

## Faith and Understanding

For those who seek to conserve the historic message of Christianity, the problem of the relationship of objective historical facts to faith is assuming a new prominence in the light of several contemporary thought-movements. The sphere of science, resting upon sense experience, and the sphere of religion, resting upon revelation, have never been able to reconcile their competing claims. An uneasy peace was reached in the view, once more common than now, that science seeks impersonal truth capable of expression by universal concepts, and as such does not touch the inner life of man, which is the province of religion, and whose stock in trade is mystery and image, these being personal and capable of expression only in terms of their inner truth. The complicating factor in this attempted solution is the character of the Christian Scriptures, which not only deal with the area of inner religious meaning, but with a vast amount of historical material.

Moreover, the circumstances surrounding the production of the Bible are such that the historical garment clothing its spiritual meaning is not so easily disposable as was once thought. It is true that there is a certain independence of truth from time and historical event; nevertheless, the circumstances under which what is set forth as *truth* are such that reasonable men may legitimately question its validity unless the historical events in which it is set are *true*. Nor does it help much to assert that historical facts can only be understood in the light of faith, if by that is meant that faith does not seek factual historical meaning. It is true, of course, that faith is not a mere collector of historical data. Its most characteristic operation is in a realm deeper than that, namely, in the inner citadel of the heart.

The appeal of the Christian message is essentially an appeal to faith. That is to say, it always summons the life to devotion to

that which cannot be mathematically demonstrated. It asserts the primacy of God over man, the superior altitude of His thoughts above our thoughts. At the same time, it presents its data to man in terms of a revelation set in history, history in which places, dates, and men of all types figure prominently. As such, faith must be nourished by a certain amount of evidence and sustained by a reasonable measure of congruence between the facts in which its specifically spiritual content is set, and the realm of accepted historical fact.

Some will see at once a major problem in the words "reasonable measure of congruence" and inquire whether the Christian can expect to find his faith verified, point by point, in historical and archaeological research. To the individual holding a high view of the inspiration of the Bible, this would mean a great deal, for the segment of history thus involved is large, and the events are set well into the past. It seems to this writer that this entire problem has not received the attention which it deserves, and while the question is one involving a vast amount of research for which he is not qualified, he would draw attention to two or three considerations which seem to bear significantly on the question.

It should be noted that in *any* understanding of events in antiquity, there are large and tantalizing gaps. The data which we possess concerning the first century of the Christian era, and the centuries immediately preceding it, are at best fragmentary. This is shown by the manner in which archaeological studies are constantly throwing light upon the usages of the period. Moreover, archaeology tends to put flesh on the dry bones of the literary remains of the period, so that an appeal to its discoveries is in itself a confession of both the limitation of the quantity of historical data and of the essentially artificial character of

the surviving writings. When we move back into the period of the Old Testament, we find that the hiatuses are more numerous and more gaping. Most historians agree that it is difficult to establish with accuracy any chronology back of about 800 B.C.

But man is concerned—and vitally so—with events far more remote than this. His origin and early history are more than matters of antiquarian interest. Certainly he ought to know something of these. Yet the tangible data at these points, for example, are meager and fragmentary. Monuments and fossils remain; traditions linger, and ancient literatures speak, but with no united voice. Science has attempted to piece together the bits of evidence, but has been compelled to rely heavily upon an hypothesis for a framework. One gets the feeling from reading the scientific explanations that there is a certain amount of regimenting of the facts—and back of this, still a vast amount requiring explanation.

While archaeology is assisting in some areas of the recovery of ancient history, its work is slow and fragmentary. Meanwhile, the gaps remain. Hypotheses come and go. Some, formerly confidently accepted, have gone into the discard. New options appear and are entertained. But there is one option which is seldom entertained among the men of scientific temper, namely the biblical one, which asserts the special creation and recent advent of man, his primeval innocence and his historical fall. True, this is an option of faith; but perhaps this is *one* of the specific functions of faith, to fill in the hiatuses in available data. Some will object that this is an appeal to ignorance. But is not *some* option of faith inevitable? Is not the developmental hypothesis an appeal to faith? Does not its use leave vast questions unanswered? Has it not been sustained by the sheer weight of numbers of those accepting it? These facts the scientists ought not brush off lightly.

At the present moment, it is extremely unlikely that men now living will possess, from archaeology and related sources, sufficient data to enable them to fill in the major gaps in human thought with respect to the questions just noted. A realistic view

demands that we recognize how little we know in these areas. Perhaps, therefore, the matter of the selection of our options in the inevitable filling in of the blanks in our knowledge deserves more thought than our age has given to it. And the acceptance of the biblical option does not necessarily mean that we must first wait for criticism, archaeology and exegesis to say the last word upon the structure and content of Scripture. This would be to place the biblical option at a disadvantage which is not allowed in case of alternate solutions. In other words, it is time to abandon the squeamishness with which biblical faith is treated, and reinstate it in its rightful place as a tenable option, with the added value which comes by virtue of the historic recognition given it through the centuries.

This will be hard on our pride in the infallibility of twentieth-century knowledge, for we have so long made the outlook of our day the measuring stick of truth in all ages that we fail to recognize our bondage to its limited methods. Similarly, there is not a little of pride in our high-handed judgment of naiveté upon much of the past. We need the perspective of history if we are to evaluate our time.

This brings us face to face with certain problems of fact, especially that involved in the acceptance of the option that in the first century of the Christian era, God became incarnate and walked among men, leaving in the sand of that century the footprints of supernatural works, culminating in His rising again. Any who have felt the pulse of our time can realize that the modern man finds it much easier to believe that the reports of these events are faulty than that such events actually occurred. An assertion of the reality of the events seem to be a pronouncement of judgment, not only upon the philosophical structure of our time, but upon a science which has, in a remarkably short space of time, brought a standard of living unparalleled in man's history. This is no light matter.

At the same time, the records of the New Testament are with us, and were not only accepted by men far nearer to the events which they describe than research can ever take us, but were held in the face of great

odds by selfless persons whose final impact upon the world is undoubted. Even the skeptical observer of European history must admit the historical impact of the Gospel. The real question is, whether this impact could have grown out of superstition and misinformation. We think not. But if not, then the problem remains with us. The position here set forward is, that the entire question posed by the appearance and spread of Christianity is one which only faith can answer. And he who rejects the biblical option seems to be throwing away the only key by means of which such a phenomenon can be understood.

It needs to be noted in this connection that faith, no less than the scientific outlook, is confronted with a pattern of significant problems. It creates no new mysteries, for mysteries are already with us. The problems of the origin of the world, the origin of man, and the origin of evil exist quite apart from whether or not we consider the option of faith. These antedate the appearance of Christianity. But as mysteries, they seem to the devout Christian to be less strange than they evidently appear to be to the scientist. This is due to the fact that the Christian is himself immersed in the larger program of faith, namely the redemption of man. Without this, the "God" of the scientists is strangely foreign to man's tragic fate, and any supposed solu-

tion to the ultimate mysteries of the universe becomes cold and detached, and must be finally unsatisfactory.

In view of the foregoing, it may be noted that faith, in the sense in which we have considered it, becomes a characteristic way of viewing things, in which the total meaning of the universe is sought in terms of the Christian Scriptures. These are viewed, not simply as containing a central core of reliable "redemptive truth", but as embodying a characteristically Christian way of viewing the whole of reality, and as being in consequence reliable as they touch contiguous areas, such as history, geography, anthropology and cosmology. To him who is immersed in the modern way of looking at things, this will seem nothing short of revolutionary. Perhaps this is precisely what the Bible ought to be.

In any case, he who will take the Scriptures seriously must ultimately face the problem of faith and its content in understanding. This will proffer no easy route to the thoughtful man; indeed, we need to divest ourselves of the idea that Christianity offers an easy intellectual road. But he who can accept the momentous proposition that "by faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God" may shortly find himself understanding, through faith, a great many other things.

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