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# The Evangelical Quarterly

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## THE HISTORICITY AND ACCURACY OF SCRIPTURE

WE ARE to begin our examination of this question in agreement over the fact of the inspiration of Scripture and upon its uniqueness as a vehicle of revelation and the criterion of Christian doctrine. The problem we have set ourselves is that of the extent to which inspiration involves historicity and accuracy, and we are to concern ourselves not only with the question whether scriptural historicity and accuracy are facts, but also whether it matters if they are facts or not. We need hardly remind ourselves that, speaking generally, such a question seldom occurred to the Christian Church until the nineteenth century. It was taken for granted that inspiration involved accuracy. It is only when nineteenth-century criticism denied the accuracy of Scripture that theologians have come to ask whether they cannot retain the authority, inspiration and uniqueness of Scripture while admitting its inaccuracy.

We ought to begin by acknowledging that at least in theory a case can be made out for such a position. Much of the Lord's teaching was in parables. The sower who went out to sow was no actual living individual. His sowing was not an objective fact. He was a symbol or type, like Hamlet or Lady Macbeth, of a whole class of men constantly engaged upon this homely occupation, and his action was again a symbol or type of action in the spiritual world. Yet nothing can convey spiritual truth better than these parables.

This being so, our mind naturally goes back to the Old Testament. We know the Old Testament to be the great picture book of the Christian faith. The apostles and New Testament writers declare it so to be and use it as such. The Apostle Paul takes the story of Sarah and Hagar and states it to be an allegory of Christian truth. We are encouraged in the New Testament to use the Old Testament in this way. If this is so, does it matter

whether the pictures are historical? May they not be allegorical in the modern sense of the word and yet just as true pictures, just as potent to illustrate and convey truth? Must every Old Testament type and story, assuming it to be an illustration of some aspect of New Testament truth, rest upon objective facts? Need there really have been, for instance, a tabernacle set up in the wilderness with the furniture and ritual that attached to it? Read a wonderful commentary like Bonar's on Leviticus—the best, incidentally, I imagine there has ever been or could be. Could not all the devotional and spiritual lessons which it conveys be just as real and just as valuable if the original tabernacle and its ritual were nothing but an imaginative ideal?

We must at once acknowledge that there is a sense in which to us Christians it would not matter. We no longer need the shadows since we possess the substance, and the disappearance of tabernacle, temple, priesthood and privilege is a sure sign that in this sense we do not need them. But that is not quite the same thing. The first question that we shall ask ourselves in a moment is this: if we do not need them now, were there not others who needed them once? And that will not be our only question.

No Christian ought to have any doubt in his mind about the historicity of the facts recorded in the New Testament. The central core of the Gospel is the fact that the Son of God came into this world in which we live, was born of a peasant woman, grew up to manhood, taught and healed in Galilee, died at the hand of the Jews by the instrumentality of Pontius Pilate, rose from the grave and returned to the Father. The foundation and centre of our Christian life is this same Jesus, unseen, but alive and present almighty Sovereign in heaven and earth and in His people's hearts. If these facts are not objective, there is no Christian faith and there is no meaning in the New Testament at all. The only historical book in the New Testament beside the Gospels is the Acts of the Apostles, and the same considerations apply here. It is concerned with the beginnings of the same Christian Church to which we belong to-day and with the proclamation of the same Gospel with which we are entrusted. Its story contains elements of example and precept. So does the life of Jesus. But these are quite inadequate alone to sustain the value of the book if we deny the objectivity of the facts recorded. If the stories in Acts are myths like the mediaeval legends, then the Christian Church is a myth also.

These things, I think, are generally conceded or acknowledged by most theologians to-day, except perhaps some belonging to an extreme wing of liberalism. But we cannot say the same with regard to the Old Testament. While we conservatives should be content to rest upon the word of Christ alone, which is quite definite and inescapable with regard to the historicity of the Old Testament, it is much better not to be obliged to do so blindly but to understand for ourselves the necessity for the historicity. Where is our point of contact to be? It seems to me that it must be *upon the Emmaus road*. It is here that to the minds of the two disciples and through them to the minds of all believers there was revealed the identity of the risen Christ, the incarnate Jesus and the Messiah of Old Testament Scripture. It seems impossible to confine the ground covered by the Lord in His conversation on that walk to direct prediction such as is to be found in Deut. xviii or Dan. ix. If the story means anything, it means that He made the whole Old Testament glow with life and meaning. This was the starting-point of the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament unfolded on the very day that the fulfilment of the prophecies about Christ's work was complete. Here began the Church's vision of "Christ in all the Scriptures".

Here, it seems to me, lies the ultimate reason for holding the historicity of the Old Testament—because the whole Old Testament testifies to Christ. The events which it recounts are as real as He is real. Suppose they were not. Suppose the story of Noah and his ark was as much fiction as the story of Othello. Suppose the biography of Abraham came from the imagination of some eastern story-teller. Suppose the account of the Exodus was the imaginative embellishment of some dim commonplace event of the past wrongly understood and inordinately valued. Suppose the tales of David and Samuel, Solomon and his temple, Elijah, Elisha, Jezebel and Hezekiah had their origin in hero-worship and were nothing but the theme of minstrels. How could these things be fingers pointing to Christ? If we are to reconcile the theory that they are fiction with the theory that they speak of Christ, we must believe in a kind of inspiration of which, it seems to me, the Bible gives us no hint, an inspiration more mechanical, more crude, than any that a "fundamentalist" has ever been accused of holding. We must believe that God so worked on the minds of story-tellers and

fiction-mongers that they produced from their imaginations stories which were a perfect and recognisable foretelling of Christ. This would make the *praeparatio evangelica* completely artificial, something of the intellect and fancy only, having no contact with experience. This for one I cannot believe, though it seems to me that many theologians of to-day may find themselves driven to it if they continue to be blind to the historicity of the Old Testament narratives. The writers of the Bible, if they do anything, surely give us an inspired record of things that they knew and saw. And the great events by which God prepared the world in Israel for the coming of Christ were not reproduced by Him in the imaginations of storywriters but upon this actual scene of flesh and blood. Jesus Christ is supremely real. Only what is real could truly typify or foreshadow Him. No wonder that those who reject the historicity of much in the Old Testament reject also the age-old Christian conception that the Old Testament points to Christ.

Even when we read the Old Testament for the purpose of obtaining spiritual strength for our own lives, when we try to follow Abraham in his faith or to profit by his mistakes, surely it is essential that we realise that the God of Abraham is our God, that what He did for Abraham He does to-day for us. It is not Abraham, Moses, David and the rest that ought to matter most to us when we read their lives and stories. It is God. But if the stories are but precepts and parables without basis in fact, then our attention must be concentrated on the characters. The truth is that the Old Testament is the story of God. It tells us what He has done, what infinite pains He took to prepare the way for the coming of His Son, how He moulded the events and the history of the world in which we live so that by a wonderful series of types and correspondences He could be recognised when he came and His work understood. "O God, we have heard with our ears, and our fathers have told us, what great things Thou didst in their days, and in the old time before them." But if we have not heard, if our fathers have been telling us fairy-tales, what is the use of crying, "Arise, O Lord, save us and deliver us for Thine honour"? None, as it seems to me.

We have already stated that there is a sense in which the objectivity of the shadows matters little to us Christians now that we have the substance. It is true that the importance of the Old Testament to us lies in its witness to Christ. It forms a series

of pictures of Him, but real pictures, not imaginative ones. But we have to remember that for generations before the coming of Christ there existed among Israel a true remnant, a congregation of the Lord, sustained both by its remembrance of the past and its hope for the future. We to-day are in exactly the same position as this though the events to which we look back are of course infinitely greater. Now suppose the records of those events were untrue. Suppose their historicity was open to doubt. We have already told ourselves in the course of this paper what would happen. No Christianity would be left. To prove that this is so we have only to look round and see the collapse of faith that has followed the destructive criticism of the Biblical records. Faith can only be sustained by the most definite conviction, resting upon incontrovertible grounds, of those facts upon which it stands. Old Testament believers possessed such conviction. The Old Testament is full of it. Did it rest upon false grounds which they were too innocent to suspect? Is that the way God treats His servants? If we believe that it is not, are we not bound on this ground alone to believe in the historicity of the Old Testament records?

We must now turn our attention to the subject of Scriptural *accuracy* as opposed to general historicity. The *events* recounted in Scripture may be all historical—indeed we firmly believe that they are, but are the *descriptions* of those events accurate? Now it is obvious that if we allow inaccuracy at all there must be limits to the inaccuracy if we are to benefit by the historicity. We should know nothing of an event, however historical, if it were described to us in language of which not one sentence could be trusted. Readers of *The Brut*, or Henry of Huntingdon, or even Geoffrey of Monmouth, will understand something of what I mean. In certain writers of the Bible we may expect to find a standard of accuracy comparable with that of the careful and scholarly historian—in the writings of Luke, for example—and there is evidence that we have it; but what of a man such as Mark, what of the Jewish prophets and scribes in Old Testament times? It is axiomatic, of course, that, however careful or dispassionate a historian may set out to be, it is impossible for him to keep from introducing to some extent into his writing a bias due to his own outlook and personality. Indeed it is only in modern times that the desire to write history impartially and to describe events dispassionately has arisen at all. In the

ancient world most people described past events in order to draw from them conclusions which would help to impress upon their readers some idea that they were propagating or purpose that they had in mind. This is certainly true of the Biblical writers. The purpose that they had in mind was the glory of God and the salvation of mankind. We shall not find anything cold or dispassionate in the Bible.

Then again there are inevitably different standards of accuracy. No one can be more accurate than the extent to which his realisation and knowledge takes him. When I hear the clock strike, I say quite rightly, "It is twelve o'clock", but to anyone in an observatory who uses a chronometer that can measure fractions of seconds my remark is grossly inaccurate. Again in view of the theoretically possible infinite division of time the chronometer itself is so inaccurate as practically to have no meaning at all. In that part of God's creation which may be outside the limits of time the remark "It is twelve o'clock" is not only inaccurate. It is meaningless. Accuracy, therefore, is always relative. It depends upon a standard which is relative. If we expect the Scriptural writers to speak with the accuracy of the chronometer, where are we to expect them to stop? They must speak, to be logical, in an absolute language known only to, and understood only by, God. Inspiration does not involve this. If it did, it would be necessary for every reader of the Bible to be equally "inspired" with the writers in order to understand what they were talking about. The result would be nonsense, a Bible utterly useless because unintelligible. Failure to see this was the mistake of the foolish rationalist who "proved" to a gullible set of undergraduates that the Bible was inaccurate and therefore uninspired by turning them to 1 Kings vii. 23: "a molten sea, ten cubits from the one brim to the other: it was round all about, and his height was five cubits; and a line of thirty cubits did compass it round about." This verse, he said, gave a wrong value to the ratio  $\pi$ . The rationalist's error was in supposing that his scientific instruments had given him the final and ultimate standard of accuracy. The truth is that the standard of his instruments was far rougher as compared with any absolute standard in the knowledge of God than is the intelligible and meaningful statement in the book of Kings as compared with the standard of the instruments. The statement in Kings is perfectly accurate according to the measure habitually

used and understood by the writer and his immediate readers. The language of the Bible is always the language of the man in the street because it is to him that God addresses Himself. It is our hyper-accuracy that is beside the mark.

This brings us to another important stage in our pursuit of accuracy. We must distinguish between accuracy of language and accuracy of thought. Language is constantly changing. Words of the same language, accurate enough in one century, may be inaccurate, or even meaningless or erroneous, in the next. This factor is greatly increased when we are dealing with a foreign language and centuries of time. When a language is dead it is frankly impossible to cover with our knowledge all its shades of meaning and shifting emphasis. Before therefore we pronounce an ancient writer inaccurate we must exercise the utmost care to see that we are aware as far as possible of the meaning that the words conveyed to the writer and to those who first read them. There is no hard-and-fast form of verbal expression for the conveyance of any given idea. There are sometimes almost as many forms as there are speakers. The right conception of verbal inspiration does not involve a kind of magic in the words as such. It is the meaning that matters. There are, of course, prominent words such as *χάρις*, *πίστις*, *ἀγάπη* which convey definite, almost technical, spiritual meanings, but a sentence as a unit of expression is seldom if ever stereotyped. This fact is illustrated by the frequent verbal inaccuracy of quotation from the Old Testament in the New. Yet the meaning behind the words is never altered (unless intentionally).

The use of stereotyped language would be impossible in Scripture. It would make nonsense. It would not allow, for example, for figure of speech. Take for instance the statement in Acts ii. 5 that there were at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost Jews from every nation under heaven. Were there present Malaysians, Maoris, Patagonians or Eskimo? The expression would be a mistake only if the writer understood it in such a sense. If he meant it as a figure of speech and was instinctively aware that his readers would understand it as such, we cannot accuse him of inaccuracy of language. This use of the word "all" carries our minds back to Gen. vii. 19: "all the high hills, that were under the whole heaven, were covered." It seems to me impossible at this distance of time to determine whether this expression is to be taken as an absolute, to be understood by



us as applicable to the whole planet as known by our generation, or whether, as I suspect, it means all hills that could be seen on the extent of the horizon by one standing in the Mesopotamian plain. These two passages alone ought to be warnings to our literalists against their insistence on the letter. The letter is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end.

It is then accuracy of thought or meaning for which we must look in Scripture. But standards of thought alter. Outlooks change. A given age unconsciously takes as fundamental or axiomatic facts and standards which may differ radically from the reference-criteria of its forefathers. Many factors combine to effect such changes. The wonder of the Bible is that it deals with such fundamental traits of human nature that its great truths are applicable and intelligible to any race at any given point of history. But it is inevitable that much of the description and expression of the Biblical writers should belong to the thought-forms of their own age or ages. It is our business diligently to search and to recover these thought-forms so far as is possible and thus enhance for our own benefit the value, meaning and penetrating power of the Bible. This should not be difficult for the Christian man. It seems to me that the Bible is so powerful that it can, and is meant to, correct our very thought-forms and standards of reference. It is in fact always ahead of us in its conception of God, His attributes and His relationship with men. There is that hidden in the Bible which lies deeper even than the thought-forms of the men who wrote the various books. This fact is well illustrated by the light thrown upon the Old Testament by the Christian revelation. Prophets and kings with their open Bible before them desired earnestly to see what the Galilean fisherman at length saw, but failed to do so. Seers peered earnestly into their own writings but did not receive the full light. It was the coming of Jesus, His death and resurrection, the preaching of the Gospel, the ingathering of the Church that cast beams of light upon the Old Testament and revealed what by Divine inspiration had been hidden in it. And this is but a picture of what the Holy Spirit does with the Bible in every humble believing heart.

We are apt to ask—we have in fact been asking—whether the Bible is accurate. What do we mean by this question? We can only ultimately mean by it the question whether the Bible conforms to our ideas of truth. So long as our ideas of

truth are inaccurate morally or logically, the Bible will not conform to them. What we ought rather to ask is whether *we* are accurate in the light and by the standards of the Bible. We peer down the long avenue of the centuries into the far past to a scene transformed not only by distance of time but by the completely different customs and standards of the oriental world, pronounce that such and such a thing could not have taken place and conclude that the Scripture is therefore inaccurate in stating that it did. We try to force the Bible to conform to our conception of the outer world, though we really know so few facts on which to form a judgment. The historian complains that the books of Kings tell us so little history. They speak so little, he says, of battles, treaties, commerce, of the claims of the kings or the structure of their kingdom, so little even of the towers, the fortresses or the ivory houses, only of the prophets, the temple, the perpetual struggle over the groves and the images. An energetic ruler may be condemned and his exploits pass unmentioned. Of course. But it is the Scriptural standard that is correct. The things mentioned by the Bible are the primary things. It puts the emphasis in the right place, and accuracy is as much a matter of emphasis as of words.

There are certain indications in the New Testament of this absolute standard of the Bible and of its independence of the world of history outside. Are we meant to regard the Scripture as existing as it were in a framework of its own? The Apostle Paul in Rom. ix. 17 quotes the Scripture as speaking to Pharaoh. Such a thing, of course, never happened in the world of history. No Scripture spoke to Pharaoh in Egypt in the fifteenth century B.C. It spoke to him in the book of Exodus. The apostle's Pharaoh is not the Pharaoh of this or that dynasty, whose name is inscribed on this or that column, whose tomb may or may not be with us. He is the Pharaoh of Exodus, the Pharaoh of the Scriptures. Again in Gal. iii. 8 the apostle says that the Scripture promised beforehand to Abraham. Of course, it did nothing of the sort in Palestine in the nineteenth or twentieth century B.C. It did so in the book of Genesis. The apostle's Abraham is the Abraham of Genesis, the Abraham of Scripture. Even more striking is the description of Melchizedek in Heb. vii. 3: *ἀπάτωρ, ἀμήτωρ, ἀγενεαλόγητος, μήτε ἀρχὴν ἡμερῶν μήτε ζωῆς τέλος ἔχων*. This is not historically true. So far as we can judge, the historical Melchizedek who met Abraham is likely to have

been an Amorite chieftain. In any case he was not historically without father, mother or ancestors, having neither beginning of days nor end of life. But he is so *Scripturally*. He appears *in Scripture* like a bolt from the blue and disappears as suddenly. Nothing is known of his antecedents. He is depicted like this for a purpose, so that he might be likened to the Son of God. As an *historical* statement, Heb. vii. 3 is inaccurate, in fact untrue. *Scripturally* it is exact and correct. The conception of these three characters as existing *Scripturally* rather than historically seems to be in line with the revelation made by Christ on the Emmaus road of Himself in all the Scriptures. It is in Christ that Scripture and history meet.

Now what can we make of the three statements that we have mentioned about Pharaoh, Abraham and Melchizedek, which appear to be historically untrue? They seem to me to exemplify a breaking through into our world of something of that perfect and absolute activity of the mind of God which is beyond our ken. It is as if God were not concerned with the Pharaoh of a moment of time sitting on his throne in Egypt. He saw beyond time a Pharaoh fixed eternally in Scripture. The words of Moses were spoken and the life of Pharaoh was lived with the one object of their being introduced into Scripture. They constituted Scripture in the making. Scripture was the end. Is this too high a conception? Yet I feel that we are driven to it. Scripture differs often from history in emphasis. If the difference is great, it becomes in view of what we have tried to state with regard to relativity of standard and outlook almost a difference of fact. In such cases it seems to me that we shall be on the right track if we regard the Bible not as less accurate than history, as less accurate even than our own senses (than which incidentally it expressly declares itself to be more dependable, 2 Pet. i. 19), but as more so. We shall understand the Bible only if we realise that it represents always God's point of view, speaking of persons and facts and events as they are surveyed from that spiritual world of reality which embraces our own world and lies beyond its limits of time and space. If our conceptions and expressions differ from the facts of the outer world, we are less accurate than history. If the Bible should be found to differ from them, it is more accurate than history.

There are to be seen in the British Museum Assyrian models of bulls which have five legs. This is a distortion and grossly

inaccurate. Yet if the bulls are viewed from the angle and elevation from which it was originally intended that they should be seen, no more than four legs can ever be seen at one time. This illustrates to some extent what I have been trying to say.

The key to Scripture, and at the same time its paradox, is that in it *God* meets *us*. As far as we understand the incarnation, so far can we understand what this means. Accuracy by our standards matters nothing. What is necessary is the adjustment of our own standards to God's in the light of the Bible.

In conclusion may I mention two matters in which among others this question of the accuracy of Scripture seems specially to arise, first the statistics of the Bible, secondly the miracles?

Statistics constitute an appreciable part of the matter of the Old Testament. We are told the length of patriarchs' lives, the length of certain periods of time, the length of the reigns and the ages of numerous kings, the numbers of population taken at various censuses, etc. Some of these numbers seem to us improbable, probably unduly large. In dealing with this question we ought to turn our attention first to the possibility of errors in transmission, to which in any language numbers and figures are peculiarly liable. Next we ought to do our utmost to ascertain whether the Hebrew terms for hundreds and thousands may not sometimes bear a meaning that is not strictly numerical but may designate merely some sort of group. A standing difficulty is constituted by the statements in the books of Exodus and Numbers of the numbers of the Israelite tribes in the wilderness, a difficulty which is not entirely removed by the realisation that the Pentateuch consistently states these numbers to be surprisingly high and appears to point to this fact as evidence of the power and special providence of Israel's God. The whole matter of numbers and statistics, their meaning in the Old Testament and their transmission, might prove a fruitful subject for research.

Secondly, the accuracy and indeed the historicity of the Old Testament and of the whole Bible are sometimes denied on the ground that it constantly describes miraculous events. This attitude arises from inability to attribute the supernatural or the operation of laws normally outside of human experience to anything but magic. It is the attitude of the savage ignorant of science and engineering who imagines any mechanical device to be magical. The answer to it lies in the recollection of the fact

of which we have already reminded ourselves, that the Bible tells the story of the providence of God among men working out the purpose of their redemption. In the chain of events which make up this purpose we see God constantly breaking in upon our world. The experiences of which the Bible tells we may well consider to be normal to the human race *apart from sin*. The fall has deprived man of his experience of God and left him spiritually emasculated, shut up to a dark and strictly limited sphere of self-consciousness. He has no experience of real human life. When higher experience is made possible by the intervention of God, he misunderstands and disbelieves. To say all this is but to approach from a different and rather more obvious starting-point the ground which we took a few moments ago when we said that in the Bible we see a breaking-in of God with the viewpoint of the eternal world. We have no right or reason to reject the miraculous in the Bible on the ground that it is outside normal human experience. God is unique and His operations among men are therefore likely to be unique also. Yet there is room for research on the miraculous element in Biblical history, for the classification of miracles and the explanation of their purpose.

All this again seems to me to prove that it matters fundamentally to us whether the events described in the Bible are historical or not. If they are not, they may indeed be able to teach us truth about God and salvation as in fact by its use of parable the Bible itself demonstrates, but they could teach us only about a salvation that could never be ours. As it is, the whole purpose of the Bible is to show us that this salvation has been brought down to us in our need and darkness and has met us amid all the restrictions and frustrations of the very world in which we live with all its human problems, pointing out to us the way back again to God and to peace. Men and women of whom the Bible tells us have found that way and, as the eleventh chapter of Hebrews indicates, if they have found it so can we.

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