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## TRUTH AND FACT IN THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

Is a knowledge of fact essential to a conception of truth regarding the fundamental verities of our faith? Can man know God apart from certain historical events which are presented to him for his acceptance? That is the subject which we propose to examine in this paper.

It is very frequently said that since modern historical methods have been applied to the Bible, and scientific conclusions respected in its exegesis, we can no longer hold much of the narrative portions to be real fact. Their historicity must be surrendered. This, however, is followed up by saying that what we have lost is not of first-rate importance. The *truth* is there, even though the *fact* has gone, or in other words, what the narrative is intended to teach us of moral and spiritual realities stands out with just as much power as it did to our fathers who believed the Bible as it stands.

This canon of interpretation is employed in the whole of the Old Testament. Take the story of the Garden of Eden to begin with. Evolution, we are told, has utterly demolished all chance of reading the story as in any sense historical. It is pure allegory, showing in pictorial guise what happens to the generality of people as they grow through the various stages of individual development, meeting and falling before temptation, being made conscious of shame, and finally being reconciled to God. It is, to use a phrase we once heard, "The story of Everyman."

When we come to the Patriarchs, there seems to be some doubt as to how far the narratives are to be taken as history. The theory of the personification of the tribe has given way, we think, to the interpretation of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as real persons, though how much of their biographies is to be taken as historical fact is a matter for discussion. In a book published for the use of school-teachers during the Scripture lesson, Canon Glazebrook sets a number of questions, amongst which is this: Why did the Hebrews invent (note the word) the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac? The answer to be given is—To teach us faith. In short, much of the detail here must be given up, though as before the moral and spiritual truth is said to remain.

Are the Exodus and the Conquest of the Promised Land to be regarded as real history? Canon Cheyne, who is admittedly a more extreme critic than many others, denies the actual existence of Moses himself. We do not see that his position differs logically from the position of Dr. Driver, who does believe in the historical personality of the great Lawgiver, but in any case they are at one in denying many of the details given in the books of Exodus and Joshua. In the later annals of Samuel and Kings, it is admitted that the main trend of the story is trustworthy, though we are never free from the fear that in the details some error of fact may have crept in. The miracles associated with the names of Elijah and Elisha are reckoned to be far less reliable than the previous and subsequent history, and are in fact dismissed by most critics as entirely legendary. The books of Chronicles are described as "idealised history," that is, history written with a view to showing up the past in a much more favourable light than would appear the case from the earlier historical books. The same ground is covered, but the facts so changed as to make the national past appear much more splendid than it really was. Here again, the facts are dismissed as not being essential to the true mission of the books.

In one other type of Old Testament literature the same rule is followed. We take the Book of Job as our first example. This story of the sufferings of a good man, and the cold comfort which he received from his friends, is said to be not a record of actual happening but a drama in which the problem of suffering is set forth and discussed. The other example is the well-worn story of Jonah, which is pronounced to be an allegory woven around the name of a prophet who was known to have lived.

We do not believe that these positions can be consistently maintained by Christian scholars, and we subjoin our reasons for our rejection of them.

The critical findings neglect the fact that the Bible professes to be an almost continuous history throughout its entire historical portion. One scene leads on to another, and a transition is made smoothly and with no noticeable break. Take the Book of Genesis as an instance. It is grouped around the phrase "These are the generations of ——" which occurs ten times, and on each occasion is the sign of a change from a more general to a more

particular treatment of the history. From Adam we come to Noah, from Noah to Abraham, and from Abraham to Joseph. Each step is dependent upon the stage previous to it. Consequently, if we remove any of the connecting links in the chain, we are at a loss to know what to do with the others. They seem to be left "in the air" so to speak. Further, it is beyond doubt that wherever the later portions of the Bible mention the earlier portions, it is with the assumption that the earlier portions are as historical as themselves, and if we attempt to interpret these references of one passage to another whilst at the same time sharing the critical view of the importance of the history as a whole, we shall find ourselves in difficulties. Take the Garden of Eden story and compare it with Luke iii. 24-38. The latter passage gives us the genealogy of our Lord back to Adam. It finishes with the words, ". . . the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God". Assuming that Adam is simply a type of Everyman, we must read, ". . . the son of Seth, the son of a representative of human nature in general, the son of God". Evidently the Gospel writer knew nothing of Adam being simply a representative of human nature. Adam was certainly a historical character to him, from whom the later ancestors of our Lord were descended. The same applies to the genealogies of the Old Testament. If myth gradually merges into history we are plunged into uncertainty as to where myth ends and history begins.

The critics entirely overlook this aspect of the matter. Moralising upon the story they forget that out of it is drawn all the subsequent history of God's chosen race. The treatment, in fact, is that of a complete story which has no connection with what appears on the next page, a treatment which is most obviously out of place here, where the narrative has a manifest and intimate connection with that which follows.

The rest of the history as far as the Exodus is treated in much the same way, making this part of the Oracles of God not a connected account of God's overruling purpose, but a series of disjointed tales each intended to point a moral.

It is here that the fallacy becomes apparent in the analogy sometimes drawn between the early narratives of the Bible and the legendary anecdotes of such early heroes as King Arthur of our own country. The latter are not accepted as an authentic part of the annals of our land. They are openly recognised to

be something different from proper history, and are accordingly put into a different category. The early history of the Hebrews has in it no distinction of the kind. So far as an unbiassed reader can detect, all is history. If it be pleaded that the distinction is there although the original writers did not take any trouble to make it plain, we can only say that this is to assume the very position under discussion, and to establish which evidence must be brought forward.

It is significant that when we come to the New Testament many of the critics who dismiss the necessity for history in the Old Testament are strongly in favour of retaining it here, although this rule is by no means invariable. Dr. Major, for example, has said that a man can be quite a good Christian even if he does not believe that Jesus ever lived. Dr. Major takes Christianity to be simply an adherence to the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount, in which a belief in the Jesus of history does not, to say the least, bulk so large. More generally, however, the groundwork of the Gospel records is taken as being an essential foundation for the theological aspects of our faith. In fact Dr. Peake pleads strongly for this view in *Christianity, its Nature and its Truth*. Now, if plain unvarnished fact is necessary in the case of the New Testament, why not in the case of the Old Testament as well? Those who make a distinction are, in respect to all those who value sound reasoning, bound to show the principle on which the distinction is based. Either the historical foundation is necessary or it is not, and we quite fail to see that it makes any difference whether the old or the new covenant be the subject of our inquiries.

Whilst the New Testament is under notice, it will be convenient to ask, in relation to our general subject, what is the truth to be revealed? Is it of such a nature that it can be entirely dissociated from the facts of history? We are persuaded that much of the critical reasoning is vitiated by a fallacy at this point. It is not enough to say that Christianity teaches that God is a God of love, or that righteousness will somehow prevail in the end. Through the centuries, and certainly at each of the great revivals, it has been stressed that Christianity is a way of salvation, and that that salvation has been wrought out for us in certain great events, such as the preparation of a particular people,

the Incarnation of the Son of God, and above all His atoning work upon the Cross. If these things be not true, then the Christianity of millions of saints, both past and present, will simply have vanished. Such events have proved to be the ladder by which believers have risen from darkness to light, from despair to hope, from death to life. To snatch them away would be tantamount to snatching away the ladder on which they firmly believe themselves to be climbing Heavenward, and would plunge them back again into the abyss of an aimless, hopeless existence. To attempt to satisfy them by saying that truths like "God is love" still remain intact would be to offer them a stone instead of bread. Whatever may be the philosophical worth of such propositions as "Christ died, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God", it is upon statements of this kind, much more than upon abstract eternal truth, that the Christian Church depends, and which have been the very reason for its existence.

We return to the Old Testament, as being the more fruitful field for discussion, in order to point out the falsity of a very common line of critical argument. The actual occurrence of many of the events recorded in the Old Testament is said to be unnecessary to our interpretation of them on the same ground that the parables of Jesus are not based, so far as we know, upon real happenings. We do not demand historicity in the parables in order to elucidate their teaching: why, it is asked, should we do so in the case of the Old Testament narratives?

This identification of the two types of literature overlooks the distinction which we have already drawn between isolated scraps and a continuous strand of the record of a nation's for-ordination, selection and development. The parables of Jesus are not a part of the staple of history. They are plainly the utterances of a teacher which have for their purpose the pointing of a moral or religious truth. The story itself matters little, save in so far as it adds force to the point which the teacher wishes to make. They have an obvious beginning and an obvious ending, and are not connected with what goes before or what comes after. In a word, they are parenthetical, and they are marked in so many words as utterances of Jesus. When the moral is pointed or otherwise seen by the listeners their task is done and a return is

made to our Lord's action, whatever it may be. How can it be said that this applies to the Old Testament narratives? The narratives which it is so glibly proposed to compare with the parables of our Lord are an integral part of the historical fabric. If the accounts of the beginnings of man upon the earth, of the promises to the patriarchs, of their wanderings under the Divine guidance, of the deliverance from Egypt, and the entry into Canaan, are all parabolic, where is the background of history into which they are supposed to fit?

A truer analogy would be found by comparing the parables of Jesus to those of Jotham and Nathan. The parable of the trees in the ninth chapter of Judges is recorded, not as if it were a part of the history of Israel, but as a speech of Jotham. The speaker immediately goes on to make his meaning absolutely clear, and after that the action of Jotham himself comes before us. Both in the pointing of the moral by the speaker, therefore, and by the parenthetical setting in which the story is placed, the real character of the story is demonstrated. The same applies to the story of the poor man's ewe lamb which was told by Nathan to David after the King's great sin against Uriah the Hittite. Again the story is clearly shown to be an utterance of the prophet, superimposed upon the incident of his visit to the King. When Nathan comes to the end of his parable he shows by a swift and penetrating sentence of judgment that it has a historical counterpart in the King's own life. Both of these utterances are true parables, and they are widely different in their literary setting and their purpose from the other Old Testament narratives mentioned in the beginning of this paper.

We have said at an earlier stage in this paper that Christianity consists, not merely in abstract truths about God and the Universe, but much more in certain tangible events; but we will now go a step further and ask, "How is it possible to obtain a knowledge of the eternal, abstract truths themselves apart from the facts and events which we can grasp?" Truth concerning the nature of God and of His purpose in the world is not self-evident, and the Bible is allowed to be a revelation of those truths which could not be discovered by the unaided reason. Now, in so far as the revelation is recorded in history, we submit that the history is absolutely necessary to our knowledge of the

truth to be revealed. The proof of this may be stated very briefly thus: The records give us an account of God's dealings with men, and from the dealings we can deduce His character, or at least that part of it with which we are concerned. The dealings which we find recorded in the Bible are, in fact, an index in time and space to that which lies behind time and space. The step from the one to the other is just a piece of induction from the particular to the general, and it is therefore manifest that before we can say anything at all on the matter of general truth, we must have the particular facts as a foundation on which to build our superstructure of Theology.

Come back to the instance quoted above from Canon Glazebrook. This writer thinks that the actual occurrence of the offering of Isaac by Abraham cannot be accepted. It is simply an allegory invented with the idea of teaching us faith. How did the Jews know that God was worthy of the faith they wished to inspire? They must have known somehow, if the story were to have any value, and upon this previous knowledge the story was founded. It would follow from this that the narrative does not form any part of a real revelation from God to man, but only a later illustration of a revelation already known. The enquirer will doubtless ask, "But *how* is the revelation already known?" To this question the Bible has no answer if we take the critical view of it, that the facts recorded are of secondary importance. A simple illustration will perhaps make this clearer. If I hear that a friend of mine of whom I do not know very much has been living a life of voluntary poverty in order to benefit the poor, I will at once come to the conclusion that he is of a noble character. The conclusion is based upon the known or assumed fact. If now the report turns out to be false owing to there having been some confusion, how am I justified in continuing to believe in his reputed character of self-sacrifice? If the belief rests on this report alone it is coterminous with it. In the same way, the story of Abraham cannot reveal the opportunity for faith unless it be true as a narrative.

The critic may reply that the truth can be otherwise known, principally through the revelation of Jesus, and therefore the historical nature of the narrative need not be insisted upon. This, however, does not get rid of the question but only removes it to the New Testament, and this matter has already been mentioned. Moreover, if this step be taken, these narratives which



have been given up are no longer to be regarded as revelations of truth, but only as illustrations of truth already known. They become, in fact, little better than a series of fables something like Æsop's, except that the writer has forgotten to append the moral to each one, an omission which has recently been supplied by the critics.

We go on to suggest that if the plain man gets the idea that the history which he reads in the Bible is untrustworthy he will begin to doubt the spiritual teaching of the Book. "If I told you of earthly things and ye believe not," said Jesus, "how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things?" The plain man will argue that if he cannot accept those statements which it is in man's power to verify or to correct, how can he be expected to accept those teachings in regard to which he can do neither? To say the least, faulty history is not calculated to give that whole-hearted confidence in the Scriptures which is necessary to their most profitable reading. We remember hearing Henry Howard, one of the greatest experts on sermon illustration in the world, say to a party of young ministers, "Always verify your facts in an illustration: If you make a mistake in a point of fact, and there is a man in the congregation who understands this point of fact, his confidence in the preacher will at once drop, and the preacher's power is, in his case, considerably damaged". It seems to us that exactly the same principle applies in the case of the statements of Scripture. If they are shown to be unreliable, a shadow of doubt is cast upon the other parts of God's Word.

We have now another significant thing to bring before the reader of this paper. When the importance or otherwise of historical fact is being discussed, the members of the critical school hasten to assure us that although the fact has had to go, the spiritual teaching remains. But now we turn to what the critics have to say when, the question of history being put aside, they tell us of the different conceptions of God which have found place between the covers of the Bible. We now get the impression that much of the theology of the Old Testament is no more to be trusted than its history. Those who have surrendered belief in the history on the strength of retaining the spiritual teaching have probably not bargained for this, but no reader of critical literature needs to be told that it is true, and a few

moments' reflection will show why. If it is shown that the historical portions of the Bible (or any portions which deal with commonplace facts) either did not happen or are not correctly stated it is immediately open to the critic to say that inspiration does not imply infallibility. This position being allowed, it is but an easy step to the position that the spiritual teaching has become largely mixed up with the human element, and hence is not to be taken as it stands. On the critics' own showing, therefore, we cannot separate fact from truth in the way proposed. The reliability of the one inevitably affects the reliability of the other.

We do not propose to examine in detail Christ's attitude to the so-called myths and legends of the Old Testament, since we think that each instance must be settled on its own particular factors. There is, however, one thing which it seems desirable to say, as showing that our Lord did not subscribe to the idea we are opposing. The incident concerned is that of the Flood. Dr. Fosdick has told us that we can no longer believe in a God who would drown all the inhabitants of the earth for their wickedness, but when we return to Matt. xxiv. 38-39, we find that Christ's statement on the matter is very different. There is absolutely nothing to show that He did not believe and stress the current conception of the Deluge story. He compared it with His own Second Advent, pointing out that both are in the nature of judgments upon the world. According to our Lord Himself, then, the Flood was a Divine judgment, and He and Dr. Fosdick are shown to be at variance on the very important question of the moral nature of God. The critics have always assured us that whatever parts of the Bible they dismiss, they will certainly acclaim Jesus to be at least an unerring teacher regarding the Divine character. Was He really such, or was He simply a retailer of popular, erroneous ideas? If the former, our principle is upheld, taking the reference to the Flood as a fair example. If not, then either His teachings ought to be thrown aside as those of a blind, albeit well-meaning guide, or else His very name deserves to be cast out and trodden under foot of men as being borne by the most fraudulent charlatan who ever professed to lead erring men and women to their Heavenly Home. The thought, in the circumstances, is logical; but for us for ever intolerable!

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