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REVIEW SECTION.

I.—THE HISTORICITY OF THE GOSPELS.

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ARE the Gospels true histories, to be received as such by candid students to-day? We may reply affirmatively, without touching the questions of scriptural inspiration and inerrancy. We may also answer in the affirmative, while acknowledging that the evangelic narratives are only outline sketches of the life of Jesus, fragmentary, and not always clearly consistent, accounts of the Founder of Christianity. The four books which are the literary basis of Christian faith and are immortal inspirations to Christian hope and love are evidently unlike the biographies that are issued from the modern press. They do not resemble the elaborate and finished lives of Napoleon and Lincoln, which, in five or ten bulky volumes, narrate chronologically, minutely, and with philosophical reflections the careers of those great men. The Gospels, while telling nearly all that is known of the most important Life ever lived, are exceedingly brief, sometimes apparently contradictory, and are wanting in discursive meditations upon the events described. Are there two biographies more unlike than Matthew's life of Jesus and Masson's "Life of Milton"? The first was apparently "the child of memory;" the second is the product of years of prodigious toil in libraries. In part at least the Gospels were spoken at the beginning as the personal witness of those who were acquainted with the Nazarene Prophet. What are the reasons which have led candid and studious men in all Christian ages to accept the Gospels as true? Within the compass of this article, little more can be done than to enumerate some of these reasons.

1. They give the *impression* of truthfulness, and so strong is this impression that frequently the best tonic for enfeebled faith is to read and ponder, with a reverent heart, these simple and self-evidencing narratives. The mere reading of one of the Gospels has sometimes exercised such a strong influence over the mind that the reader, without any further evidence, has believed the account to be true and has accepted Christianity. "The

simple, straightforward New Testament record" has produced upon multitudes such a lasting impression of its self-evidencing truthfulness, that the ingenious arguments and speculations of unbelief have been unable to remove the impression. The sceptical theory which would overthrow the record has often seemed little better than "an outrage upon common sense." The Gospels give no impression that their writers were either weak-minded, fanciful, or untruthful. It is no uncommon experience, that of Lacordaire, who turned from the ingenious and learned pages of Strauss, and found that it never needed more than a few minutes' reading in the Gospels to dissipate the charm of a vain science, and to enable him to smile inwardly at the impotence to which God has condemned error. And this impression of truthfulness is vastly deepened when one turns from the Gospels to read the legends of Hercules, the confused accounts of the life of Buddha, or the stories of mediæval miracle-working saints. If one desires what, to most persons, will be a sufficient evidence of the historicity of the evangelic accounts, he will only need to peruse, by way of contrast with them, the so-called Apocryphal Gospels, which are indubitably forged, and in which the writers give the most reckless scope to their fancies in ascribing fictitious marvels to Jesus of Nazareth. One might dwell on this at length, and show the simplicity and naturalness of the references to Jesus in the Gospel histories as contrasted with the wild workings of invention in the Apocryphal accounts. The four evangelists give no play to their emotions or their fancies, and appear to be faithfully recording only what they have seen and known.

2. We have a second reason for accepting the Gospels as true histories, from the fact that they are the narratives of men who witnessed the life of Christ, or of those who were friends of eye-witnesses. It is certain that they were composed in the language in use during the first Christian century—that is, in what is called Hellenistic Greek—and we have the testimony of ecclesiastical writers for the first three centuries that they were composed by the men whose names they bear, a testimony supported by the heretical writers and pagan sceptics of that period. The doubts which were raised concerning some of the books that were finally accepted show that the critical spirit was not wanting in the early Church. The primitive Christians were not credulous in this matter; they received only on testimony and evidence. Tertullian says of the four Gospels that they have existed "from the beginning," and "are coeval with the churches themselves." Clement of Alexandria appeals to the four Gospels as being the only authentic history of Christ that has been handed down to us. Justin Martyr, born in Palestine about the year 100, refers to the "Memoirs of the Apostles," making one hundred and twenty allusions to the Gospel history which correspond to the records that we hold to-day. He speaks of these Memoirs as composed by "the apostles and their companions." Professor Fisher has said: "The universal reception of the four Gospels as having exclusive authority by the churches in the closing part of the

second century requires to be accounted for if their genuineness is denied." If later writers palmed off their own compositions and forged apostolic names, why should one Gospel have been ascribed to the obscure Matthew, about all we know of whom is that he was a despised and hated publican? And why should Mark and Luke, neither of whom was an apostle, have been pitched upon as the authors of two of the narratives, if later writers were palming off their own works? John's authorship of the Fourth Gospel had never been questioned in the time of Eusebius the historian, except by an insignificant heretical sect. It bears the marks of being the autobiographic record of a profound and affectionate soul who had come to believe, and who desired others to believe in the supernatural nature of the Messiah. It is because John's testimony, if acknowledged to be his, is so powerful in establishing the Deity of his Master and the celestial authority of His mission, that the anti-supernaturalists have, in the last fifty years, so violently assailed the Fourth Gospel. But after such defences of its Johannine authorship as those of Weiss, Meyer, Godet, Lightfoot, Ezra Abbott, Westcott, and a score of others, there is every reason to believe that the author was a Christian of Jewish origin, that he was a Jew of Palestine, that he was a contemporary of Jesus, that he was an eye-witness of what he recorded, that he was the disciple whom Jesus loved—in other words, that he was John, the son of Zebedee.

3. Our faith in the Gospels is augmented by the fact that we have a *fourfold* record of the life of Jesus. Each Gospel is different from the others, Matthew apparently written for the Jews, to show that Christ is the Messiah of the Old Testament; Mark, written, as it would seem, for the Romans, and, as the ancient writers unanimously testify, under the direction of Peter, to show in a vivid way Christ in action as the strong Son of God; Luke, written, it would seem, for the Greeks, under the direction of Paul, to show the universality, the mercifulness, and the peculiar tenderness of the grace of Christ and of His teaching; and John, apparently written for all Christians, to show that Jesus is One with the Father. And yet, though different, the peculiarities of each are found in some measure in all the others. The divinity of Christ is not taught by John alone, nor the graciousness and universality of His Gospel by Luke alone. The discrepancies between them forbid the theory of collusion and fraud, and tend to strengthen the conviction of the candor and faithfulness of the men who wrote of what they saw and believed. With so many gaps in the Gospel record, it may not be possible, and it is certainly not necessary, to show a perfect agreement. The careful reading of the four narratives gives the feeling that the variations confirm, rather than weaken, the total impression of reality and of faithfulness to the essential truth.

4. The evidence of the four evangelists is further strengthened by the important testimony of the Apostle Paul. Besides the Gospels we have, in confirmation of the evangelic narratives, the four undisputed Pauline epistles, Galatians, Romans, and First and Second Corinthians. The

sceptical scholars generally acknowledge that these were written by Paul within thirty years of the crucifixion. As Dr. Schaff has said, "They refer to our Lord's birth from a woman of the royal house of David, His sinless life and perfect example, His atoning death, His triumphant resurrection on the third day, His repeated manifestations to His disciples, His ascension and exaltation to the right hand of God, whence He will return to judge all men in righteousness, the adoration of Christ by His followers, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the establishment of the Church in Jerusalem." Paul narrates in detail the various appearances of Christ after His resurrection. His epistles are the destruction of the mythical theory. The period is too short for the growth of those mythical fancies to which Strauss attributed the miracles. Paul, writing in the midst of the men who knew Christ personally, nearly five hundred of whom were living witnesses of the resurrection, whose names were known, and who could be found and questioned, this apostle, in various literature which cannot be successfully disputed, gives his mighty additional testimony to the truth of the Gospel history. How many events between the battle of Marathon and the death of Cæsar have been recorded by five separate, competent, and apparently trustworthy historians, contemporary with the events described? But here we have five writers, including Paul as a separate evangelist, who have recorded the Gospel history in such a way that it commends itself to the confidence of mankind.

5. Another important evidence of the historic truth of the Gospels is the fact of their early proclamation and reception as true. No one doubts that the early Church believed that Christ rose from the dead. Primitive Christianity cannot be explained without this belief. The New Testament is largely the literature of the resurrection. Without it the primitive Christian theology is unintelligible. Channing says: "A history received by a people as true not only gives us the testimony of the writer, but the testimony of the nation among whom it finds credit." The earliest disciples, in the capital of Judaism, appealed to the enemies of Christ for the truth of Christ's miracles; and this appeal "was not contradicted by the Jews, as it unquestionably would have been had these miracles been an invention of a few followers of Christ." Peter said at Pentecost, within a few weeks of Christ's resurrection: "Ye men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God unto you by mighty works and wonders and signs which God did by Him in the midst of you, *even as ye yourselves know.*" And had it not been for the stumbling-block of the Cross, with its solemn disclosures of human guilt, with its enthronement of meekness, goodness, and mercy, and had Jesus proved the sort of Messiah that the Jewish leaders wanted, and not a flaming rebuke to their spirit of pride, formalism, and national revenge, they would more generally have yielded to His claims. As Edersheim has written: "Not denying His miracles, they regarded Jesus as the constant vehicle of Satanic influence, not because they convicted Him of any sin, but because His Kingdom

of God was precisely opposite to their kingdom of God." That One with such ideas should claim to be their Messiah called forth the cry of "blasphemy." But history has shown that His idea and not theirs was divine. From the very beginning, then, the first preachers of Christianity appealed to the Jewish people in behalf of the truth of what they asserted, and not till a later generation were the facts contradicted.

6. *The rapid progress and triumph of the Christian Church* is another evidence of the truth of the Gospel history on which the Church was founded. Mr. Gladstone is of the opinion that there never was so unequal a contest as that of Christianity with the Roman world. "Tainted in its origin by its connection with the detested Judaism, odious to the prevailing tone by its exclusiveness, it rested originally upon the testimony of men, poor, few, and ignorant, and for a length of time no human genius was enlisted in its service with the single exception of Saint Paul." Gibbon describes five causes for the rapid early spread of Christianity. The third of these is the miraculous powers attributed to the early Church. The other causes are the intense zeal of the early Christians, a zeal mingled with love, the profound and pervading belief in immortality as a state of reward and punishment, the active virtues of the early believers, and the mild and equitable form of Church government among them for a century after the death of the apostles. But when we go back of these secondary causes, and ask why Christian men had such a self denying zeal in an age of utter selfishness, why they were so confident in regard to the future, when the world generally had become sceptical, why they manifested such virtues far above the men about them, and lived as loving brethren in their Church life in the midst of a hate-ridden world, we strike immediately their faith in that wonderful history which was the substance of their preaching, their belief in Christ's resurrection, the supreme evidence to them of their immortality; we strike their belief in a divine Person who was their risen King, to whom they were bound by a deathless love, who inspired in them every active and passive virtue, and before whose majesty all were equal and all should be loving.

7. The Gospels are a record of miracles, and since the early progress of the Church is explained in great part by the miraculous forces lodged within it, we have here a mighty evidence confirmatory of the truth of the Gospel histories. It is not a marvel that so many Jews and others rejected the claims of the crucified Nazarene, but the wonder is that so many accepted them. "The reception of Christianity by them," it has been wisely said, "shows prejudice overcome by something, and the question is, by what?" Our answer is in part by the miracles. Some men have accepted a philosophy of history and of nature which forbids them to believe in miracles. Such persons have spent many years in the vain task of explaining away the Gospel narratives on the ground of fraud or delusion. They have attempted to break the force of the testimony, sealed with the heroic, unselfish, suffering lives and martyr deaths of those who

declared that they were witnesses of the miracles of Christ and of His risen person. For a hundred years sceptical scholarship has been perplexed and baffled in endeavoring to give a rational account of the person of Jesus on the theory of His being a fable and sometimes deluded and imperfect man. They have attempted to explain away the universal faith in Christ's resurrection for which men laid down their lives, a faith on which Strauss acknowledged the Church was built, a faith which was not destroyed by the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, not because they were unwilling, but because they were unable. But how was it that the early Church, which made no appeal to pride and human passions, which refused to use the sword, but espoused lowliness and purity as its distinctive virtues—how was it that the Church, beset by such constant and terrible antagonism on every side, was not extinguished? The system of truth which originated with the Jewish Carpenter and a few rough fishermen—could not have fought its way to world-wide acceptance against the combined hostility of Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome, against synagogue and philosophic school and armed antagonism, against all the external forces of imperial civilization, and against the obdurate unbelief and wickedness of the human heart, unless it had been accompanied by the signature of Almighty God.

8. The character of Christ is a luminous evidence of the truth of the Gospels. Dupes or liars could not have given us such a portrait of a perfect personality as shines from the evangelic pages. Matthew and John, the publican and the fisherman of Galilee, unless painting from the life, would have left some "action or omission to act" to stain the fair picture of an incomparable Being. We cannot tear out the miracles from the Gospels without sinking the apostles to the level of fools or deceivers, a conclusion which is irrational, both from what they have written, from the lives they lived, and, most of all, from the incomparable grandeur of the portrait which they have drawn of Jesus Christ. That portrait was not the product of imagination; it was drawn from the life, and that alone "is sufficient to demonstrate the truth of the Gospel history." It was natural that such a Being as the sinless Christ, who, with all His genuine humanity, manifestly did not belong to this world—it was natural for the Holy One of Nazareth, whose touch is the life of our civilization to-day, whose Spirit is the very breath of God, should do the works of His Father. Miracles are the jewels that naturally adorn the brows of this celestial King. He who spake with the tenderness, the holiness, the wisdom, and the authority of God, and with constant assertions of His supernatural origin and Almighty power, is to be believed when He claimed to do the works of heaven. The presence of Christ in the Gospels forever vindicates their truth.

9. The unanimity of the Christian Church in all ages with regard to the truth of that wonderful history out of which it sprang, the high character and services of the men who, after long investigation, have given in their adherence to historic Christianity and the unequalled transforming power

which the Gospel of Jesus Christ has manifested, are all of them strong corroborations of the reasons already urged for the truthfulness of the Gospel narratives. The marvellous force of Christianity has sprung from the preaching of a supernatural history. What is peculiar in Christianity, even as a system of ethics, is this, that its ethical teachings are all embodied in a divinely perfect Teacher whose redemptive work fills them with a new and life-giving power. The Teacher Himself is the beginning and end of Christian faith. Christianity is Christ as set forth in the Gospels. These Gospels, which tell of a Divine incarnation, which relate the life of the Founder of Christianity, which rehearse His discourses and His miracles in the same breath, which bring their fourfold testimony to His death and resurrection, are now repeating their story in more than three hundred languages. Nothing parallel to this can be found in human history. Ewald said of the New Testament: "In this little book is all the wisdom of the world." It is most difficult to believe that the Book of Life, whose messages are all interwoven with so-called history, was built on a mass of fables and fancies. The Gospel history was preached as true at the very dawn of Christianity, and on its truth were built up institutions and usages which have come down to us, and which were never so strong and widespread as to-day. The kingdom of Christ with its conquering front is a mighty argument for the truth of that history out of which it rose. Once renounce the faith which is proclaimed by the solemn voice of the Christian ages, and the mind is tossed on the sea of restless speculation. After the freest and most prolonged and minute discussion of the Gospel documents and of the early Christian history, one theory after another, which would account for Christ and the Gospels and the early Church, on the basis of anti-supernaturalism, has been abandoned. Strauss destroyed the form of scepticism which went before him; Baur has revealed the untenable nature of the theory of Strauss; and the disciples of Baur have divided along various lines, have lost their hold of German thought, and have been forced to bring back the date of the Fourth Gospel from thirty to fifty years before the time fixed by their learned leader. Surely if the attacks made thus far on the Gospel histories have been unavailing, we need not expect that they will soon succeed. "The strength and consummate equipment of these attacks," it has been truly said, "has but rendered more evident the impregnability of the sacred citadel." The Church of God, built on the incarnation and the resurrection, and holding from her temple's topmost spire that Cross which gathers about it all the light of human history, has seen imperial dominions and hoary superstitions and theologies of error and ten thousand airy speculations disappear, while she steadily expands her sheltering walls and opens her shining gates to encompass all nations.