

RECENT NEW TESTAMENT CRITICISM.

IV.

THE TESTIMONY OF CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE TO THE
HISTORICITY OF THE EVANGELIC JESUS.

IT must be confessed that the appeal to experience is a somewhat perilous expedient and one which should be employed with extreme caution. It is not infrequently an *asylum ignorantiae* resorted to by enthusiasts and obscurantists when they are hard put to it for a reason of the faith they profess. Argument is at an end when a man says: "So it seems to me; and, say what you will, you shall not argue me out of my conviction." This is just the Protagorean *homo mensura* which Socrates criticizes in the *Theætetus*.¹ "'Man,' says Protagoras, 'is the measure of all things—of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not.' He means by this that, as everything appears to me, such is it to me; and, as it appears to you, such again is it to you."

This, however, is the abuse of the argument, and does not disprove the legitimacy or validity of it. Experience is a fact and must be taken account of. It was a fair and conclusive appeal to experience when Diogenes, unable to expose the fallacy in Zeno's demonstration of the logical impossibility of locomotion, got up and walked. *Solvitur ambulando*. And with equal justice may a believer take his stand, in quiet confidence, upon his experience of Christ's grace and reply to the criticism which assures him that the Saviour whom he trusts in is a mythic personage and that next to nothing can be known about the Historic Jesus: "I know Him whom I have believed. He has manifested His mercy and grace to my poor soul; and I am sure that He

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was just what the Gospels represent, because I have found Him even such in my own experience."

According to Romanes¹ the criteria which differentiate faith from superstition are "the spiritual verification" and "the moral ingredient," and it is the selfsame criteria that determine the legitimacy of the appeal to experience. Does the experience accord with the evangelic story? Then it verifies the story and the story justifies it. And is it morally unobjectionable? It is told how an impostor, one Lacey, of the sect called the Prophets, once waited on the Lord Chief-Justice Holt and demanded the release of a brother fanatic who had been thrown into Newgate for seditious talk. He announced himself as "a prophet of the Lord God." "He has sent me to thee, and would have thee grant a *nolle prosequi* for John Atkins, His servant, whom thou hast sent to prison." This pretended experience lacked the moral ingredient. "Thou art a false prophet," was his lordship's reply, "and a lying knave. If the Lord God had sent thee, it would have been to the Attorney General, for He knows that it belongeth not to the Chief-Justice to grant a *nolle prosequi*; but I, as Chief-Justice, can grant a warrant to lay a lying knave by the heels."

Consider, then, how Christian experience answers to the evangelic record. It is written in the Gospels how, when Jesus met with penitent sinners, of His own sovereign authority He absolved them and bade them enter into peace; how He bade the weary and heavy laden come unto Him and find rest unto their souls; and how multitudes trusted Him and from that hour lived new lives, being freed from the lusts which had held them in bondage, and filled with all joy and peace in believing. Thus it is written in the Gospels, and even such at this hour, as it has been during more than sixty generations, is the actual experience of myriads of believers.

¹ *Thoughts on Religion*, p. 139.

It is remarkable with what equanimity the mass of Christians are wont to regard the assaults of destructive critics on the historicity of the Scriptures, going quietly on their way and feeding their souls upon those narratives whose incredibility is so loudly proclaimed. It is not that they are irrational, but rather that their faith rests on a foundation which no criticism can weaken or destroy. They know Him whom they have believed. They have seen His blessed and gracious face, have tasted of His goodness, have experienced the power of His Resurrection, and are holding continual fellowship with Him. Their faith standeth not in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. They believe in Jesus, not simply because the Scriptures testify of Him, but because they have had personal experience of His love and grace; and they regard arguments against the historicity of the Gospels much as one might a scientific demonstration of the non-existence of the sun. They may be unable to refute them, but they know that they are false.

Though one be personally a stranger to such experience, one dare not question the reality of it, seeing it in others; as Bunyan saw it in those "three or four old women" in Bedford, "sitting at a door, in the sun, talking about the things of God. . . . Their talk was about a new birth, the work of God in their hearts, as also how they were convinced of their miserable state by nature. They talked how God had visited their souls with His love in the Lord Jesus, and with what words and promises they had been refreshed, comforted, and supported against the temptations of the devil: moreover, they reasoned of the suggestions and temptations of Satan in particular; and told to each other by what means they had been afflicted; and how they were borne up under his assaults. They also discoursed of their own wretchedness of heart, and of their unbelief, and did contemn, slight, and abhor their

own righteousness as filthy, and insufficient to do them any good. And methought they spoke with such pleasantness of Scripture language, and with such appearance of grace in all they said, that they were to me as if they had found a new world—as if they were people that dwelt alone, and were not to be reckoned among their neighbours.”¹

One will hardly dare to dismiss it as a devout illusion who reflects that never is such experience of the Lord's grace so real and precious as in the sore straits of life, and especially in the solemn hour of dissolution when, if never before, a man deals honestly by himself and looks facts in the face. Even at the risk of seeming to import sentiment into a scientific discussion one must marvel how it is possible for a Christian minister, in face of the express and emphatic declaration with which it closes (xxi. 24; cf. xix. 35), to deny the Johannine authorship of the Fourth Gospel, thereby convicting the writer of deliberate falsehood. The conclusion may seem probable to one who takes account exclusively of the critical evidence; but there are other and weightier considerations which should not lightly be set aside and must surely appeal most powerfully to one who has knelt by a death-bed and seen the wasted face light up as though it had caught a glimpse of the glory to be revealed, while he repeated those words which have been the stay of myriads of departing souls: “In My Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” Amazing as are the moral mixtures which the human heart is capable of containing, it passes belief that one who stands convicted of a literary fraud should have conceived that peerless chapter. The fact is that, so far as purely critical investigation goes,

¹ *Grace Abounding*, §§ 37, 38.

much may be said on both sides as regards the Johannine authorship of the Fourth Gospel;¹ and surely it is but reasonable that the weighty evidence of Christian experience should turn the wavering balance.

Nor is it only the experience of believers that thus attests the historicity of the evangelic narratives. It is surely a powerful reinforcement of the argument that the moral supremacy of our Lord is universally acknowledged. "Not even now," says John Stuart Mill² "could it be easy, even for an unbeliever, to find a better translation of the rule of virtue from the abstract into the concrete than to endeavour so to live that Christ would approve our life"—precisely the sentiment which Dr. George MacDonald has put in the mouth of a simple and unlettered believer: "When anything comes up, I just says to myself, 'Now, Old Rogers, what do you think the Lord would best like you to do?' And as soon as I ax myself that, I know directly what I've got to do."³ The meaning of this is that the Evangelic Jesus has the "value" of an external conscience, and it would be difficult to conceive a more conclusive evidence of our Lord's spiritual presence according to His parting promise: "Lo, I am with you all the days even unto the consummation of the age."

Consider further the testimony of history, which is just the experience of mankind. "If," says Romanes,⁴ "we estimate the greatness of a man by the influence which he has exerted on mankind, there can be no question, even from the secular point of view, that Christ is much the greatest man who has ever lived." The history of these

¹ Not only is critical opinion fairly divided on the question, but the steady tendency has been to push the date of the Fourth Gospel further and further back. Baur, in defiance of Patristic testimony, put it at 170 A.D.; now it is put near the close of the first century or early in the second.

² *Three Essays on Theism*, p. 255.

³ *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*, iii.

⁴ *Thoughts on Religion*, p. 159.

eighteen centuries is in very truth a record of *gesta Christi*. It would require a volume to show the difference which Jesus has made, but it will suffice here to recall one ancient usage which is eloquent of the misery of the world as He found it and the happy change which He has effected. Alike in Greece and in Rome it rested with the father whether a child should live or die. The infant was laid before him, and, if it pleased him, he took it up (*elevare*) and acknowledged (*agnoscere*) it as his child; but, if he had no mind to rear it, he let it lie, and then the hapless creature was disposed of. Sometimes it was drowned, but usually it was exposed (*ἀπόθεσις, expositio*) and left to perish of hunger or to be torn by beasts of prey, unless some passer by should take pity on it and rear it out of charity. It was common to get rid of superfluous girls in this hideous fashion, and it was the invariable practice with deformed or weakly babes. The infant Œdipus was cast out on Mount Cithæron, and his little feet were pierced with an iron pin to ensure his destruction. Some pitiful soul might have rescued a healthy child, but one thus mangled was likely to be left to its fate. Of course the story was but an ancient fable, nevertheless it is a ghastly revelation of the sentiment and usage of the ancient world that, when the drama of Sophocles was acted in the theatre, it excited no horror. Such things were done every day, and that in Athens, the home of philosophy, art, and all the "fair humanities." Even Seneca, that humane and polished gentleman of imperial Rome, could write a passage like this: "We fell mad dogs, we slaughter a fierce and untamable ox, and plunge a knife into diseased cattle lest they infect the herd; monstrous embryos we destroy; children also, if they are born weakly and deformed, we drown. It is not anger but reason to separate the useless from the sound."¹

Ex uno disce omnia. Such was that ancient world despite

¹ *De Ira*, i. 15.

its philosophy, its literature, its art, its unsurpassed civilization. It is Jesus that has humanized mankind and evoked the sentiments of chivalry and compassion. It is He that has put it into men's hearts to befriend the needy, support the weak, and look on the maimed and broken no longer as worthless refuse but as objects of peculiar reverence and tender solicitude. It is His unseen hands that have built our hospitals, our orphanages, and our houses of refuge. Had He never lived that life of love and died that death of sacrifice whereof the Gospels tell, the world had never known that "enthusiasm of humanity" which unbelievers share with His disciples, inasmuch as they too live in the new world which He has made, and, even while they disown Him, breathe His spirit.

Now, what is the inference to which this points? It may be maintained that the Evangelic Jesus is simply an un-historic ideal, a beautiful dream which has set men's hearts on fire and allured humanity to loftier and ever loftier heights. Something like this has been argued by the late Mr. T. H. Green of Oxford, the prototype of Langham in *Robert Elsmere*. His position is that it matters not at all whether the evangelic conception of Jesus be historical. In point of fact it is not. It is a sublime ideal, the creation partly of St. Paul, but still more of one even greater than St. Paul, "the writer whom the church calls St. John." "More, probably, than two generations after St. Paul had gone to his rest, there arose a disciple, whose very name we know not (for he sought not his own glory and preferred to hide it under the repute of another), who gave that final spiritual interpretation to the person of Christ, which has for ever taken it out of the region of history and of the doubts that surround all past events, to fix it in the purified conscience as the immanent God."¹ Wherefore inquire after the

¹ *Works of T. H. Green*, vol. iii. p. 242.

Historic Jesus? It is sufficient that this perfect ideal of the relation betwixt God and man has dawned upon the world, and it matters not whence or how it arose.

Ye know there needs no second proof with good
Gained for our flesh from any earthly source:
We might go freezing, ages,—give us fire,
Thereafter we judge fire at its full worth,
And guard it safe through every chance, ye know!
That fable of Prometheus and his theft,
How mortals gained Jove's fiery flower, grows old
(I have been used to hear the pagans own)
And out of mind; but fire, howe'er its birth,
Here is it, precious to the sophist now
Who laughs the myth of Æschylus to scorn,
As precious to those satyrs of his play,
Who touched it in gay wonder at the thing.¹

Indeed it is an impure sort of faith that concerns itself about historic evidence. "It is not on any estimate of evidence, correct or incorrect, that our true holiness can depend. Neither, if we believe certain documents to be genuine and authentic, can we be the better, nor if we believe not, the worse. There is thus an inner contradiction in that conception of faith which makes it a state of mind involving peace with God and love towards all men, and at the same time makes its object that historical work of Christ, of which our knowledge depends on evidence of uncertain origin and value."²

Notwithstanding Mr. Green's grateful enthusiasm for St. Paul and St. John, one is hardly disposed to admit without demur his title to claim their authority for his rendering of Christianity. It is more than questionable whether the apostles would have recognized in his philosophy the remotest resemblance to the faith which they preached. Assuredly neither of them made light of the historic facts of our Lord's Life, Death, and Resurrection. It is

¹ Browning, *A Death in the Desert*.

² *Works of T. H. Green*, iii. p. 260.

true indeed that in 2 Corinthians v. 16 St. Paul says that "though he has known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth he knows Him so no more"; but here it is not in all his thoughts to make light of the historic facts. On the contrary, he is asserting the momentous truth that Jesus is not dead but the living and reigning Lord; and so far is he from slighting the historic facts that, as he continually recognized, the postulate and guarantee of the spiritual presence of Jesus is the supreme historic fact of His Resurrection. We have it on his own authority that the historic facts formed the invariable theme of his preaching: "I handed on to you first of all what I also received—that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that he hath been raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen" (1 Cor. xv. 3-5). In view of such a statement, it is simply flying in the face of the Apostle's own declaration to assert that "there is no reason to think that he knew anything of the details of the life of Jesus of Nazareth."¹ As for St. John his Gospel is nothing else than a record of the historic facts and an interpretation of their eternal significance. Neither apostle would have acknowledged Mr. Green's philosophy of Christianity as an adequate representation of the faith he preached. Sin, Justification, and Reconciliation are the very fabric of St. Paul's theology; while the basis of the Fourth Gospel is no ideal conception of the immanence of God in man, but an objective revelation enacted on the stage of human history—*ἡ τοῦ Σωτῆρος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἔνσαρκος οἰκονομία.*

An ideal may charm the intellect, but it cannot satisfy the heart; and it is the condemnation of Mr. Green's view that it makes Christianity not a religion but a philosophy, and a very subtle philosophy hopelessly incomprehensible

¹ *Works of T. H. Green*, iii. p. 232.

to the great mass of mankind. What the metaphysician here misses the poet has perceived :

Truth in closest words shall fail,
When truth embodied in a tale
Shall enter in at lowly doors.

And so the Word had breath, and wrought
With human hands the creed of creeds
In loveliness of perfect deeds,
More strong than all poetic thought.

Had Christianity been no more than a lofty ideal, "the worship, through love and knowledge, of God as a spiritual being, immanent in the moral life of man,"¹ it would never have entered, as it has, into human history and shaped the course thereof. What has touched the hearts of men, won their allegiance, and inspired them with utter devotion, is no metaphysical ideal, but the spectacle of the Son of God, in His wondrous love and pity, descending from His glory, assuming our nature, bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows, enduring the contradiction of sinners, bleeding on the cruel and shameful Cross, and bursting the bands of death. If this be all a dream, if the Evangelic Jesus be no more than a symbolization of thought, a sensuous presentation of a sublime ideal, then we are shut up to the astonishing and truly incredible conclusion that an illusion, born of the multitude's incapacity for abstract thinking, has proved itself the most potent and beneficent force in the history of the world during eighteen centuries. "To read the history of the Christian Church without the belief that Christ has been in vital and organic relation with it, seems to me to read it under the impression that a profound illusion can, for centuries, exercise more power for good than the truth. . . . I cannot understand the history of the Christian Church at all, if all the fervent trust which has been stirred

by faith in the actual inspirations of a nature at once eternal and human, has been lavished on a dream.”¹

Sixty generations of believers have been adoring the Evangelic Jesus as their Lord, labouring for Him, and studying the record of His earthly life ; and each generation has discovered fresh glory in His person and deeper significance in His teaching. It was all there from the first, but it has been gradually perceived and gradually appropriated. Just as Science has in each successive generation discovered new marvels which had resided in Nature all unsuspected from the beginning, so Faith has been ever bringing to light more and more of “ the treasures of wisdom and knowledge which are hidden away in Christ ” (Col. ii. 3). The Evangelic Jesus is the perfect revelation, and increasing knowledge, so far from exhausting His unsearchable riches, does but disclose fresh and undreamed of wonders such as eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man. Surely the inference is inevitable, that this Jesus of the evangelic story and the Church’s faith is in very truth the Jesus of history, and that, moreover, as the Gospels declare and the Church believes, He is “ no dead fact stranded on the shore of the oblivious years,” but the Living Lord who, according to His promise, maketh His abode with believing souls and manifesteth Himself unto them in another way than He doth unto the world. The spiritual presence of Jesus is an indubitable experience with every believer, and the complete accord of this experience with the evangelic narratives is a singular and incontrovertible attestation of their historicity.

Such is the argument from Christian Experience. It is no novel method, but one which our Lord Himself has recommended. “ If any man,” He said to cavillers in Jerusalem, “ willeth to do His Will, he shall come to know (*γνώσεται*) as regards the Teaching whether it be of God

¹ Hutton, *Theol. Ess.* viii.

or whether I speak from Myself" (John vii. 17). The man who applies himself to that most practical and straightforward task which Jesus here defines as "doing the Will of God" and which answers to such modern phrases as *obeying the dictates of conscience, acting up to the highest one knows*, presently finds himself in possession of a certain experience; and, if he takes the experience thus acquired and lays it alongside of the teaching of Jesus, he will find that it fits in with the latter in a most accurate fashion.

St. Augustine does much less than justice to this pregnant counsel of Jesus when he renders it: "Seek not to understand in order that you may believe, but believe in order that you may understand";¹ as though it were possible to stifle one's doubts and profess an incredible creed in the hope of coming to believe it. This were indeed what Romanes styles a "fool's experiment," and it is in no wise what our Lord enjoins. His counsel is, on the contrary, a challenge to honest and rational inquiry and agrees exactly with the method of scientific investigation. The first step toward discovery is a theory; then follows the testing of the theory by the phenomena; and if so be that they bear it out, it is thereby verified. It is mere waste of breath and endless disputation to reason about the theory. "Do not think; try," John Hunter was wont to say; meaning, "Do not waste time on a *a priori* discussion of the theory: put it to the test and ascertain the verdict of the facts."² It is thus that one must proceed in order to acquire proficiency in any art. "Try," said Rembrandt to his pupil Hoogstraten, "to put well in practice what you already know; in so doing you will, in good time, discover the hidden things which you now inquire about."³ The principle is valid also amid the moral tangle of conflicting duties.

¹ Apud *Cat. Aur.*: "Noli quærere intelligere ut credas, sed crede ut intelligas."

² Romanes, *Thoughts on Religion*, p. 167.

³ Hamerton, *Intellectual Life*, p. 303.

“Most true is it,” says Carlyle, “as a wise man teaches, that ‘Doubt of any sort cannot be removed except by Action.’ On which ground, too, let him who gropes painfully in darkness or uncertain light, and prays vehemently that the dawn may ripen into day, lay this other precept well to heart, which to me was of invaluable service: ‘*Do the Duty which lies nearest thee,*’ which thou knowest to be a Duty! Thy second Duty will already have become clearer.”

This is precisely the counsel of our Lord. His teaching is the theory, and the experience of morally earnest men the facts; and He bids us not debate about the theory but subject it to the only just and infallible test by laying it alongside of the facts and ascertaining whether it falls into line with them. The question of the trustworthiness of the Gospels is not to be settled exclusively or even principally by the processes of documentary criticism or the testimonies of ancient authors. Their best credentials lie in our own hearts and consciences.¹ “The Word is nigh thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart; that is, the Word of Faith which we preach.” The appeal to Experience attests the truth of the evangelic narratives and the historicity of the Evangelic Jesus. And it is no *asylum ignorantiae*. It has the sanction of our Lord, and it is the method of inductive science.

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¹ Cf. the *Testimonium Spiritus Sancti* of the Reformers. Calv. *Inst.* I. vii. 4: “Sicuti Deus solus de se idoneus est testis in suo sermone, ita etiam non ante fidem reperiet sermo in hominum cordibus quam interiore Spiritus testimonio obsignetur.”