

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expository-times\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php)

pdfs are named: [Volume]\_[Issue]\_[1<sup>st</sup> page of article].pdf

'Can these bones live?'—

'God knows:

The prophet saw such clothed with flesh and skin;  
A wind blew on them, and life entered in;  
They shook and rose.

Hasten the time, O Lord, blot out their sin,  
Let life begin.<sup>1</sup>

2. For us the words contain a wider message—a message of life and hope which applies to the whole world with its superstitions, and vices, and needs, and is an answer to all the questions which doubt may raise or philosophy suggest. This world is not under the sway of soulless, unmoral law; it is the sphere of operations of a living and redeeming God. Now to assert that sin is eternal and irremediable in its effect is either to forget God entirely or to say that evil is stronger than God. But just because I believe in the living and personal God, I believe in the remediability of the evils wrought by sin. For God is ever present in the world, working against sin and repairing its ravages. Where sin abounds, grace doth much more abound. When we say that the effects of sin on the individual are eternal, we forget that the living God Himself comes to the forgiven man, and God in a man becomes a fountain of healing, cleansing, and restoring energy. And when I think of the restoring and healing powers of the grace of God, I can believe the old Bible word, that we shall be clean every whit, that we shall be lifted up from the dunghill, set among princes, and made to inherit a throne of glory. That is a significant sentence in the Apocalypse where the angel, describing the multitude before the throne, says, 'These are they which come out of the great tribulation, and they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.' They had once borne upon them the stains and defilements

<sup>1</sup> Christina G. Rossetti, *Poems*, 203.

of sin; but every trace of these had disappeared. They stood before the throne in 'spotless white.' And how had they been made white? They had 'washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.' 'Washed in blood'! Now, the blood is the life; and what the phrase means is that the redeeming and cleansing energies of the life of Christ in them had gradually set them absolutely free from every trace and defilement of sin. And we, too, may be 'made white in the blood of the Lamb.' Christ in us is the hope of glory. God is at work in our world, counteracting evil and ever seeking to destroy it. Here is an old word full of comfort for those who are tortured by the thought of evil influences, to which they gave the initial impulse: 'Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee; the residue of wrath shalt thou restrain.'

A child said, 'When I say my prayers I always see everything. When I say, 'Deliver us from evil,' I see God going out with a spear to fight Satan; and when I say, Forgive us our trespasses, I see Him with a big rubber cleaning a black-board.' Another little boy of seven years repeated one day the text, 'The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin.' Then, after thinking for a little, he said, 'I see how it is; the blood of Jesus Christ is God's india-rubber; when it is rubbed over the page of the book where our sins are written, it takes them all away.'<sup>2</sup>

Rout and defeat on every hand,  
On every hand defeat and rout;  
Yet through the rent clouds' hurrying rack  
The stars look out.

Decay supreme from west to east,  
From south to north supreme decay;  
Yet still the withered fields and hills  
Grow green with May.

In clod and man unending strife,  
Unending strife in man and clod;  
Yet burning in the heart of man  
The fire of God.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> William Canton, *Children's Sayings*.

<sup>3</sup> H. P. Kimball.

## Can the Literature of a Divine Revelation be dealt with by Historical Science?

BY THE REV. A. E. GARVIE, D.D., PRINCIPAL OF NEW COLLEGE, LONDON.

I HAVE in previous numbers of THE EXPOSITORY TIMES dealt with the religious-historical method in its application to Christianity,<sup>1</sup> but return to the

<sup>1</sup> The articles have been included in my book on *The Christian Certainty*.

subject in order to deal more fully with one topic implied rather than discussed in the former treatment, a topic, however, so important as to deserve further consideration. I shall deal with it in trying to answer the questions: (I.) In what sense is history

a science? (II.) How far does revelation fall within the province of history? (III.) How is our conception of revelation affected by the methods of history as a science?

## I.

1. The object of Comte's positive philosophy was to bring all knowledge to the *positive* or scientific stage, to deal with man and all that belongs to his thought and life by the same methods of observation, experiment, and generalization as are applied to physical facts. (i.) Mill in his *Logic* maintained that all the studies relating to man could be brought out of their condition of confusion and controversy only as the methods of physical science were followed in them. Recognizing the objection that might be made on the ground that in all human affairs a fresh factor—human liberty—has to be reckoned with, he boldly cut the Gordian knot by declaring in favour of determinism. It is worth noting at the outset that the proposal to bring the study of man within the range of science was, by Mill at least, defended on the assumption of determinism.

(ii.) If we are going to maintain human liberty as a fact with all the consequences in human history which result from it, and yet assert that the study of history is a science, we must recognize that the term science is used ambiguously, as the method approved in the province of nature cannot be employed without modification in the realm of human life and thought. We may have a science of sociology in a stricter sense than we can have a science of history; for sociology deals with general tendencies of men in association with one another; it is concerned with *averages*, where *uniformities* may be observed, and *generalizations* may be made; but history is concerned with *particular facts*, where personality is not a negligible factor, and where individual capacity, character, or spirit tells. Although we must deal more fully with the distinctive feature of religion subsequently, meanwhile at this point of our discussion we may add that in the realm of religion—man's relation to God—the average man is not so significant for history as the exceptional; and so the history of religion seems still more to elude the grasp of science in the strict sense. We must by Mill's frank admission be put upon our guard, lest, under the pretext of dealing with history as a science, attempts be made to assimilate the methods of this study with the methods of physical

science on his assumption that man is not free, an assumption which belongs neither to science nor to history, but to a philosophy to be argued on its own merits.

2. A more recent statement of the historic method of dealing with Christianity is presented by Dr. Percy Gardner in his book *A Historic View of the New Testament*. He holds that there are 'three ways of thought which have passed from physical to historic studies.' The first is the *criticism of authorities*. 'In place of external fact of history, we have in the last resort psychological fact as to what was believed to have taken place' (p. 8). The necessity of such criticisms may be frankly and fully admitted; and we are learning in dealing with the Scriptures to recognize more candidly and courageously the personal equation of the writers. In the Gospels even we see the reflexion of the mind of the evangelists, and not merely the reproduction of the words and works of Jesus. But can we ourselves escape the personal equation? Will not our belief about the probability or improbability of what the writers believed to have taken place affect our judgment of their credulity or veracity as witnesses? This is the *crux* of the matter. Let us criticise the authorities by all means, but let us determine by what standard of judgment. Is the ordinary alone credible, and the extraordinary incredible? Is testimony to the natural true, and to the supernatural false? There is a tacit assumption of a philosophical character in a great deal of the criticism of authorities which needs to be exposed, and must not be allowed to pass unchallenged.

3. This assumption is confessed in the second principle of the method, *historical construction*, or *correlation of all the facts*. Every historical person, event, utterance is to be put back into the historical context, and to be explained by it. The category of cause and effect is to be carried into the realm of history. (i.) But is this relation the same in history as in nature? Can we assume, as the physical sciences do, a quantitative equivalence of antecedents and consequents in accordance with the physical laws of the conservation of matter and energy? Or putting it more concretely, Is every man's experience or character simply the resultant of his heredity and environment?

(ii.) Dr. Gardner evades this issue, when he notes 'the acceptance of evolution' as the second feature common to physical and historic studies;

for evolution may be understood as such a quantitative equivalence, and Herbert Spencer tries so to represent it, although he fails to show how such differences as the stages of evolution show are on such an assumption intelligible. A qualification which Dr. Gardner adds shows that he does not so understand human history; for he does expressly acknowledge that we must admit in human affairs 'a great force, which is not, as far as we can judge, evolutionary, and the law of which is very hard to trace—the force of personality and character' (p. 13). Admitting this force, which does not allow of quantitative determination, we may ask ourselves whether, instead of accepting personality as an exception to evolution, we should not rather transform our conception of evolution from the standpoint of personality.

(iii.) Is a quantitative equivalence an adequate conception of the causal relation, however convenient for science such an hypothesis may be? Causality is a conception; where do we get it? Not from the observation of nature; for all we can observe is sequences. It is our own volition, the sense of exercising a power which effects our purpose, from which we ultimately derive our conception of causality. Even in nature we must assume power effecting change, for the quantitative equivalence of antecedents and consequents leaves out the explanation of the qualitative difference of cause and effect.

(iv.) In volition we are conscious of producing the new, for the present does not merely repeat the past. So we may reinterpret *evolution* from this view of causality. It is not what Herbert Spencer represented it as being—mind and life nothing more than matter-in-motion. It is *epigenesis*. There is novelty as well as continuity. Evolution is not merely conservation, transformation, but creation. This is Henri Bergson's most valuable contribution to contemporary thought.

(v.) In spite of this criticism of categories it will be found that in historic study the mechanical view of evolution is assumed, and so the natural analogy is overstrained; and even Dr. Gardner, having made this concession of a non-evolutional factor, when he comes to deal with the concrete facts of the history in the Gospels, does not make the use of it that he might and should make. Let us have historical construction and correlation as much as we will, but let us not try to force history into the

Procrustes bed of this inadequate physical conception of causality and evolution.

4. The third contribution from physical to historical science is the *comparative method*. (i.) It assumes that in human affairs as in natural occurrences there is *uniformity*, the assumption already made by Mill in favour of his determinism. Two sentences from Dr. Gardner may show how this principle is applied. 'When we come to a gap in past history, or to a part of it which has been blurred by too vivid emotion, and obscured by practical purpose, we look about us to find in the present world, or in the better recorded phases of the past, some similar and parallel groups of phenomena.' For 'the comparative method assumes that the events in the human world do not happen at random, but are subject to law, though historic law is far less hard and rigid than that observable in the realm of nature' (p. 16). This comparative method is being applied to the study of religions, and the demand is that Christianity must be treated as one of them. But is there not a *petitio principii* here?

(ii.) In physics we observe and compare phenomena, and then assert uniformity when that is evident. How many scholars start with the assumption of uniformity in religious phenomena, and explain away any testimony to any phenomena that are exceptional and not ordinary? There is a common religious capacity of man, and religious psychology may fix its distinctive features. There are many resemblances in the religious development of different races, although we fail to do justice to each by fixing our regard on these resemblances, and neglecting the differences. When the physical and historical conditions affecting the religious thought or life are similar, the beliefs, rites, etc., are likely to be similar. Our understanding of the Old Testament religion owes much to the study of the common characteristics of Semitic religion. But the grateful recognition of the value of the comparative method may go along with a challenge of the exclusive claim which is made for it.

(iii.) A belief in God's Providence and man's personality forbids the conclusion that every religion must move within the rigid limits observable in other religions. If different nations serve different functions in human history, the nation which has shown the *genius for religion* (to put the claim in the lowest terms) in an exceptional

degree, may present to us religious phenomena which we do not find elsewhere. If even different personalities vary in the value of their contribution to religious thought and life, the personality, which, by an increasingly universal confession, is pre-eminent in the relation between God and man, may show moral and spiritual characteristics with which no comparison is possible. Dr. Gardner makes the concession that historic law is 'far less hard and rigid' than natural, and yet it will be found that practically this concession is ignored by many scholars using this comparative method. In history may there not be solitary phenomena, one nation or one person divinely chosen for a unique function, and so possessing a unique value? The volume of testimony from Christian experience makes this assumption more probable than that of uniformity.

## II.

1. It is only in a qualified sense that we can speak of *historical science*, if the natural sciences are to be regarded as the model of what science should be. This assumption, which is the explanation of many of the negative conclusions advanced by scholars, ignores the difference in the phenomena as demanding a difference of method. 'The historical method,' says Dr. Hastie (*Theology as a Science*), 'is as truly scientific as is the method of the physical sciences themselves, although it may not yet be so exactly formulated—and may always be more difficult to apply.' One peculiarity of history is that it is concerned with persons, not things—ideas and ideals, and not forces; and that for understanding more is needed than the possession of similar sound senses as in the physical realm. 'The spiritual element,' says Dr. Hastie, 'brings with it new relations and higher ideas, which the student and interpreter can only apprehend and fathom by the spiritual affinity to them of his own mind.' Thus the personal equation is inevitable in historical study as it is not to the same degree in physical. Historical science is never as objective as physical science: whether consciously or unconsciously, the student and interpreter has his own judgments of value, which he uses in testing the veracity of witnesses, or determining the probability of events. The confidence with which many scholars advance their conclusions as science is simply an evidence that they have not criticised their categories, and

are making assumptions of which they are unaware.

2. Having thus discussed the possibility of historical science, we must try to fix more rigidly the conception of history. It seems to me in these discussions to be used in two distinct senses. Does it mean simply the record of facts, or does it mean besides the placing of these facts in their context, the showing of the sequences of events, the explanation of purposes, motives, and actions, by some conception of human nature as such? This is no idle question. For in German books especially the assumption is made that even if a fact is alleged in a record, otherwise trustworthy, yet if it cannot be so placed, connected, and explained, it is to be dismissed as unhistorical, that is, doubted and denied as a fact. The Resurrection, for instance, might be declared *unhistorical* in the sense that it stood so entirely out of the historical context as to be inexplicable by the historian; but such a statement would ordinarily be understood to be a denial of its actuality, although it might not be so intended, and need not be so understood. It is well for us to be quite clear what we mean by history before we ask whether revelation falls within the province of history. Revelation might be fact, attested by the experience and character of the agents of it, and confirmed by the illumination given, and influence exercised on the recipients of it; and yet it might be inexplicable, in the ways in which the historian guided by common experience seeks to account for the sequences of events, the character and conduct of persons, the issues of a course of action. But the inexplicable need not be the unreal.

3. Applying this distinction to the revelation with which we are practically concerned—the Christian—we must insist that there is an element that is necessarily inexplicable by common experience, that does not consequently fall into the province of history in the narrower sense of the term as the explanation, and not merely the record of events. History is concerned with the phenomenal—words, acts, effects, influences: it cannot penetrate to the noumenal, the inner life of the soul, unless in so far as the phenomenal reveals it. In human personality even there is mystery. Free choice is inexplicable by motives. Still more in the relation of human personality to God do we pass further from the phenomenal to the noumenal. 'The secret of the Lord is with them that fear

him.' This does not mean that we pass from the conscious to the subconscious, the rational to the irrational; that the ecstatic state of the mystic is the necessary form of contact and communion with deity. But it does mean that while there may even be a stimulation of the whole conscious personality, word and deed cannot convey it fully to others, it cannot enter in its entirety into the context of human history. If religion be not an illusion, and revelation a deception, God does really hold intercourse with and make communications to men; but as the eternal and infinite reality, it cannot be confined within the bounds of any historical explanation. In so far as the divine reality is present and operative in revelation, it cannot be said to fall in the province of history as a science, even although the actuality of God's self-unfolding and self-giving may be one of the surest certainties for the agent or recipient of the revelation.

4. The human personality which is agent and recipient of the revelation in word and deed falls within the realm of the phenomenal, can be placed in the historical context, can be explained in many respects by race, people, home, surroundings, teaching and training, etc., and so can be dealt with by history. And yet even here two qualifying considerations must be insisted on. (i.) Even human personality is not merely phenomenal; heredity and environment do not explain individuality; liberty and originality have not their immediate manifest phenomenal antecedents. And on this rock all attempts to treat history as nature is treated will be shattered to pieces.

(ii.) But still more is it impossible to confine man, when in contact and communion with God, to the phenomenal. It is only a pantheism which identifies God and nature, or an idealism which limits the real to the rational in the sense of the intelligible to the common human reason, which can assume that God in man acts and can only act within the limits of the phenomenal as known in our common experience. What moral or spiritual insight, what conquest over sin and evil, what perfection of character may be possible to man, in whom God dwells and works, cannot be determined by statistics dealing with the general tendencies of average men. It is not only to limit man, but to limit God Himself, to doubt or deny that Jesus was sinless and perfect. For God in man does not fall within the province of history

as science, nor even does man when joined to God.

### III.

1. The result of the previous discussions can now be briefly stated. We must distinguish the phenomenal and the noumenal aspect of revelation, that temporal and local form in which the eternal and infinite reality is expressed and the reality itself. (i.) History as a science can explain to us the phenomenal aspect, and it has wonderfully altered our view of the method of revelation. We see that it is much more natural than the older view assumed. The agents and recipients of revelation can be placed in an historical context, and their words and deeds can be much better understood. How great the gain modern scholarship is daily showing.

(ii.) But we must insist that the noumenal aspect is not to be ignored, and that possibilities in the phenomenal as the result of the presence and operation of the noumenal in and through it, God in man acting in and through nature, must not be ruled out, simply because inexplicable or exceptional; for this is to assume that the noumenal, the eternal and infinite God Himself, and man as personal with capacities we cannot measure, is to be so identified with, as to be limited by, the phenomenal as we ordinarily know it. The denial of the supernatural, the miraculous, the divine in human history is not a necessary result of the progress of historical science; but is a philosophical assumption which, whether true or false, is older than the historical method, and must be dealt with on its own merits, and so falls beyond the province of this article.

2. The previous argument is intended to establish the one conclusion only, that revelation cannot be brought within the fetters of a mechanical causality, or an evolutionary process conceived in similar terms. It does not, and is in no way intended to, preclude the applications of approved historical methods to the Bible. (i.) Let the evidence for the supernatural and miraculous be subjected to a searching scrutiny; only it must not be discredited at the start because of its content. (ii.) Let the testimony of the agents or recipients be examined closely, so that as far as possible the psychology of the religious consciousness may be made intelligible, only it must not be dismissed as illusive because unusual. (iii.) Let

the historical antecedents of every belief, rite, custom, idea or ideal, be exhibited as fully as our available assured knowledge allows: only let it not be assumed that there must be nothing confessed as unique or inexplicable. (iv.) Let philosophy and theology combine in reaching such a conception of God as the total reality not only of the ordinary

experience and the common understanding, but of exceptional occurrences, outward or inward, if well attested, demands and justifies, and not attempt to force the fulness of the real within the bounds of a preconception of what is and what is not possible; for with God all is possible which does not contradict His perfection.

## Literature.

### PROPERTY.

IT may be that property is often unjustly held and wealth often wrongfully used, yet it does not follow that all proprietors and rich men are regardless of their duty. On the well-founded understanding that many are anxious to know how to fulfil their obligations, and ready to fulfil them when they know, a volume has been prepared on *Property: Its Duties and Rights* (Macmillan; 5s. net), to which some of the greatest authorities on economics are contributors. Professor L. T. Hobhouse writes on 'The Historical Evolution of Property, in Fact and Idea'; Dr. Hastings Rashdall on 'The Philosophical Theory of Property'; Mr. A. D. Lindsay, M.A., on 'The Principle of Private Property'; Dr. Vernon Bartlet, on 'The Biblical and Early Christian Idea of Property'; the Rev. A. J. Carlyle, D.Litt., on 'The Theory of Property in Mediaeval Theology'; Mr. H. G. Wood, M.A., on 'The Influence of the Reformation on Ideas concerning Wealth and Property'; Canon Henry Scott Holland, D.D., on 'Property and Personality.' It is perhaps enough to name these men and their essays. Their essays cover the whole subject sufficiently; their names carry sufficient weight. But a few sentences may be quoted from the Introduction by Bishop Gore to show how the book came into being. 'Dr. Bartlet, of Mansfield College, Oxford, had written a letter to the *British Weekly* strongly urging upon Christians the duty of reconsidering their ideas about property in the light of the Bible doctrine of stewardship—the doctrine that God the Creator is the only absolute owner of all things or persons—that "all things come of Him" and are "His own," and that we men hold what we hold as stewards for the purposes of His Kingdom, with only a relative and

dependent ownership limited at every point by the purpose for which it was entrusted to us. He was good enough to send me his letter and to suggest that we might combine to issue some literature of a popular kind about the duties and rights of property based on this Biblical doctrine.'

'But we want a theory, a principle to guide us. We cannot act with any power as mere individuals without a corporate mind and conscience on the subject; and we can form no corporate mind and conscience without a clear principle. It was this principle, this philosophy of property, in which, when I listened to Dr. Bartlet's appeal, I felt myself lacking. Without it I cannot play my part effectively as a citizen and still less as a moral teacher. Any moral teaching which is to grip men's minds requires it as a background. Therefore, before engaging in a popular propaganda, I needed to clear up the principle of property. So I felt: so I knew others were feeling. And, Dr. Bartlet agreeing, we set to work to get written a volume of essays on property in which the subject should be treated both from the standpoint of philosophy and of religion.'

### ROME OF THE PILGRIMS AND MARTYRS.

'In approaching the study of the stones of Christian Rome with the object of collecting some material for elucidating the still obscure story of the first three centuries of Christianity, the student is constantly confronted with certain early Christian documents—the *Liber Pontificalis* or History of the Popes, the *Itineraries* or Pilgrims' guide books, the *Acta Martyrum* or Acts of the Martyrs, the *Martyrologies*, and the *Sylogæ* or Collections of Inscriptions.