bearing on our immediate subject. No inference could be drawn from it to show that the Gospels were not written by those to whom they are ascribed.

The first disciples of our Lord, the first preachers of his religion, whether their account was true or false, taught that he was a messenger from God, whose authority was continually attested by displays of divine power, superseding the common laws of nature. They represented Christianity only under the character of a dispensation wholly miraculous. It has come down to us bearing this character from the first accounts we have of its annunciation,—from the time when St. Paul wrote those Epistles, the genuineness of which cannot be questioned.—The fact that Christianity is a miraculous dispensation was the basis of his whole teaching, and equally of the teaching of the other Apostles. It cannot be pretended, that any indication is to be found of its having been presented to men under another character. The effects which followed its preaching are such as could have resulted only from such a conception of it. The hypothesis, therefore,—for such an hypothesis has actually been put forward,—that this was not the original character of Christianity,—that its first preachers did not announce it as a miraculous dispensation, but that some time during the lives of the Apostles, or immediately after, it assumed this character,—can be regarded only as one of the most extraordinary of those exhibitions of human folly which have lately been given to the world as speculations concerning our religion. There is no doubt, that the Apostles and their companions represented Christ as a messenger from God, whose divine authority was attested throughout his ministry by miracles. It can, therefore, be no objection to the genuineness of the Gospels, that such is the representation to be found in them.—Whether true or false, it is the only representation that was to be expected in histories of Jesus given by Apostles and their companions.

The Gospels, then, contain that view of Christianity which was presented by its first preachers. We have in these books that solemn attestation which was borne by them, and was confirmed by circumstances that exclude all doubt of its truth, to facts in the ministry and character of Christ which evince his divine mission. And to this nothing is objected but a speculation, which supposes that all religion must be false.

In regard to men's belief in Christianity, and their apprehension of its character, the present is an age of transition. We are leaving behind us the errors and superstitions of

former days, with all their deplorable consequences,—the dominion of a priesthood, tyranny over reason, persecution, false conceptions of morality by which its sanctions were often wholly prevented, and that disgust toward Christianity which the deformed image bearing its name, and set up for idol-worship, was so fitted to produce. But, through a revulsion of feeling, occasioned by this state of things, many of the clergy, particularly in England,—one is reluctant to say many priests, though this is a title which they readily assume,—have turned about, and are travelling back into the dark region of implicit faith, Jesuitical morality, and religious formalities, absurdities, and crimes. On the other hand, there is a multitude of speculators, who, in the abandonment of religious error, have abandoned religion itself, and whose only substitute for it, if they have any, is an unsubstantial spectre which they have decorated with its titles.—Meanwhile, very many enlightened men, who have been repelled from the study of Christianity by the imbecility or folly of those who have assumed to be its privileged expositors and defenders, regard it, at best, only with a certain degree of respect, as being, perhaps, a noble system, if properly understood, and one the belief of which, even under the forms that it has been made to assume, is, at all events, useful to the community:—*Magnifica quidem res cœlularis, si modo est ulla.*

In order that we may pass from this state of things to a better, it is necessary that the intellect of men should be awakened and brought to exercise itself on the most important subject that can be presented to its examination. The result would be a rational and firm faith in Christianity, with all the consequences that must flow from such a faith. The conviction which rests on reason are of very different efficacy from the impression produced through prejudice, imagination, or passion. The latter may lead to great evil; the former can produce only good. There is a sense of reality attending the convictions of reason, which makes it impossible that they should not penetrate into the character. Let any one, in the best exercise of his understanding, be persuaded that the history of Jesus Christ is true, that the miracle of his mission from God, which belongs to the order of events lying beyond the sphere of this world, and concerning the whole of man's existence, is as real as those facts which take place in this world, conformably to the narrow circle of its laws with which we are familiar, and he has become intellectually, and can hardly fail to become morally, a new being. In recognizing that fact, he recognizes his relation to God, or rather, if I may so speak, God's relation to him. Life assumes another character. It is not a short period of existence in which we are to confine our views and desires to what may be attained within its limits. It is a state of preparation for a life to come, which will continue into an infinity where the eye of the mind is wholly incapable of following its course. Viewed in the broad light which thus pours in upon us, their false coloring disappears from the objects of passion, and we perceive that there is nothing permanently good, but what tends to the moral and intellectual progress of the soul, and nothing to be dreaded as essentially evil, but what tends to impede it.

BE KIND.—How foolish it is to be anything else. Kindness to all God's creatures is like soft soap upon a ship's ways. It enables one to slide off into the great ocean of eternity without friction—without smoke or smell of fire. There is no excuse for unkindness, even to the 'vildest of the vile.' It is the bane of society, and yet all are more or less liable to indulge it. We may be determined, resolute, unyielding in what we believe to be duty, but still we may be kind. Indeed, firmness and decision in our treatment of wrong doers, are required by kindness, for one of the first dictates of a kind spirit is, that we should consult the good of an offender, and his good can be effectually promoted only by intercepting him in his evil way.

Eastern Times.

* By Strauss, in his *Leben Jesu* (Life of Jesus).