THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES.

I. A CRITICISM OF LIGHTFOOT AND HEADLAM.

THE theological literature of England has recently been enriched by the addition of two important publications in the form of Dictionaries of the Bible, namely, a new edition of the first volume of Dr. William Smith's well-known work, first published by Messrs. Murray in 1863, and the first and second volumes of a new work, *A Dictionary of the Bible, dealing with its language, literature, and contents, including the Biblical Theology*, published by T. & T. Clark of Edinburgh, and edited by the Rev. Dr. James Hastings with the assistance of other scholars. It is not necessary to speak of the value of either of these works, or of their great practical utility. Both will be generally acknowledged. But we may perhaps be permitted to offer a few criticisms on the treatment of one important subject in these volumes.

The article on the Acts of the Apostles in the new edition of Smith's Dictionary is from the pen of the late Bishop Lightfoot, who on some points refers the reader to his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*. The article on the same subject in Dr. Hastings' work is written by the Rev. Arthur Cayley Headlam, formerly Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. Both of these are careful and elaborate articles by representative scholars, and it is interesting to note that, while the late Dean Alford's article on the Acts in the first issue of Smith's Dictionary was less than three columns in length, Bishop Lightfoot's article extends to more than thirty-seven columns, and that of Mr. Headlam to twenty. Of the variety of subjects dealt with in these articles I propose to examine only one, namely, that described by Mr. Headlam in the heading of section ix as 'The Historical Value of the Acts,' and discussed

by Bishop Lightfoot under the heading of 'Authenticity and Genuineness.'

In inquiring into the historical value of the Book of Acts, the point which would seem first to attract attention is the character of the narrative in the early chapters of the book. The story of the Ascension in Acts differs materially not only from what we read on the same subject in the first Gospel, but also from the writer's own statement in the third Gospel. It is impossible to deny the existence of this contradiction. The statement in the Acts is quite clear. And if any doubt existed as to the interpretation of the concluding verses of St. Luke's Gospel it would be removed by a comparison with the appendix to St. Mark. In fact we nowhere hear of the forty days in Jerusalem until we come to the Book of Acts[1].

The doubt about the forty days of necessity extends to other events in the early history of the Church in Jerusalem, to the election of Matthias, the occurrences on the Day of Pentecost, Peter's speech, the numerical growth of the Church, and so on. On the subject of the speaking with tongues on the Day of Pentecost the opponents of the historical character of these early chapters lay special emphasis, because of the contrast between the account given in Acts ii 1–11 and what we read in St. Paul's Epistles about the gift of tongues in the Corinthian Church. It is a disappointment to find that neither the question of the forty days nor that of the speaking with tongues is mentioned in either of the Dictionary articles; unless we are to suppose that there is a reference to them intended in Mr. Headlam's statement (p. 35 *a*) that 'for the previous period [that is, the part of the history contained in the early chapters of the Book of Acts] he [St. Luke] could not in all cases attain the same degree of accuracy' as in the later chapters, and especially in the part covered by the 'We' sections. But to this Mr. Headlam imme-

[1] See Matt. xxviii 16–20, Luke xxiv 36–53, Mark xvi, John xxi, and 1 Cor. xv 6 (compare Acts i 15). The recently discovered fragment of the Gospel of St. Peter affords additional proof, if such were needed, of the existence in the Church of a tradition according to which the disciples left Jerusalem after the Resurrection instead of waiting for the Day of Pentecost, as the Acts relates. The Church, however, seems to have early adopted the Jerusalem tradition, as is shown by the early observance of the Christian Pentecost (see Smith's *Dict. C. A.*, art. 'Pentecost').

diately and somewhat perplexingly adds, 'Yet he was personally acquainted with eye-witnesses throughout, and may probably have had one or more written documents' (ibid.). If we are to suppose that St. Luke had the testimony of eye-witnesses for his account of the Ascension and the speaking with tongues, some explanation ought to be offered of his disagreement with the other Evangelists, and with St. Paul, and with his own former treatise.

It will add to the questions raised by these early chapters of the Acts if we accept a conclusion at which Professor Stanton arrives in his article on the Gospels in the second volume of Hastings' Dictionary. He gives the preference to the Johannine tradition of the life of Christ as compared with that of the Synoptics, an opinion for which there is much to be said, and he thinks that the fragmentariness of the Synoptics must be due to the limited character of the material that had come to their hand. 'But,' he adds, 'in order to explain the phenomena now before us—the contrast between the Synoptic and the Johannine accounts—it seems necessary to suppose further that the knowledge embodied in the latter had, at the time when the first three Gospels were composed, been delivered only within a comparatively limited circle' (p. 247). If this were so, it would make it hard to accept all that is implied in St. Luke's account of the appointment of Matthias, for if there was a college of men at Jerusalem specially qualified to deliver the correct tradition of the ministry of Jesus, how did it happen that Luke himself did not know the true story, but accepted the imperfect Synoptic tradition? And what are we to think of his claim to have 'traced the course of all things accurately from the first'?

Passing over the variations which are found to exist between the different forms of the story of the conversion of St. Paul, which are of little importance in themselves, though they show that the writer cannot be trusted for strict accuracy, we come to the alleged contradictions between the narrative of the Acts and St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. These concern St. Paul's visits to Jerusalem, the relation between St. Paul and the older Apostles, and the attitude of the Church in Jerusalem towards the Gentile Christians.

On the subject of St. Paul's visits to Jerusalem and his

relation to the Church there, the impression produced by the Book of the Acts is distinctly different from that which we derive from St. Paul's own statements on the subject in the Epistle to the Galatians. According to the Acts St. Paul returned from Damascus to Jerusalem soon after his conversion. At Jerusalem he was introduced to the Apostles by Barnabas, and 'was with them, going in and going out at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord,' until he was compelled to depart by the threatening attitude of the Grecian Jews (Acts ix 19–31). After this we read of two official visits to Jerusalem—first, when he was sent with Barnabas from the Church at Antioch to carry relief to the brethren which dwelt in Judaea (Acts xi 27–30, xii 25); and, secondly, when he and Barnabas were again sent from the same Church to the Council of Jerusalem (Acts xv 1–31). A later passage in the Acts puts in St. Paul's mouth the declaration that on his conversion he 'declared both to them of Damascus first, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the country of Judaea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, doing works worthy of repentance' (Acts xxvi 20).

This representation of the Apostle's relations with the Church in Jerusalem after his conversion differs materially from what we read in Galatians (Gal. i 15–ii 2), that St. Paul did not return to Jerusalem until three years after his conversion, having in the meantime gone into Arabia; that when he did go to Jerusalem he went only to visit Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days, seeing no other of the Apostles except James the Lord's brother; and that then and afterwards he was unknown by face to the churches of Judaea, being known to them only by report as a convert to Christianity. Then fourteen years later he went up again to Jerusalem 'by revelation,' and laid before them the gospel which he preached among the Gentiles, 'but privately before them who were of repute.'

Lightfoot endeavours to get over the difficulty about the time of the first visit by supposing that the 'days' which St. Paul spent in Damascus, according to the narrative in the Acts, might cover the three years mentioned in the Epistle to the Galatians[1].

[1] 'Certain days' (*ἡμέρας τινάς*), Acts ix 19; and 'many days' (*ἡμέραι ἱκαναί*), ix 23.

This, however, is not likely. It is opposed to what appears to be the obvious intention of the writer of Acts, who tells us that when St. Paul came to Jerusalem the members of the Church could not believe the story of his conversion, and implies that the Apostles had not heard about it until they were told of it by Barnabas. This does not look as if three years had elapsed since St. Paul had commenced to preach Christ in Damascus.

The same interpretation of the narrative is confirmed by the concluding words (Acts ix 31):—'So the Church throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria had peace, being edified; and, walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, was multiplied.' These words seem intended to connect the cessation of the persecution with the event on the road to Damascus, and, if so, they do not leave room for an interval of three years.

Mr. Headlam takes safer ground than Bishop Lightfoot when he acknowledges that 'the obvious impression created by the narrative is that the writer [of the Acts] did not know of the Arabian journey, nor of the length of time which had elapsed before the Jerusalem visit,' and that 'the two narratives give a somewhat different impression.'

The difference between the two narratives is accentuated when we remember the Apostle's saying in his Epistle to the Galatians that he was 'unknown by face unto the churches of Judaea.' It is not sufficient to answer to this with Bishop Lightfoot, that 'to a majority of the Christians at Jerusalem he *might*, and to the churches of Judaea at large he *must*, have been personally unknown' (*Galatians*, p. 92)[1], especially when we remember the words put into St. Paul's mouth in Acts xxvi 20, that he had preached 'first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the country of Judaea'; although it must be acknowledged that this statement is as hard to reconcile with the rest of the Book of Acts as it is with the Epistle to the Galatians.

The difficulty about the second visit recorded in the Acts is that St. Paul's statement in Galatians appears to leave no room for it. Lightfoot's solution is that when St. Paul went to

[1] In 1 Thess. ii 14 the phrase 'the churches of God which are in Judaea' does not seem intended to exclude Jerusalem. Comp. Rom. xv 31 and 2 Cor. i 16.

Jerusalem the Apostles were not there, having fled from the city to avoid the persecution under Herod Agrippa I (Acts xii 1–19), and that therefore he did not mention the visit, because his object was not to enumerate his journeys to Jerusalem, but to define his relations with the Twelve (*Galatians*, p. 126). But St. Paul does more than omit the mention of the visit. He says that he 'was unknown by face to the churches of Judaea.' Mr. Headlam seems undecided about this second visit. He speaks of it as 'a genuine difficulty,' but he quotes Lightfoot's solution with approval, and speaks of it as receiving the support of Dr. Hort.

It seems to be pretty generally agreed, in spite of Professor Ramsay's recently expressed opinion to the contrary, that the third journey to Jerusalem, recorded in Acts xv, is to be identified with the second of the two which are mentioned in Galatians. If so, the first point of divergence that strikes us is that the account given in the Acts of St. Paul's mission from the Church of Antioch, and of his public reception by the whole Church in Jerusalem, is not consistent with his own words, that he went up by revelation to lay 'privately before them who were of repute' a statement of the work which he had been doing amongst the Gentiles. It is quite possible that, as Bishop Lightfoot urges, he may have gone up to Jerusalem by revelation, and also have been sent with a public commission from the Church of Antioch; and it is also quite possible that both of the accounts, that in the Acts and that in the Galatians, may have related to a visit at which both a private interview with the heads of the Church and a public conference of the whole Church took place. But it must be admitted that each of the narratives as they now stand excludes the other. St. Paul says that when he went up to Jerusalem he laid his statement privately before the leaders, and the whole drift of his argument implies that there was nothing more than this private conference. Or else what does he gain by saying that it was private? On the other hand, the Acts relates the public council and the results that followed, but knows nothing of a private meeting. The contradiction in itself may not be of much, or of any, importance, but it implies of necessity that we cannot regard both accounts as accurate. It may be that, as Bishop Lightfoot says, each narrative represents a different

aspect of the same event. But each represents it in such a way as to exclude the other.

Bishop Lightfoot cites Acts xv 4, 5, 6 as showing that 'St. Luke alludes in a general way to conferences and discussions preceding the congress' (p. 125), one of which may have been the private meeting. But the first conference recorded in these verses was not a private meeting. It was the public reception of the envoys from Antioch by the whole Church in Jerusalem. Then followed the objections of the Pharisee converts, made most likely at the reception, though possibly afterwards; and then the public meeting to consider the questions raised. There is no hint of any private conference with the heads of the Church.

The difference between the Apostolic decree in Acts xv and St. Paul's statement in Galatians (ii 1–10) of the terms of the agreement come to between him and the older Apostles, and the inconsistency of the former with St. Paul's habitual teaching as to the complete freedom of Christians from the law of Moses, are serious difficulties in the way of the reconciliation of the Acts with the Pauline Epistles. It is not easy to be satisfied with Bishop Lightfoot's explanation, that 'the Apostolic letter was only addressed to the Gentile brethren "in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia" (xv 23), that is, to the churches more directly in communication with Palestine, and therefore materially affected by the state of feeling and practice among the Jewish Christians,' and that 'there is no reason for supposing that the decree was intended to be permanent and universal' (*Galatians*, p. 126). When Paul and Silas set out upon their next missionary journey, we are told that 'as they went on their way through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, which had been ordained of the Apostles and elders that were at Jerusalem' (Acts xvi 4), and this after they had travelled beyond the limits of Syria and Cilicia. This shows that the operation of the decree was not intended to be limited to those to whom it was formally addressed. It was addressed to them apparently because it was an answer to the question which they had asked[1]. There is no hint in the Acts of any intended limitation of the application

[1] Acts xv 1–3. Antioch, the capital of Syria, was close to the borders of Cilicia. Compare Acts xi 25, 26. See also Gal. i 21.

of its principles either in time or place. On the contrary, a long time after these events, when St. Paul's missionary labours had extended as far as to Macedonia and Greece, the heads of the Church in Jerusalem are represented as speaking of the decree as still in force, and without giving a hint that it was not of universal application (Acts xxi 25).

Mr. Headlam makes light of the difficulty connected with the 'dissembling' of Peter (Gal. ii 11–21). 'It is merely,' he says, 'that St. Luke does not record a narrative concerning St. Peter mentioned by St. Paul.' Lightfoot shows more appreciation of the point. He says, 'The conduct of St. Peter at Antioch has been a great stumbling-block both in ancient and modern times. It has been thought strange that the very Apostle to whom was vouchsafed the revelation that there is nothing common or unclean, and who only a short time before this meeting at Antioch had declared himself plainly in favour of Gentile liberty, should have acted in a manner so inconsistent with all that had gone before' (*Galatians*, p. 127). He finds the explanation in Peter's well-known character:—'It is no surprise that he who at one moment declared himself ready to lay down his life for his Lord's sake, and even drew his sword in defence of his Master, and the next betrayed him with a thrice-repeated denial, should have acted in this case as we inferred he acted from the combined accounts of St. Luke and St. Paul' (p. 128). This explanation might be more satisfactory if the only difficulty was the impulsiveness of Peter. The action attributed to James is equally strange after all that had occurred in the Jewish Church (Acts x 1–xi 18, xv 1–29)[1].

There is another passage which deserves notice when we compare the Pauline Epistles with the Acts of the Apostles, but which receives no attention from either Bishop Lightfoot or Mr. Headlam, namely, that in which the Apostle of the Gentiles enumerates the sufferings which he endured as a

[1] In support of the Acts narrative Mr. Headlam quotes Harnack that 'it is clear from Gal. ii 11 ff. that Peter then and for long before accepted in principle the standpoint of Paul' (*Hist. of Dogma*, p. 90, note; see also Weizsäcker, *Apost. Age*, p. 75. Both in Eng. tr.); that is, 'that a man is not justified by the works of the law, save through (or, but only through, Marg.) faith in Jesus Christ.' But though this may be true, it would still leave a difficulty in reconciling St. Paul's statement in Gal. ii 11–14 with Acts x, xi 1–18, and xv 6–11, 13–21.

minister of Christ (2 Cor. xi 23–33). Of the Jews he five times received forty stripes save one. Thrice was he beaten with rods (by the Roman authorities). Thrice he suffered shipwreck. A night and a day had he been in the deep. If these details are to be trusted—and they are stated with great exactness—it follows that the Book of the Acts presents a very incomplete picture of the missionary labours and sufferings of St. Paul. It is certain either that the writer had but a very meagre knowledge of his subject, or else that he selected only such materials as suited his purpose, whatever it may have been, and that in either case he gave his narrative an appearance of completeness which it did not really possess[1].

The three sentences which Mr. Headlam devotes to the miracles in the Acts are not very clear. He says:—'To say that the document is unhistorical because it relates miracles, or because it contains accounts of angels, is simply to beg the question. Even if we were quite certain that such events were impossible and never occurred, we have abundant evidence for knowing that the early Christians believed in them. St. Paul claims himself to have worked what were believed both by himself and his readers to be miracles' (p. 31 *a*). The fact that the early Christians believed in miracles would be evidence of the good faith of the writer who recorded them, but it would not, of itself, prove the historical value of a composition in which 'impossible' narratives occurred. Mr. Headlam does not mention the fact that some of the miraculous narratives in the Acts, such as the healings of the people by Peter's shadow (v 15, 16), or by the handkerchiefs or aprons from Paul's body (xix 12), or the details of the deliverance from the prison in Philippi (xvi 19–40), are felt to be difficulties even by persons who do not disbelieve in miracles generally.

Bishop Lightfoot has a paragraph on the minor discrepancies and errors, real or supposed, in the Book of Acts[2]. There is

[1] Writing in defence of St. Luke, Professor Ramsay says that 'true historical genius lies in selecting,' and that 'the historian may dismiss years with a word' (*St. Paul*, p. 7). But the difficulty with St. Luke is that he dismisses them without a word, without a hint that he knew of their existence, or even with words that imply the contrary.

[2] Compare Acts i 4 with Matt. xxviii 9, 10; Acts i 15 with 1 Cor. xv 6; Acts i 18, 19 with Matt. xxvii 3–8, and see Alford; Acts v 36 with Jos. *Antt.* xx 5. 1, and see Alford; Acts vii 4 with Gen. xi 26, 32, and xii 4 (see Alford);

a very considerable number of these, and they ought certainly to be taken into consideration in estimating the historical accuracy of the book. Lightfoot's method of dealing with them illustrates in a striking way the position which he takes up with regard to the criticisms which modern scholars have passed upon the book. Some of them occur in the speeches, or in other compositions which he supposes the author to have incorporated in his work, as, for example, the three different accounts of the conversion of St. Paul. He claims therefore that the errors, if errors there be, are the fault of the speakers whose speeches are reported, or of the other original sources which the writer used, and not of the author of the Acts. Instead of being an argument against the historical character of the Book of Acts, the apparent errors thus become an additional proof of its accuracy, because they show the care with which the author reproduced his materials just as he found them, without making any correction or emendation[1]. Lightfoot holds that, considering the common use of shorthand amongst the ancients, there is no improbability in the supposition that the speeches were reproduced from written notes taken down at the time, and that this is the most reasonable account that can be given of their appearance in the Acts. On all which we may remark that, without entering into any inquiry as to how far shorthand was in use in the first century for the purpose of reporting speeches, it is very unlikely that any accurate reports would have been preserved of a number of speeches separated so widely in the time, place, and circumstances of their delivery as those that are brought together in the Book of Acts; that it seems to be generally acknowledged that the similarity of style pervading the whole book shows that, whatever the original materials may have been, the author of the Acts did not insert them in his work without alteration; and, lastly, that our study of the book in other particulars does not favour this

Acts vii 14 with Deut. x 22 (see Alford); Acts vii 15, 16 with Gen. xlix 29–33, l 26, Exod. xiii 19, Josh. xxiv 32; also with Gen. xxiii 3–20, xxxiii 18–20; Acts vii 43 with Amos v 27; Acts vii 57, 58 with John xviii 31; Acts ix 3–22 with xxii 6–21, xxvi 12–20; ix 7 with xxii 9; ix 29, 30 with xxii 17–21; Acts x 28 with Alford's note; Acts xxvi 20 with Gal. i 22.

[1] 'We have also another indication of genuineness in the minor discrepancies and errors, or what appear to be such,' Smith's Dict., p. 34 *a*.

notion of such minute accuracy on the part of the writer as is implied in Bishop Lightfoot's view.

On the subject of the speeches Mr. Headlam is less conservative than Lightfoot. He says, 'They are all very short, too short to have been delivered as they stand, and for the most part the style in which they are written is that of the historian. They are clearly, therefore, in a sense his own compositions' (p. 33 *b*). 'The presence of the author's hand in the speeches cannot be denied. Their literary form is due to him. He may possibly have summed up in a typical speech the characteristics of St. Paul's preaching before certain classes of hearers. Some details or illustrations may be due to him, such as the mention of Theudas in Gamaliel's speech, or that of Judas in Peter's first speech. But no theory which does not admit the possession of good evidence, and the acquaintance of the author with the events and persons that he is describing, is consistent with the phenomena of the speeches. They are too lifelike, real, varied, and adapted to their circumstances to be mere unsubstantial rhetorical exercises' (p. 34 *a*)[1].

We have seen that in other points, as well as in the case of the speeches, Mr. Headlam is prepared to go further than Bishop Lightfoot in accepting the results of criticism. But, while we gladly recognize the many excellencies of both of these articles, it will be evident, without adding to these notes, that neither of them can be accepted as fully meeting the objections which have been made to the accuracy of the author of the Acts as an historical writer.

Though the writer of the Acts may not be a model of accuracy, or may not have understood the art of writing history as we understand it now, his work will still remain our most valuable source of information for the history of the Apostolic age. But if we are to gain from such a book all the information which it contains, it is necessary that we should first form, by

[1] In connexion with the speeches it may be worth observing that it is in accordance with the manner of the writer of the Acts to let his characters speak for themselves, instead of telling us in his own words what they said. 'The employment of the indirect form of speech, whether with ὅτι and the optative, or with the accusative (nomin.) and infinitive, is not in the manner of the N.T. writers of narrative, as it is foreign to the style of popular narrators in general.' Blass, *Grammar of New Testament Greek*, § 79. 12.

perfectly independent investigation, a correct idea of its historical character and value. No one person can do this completely, whatever his ability or knowledge may be, for we are all, even the greatest of us, subject to bias and prepossession in one direction or another. But we may hope that, by the united labours of all, the truth will be reached in the end.

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