

The Credibility of the Testimony of the Apostles

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IF it was ever reasonable to expect from God a supernatural revelation of his will, to instruct mankind in the knowledge of the law of their duty, and to propose to them the hope's of eternal life, and the means of salvation, this revelation must necessarily have been confirmed by such miraculous operations as would demonstrate that it was God who had spoken. The christian revelation, conformably to this principle, was confirmed by numerous, and most illustrious miracles, performed in the presence of multitudes of the people, and, especially, in the presence of those disciples whom our Saviour had chosen to be the constant spectators of these sublime evidences of his divine mission, and the witness of them to the ends of the earth. The character of these witnesses, and the sufferings which they endured for their testimony place the credit of their histories beyond all reasonable doubt.

They were plain unlettered men, indeed, taken from the inferior occupations of life, and entirely simple and artless in their manners. But, if we may form a judgment from their writings, and from the noble and excellent principles of morals and religion which these writings contain, they were men of the soundest understandings, and of warm and rational piety, which would render it impossible that they should be deceived themselves by any fictitious pretences to a divine power, and should free them from every suspicion of attempt to impose a history of false wonders upon the world. Is there the smallest probability that men, confined to their humble walks in life, should ever have conceived the idea of converting the universe and that in the name of a crucified man, unless they had acted under a divine direction? If they had been capable of conceiving the idea, is it possible that such an enterprise should have succeeded, especially in the enlightened age in which they lived, unless they had been supported by the most evident truth? So certain and undeniable, indeed, was the miraculous history of our blessed, Lord, that Celsus, the most ingenious and bitter of the enemies of the christian name among the philosophers of that time, does not pretend to controvert the miracles ascribed to Christ; but has, at once, the weakness, and the effrontery, to impute them to the powers of magic. ·

In the writings of the apostles and evangelists we perceive the strongest characters of sincerity and truth. There is no appearance of disguise and art, such as is usually employed to cover deception, but, on the other hand, an undesigning simplicity, which speaks powerfully to the

heart, evidently reigns through the whole of their narrations. It might well be expected, from the frailty of human nature, that impostors, in some parts of their systems, would designedly justify their own vices, or inadvertently introduce principles which would betray to an ingenious observer some predominant and vicious inclination. But, in the histories and epistles of the disciples of Christ, you discern none but the purest precepts of morality, the noblest sentiments of a genuine and rational piety. And, beyond all reasonable doubt, that admirable and profound wisdom which distinguishes their writings, that perfect moral code which they have prescribed, that pure and sublime theology which runs through the whole, so that superior to what was to be expected from their education and rank in life, and excelling whatever has been produced on these subjects by the most venerated sages of the pagan world, all carry with them strong evidence of the truth, and the divine mission of the holy evangelists and apostles. We may say of them, as the astonished fellow-citizens of Jesus said of their divine master, *whence had these men this wisdom*, unless it were given them from above? If they had been impostors they would probably have betrayed themselves by their art, and by some immoral tendency in their system. On the other hand, had they been enthusiasts, there is the highest probability that they would have betrayed themselves by innumerable extravagances. Widely different is that which comes from the Spirit of God, from whatever has its source only in the wisdom or the weakness of man.¹

Admitting the sound understanding, the wisdom, and integrity of the apostles and evangelists, which, after a candid examination of their writings cannot be denied them, the circumstances under which they published the gospel to the world, afford a proof, of the strongest kind, of the authenticity of its miraculous history.

Men impelled by an ardent ambition, may often encounter dangers, or sufferings, in the pursuit of glory, or of power. And avarice may prompt them to toil for wealth. But, without any prospect of emolument, or of honour, nay, in the very face of poverty, contempt, and hatred, of the fiercest persecutions, and the most cruel deaths, voluntarily to undertake the cause of a crucified master, from whom they could have no further expectations and, with a heroism and patience, worthy of the highest virtue, and the noblest ends, to propagate a deliberate imposture, only for

¹ In reading the writings of the New Testament, and particularly the discourses of our blessed Saviour, as recorded by the evangelists, we must be forcibly struck, as Dr. Paley justly remarks, with the difference between that calm, temperate, and rational spirit of piety which pervades them, and the rantings, excesses, and unholy familiarities with the Deity, which take place in those enthusiastic sects in modern times, which are composed chiefly of a people taken from the same orders of society with the evangelists. And if we compare the morality and theology of the sacred-writers, with those of the ancient schools of philosophy, shall we not be equally struck with the superiority of the fisher-men of Judea, over the politest and profoundest scholars of Greece and Rome ?

his glory, is contrary to all the known principles of human nature, and is utterly incredible. Jesus forewarned his disciples that they should meet with contumely and reproach, with persecution, and with death, in every formidable shape. With such discouragements before them, is it consistent with what we know of the motives of human action, to believe that they would have embarked in such an undertaking, unless they had possessed the fullest conviction of the truth of that miraculous history which they proclaimed with such indefatigable and heroic zeal; and unless they had entertained the most certain hopes of those immortal rewards, which could have been assured to them only by the resurrection of Christ from the dead, of which they were witnesses? Who then can doubt of their perfect knowledge of the facts which they relate, when they were so long the immediate companions, and intimate friends of their divine Master? And who can doubt of their sincerity, and truth, when we see them persevering in their testimony, and reiterating it in the face of the greatest dangers, and under the pressure of the severest sufferings? They were loaded with chains, they were thrust into dungeons, they were lacerated with scourging; they were crucified, sawn asunder, clothed in the skins of wild beasts and exposed to be devoured by dogs, burnt at the stake, invested with pitched shirts, to which, when fire was applied, they were turned into the circus, to light the barbarous sports of the insulting populace. But all these terrors combined were not able to shake their firmness, or induce them to retract one tittle of their testimony. Could they have been induced only to deny the resurrection of Christ, they might have delivered themselves from their miseries. Yet their dying breath, their last accents, were employed in confirming their unwavering testimony.²

Among all the facts, then, in the history of the world, to which we yield the most undoubting assent, which of them comes confirmed to us by an evidence so clear and unequivocal as the miracles, and, consequently, the divine mission, of our blessed Saviour? The witnesses of them were men of the soundest understanding, and therefore most capable of observing with accuracy the phenomena before them; they were men of the purest hearts and the most disinterested

² A crowd of writers, pagan as well as christian, confirm this representation of the sufferings of the primitive disciples and their astonishing constancy in maintaining the truth of the resurrection, and the miracles of Jesus Christ. Suetonius, Pliny, Juvenal, Martial, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Tacitus, all bear witness to these facts. A single sentence only I quote from the last of these writers, in the name of all the rest. "Their sufferings at their execution," says he, speaking of the christians, "were aggravated by insult and mockery. For some were disguised in the skins of wild beasts and worried to death by dogs; some were crucified, and others were wrapped in pitched shirts and set on fire, when the day was closed, that they might serve as lights to illuminate the night."

The constancy with which the christians endured their tortures, was ascribed, by their enemies, to madness, or to obstinacy. But, how much more reasonable would it have been to ascribe it to a deep and heart-felt conviction of the truth of their religion, and its infinite importance to the happiness of mankind?

conduct, who could have no intention therefore to deceive; and they were evidently free from all illusive heats of enthusiasm, which might render them liable to deceive themselves. Their testimony derives additional credit from their own original and inveterate prejudices, which were so difficult to be subdued, and which nothing seemed able to conquer but the most illustrious demonstrations of a divine power every where accompanying their divine Master . They, along with their whole nation, expected to find in the Messiah a mighty temporal prince, who should restore the kingdom to Israel, and extend his dominion, and the glory of the Jewish people, over the universe. In this kingdom it was natural for them, as the companions of the future prince, to expect the highest honours and. distinctions. So rooted were these prejudices, and so strongly supported by national error, and individual vanity, that it was one of the most difficult tasks in the ministry of Jesus to eradicate them from their minds; nor was this, indeed, fully effected, till they were supernaturally enlightened on the day of Pentecost. When he spoke to them of the spiritual nature of his kingdom, they were unwilling, or unable to comprehend him. And when, instead of the magnificent hopes which they had conceived for themselves, and for their nation, he presented to them only the approaching ruin of the holy city, the pride and boast of every Israelite; only the sufferings and deaths to which they should be exposed in preaching his name to a world hostile to the spirit of his institutions, they were often ready to abandon his service. Nothing could have been sufficient to recall them to their arduous duties, or to attach them to his humble fortunes, in the midst of such cruel disappointments, and such menacing dangers, but those works of omnipotence daily wrought by his hands, which carried to, their inmost souls the irresistible conviction that he was the Son of God. They could not be persuaded that the Messiah could die, till they saw him expire. They neither believed nor understood the resurrection of the dead, till they had seen him, who had conquered death, restored from the tomb. Even then it was long before their astonished senses could admit the full conviction of a fact which contradicted all the prepossessions of experience and of education. They conversed with him, they touched him, they thrust their hands into his wounded side, before they could be convinced that it was their beloved Master whom they saw again, and whom they thought they had lost forever. Their own prejudices were first to be conquered by the most powerful evidence, before they set out to conquer the prejudices of the world. But then forms of danger, or of death, could shake their constancy; such fast hold had the conviction, and the infinite importance of this fact taken on their minds. It is a fact concerning which it was impossible for them to be mistaken: and such were the circumstances under which they delivered their testimony, that it was impossible they should have intended to impose a fictitious narrative upon the world. Their toils, their self-denials, their sufferings, their deaths, together with the entire relinquishment of all their former prejudices, are the strongest vouchers for their sincerity and truth.

Will it be asked if there are not, in history, many examples of enthusiasts who have died for false principles with astonishing firmness? But, besides its being evident that there is, in the characters

and writings of the apostles, no tincture of enthusiasm, there is a wide difference between dying for *an opinion*, and in attestation of *a fact*. In our opinions, however honestly they may be formed, we may err: yet they may have the same influence on the mind, to inflame or to fortify it, as truth. But, with regard to facts, when the senses are not impaired, when the judgment is sound, and the heart is honest, and when men possess such means of judging with certainty as the apostles enjoyed, it is impossible to be deceived; and, not being deceived, it is contrary to all the principles of human action to suppose that these holy men should voluntarily encounter such dangers, endure such toils and sufferings, and at length lay, down their lives in order to propagate a known and unprofitable falsehood. From these reflections, if they are well founded, it results, that no moral evidence for any historical fact can be higher than that by which the sacred history has come down confirmed to us.