

The Bible does not profess to supply us with treatises on mathematics, astronomy, geology, or physiology; but it does profess to give us much sacred history. That history seems as much an integral part of the Bible as any of its prophetic predictions or admonitions, its sacred songs, its laws of life. Nay, its directly moral and religious lessons are most commonly given in the historical form—in the records of God's dealings with nations, families, individuals—in the bright example of God's servants culminating in the perfect human life of His only begotten Son. Wherever, therefore, common human history comes athwart any of the sacred narratives, we feel that it is treading on holy ground, and that any discrepancies here established between the common human and the sacred narrative are far more important than difficulties respecting science properly so called. We feel, and rightly, that if the Bible be not substantially a true history, it is not that for which the Christian Church has ever taken it, and which, indeed, it distinctly professes to be. And here all that can well be done, especially on such an occasion as the present, to guide honest, and patient, and humble inquirers in the sight of such difficulties is to point out one or two principles which good men have found of great value, and which, borne in mind, may avert any real evil. First, let us not make too much of the term, 'a substantially true history.' Such a history is not necessarily guaranteed by a perpetual miracle in the strict accuracy of all its minute and insignificant details. Most sound theologians have no dread whatsoever of acknowledging minute points of disagreement in the fourfold narrative even of that most momentous of all histories which records the life of the Redeemer. 2nd. All sound theologians maintain that as God employed human instruments to be, in a secondary sense at least, the authors of the sacred books, so he left them free to show their own characters and habits of observation and of thought, in matters which were clearly beside the great Divine message which it was their honoured office to communicate or transmit. How many of the supposed difficulties as to numbers and national or family genealogies, and even as to geographical, chronological, or physiological accuracy, may be allowed quietly to float away without our being able to solve them, if we bear this acknowledged fact distinctly in mind? When laborious ingenuity has exerted itself to collect a whole store of such difficulties, is it wrong to answer—Suppose what you say is true, what on earth does it signify? How does it affect God's message to my soul? Nay, does not the same thing hold here in our comparison of the Gospels, as in our comparison also of all separate streams of mere human history? It has been urged that the divergencies in unimportant matters—the alleged marks that the authors embodied the somewhat narrow and inaccurate styles of the age in which they lived—give a surer air of reality to their record, and stamp them with a more vivid impress of truth. Chalmers certainly has long since pointed out that it is a peculiar proof of unfairness in many of the adversaries of Christianity that they would subject the sacred histories to a degree of minute and unnatural scrutiny as to their accuracy in details which, if applied to history in general, would destroy all historical evidence, and prove that no history that was ever written was substantially true. 3rd. We must be very cautious not to confound mere traditional expositions of what is contained in Scripture with the Scripture itself. It is astonishing how many statements, historical or scientific, are commonly believed to be in Scripture which, when we examine for ourselves, we find are not really there. For example, it is not thoughtless persons only who have but a dim perception of the difference between what we read in the Bible and in Milton. There never was a time when it was more necessary that, for the honour of the Bible, we should make sure that we know what is really in it, and allow it to speak for itself. 4th. The student will not forget that, though archæological and ethnological researches, whether based on ingeniously deciphered inscriptions or on the remains of ancient art, or the patient study of the affinities of language, have of late made great progress, they are still I suppose, to be regarded as only in their infancy. No wise man, then, will rush hastily to conclusions which may, after all, when our knowledge is more complete, prove not to be supported by the very testimony on which the whole rests. The same wise and modest caution which has been recommended