

Testimony of the Evangelists

Simon Greenleaf, 1846

This time-honored work includes an examination of the legal procedures in the trial of Jesus. How would the Gospels be regarded if they were submitted as evidence in a court of law? This fascinating question forms the basis for Simon Greenleaf's classic study of the rules of legal evidence as applied to the New Testament account of the life and teaching of Jesus. As Dane Professor of Law at Harvard in the mid-19th century, Simon Greenleaf produced the greatest single authority on evidence in history. Applying the same rules of evidence administered in courts of justice, Greenleaf demonstrated the validity of the gospels as trustworthy and authoritative historical accounts.

In examining the evidence of the Christian religion, it is essential to the discovery of truth that we bring to the investigation a mind freed, as far as possible, from existing prejudice, and open to conviction. There should be a readiness, on our part, to investigate with candor to follow the truth wherever it may lead us, and to submit, without reserve or objection, to all the teachings of this religion, if it be found to be of divine origin. "There is no other entrance," says Lord Bacon, "to the kingdom of man, which is founded in the sciences, than to the kingdom of heaven, into which no one can enter but in the character of a little child." The docility which true philosophy requires of her disciples is not a spirit of servility, or the surrender of the reason and judgment to whatsoever the teacher may inculcate; but it is a mind free from all pride of opinion, not hostile to the truth sought for, willing to pursue the inquiry, and impartiality to weigh the arguments and evidence, and to acquiesce in the judgment of right reason. The investigation, moreover, should be pursued with the serious earnestness which becomes the greatness of the subject—a subject fraught with such momentous consequences to man. It should be pursued as in the presence of God, and under the solemn sanctions created by a lively sense of his omniscience, and of our accountability to him for the right use of the faculties which he has bestowed.

In requiring this candor and simplicity of mind in those who would investigate the truth of our religion, Christianity demands nothing more than is readily conceded to every branch of human science. All these have their data, and their axioms; and Christianity, too, has her first principles, the admission of which is essential to any real progress in knowledge. "Christianity," says Bishop Wilson, "inscribes on the portal of her dominion 'Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, shall in nowise enter therein.' Christianity does not profess to convince the perverse and headstrong, to bring irresistible evidence to the daring and profane, to vanquish the proud scorner, and afford evidences from which the careless and perverse cannot possibly escape. This might go to destroy man's responsibility. All that Christianity professes, is to propose such evidences as may satisfy the meek, the tractable, the candid, the serious inquirer."

The present design, however, is not to enter upon any general examination of the evidences of Christianity, but to confine the inquiry to the testimony of the Four Evangelists, bringing their narratives to the tests to which other evidence is subjected in human tribunals. The foundation of our religion is a basis of fact—the fact of the birth, ministry, miracles, death, resurrection by the Evangelists as having actually occurred, within their own personal knowledge. Our religion, then, rests on the credit due to these witnesses. Are they worthy of implicit belief, in the matters which they relate? This is the question, in all human tribunals, in regard to persons testifying before them; and we propose to test the veracity of

these witnesses, by the same rules and means which are there employed. The importance of the facts testified, and their relations to the affairs of the soul, and the life to come, can make no difference in the principles or the mode of weighing the evidence. It is still the evidence of matters of fact, capable of being seen and known and related, as well by one man as by another. And if the testimony of the Evangelist, supposing it to be relevant and material to the issue in a question of property or of personal right, between man and man, in a court of justice, ought to be believed and have weight; then, upon the like principles, it ought to receive our entire credit here. But if, on the other hand, we should be justified in rejecting it, if there testified on oath, then, supposing our rules of evidence to be sound, we may be excused if we hesitate elsewhere to give it credence.

The proof that God has revealed himself to man by special and express communications, and that Christianity constitutes that revelation, is no part of these inquiries. This has already been shown, in the most satisfactory manner by others, who have written expressly upon this subject. Referring therefore to their writings for the arguments and proofs, the fact will here be assumed as true. That man is a religious being, is universally conceded, for it has been seen to be universally true. He is everywhere a worshiper. In every age and country, and in every stage, from the highest intellectual culture to the darkest stupidity, he bows with homage to a superior Being. Be it the rude-carved idol of his own fabrication, or the unseen divinity that stirs within him, it is still the object of his adoration. This trait in the character of man is so uniform, that it may safely be assumed, either as one of the original attributes of his nature, or as necessarily resulting from the action of one or more of those attributes.

The object of man's worship, whatever it be, will naturally be his standard of perfection. He clothes it with every attribute, belonging, in his view, to a perfect character; and this character he himself endeavors to attain. He may not, directly and consciously, aim to acquire every virtue of his deity, and to avoid the opposite vices; but still this will be the inevitable consequence of sincere and constant worship as in human society men become assimilated, both in manners and moral principles, to their chosen associates, so in the worship of whatever deity men adore, they "form to him the relish of their souls." To suppose, then, that God made man capable of religion, and requiring it in order to the development of the highest part of his nature, without communicating with him, as a father, in those revelations which alone could perfect that nature, would be a reproach upon God, and a contradiction.

How it came to pass that man, originally taught, as we doubt not he was, to know and to worship the true Jehovah, is found, at so early a period of his history, a worshiper of baser objects, it is foreign to our present purpose to inquire. But the fact is lamentably true, that he soon became an idolater, a worshiper of moral abominations. The Scythians and Northmen adored the impersonations of heroic valor and of bloodthirsty and cruel revenge. The mythology of Greece and of Rome, though it exhibited a few examples of virtue and goodness, abounded in others of gross licentiousness and vice. The gods of Egypt were reptiles, and beasts and birds. The religion of Central and Eastern Asia was polluted with lust and cruelty, and smeared with blood, rioting, in deadly triumph, over all the tender affections of the human heart and all the convictions of the human understanding. Western and Southern Africa and Polynesia are, to this day, the abodes of frightful idolatry, cannibalism, and cruelty; and the aborigines of both the Americas are examples of the depths of superstition to which the human mind may be debased. In every quarter of the world, however, there is a striking uniformity seen in all the features of paganism. The ruling is lewd and cruel. Whatever of purity the earlier forms of paganism may have possessed, it is evident from history that it was of brief duration. Every form, which history has preserved, grew rapidly and steadily worse and

more corrupt, until the entire heathen world, before the coming of Christ, was infected with that loathsome leprosy by St. Paul, in the beginning of his Epistle to the Romans.

So general and decided was this proclivity to the worship of strange gods, that, at the time of the deluge, only one family remained faithful to Jehovah; and this was a family which had been favored with his special revelation. Indeed it is evident that nothing but a revelation from God could raise men from the degradation of pagan idolatry, because nothing else has ever had that effect. If man could achieve his own freedom from this bondage, he would long since have been free. But instead of this, the increase of light and civilization and refinement in the pagan world has but multiplied the objects of his worship, added voluptuous refinements to its ritual, and thus increased the number and weight of his chains. In this respect there is no difference in their moral condition, between the barbarous Scythian and the learned Egyptian or Roman of ancient times, nor between the ignorant African and the polished Hindu of our own day. The only method, which has been successfully employed to deliver man from the idolatry, is that of presenting to the eye of his soul an object of worship perfectly holy and pure, directly opposite, in moral character, to the gods he had formerly adored. He could not transfer to his deities a better character than he himself possessed. He must forever remain enslaved to his idols, unless a new and pure object of worship were revealed to him, with a display of superior power sufficient to overcome his former faith and present fears, to detach his affections from grosser objects, and to fix them upon that which alone is worthy. This is precisely what God, as stated in the Holy Scriptures, has done. He rescued one family from idolatry in the Old World, by the revelation of himself to Noah; he called a distinct branch of this family to the knowledge of himself, in the person of Abraham and his sons; he extended this favor to a whole nation, through the ministry of Moses; but it was through that of Jesus Christ alone that it was communicated to the whole world. In Egypt, by the destruction of all the objects of the popular worship, God taught the Israelites that he alone was the self-existent Almighty. At the Red Sea, he emphatically showed them that he was the Protector and Saviour of his people. At Sinai, he revealed himself as the righteous Governor, who required implicit obedience from men, and taught them, by the strongly-marked distinctions of the ceremonial law, that he was a holy Being, of purer eyes than to behold evil, and that could not look upon iniquity. The demerit of sin was inculcated by the solemn infliction of death upon every animal, offered as a propitiatory sacrifice. And when, by this system of instruction, he had prepared a people to receive the perfect revelation of the character of God, of the nature of his worship and of the way of restoration to his image and favor, this also was expressly revealed by the mission of his Son.

That the books of the Old Testament, as we now have them, are genuine; that they existed in the time of our Savior, and were commonly received and referred to among the Jews, as the sacred books of their religion; and that the text of the Four Evangelists has been handed down to us in the state in which it was originally written, that is, without having been materially corrupted or falsified, either by heretics or Christians; are facts which we are entitled to assume as true, until the contrary is shown.

The genuineness of these writings really admits of as little doubt, and is susceptible of as ready proof, as that of any ancient writings whatever. The rule of municipal law on this subject is familiar, and applies with equal force to all ancient writings, whether documentary or otherwise; and as it comes first in order, in the prosecution of these inquiries, it may, for the sake of mere convenience, be designated as our first rule.

Every document, apparently ancient, coming from the proper repository or custody, and bearing on its face no evident marks of forger, the law presumes to be genuine, and devolves on the opposing party the burden of proving it to be otherwise.

An ancient document, offered in evidence in our courts, is said to come from the proper repository, when it is found in the place where, and under the care of persons with whom, such writings might naturally and reasonably be expected to be found; for it is this custody which gives authenticity to documents found within it. If they come from such a place, and bear no evident marks of forgery, the law presumes that they are genuine, and they are permitted to be read in evidence, unless the opposing party is able successfully to impeach them. The burden of showing them to be false and unworthy of credit, is devolved on the party who makes that objection. The presumption of law is the judgment of charity. It presumes every man is innocent until he is proved guilty; that everything has been done fairly and legally, until it is proved to have been otherwise; and that every document, found in its proper repository, and not bearing marks of forgery, is genuine. Now this is precisely the case with the Sacred Writings. They have been used in the church from time immemorial, and thus are found in the place where alone they ought to be looked for they come to us, and challenge our reception of them as genuine writings, precisely as Domesday Book, the Ancient Statues of Wales, or any other of the ancient documents which have recently been published under the British Record Commission, are received. They are found in familiar use in all the churches of Christendom, as the sacred books to which all denominations of Christians refer, as the standard of their faith. There is no pretense that they were engraven on plates of gold and discovered in a cave, nor that they were brought from heaven by angels; but they are received as the plain narratives and writings of the men whose names they respectively bear, made public at the time they were written; and though there are some slight discrepancies among the copies subsequently made, there is no pretense that the originals are lost, and that copies alone are now produced, the principles of the municipal law here also afford a satisfactory answer. For the multiplication of copies was a public fact, in the faithfulness of which all the Christian community had an interest; and it is a rule of law, that,—In matters of public and general interest, all persons must be presumed to be conversant, on the principle that individuals are presumed to be conversant with their own affairs.

Therefore it is that, in such matters, the prevailing current of assertion is resorted to as evidence, for it is to this that every member of the community is supposed to be privy. The persons, moreover, who multiplied these copies may be regarded, in some manner, as agents of Christian public, for whose use and benefit the copies were made; and on the ground of the credit due to such agents, and of the public nature of the facts themselves, the copies thus made are entitled to an extraordinary degree of confidence, and, as in the case of official registers and other public books, it is not necessary that they should be confirmed and sanctioned by the ordinary tests of truth. If any ancient document concerning our public rights were lost copies which had been received in evidence in any of our courts of justice, without the slightest hesitation the entire text of the corpus juris civilis is received as authority in all the courts of continental Europe, upon much weaker evidence of its genuineness; for the integrity of the Sacred Text has been preserved by the jealousy of opposing sects, beyond any moral possibility of corruption; while that of the Roman Civil Law has been preserved by tacit consent, without the interest of any opposing school, to watch over and preserve it from alteration.

These copies of the Holy Scriptures having thus been in familiar use in the churches, from the time when the text was committed to writing; having been watched with vigilance by so many sects, opposed to each other in doctrine, yet all appealing to these Scriptures for the correctness of their faith; and having in all

ages, down to this day, been respected as the authoritative source of all ecclesiastical power and government, and submitted to, and acted under in regard to so many claims of right, on the one hand, and so many obligations of duty, on the other; it is quite erroneous to suppose that the Christian is bound to offer any further proof of their genuineness or authenticity. It is for the objector to show them spurious; for on him, by the plainest rules of law, lies the burden of proof. If it were the case of a claim to a franchise, and a copy of an ancient deed or charter were produced in support of the title, under parallel circumstances on which to presume its venture to deny either its admissibility in evidence, or the satisfactory character of the proof. In a recent case in the House of Lords, precisely such a document, being an old manuscript copy, purporting to have been extracted from ancient Journals of the House, which were lost, and to have been made by an officer whose duty it was to prepare lists of the Peers, was held admissible in a claim of peerage.

Supposing, therefore, that it is not irrational, nor inconsistent with sound philosophy, to believe that God has made a special and express revelation of his character and will to man, and that the sacred books of our religion are genuine, as we now have them; we proceed to examine and compare the testimony of the Four Evangelists, as witnesses to the life and doctrines of Jesus Christ; in order to determine the degree of credit, to which, by the rules of evidence plied in human tribunals, they are justly entitled. Our attention will naturally be first directed to the witnesses themselves, to see who and what manner of men they were; and we shall take them in the order of their writings; stating the prominent traits only in their lives and characters, as they are handed down to us by credible historians.

Matthew, called Levi, was a Jew of Galilee, but of what city is uncertain. He held the place of publican, or tax-gatherer, under the Roman government, and his office seems to have consisted in collecting the taxes within his district, as well as the duties and customs levied on goods and persons, passing in and out of his district and province, across the lake of Genesareth. While engaged in this business, at the office or usual place of collection, he was required by Jesus to follow him, as one of his disciples; a command which he immediately obeyed. Soon afterwards, he appears to have given a great entertainment to his fellow-publicans and friends, at which Jesus was present; intending probably both to celebrate his own change of profession, and to give them an opportunity to profit by the teaching of his new Master. He was constituted one of the twelve apostles, and constantly attended the person of Jesus as a faithful follower, until the crucifixion; and after the ascension of his Master he preached the gospel for some time, with other apostles, in Judea, and afterwards in Ethiopia, where he died.

He is generally allowed to have written first, of all the evangelists; but whether in the Hebrew or the Greek language, or in both, the learned are not agreed, nor is it material to our purpose to inquire; the genuineness of our present Greek gospel being sustained by satisfactory evidence. The precise time when he wrote is also uncertain, the several dates given to it among learned men, varying from A.D. 37 to A.D. 64. The earlier date, however, is argued with greater force, from the improbability that the Christians would be left for several years without a general and authentic history of our Savior's ministry; from the evident allusions which it contains to a state of persecution in the church at the time it was written; from the titles of sanctity ascribed to Jerusalem, and a higher veneration testified for the temple than the comparative gentleness with which Herod's character and conduct are dealt with, that bad prince probably being still in power; and from the frequent mention of Pilate, as still governor of Judea.

That Matthew was himself a native Jew, familiar with the opinions, ceremonies, and customs of his countrymen; that he was conversant with the Sacred Writings, and habituated to their idiom; a man of

plain sense, but of little learning, except what he derived from the Scriptures of the Old Testament; that he wrote seriously and from conviction, and had, on most occasions, been present, and attended closely, to the transactions which he relates, and relates, too, without any view of applause to himself; are facts which we may consider established by internal evidence, as strong as the nature of the case will admit. It is deemed equally well proved, both by internal evidence and the aid of history, that he wrote for the use of his countrymen the Jews. Every circumstance is noticed which might conciliate their belief, and every unnecessary expression is avoided which might obstruct it. They looked for the Messiah, of the lineage of David, and born in Bethlehem, in the circumstances of whose life the prophecies should find fulfillment, a matter, in their estimation, of peculiar value: and to all these this evangelist has directed their especial attention.

Allusion has been already made to his employment as a collector of taxes and customs: but the subject is too important to be passed over without further notice. The tribute imposed by the Romans upon countries conquered by their arms was enormous. In the time of Pompey, the sums annually exacted by their Asiatic provinces, of which Judea was one, amounted to about four millions and a half of sterling, or about twenty-two millions of dollars. These exactions were made in the usual forms of direct and indirect taxation; the rate of the customs on merchandise varying from an eight to a fortieth part of the value of the commodity; and the tariff including all the principal articles of the commerce of the East, much of which, as is well known, still found its way to Italy through Palestine, as well as by the way of Damascus and of Egypt. The direct taxes consisted of a capitation-tax, and a land-tax, assessed upon a valuation or census, periodically taken under the oath of the individual, with heavy penal sanctions. It is natural to suppose that these taxes were not voluntarily paid, especially since they were imposed by the conqueror upon a conquered people, and by a heathen too, upon the people of the house of Israel. The increase of taxes has generally been found to multiply discontents, evasions and frauds on the one hand, and, on the other, to increase vigilance, suspicion, close scrutiny, and severity of exaction. The penal code, as revised by Theododius, will give us some notion of the difficulties must have been increased by the fact that, at this period, a considerable portion of the commerce of that part of the world was carried on by the Greeks, whose ingenuity and want of faith were proverbial. It was to such an employment and under such circumstances, that Matthew was educated; an employment which must have made him acquainted with the Greek language, and extensively conversant with the public affairs and the men of business of his time; thus entitling him to our confidence, as an experienced and intelligent observer of that day were, as in truth they appear to have been, as much disposed as those of the present time, to evade the payment of public taxes and duties, and to elude, by all possible means, the vigilance of the revenue officers, Matthew must have been familiar with a great variety of forms of fraud, imposture, cunning, and deception, and must have become habitually distrustful, scrutinizing, and cautious; and, of course, much less likely to have been deceived in regard to many of the facts in our Lord's ministry, extraordinary as they were, which fell under his observation. This circumstance shows both the sincerity and the wisdom of Jesus, in selecting him for an eye-witness of his conduct, and adds great weight to the value of the testimony of this evangelist.

Mark was the son of a pious sister of Barnabas, named Mary, who dwelt at Jerusalem, and at whose house the early Christians often assembled. His Hebrew name was John; the surname of Mark having been adopted, as is supposed, when he left Judea to preach the gospel in foreign countries; a practice not unusual among the Jews of that age, who frequently, upon such occasions, assumed a name more familiar than their own to the people whom they visited. He is supposed to have been converted to the Christian

faith by the ministry of Peter. He traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, and afterwards accompanied them elsewhere. When they landed at Perga in Pamphylia, he left them and returned to Jerusalem; for which reason, when he afterwards would have gone with them, Paul refused to take him. Upon this, a difference of opinion arose between the two apostles, and they separated, Barnabas taking Mark with him to Cyprus. Subsequently he accompanied Timothy to Rome, at the express desire of Paul. From this city he probably went into the Asia, where he found Peter, with whom he returned to Rome, in which city he is supposed to have written and published his Gospel. Such is the outline of his history, as it is furnished by the New Testament, the early historians add, that after this he went into Egypt and planted a church in Alexandria, where he died.

It is agreed that Mark wrote his Gospel for the use of Gentile converts; and opinion deriving great force from the explanations introduced into it, which would have been useless to a Jew, and that it was composed for those at Rome, is believed, not only from the numerous Latinisms it contains, but from the unanimous testimony of ancient writer, and from the internal evidence afforded by the Gospel itself.

Some have entertained the opinion that Mark compiled his account from that of Matthew, of which they supposed it an abridgement. But this notion has been refuted by Knoppe, and others, and is now generally regarded as untenable. For Mark frequently deviates from Matthew in the order of time, in his arrangement of facts; and he adds many things not related by the other evangelists; neither of which a mere epitomizer would probably have done. He also omits several things related by Matthew, and imperfectly describes others, especially the transactions of Christ with the apostles after the resurrection; giving no account whatever of his appearance in Galilee; omissions irreconcilable with any previous knowledge of the Gospel according to Matthew. To these proofs we may add, that in several places there are discrepancies between the accounts of Matthew and Mark, not, indeed, irreconcilable, but sufficient to destroy the probability that the latter copied from the former. The striking coincidences between them, in style, words, and things, in other places, may be accounted for by considering Peter, who is supposed to have dictated this Gospel to Mark, was quite as intimately acquainted as Matthew with the miracles and discourses of our Lord; which, therefore, he would naturally recite in his preaching; and that the same things might very naturally be related in the same manner, by men who sought not after excellency of speech. Peter's agency in the narrative of Mark is asserted by all ancient writers, and is confirmed by the fact, that his humility is conspicuous in every part of it, where anything is or might be related of him; his weaknesses and fall being fully exposed, while things which might redound to his honor, are either omitted or but slightly mentioned; that scarcely any transaction of Jesus is related, at which Peter was not present, and that all are related with that circumstantial minuteness which belongs to the testimony of an eye-witness. We may, therefore, regard the Gospel of Mark as an original composition, written at the dictation of Peter, and consequently as another original narrative of the life, miracles, and doctrine of our Lord.

Luke, according to Eusebius, was a native of Antioch, by profession a physician, and for a considerable period a companion of the apostle Paul. From the casual notices of him in the Scriptures, and from the early Christian writers, it has been collected, that his parents were Gentiles, but that he in his youth embraced Judaism, from which he was converted to Christianity. The first mention of him is that he was with Paul at Troas, whence he appears to have attended him to Jerusalem; continued with him in all his troubles in Judea; and sailed with him when he was sent a prisoner from Ceasarea to Rome, where he remained with him during his two years confinement. As none of the ancient fathers have mentioned his having suffered martyrdom, it is generally supposed that he died a natural death.

That he wrote his Gospel for the benefit of the Gentile converts is affirmed by the unanimous voice of Christian antiquity; and it may also be inferred from its dedication to a Gentile. He is particularly careful to specify various circumstances conducive to the information of strangers, but not so to the Jews; he gives the lineage of Jesus upwards, after the manner of the Gentiles, instead of downwards, as Matthew had done; tracing it up to Adam, and thus showing that Jesus was the promised seed of the woman; and he marks the eras of his birth, and of the ministry of John, by the reigns of the Roman emperors. He also has introduced several things, not mentioned by the other evangelists, but highly encouraging to the Gentiles to turn to God in the hope of pardon and acceptance; of which description are the parables of the publican and Pharisee, in the temple; the lost piece of silver; and the prodigal son; and the fact of Christ's visit to Zaccheus the publican, and the pardon of the penitent thief.

That Luke was a physician, appears not only from the testimony of Paul, but from the internal marks in his Gospel, showing that he was both an acute observer, and had given particular and even professional attention to all our Savior's miracles of healing. Thus, the man whom Matthew and Mark describe simply as a leper, Luke describes as full of leprosy; he, whom they mention as had having a withered hand, Luke says had his right hand withered; and of the maid, of whom the others say that Jesus took her spirit came to her again. He alone, with professional accuracy of observation, says that virtue went out of Jesus, and healed the sick; he alone states the fact that the sleep of the disciples in Gethsemane was induced by extreme sorrow; and mentions the blood-like sweat of Jesus, as occasioned by the intensity of his agony; and he alone relates the miraculous healing of Malchus's ear. That he was also a man of a liberal education, the comparative elegance of his writings sufficiently shows.

The design of Luke's Gospel was to supersede the defective and inaccurate narratives then in circulation, and to deliver to Theophilus, to whom it is addressed, a full and authentic account of the life, doctrines, miracles, death and resurrection of our Savior. Who Theophilus was, the learned are not perfectly agreed; but the most probable opinion is that of Dr. Lardner, now generally adopted, that, as Luke wrote his Gospel in Greece, Theophilus was a man of rank in that country. Either the relations subsisting between him and Luke, or the dignity and power of his rank, or both, induced the evangelist, who himself also "had perfect understanding of all things from the first," to devote the utmost care to the drawing up of a complete and authentic narrative of these great events. He does not affirm himself to have been an eyewitness; though his personal knowledge of some of the transactions may well be inferred from the "perfect understanding" which he says he possessed. Some of the learned seem to have drawn this inference as to them all, and to have placed him in the class of original witnesses; but this opinion, though maintained on strong and plausible grounds, is not generally adopted. If, then, he did not write from his own personal knowledge, the question is, what is the legal character of his testimony?

If it were "the result of inquiries, made under competent public authority, concerning matters in which the public are concerned," it would possess every legal attribute of an inquisition, and, as such, would be legally admissible in evidence, in a court of justice. To entitle such results, however, to our full confidence, it is not necessary that they should be obtained under a legal commission; it is sufficient if the inquiry is gravely undertaken and pursued, by a person of competent intelligence, sagacity and integrity. The request of a person in authority, or a desire to serve the public, are, to all moral intents, as sufficient a motive as a legal commission. Thus, we know that when complaint is made to the head of a department, of official misconduct or abuse, existing in some remote quarter, nothing is more common than to send some confidential person to the spot, to ascertain the facts and report them to the department; and this report is confidently adopted as the basis of its discretionary action, in the correction of that abuse, or the

removal of the offender. Indeed, the result of any grave inquiry is equally certain to receive our confidence, though it may have been voluntarily undertaken, if the party making it had access to the means of complete and satisfactory information upon the subject. If, therefore, Luke's Gospel were to be regarded only as the work of a contemporary historian, it would be entitled to our confidence. But it is more than this. It is the result of careful inquiry and examination, made by a person of science, intelligence and education, concerning subjects which he was perfectly competent to investigate, and as to many of which he was peculiarly skilled, they being cases of the cure of maladies; subjects, too, of which he already had the perfect knowledge of a contemporary, and perhaps an eye-witness, but beyond doubt, familiar with the parties concerned in the transactions, and belonging to the community in which the events transpired, which were in the mouths of all; and the narrative, moreover, drawn up for the especial use, and probably at the request, of a man of distinction, whom it would not be for the interest nor safety of the writer to deceive or mislead. Such a document certainly possesses all the moral attributes of an inquest of office, or of any other official investigation of facts; and as such is entitled, in foro conscientiae, to be adduced as original, competent, and satisfactory evidence of the matters it contains.

John, the last of the evangelists, was the son of Zebedee, a fisherman of the town of Bethsaida, on the sea of Galilee. His father appears to have been a respectable man in his calling, owning his vessel and having hired servants. His mother, too, was among those who followed Jesus, and "ministered unto him;" and to John himself, Jesus, when on the cross, confided the care and support of his own mother. This disciple also seems to have been favorably known to the high priest, and to have influence in his family; by means of which he had the privilege of being present in his palace at the examination of his Master, and of introducing also Peter, his friend. He was the youngest of the apostles; was eminently the object of the Lord's regard and confidence; was on various occasions admitted to free and intimate intercourse with him; and is described as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Hence he was present at several scenes, to which most of the others were not admitted. He alone, in company with Peter and James, was present at the resurrection of Jairus's daughter, at the transfiguration on the mount, and at the agony of our Savior in the garden of Gethsemane. He was the only apostle who followed Jesus to the cross, he was the first of them at the sepulcher, and he was present at the several appearances of our Lord after his resurrection. These circumstances, together with his intimate friendship with the mother of Jesus, especially qualify him to give a circumstantial and authentic account of the life of his Master. After the ascension of Christ, and the effusion of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, John became one of the chief apostles of the circumcision, exercising his ministry in and near Jerusalem. From ecclesiastical history we learn that, after the death of Mary the mother of Jesus, he proceeded to Asia Minor, where he founded and presided over seven churches, in as many cities, but resided chiefly at Ephesus. Thence he was banished, in Domitian's reign, to the isle of Patmos, where he wrote his Revelation. On the ascension of Nerva he was freed from exile, and returned to Ephesus, where he wrote his Gospel and Epistles, and died at the age of one hundred years, about A.D. 100, in the third year of the emperor Trajan.

The learned are not agreed as to the time when the Gospel of John was written; some dating it as early as the year 68, others as late as the year 98; but it is generally conceded to have been written after all the others. That it could not have been the work of some Platonic Christian of a subsequent age, as some have without evidence asserted, is manifest from references to it by some of the early fathers, and from the concurring testimony of many other writers of the ancient Christian church.

That it was written either with especial reference to the Gentiles, or at a period when very many of them had become converts to Christianity, is inferred from the various explanations it contains, beyond the

other Gospels, which could have been necessary only to persons unacquainted with Jewish names and customs. And that it was written after all the others, and to supply their omissions, is concluded, not only from the uniform tradition and belief in the church, but from his studied omission of most of the transactions noticed by the others, and from his care to mention several incidents which were known to him, is too evident to admit of doubt; while his omission to repeat what they had already stated, or, where he does mention the same things, his relating them in a brief and cursory manner, affords incidental but strong testimony that he regarded their accounts as faithful and true.

Such are the brief histories of men, whose narratives we are to examine and compare; conducting the examination and weighing the testimony by the same rules and principles which govern our tribunals of justice in similar cases. These tribunals are in such cases governed by the following fundamental rule;—In trials of fact, by oral testimony, the proper inquiry is not whether it is possible that the testimony may be false, but whether there is sufficient probability that it is true.

It should be observed that the subject of inquiry is a matter of fact, and not of abstract mathematical truth. The latter alone is susceptible of that high degree of proof, usually termed demonstration, which excludes the possibility of error, and which therefore may reasonably be required in support of every mathematical deduction. But the proof of matters of fact rests upon moral evidence alone; by which is meant not merely that species of evidence which we do not obtain either from our own senses, from intuition, or from demonstration. In the ordinary affairs of life we do not require nor expect demonstrative evidence, because it is inconsistent with the nature of matters of fact, and to insist on its production would be unreasonable and absurd. And it makes no difference, whether the facts to be proved related to this life or to the next, the nature of the evidence required being in both cases the same. The error of the skeptic consists in pretending or supposing that there is a difference in the nature of the things to be proved; and in demanding demonstrative evidence concerning things which are not susceptible of any other than moral evidence alone, and of which the utmost that can be said is, that there is no reasonable doubt about their truth.

In proceeding to weigh the evidence of any proposition of fact, the previous question to be determined is, when may it be said to be proved? The answer to this question is furnished by another rule of municipal law, which may be thus stated: A proposition of fact is proved, when its truth is established by competent and satisfactory evidence.

By competent evidence, is meant such as the nature of the thing to be proved requires; and by satisfactory evidence, is meant that amount of proof, which ordinarily satisfies an unprejudiced mind, beyond any reasonable doubt. The circumstances which will amount of this degree of proof can never be previously defined; the only legal test to which they can be subjected is, their sufficiency to satisfy the mind and concretion, and so to convince him, that he would of the highest concern and importance to his own interest. If, therefore, the subject is a problem in mathematics, its truth is to be shown by the certainty of demonstrative evidence. But if it is a question of fact in human affairs, nothing more than moral evidence can be required, for this is the best evidence which, from the nature of the case, is attainable. Now as the facts, stated in Scripture History, are not of the former kind, but are cognizable by the senses, they may be said to be proved when they are established by that kind and degree of evidence which, as we have just observed, would, in the affairs of human life, satisfy the mind and conscience of a common man. When we have this degree of evidence, it is unreasonable to require more. A juror would violate his oath,

if he should refuse to acquit or condemn a person charged with an offense, where this measure of proof was adduced.

Proceeding further, to inquire whether the facts related by the Four Evangelists are proved by competent and satisfactory evidence, we are led, first, to consider on which side lies the burden of establishing the credibility of the witnesses. On this point the municipal law furnishes a rule, which is of constant application in all trials by jury, and is indeed the dictate of that charity which thinketh no evil.

In the absence of circumstances which generate suspicion, every witness is to be presumed credible, until the contrary is shown; the burden of impeaching his credibility lying on the objector.

This rule serves to show the injustice with which the writers of the Gospels have ever been treated by infidels; an injustice silently acquiesced in even by Christians; in requiring the Christian affirmatively, and by positive evidence, aliunde, to establish the credibility of his witnesses above all others, before their testimony is entitled to be considered, and in permitting the testimony of a single profane writer, alone and uncorroborated, to outweigh that of any single Christian. This is not the course in courts of chancery, where the testimony of a single witness is never permitted to outweigh the oath even of the defendant himself, interested as he is in the cause; but, on the contrary, if the plaintiff, after having required the oath of his adversary, cannot overthrow it by something more than the oath of one witness, however credible, it must stand as evidence against him. But the Christian writer seems, by the usual course of the argument, to have been deprived of the common presumption of charity in his favor; and reversing the ordinary rule of administering justice in human tribunals, his testimony is unjustly presumed to be false, until it is proved to be true. This treatment, moreover, has been applied to them all in a body; and, without due regard to the fact, that, being independent historians, writing at different periods, they are entitled to the support of each other: they have been treated, in the argument, almost as if the New Testament were the entire production, at once, of a body of men, conspiring by a joint fabrication, to impose a false religion upon the world. It is time that this injustice should cease; that the testimony of the evangelists should be admitted to be true, until it can be disproved by those who would impugn it; that the silence of one sacred writer on any point, should no more detract from his own veracity or that of the other historians, than the like circumstance is permitted to do among profane writers; and that the Four Evangelists should be admitted in corroboration of each other, as readily as Josephus and Tacitus, or Polybius and Livy.

But if the burden of establishing the credibility of the evangelists were devolved on those who affirm the truth of their narratives, it is still capable of a ready moral demonstration, when we consider the nature and character of the testimony, and the essential marks of difference between true narratives of facts and the creations of falsehoods. It is universally admitted that the credit to be given to witnesses depends chiefly on their ability to discern and comprehend what was before them, their opportunities for observation, the degree of accuracy with which they are accustomed to mark passing events, and their integrity in relating them. The rule of municipal law on this subject embraces all these particulars, and is thus stated by a legal text-writer of the highest repute.

The credit due to the testimony of witnesses depends upon, firstly, their honesty; secondly, their ability; thirdly, their number and the consistency of their testimony; fourthly, the conformity of their testimony with experience; and fifthly, the coincidence of their testimony with collateral circumstances.

Let the evangelists be tried by these tests.

And first, as to their honesty. Here they are entitled to the benefit of the general course of human experience, that men ordinarily speak the truth, when they have no prevailing motive or inducement to the contrary. This presumption, to which we have before alluded, is applied in courts of justice, even to witnesses whose integrity is not wholly free from suspicion; much more is it applicable to the evangelists, whose testimony went against all their worldly interests. The great truths which the apostles declared, were that Christ had risen from the dead, and that only through repentance from sin, and faith in him, could men hope for salvation. This doctrine they asserted with one voice, everywhere, not only under the greatest discouragements, but in the face of the most appalling terrors that can be presented to the mind of man. Their master had recently perished as a malefactor, by the sentence of a public tribunal. His religion sought to overthrow the religions of the whole world. The laws of every country were against the teaching of his disciples. The interests and passions of all the rulers and great men in the world were against them. The fashion of the world was against them. Propagating this new faith, even in the most inoffensive and peaceful manner, they could expect nothing but contempt, opposition, revilings, bitter persecutions, stripes, imprisonments, torments and cruel deaths. Yet this faith they zealously did propagate; and all these miseries they endured undismayed, nay, rejoicing. As one after another was put to a miserable death, the survivors only prosecuted their work with increased vigor and resolution. The annals of military warfare afford scarcely an example of the like heroic constancy, patience and unblenching courage. They had every possible motive to review carefully the grounds of their faith, and the evidences of the great facts and truths which they asserted; and these motives were pressed upon their attention with the most melancholy and terrific frequency. It was therefore impossible that they could have persisted in affirming the truths they have narrated, had not Jesus actually rose from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainly as they knew any other fact. If it were morally possible for them to have been deceived in this matter, every human motive operated to lead them to discover and avow their error. To have persisted in so gross a falsehood, after it was known to them, was not only to encounter, for life, all the evils which man could inflict, from without, but to endure also the pangs of inward and conscious guilt; with no hope of future peace, no testimony of a good conscience, no expectation of honor or esteem among men, no hope of happiness in this life, or in the world to come.

Such conduct in the apostles would moreover have been utterly irreconcilable with the fact, that they possessed the ordinary constitution of our common nature. Yet their lives do show them to have been men like all others of our race; swayed by the same motives, animated by the same hopes, affected by the same joys, subdued by the same sorrows, agitated by the same fears, and subject to the same passions, temptations and infirmities, as ourselves. And their writings show them to have been men of vigorous understandings. If then their testimony was not true, there was no possible motive for this fabrication.

It would also have been irreconcilable with the fact that they were good men. But it is impossible to read their writings, and not feel that we are conversing with men eminently holy, and of tender consciences, with men acting under an abiding sense of the presence and omniscience of God, and of their accountability to him, living in his fear, and walking in his ways. Now, though, in a single instance, a good man may fall, when under strong temptations, yet he is not found persisting, for years, in deliberated falsehood, asserted with the most solemn appeals to God, without the slightest temptation or motive, and against all the opposing interests which reign in the human breast. If, on the contrary, they are supposed to have been bad men, it is incredible that such men should have chosen this form of imposture; enjoining, as it does, unfeigned repentance, the utter forsaking and abhorrence of all falsehood and of

every other sin, the practice of daily self-denial, self-abasement and self-sacrifice, the crucifixion of the flesh with all its earthly appetites and desires, indifference to the honors, and hearty contempt of the vanities of the world; and inculcating perfect purity of heart and life, and intercourse of the soul with heaven. It is incredible, that bad men should invent falsehoods, to promote the religion of the God of truth. The supposition is suicidal. If they did believe in a future state of retribution, a heaven and a hell hereafter, they took the most certain course, if false witnesses, to secure the latter for their portion. And if, still being bad men, they did not believe in future punishment, how came they to invent which was to destroy all their prospects of worldly honor and happiness, and to insure their misery in this life? From these absurdities there is no escape, but in the perfect conviction and admission that they were good men, testifying to that which they had carefully observed and considered, and well knew to be true.

In the second place, as to their ability. The text writer before cited observes, that the ability of a witness to speak the truth, depends on the opportunities which he has had for observing the fact, the accuracy of his powers of discerning, and the faithfulness of his memory in retaining the facts, once observed and known. Of the latter trait, in these witnesses, we of course know nothing; nor have we any traditional information in regard to the accuracy of their powers of discerning. But we may well suppose that in these respects they were like the generality of their countrymen, until the contrary is shown by an objector. It is always to be presumed that men are honest, and of sound mind, and of the average and ordinary degree of intelligence. This is not the judgment of mere charity; it is also the uniform presumption of the law of the land; a presumption which is always allowed freely and fully to operate, until the fact is shown to be otherwise, by the party who denies the applicability of this presumption to the particular case in question. Whenever an objection is raised in opposition to ordinary presumptions of law, or to the ordinary experience of mankind, the burden of proof is devolved on the objector, by the common and ordinary rules of evidence, and of practice in courts. No lawyer is permitted to argue in disparagement of the intelligence or integrity of a witness, against whom the case itself afforded no particle of testimony. This is sufficient for our purpose, in regard to these witnesses. But more than this is evident, from the minuteness of their narratives, and from their history. Matthew was trained, by his calling, to habits of severe investigation and suspicious scrutiny; and Luke's profession demanded an exactness of observation equally close and searching. The other two evangelists, it has been well remarked, were as much too unlearned to forge the story of their Master's Life, as these were too learned and acute to be deceived by any imposture.

In the third place, as to their number and the consistency of their testimony. The character of their narratives is like that of all other true witnesses, containing, as Dr. Paley observes, substantial truth, under circumstantial variety. There is enough of discrepancy to show that there could have been no previous concert among them; and at the same time such substantial agreement as to show that they all were independent narrators of the same great transactions, as the events actually occurred. That they conspired to impose falsehood upon the world is, moreover, utterly inconsistent with the supposition that they were honest men; a fact, to the proofs of which we have already adverted. But if they were bad men, still the idea of any conspiracy among them is negatived, not only by the discrepancies alluded to, but by many other circumstances which will be mentioned hereafter; from all which, it is manifest that if they concerted a false story, they sought to its accomplishment by a mode quite the opposite to that which all others are found to pursue, to attain the same end. On this point the profound remark of an eminent writer is to our purpose; that "in a number of concurrent testimonies, where there has been no previous concert, there is a probability distinct from that which may be termed the sum of the probabilities

resulting from the testimonies of the witnesses; a probability which would remain, even though the witnesses were of such a character as to merit no faith at all. This probability arises from the concurrence itself. That such a concurrence should spring from chance, is as one to infinite; that is, in other words, morally impossible. If therefore concert be excluded, there remains no cause but the reality of the fact."

The discrepancies between the narratives of the several evangelists, when carefully examined, will not be found sufficient to invalidate their testimony. Many seeming contradictions will prove, upon closer scrutiny, to be in substantial agreement; and it may be confidently asserted that there are none that will not yield, under fair and just criticism. If these different accounts of the same transactions were in strict verbal conformity with each other, the argument against their credibility would be much stronger. All that is asked for these witnesses is, that their testimony may be regarded as we regard the testimony of men in the ordinary affairs of life. This they are justly entitled to; and this no honorable adversary can refuse. We might, indeed, take higher ground than this, and confidently claim for them the severest scrutiny; but our present purpose is merely to try their veracity by the ordinary tests of truth, admitted in human tribunals.

If the evidence of the evangelists is to be rejected because of a few discrepancies among them, we shall be obliged to discard that of many of the contemporaneous histories on which we are accustomed to rely. Dr. Paley has noticed the contradiction between Lord Clarendon and Burnett and others in regard to Lord Strafford's execution; the former stating that he was condemned to be hanged, which was done on the same day; and the latter all relating that on a Saturday he was sentenced to the block, and was beheaded on the following Monday. Another striking instance of discrepancy has since occurred, in the narratives of the different members of the royal family of France, of their flight from Paris to Varennes, in 1792. These narratives, ten in number, and by eyewitnesses and personal actors in the transactions they relate, contradict each other, some on trivial and some on more essential points, but in every case in a wonderful and inexplicable manner. Yet these contradictions do not, in the general public estimation, detract from the integrity of the narrators, nor from the credibility of their relations. In the points in which they agree, and which constitute the great body of their narratives, their testimony is of course not doubted; where they differ, we reconcile them as well as we may; and where this cannot be done at all, we follow that light which seems to us the clearest. Upon the principles of the skeptic, we should be bound utterly to disbelieve them all. On the contrary, we apply to such cases the rules which, in daily experience, our judges instruct juries to apply, in weighing and reconciling the testimony of different witnesses; and which the courts themselves observe, in comparing and reconciling different and sometimes discordant reports of the same decisions. This remark applies especially to some alleged discrepancies in the reports which the several evangelists have been of the same discourses of our Lord.

In the fourth place, as to the conformity of their testimony with experience. The title of the evangelists to full credit for veracity would be readily conceded by the objector, if the facts they relate were such as ordinarily occur in human experience, and on this circumstance an argument is founded against their credibility. Miracles, say the objectors, are impossible; and therefore the evangelists were either deceivers or deceived; and in either case their narratives against the possibility of miracles, was founded on the bold and bold assumption that all things are governed by immutable laws, or fixed modes of motion and relation, termed the laws of nature, by which God himself is of necessity bound. This erroneous assumption is the torse, on which stands the elephant which upholds his system of atheism. He does not inform us who made these immutable laws, nor whence they derive their binding force and irresistible operation. The argument supposes that the creator of all things first made a code of laws, and then put it

out of his own power to change them. The scheme of Mr. Hume is but another form of the same error. He deduces the existence of such immutable laws from the uniform course of human experience. This, he affirms, is our only guide in reasoning concerning matters of fact; and whatever is contrary to human experience, he pronounces incredible. Without stopping to examine the correctness of this doctrine, as a fundamental principle in the law of evidence, it is sufficient in this place to remark, that it contains this fallacy: it excludes all knowledge derived by inference or deduction from facts, confining us to what we derive from experience alone, and thus depriving us of any knowledge, or even rational belief, of the existence or character of God. Nay more, it goes to prove that successive generations of men can make no advancement in knowledge, but each must begin *de novo*, and be limited to the results of his own experience. But if we may infer, from what we see and know, that there is a Supreme Being, by whom this world was created, we may certainly, and with equal reason, believe him capable of works which we have never yet known him to perform. We may fairly conclude that the power which was originally put forth to create the world is still constantly and without ceasing exerted to sustain it; and that the experienced connection between cause and effect is but the uniform and constantly active operation of the finger of God. Whether this uniformity of operation extends to things beyond the limits of our observation, is a point we cannot certainly know. Its existence in all things that ordinarily concern us may be supposed to be ordained as conducive to our happiness; and if the belief in a revelation of peace and mercy from God is conducive to the happiness of man, it is not irrational to suppose that he would depart from his ordinary course of action, in order to give it such attestations as should tend to secure that belief. "A miracle is improbable, when we can perceive no sufficient cause, in reference to his creatures, why the Deity should not vary his modes of operation; it ceases to be so, when such cause is assigned."

But the full discussion of the subject of miracles forms no part of the present design. Their credibility has been fully established, and the objections of skeptics most satisfactorily met and overthrown, by the ablest writers of our own day, whose works are easily accessible. Thus much, however, may here be remarked; that in almost every miracle related by the evangelists, the facts, separately taken, were plain, intelligible, transpiring in public, and about which no person of ordinary observation would be likely to mistake. Persons blind or cripple, who applied to Jesus for relief, were known to have been crippled or blind for many years; they came to be cured; he spake to them; they went away whole. Lazarus had been dead and buried four days; Jesus called him to come forth from the grave; he immediately came forth, and was seen alive for a long time afterwards. In every case of healing, the previous condition of the sufferer was known to all witnessed the act of Jesus in touching him, and heard his words. All these, separately considered, were facts, plain and simple in their nature, easily seen and fully comprehended by persons of common capacity and observation. If they were separately testified to, by different witnesses of ordinary intelligence and integrity, in any court of justice, the jury would be bound to believe them; and a verdict, rendered contrary to the uncontradicted testimony of credible witnesses to any of these plain facts, separately taken, would be liable to be set aside, as a verdict against evidence. If one credible witness testified to the fact, that Bartimeus was blind, according to the uniform course of administering justice, this fact would be taken as satisfactorily proved. So also, if his subsequent restoration to sight were the sole fact in question, this also would be deemed established, by the like evidence. Nor would the rule of evidence be at all different, if the fact to be proved were the declaration of Jesus, immediately preceding his restoration to sight, that his faith had made him whole. In each of these cases, each isolated fact was capable of being accurately observed, and certainly known; and the evidence demands our assent, precisely as the like evidence upon any other indifferent subject. The connection of the word or the act of Jesus with the restoration of the blind, lame and dead, to sight, and

health, and life, as cause and effect, is a conclusion which our reason is compelled to admit, from the uniformity of their concurrence, in such a multitude of instances, as well as from the universal conviction of all, whether friends or foes, who beheld the miracles which he wrought. Indeed, if the truth of one of the miracles is satisfactorily established, our belief cannot reasonably be withheld from them all. This is the issue proposed by Dr. Paley, in regard to the evidence of the death of Jesus upon the cross, and his subsequent resurrection, the truth of which he has established in an argument incapable of refutation.

In the fifth place, as to the coincidence of their testimony with collateral and contemporaneous facts and circumstances. After a witness is dead, and his moral character is forgotten, we can ascertain it only by a close inspection of his narrative, comparing its details with each other, and with contemporary accounts and collateral facts. This test is much more accurate than may at first be supposed. Every event which actually transpires, has its appropriate circumstances, of which the affairs of men consist; it owes its origin to the events which have preceded it, is intimately connected with all and often with those of remote regions, and in its turn gives birth to numberless others which succeed. In all this almost inconceivable contexture, and seeming discord, there is perfect harmony; and while the fact, which really happened, tallies exactly with every other contemporaneous incident, related to it in the remotest degree, it is not possible for the wit of man to invent a story, which, if closely compared with the actual occurrences of the same time and place, may not be shown to be false. Hence it is, that a false witness will not willingly detail any circumstances, in which his testimony will be open to contradiction, nor multiply them where there is danger of his being detected by a comparison of them with other accounts, equally circumstantial. He will rather deal in general statements and broad assertions; and if he finds it necessary for his purpose to employ names and particular circumstances in his story, he will endeavor to invent such as shall be out of the reach of all opposing proof; and he will be the most forward and minute in details, where he knows that any danger of contradiction is least to be apprehended. Therefore it is, that variety and minuteness of detail are usually regarded as certain tests of sincerity, if the story, in the circumstances related, is of a nature capable of easy refutation if it were false.

The difference, in the detail of circumstances, between artful or false witnesses and those who testify the truth, is worthy of especial observation. The former are often copious and even profuse in their statements, as far as these may have been previously fabricated, and in relation to the principal matter; but beyond this, all will be reserved and meager, from the fear of detection. Every lawyer knows how lightly the evidence of a non-mi-recordo witness is esteemed. The testimony of false witnesses will not be uniform in its texture, but will be unequal, unnatural, and inconsistent. On the contrary, in the testimony of true witnesses there is a visible and striking naturalness of manner, and an unaffected readiness and copiousness in the detail of circumstances, as well in one part of the narrative as another, and evidently without the least regard either to the facility or difficulty of verification or detection. It is easier, therefore, to make out the proof of any fact, if proof it may be called, by suborning one or more false witnesses, to testify directly to the matter in question, than to procure an equal number to testify falsely to such collateral and separate circumstances as will, without greater danger of detection, lead to the same false result. The increased number of witnesses to circumstances, and the increased number of the circumstances themselves, all tend to increase the probability of detection if the witnesses are false, because thereby the points are multiplied in which their statements may be compared with each other, as well as with the truth itself, and in the same proportion is increased the danger of variance and inconsistency. Thus the force of circumstantial evidence is found to depend on the number of particulars involved in the narrative; the difficulty of fabricating them all, if false, and the great facility of detection;

the nature of the circumstances to be compared, and from which the dates and other facts are to be collected; the intricacy of the comparison; the number of the intermediate steps in the process of deduction; and the circuitry of the investigation. The more largely the narrative partakes of these characters, the further it will be found removed from all suspicion of contrivance or design, and the more profoundly the mind will repose on the conviction of its truth.

The narratives of the sacred writers, both Jewish and Christian, abound in examples of this kind of evidence, the value of which is hardly capable of being properly estimated. It does not, as has been already remarked, amount to mathematical demonstration; nor is this degree of proof justly demandable in any question of moral conduct. In all human transactions, the highest degree of assurance to which we can arrive, short of the evidence of our own senses, is that of probability. The most that can be asserted is, that the narrative is more likely to be true than false; and it may be in the highest degree more likely, but still be short of absolute mathematical certainty. Yet this very probability may be so great as to satisfy the mind of the most cautious, and enforce the assent of the most reluctant and unbelieving. If it is such as usually satisfies reasonable men, in matters of ordinary transaction, it is all which the greatest skeptic has a right to require; for it is by such evidence alone that our rights are determined, in the civil tribunals; and on no other evidence do they proceed, even in capital cases. Thus where a house had been feloniously broken open with a knife, the blade of which was broken and left in the window, and the mutilated knife itself, the parts perfectly agreeing, was found in the pocket of the accused, who gave no satisfactory explanation of the fact, no reasonable doubt remained of his participation in the crime. And where a murder had been committed by shooting with a pistol, and the prisoner was connected with the transaction by proof that the wadding of the pistol was part of a letter addressed to him, the remainder of which was found upon his person, no juror's conscience could have reproached him for assenting to the verdict of condemnation. Yet the evidence, in both cases, is but the evidence of circumstances; amounting, it is true, to the highest degree of probability, but yet not utterly inconsistent with the innocence of the accused. The evidence which we have of the great facts of the Bible history belongs to this class, that is, it is moral evidence; sufficient to satisfy any rational mind, by carrying it to the highest degree of moral certainty. If such evidence well justify the taking away of human life or liberty, in the one case, surely it ought to be deemed sufficient to determine our faith in the other.

All Christianity asks of men on this subject, is that they would be consistent with themselves; that they would treat the evidence as they treat the evidence of other things; and that they would try and judge its actors and witnesses, as they deal with their fellow men, when testifying to human affairs and actions, in human tribunals. Let the witnesses be compared with themselves, with each other, and with surrounding facts and circumstances; and let their testimony be sifted, as if were given in a court of justice, on the side of the adverse party, the witness being subjected to a rigorous cross-examination. The result, it is confidently believed, will be an undoubting conviction of their integrity, ability, and truth. In the course of such an examination, the undesigned coincidences will multiply upon us at every step in the witnesses and of the reality of the occurrences which they relate will increase, until it acquires, for all practical purposes, the value and force of demonstration.

It should be remembered, that very little of the literature of their times and country has come down to us; and that the collateral sources and means of corroborating and explaining their writings are proportionally limited. The contemporary writings and works of art which have reached us, have invariably been found to confirm their accounts, to reconcile what was apparently contradictory, and supply what seemed defective or imperfect. We ought therefore to conclude, that if we had more of the same light,

all other similar difficulties and imperfections would vanish. Indeed they have been gradually vanishing, and rapidly too, before the light of modern research, conducted by men of science in our own times. And it is worthy of remark, that of all the investigations and discoveries of travelers and men of letters, since the overthrow of the Roman empire, not a vestige of antiquity has been found, impeaching, in the slightest degree, the credibility of the sacred writers; but, on the contrary, every result has tended to confirm it.

The essential marks of difference between true narratives of facts and the creations of fiction, have already been adverted to. It may here be added that these attributes of truth are strikingly apparent throughout the gospel histories, and that the absence of all the others is equally remarkable. The writers allude, for example, to the existing manners and customs, and to the circumstances of the times and of their country, with the utmost minuteness of reference. And these references are never formally made, nor with preface and explanation, never multiplied and heaped on each other, nor brought together, as though introduced by design; but they are scattered broadcast and singly over every part of the story, and so connect themselves with every incident related, as to render the detection of falsehood inevitable. This minuteness, too, is not peculiar to any one of the historians, but is common to them all. Though they wrote at different periods and without mutual concert, they all alike refer incidentally to the same state of affairs, and to the same contemporary collateral circumstances. Their testimony, in this view, stands on the same ground with that of four witnesses, separately examined before different commissioners, upon the same interrogatories, and all adverting incidentally to the same circumstances as surrounding and accompanying the principal transaction, to which alone their attention is directed. And it is worthy of observation that these circumstances were at that time of a peculiar character. Hardly a state or kingdom in the world ever experienced so many vicissitudes in its government and political relations, as did Judea, during the period of the gospel history. It was successively under the government of Herod the Great, of Archelaus, and of a Roman magistrate; it was a kingdom, a tetrarchy, and a province; and its affairs, its laws, and the administration of justice, were all involved in the confusion and uncertainty naturally to be expected from recent conquest. It would be difficult to select any place or period in the history of nations, for the time and scene of a fictitious history or imposture, which would combine so many difficulties for the fabricator to surmount, so many contemporary writers to confront with him, and so many facilities for the detection of falsehood.

"Had the evangelists been false historians," says Dr. Chalmers, "they would not have committed themselves upon so many particulars. They would not have furnished the vigilant inquirers of that period with such an effectual instrument for bringing them into discredit with the people; nor foolishly supplied, in every page of their narrative, so many materials for a cross-examination, which would infallibly have disgraced them. Now, we of this age can institute the same cross-examination. We can compare the evangelical writers with contemporary authors, and verify a number of circumstances in the history, and government, and peculiar economy of the Jewish people. We therefore have it in our power to institute a cross-examination upon the writers of the New Testament; and the freedom and frequency of their allusions to these circumstances supply us with ample materials for it. The fact, that they are borne out in their minute and incidental allusions by the testimony of other historians, gives a strong weight of what has been called circumstantial evidence in their favor. As a specimen of the argument, let us confine our observations to the history of our Savior's trial, and execution, and burial. They brought him to Pontius Pilate. We know both from Tacitus and Josephus, that he was at that time governor of Judea.

A sentence from him was necessary before they could proceed to the execution of Jesus; and we know that the power of life and death was usually vested in the Roman governor. Our Savior was treated with

derision; and this we know to have been a customary practice at that time, previous to the execution of criminals, and during the time of it. Pilate scourged Jesus before he gave him up to be crucified. We know from ancient authors, that this was a very usual practice among Romans. The accounts of an execution generally run in this form: he was stripped, whipped, and beheaded or executed. According to the evangelists, his accusation was written on the top of the cross; and we learn from Suetonius and others, that the crime of the person to be executed was affixed to the instrument of his punishment. According to the evangelists, this accusation was written in three different languages; and we know from Josephus that it was quite common in Jerusalem to have all public advertisements written in this manner. According to the evangelists, Jesus had to bear his cross; and we know from other sources of information, that this was the constant practice of those times. According to the evangelists, the body of Jesus was given up to be buried at the request of friends. We know that, unless the criminal was infamous, this was the law or the custom with all Roman governors."

There is also a striking naturalness in the characters exhibited in the sacred historians, rarely if ever found in works of fiction, and probably nowhere else to be collected in a similar manner from fragmentary and incidental allusions and expressions, in the writings of different persons. Take, for example, that of Peter, as it may be gathered from the evangelists, and it will be hardly possible to conceive that four persons, writing at different times, could have concurred in the delineation of such a character, if it were not real; a character too, we must observe, which is nowhere expressly drawn, but is shown only here and there, casually, in the subordinate parts of the main narrative. Thus disclosed, it is that of a confident, sanguine, and zealous man; sudden and impulsive, yet humble and ready to retract; honest and direct in his purposes; ardently loving his master, yet deficient in fortitude and firmness in his cause. When Jesus put any question to the apostles, it was Peter who was foremost to reply, and if they would inquire of Jesus, it was Peter who was readiest to speak. He had the impetuous courage to cut off the ear of the High Priest's servant, who came to arrest his master; and the weakness to dissemble before the Jews, in the matter of eating with Gentile converts. It was he who ran with John to the sepulcher, on the first intelligence of the resurrection of Jesus, and with characteristic zeal rushed in, while John paused without the door. He had the ardor to desire and the faith to attempt to walk on the water, at the command of his Lord; but as soon as he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid. He was the first to propose the election of another apostle in the place of Judas, and he it was who courageously defended them all, on the day of Pentecost, when the multitude charged them with being filled with new wine. He was forward to acknowledge Jesus to be the Messiah; yet having afterwards endangered his own life by wounding the servant of the Most High Priest, he suddenly consulted his own safety by denying the same Master, for whom, but a few hours before, he had declared himself ready to die. We may safely affirm that the annals of fiction afford no example of a similar but no uncommon character, thus incidentally delineated.

There are other internal marks of truth in the narratives of the evangelists, which, however, need here be only alluded to, as they have been treaded with great fullness and force by able writers, whose works are familiar to all. Among these may be mentioned the nakedness of the narratives; the absence of all parade by the writers about their own integrity, of all anxiety to be believed, or to impress others with a good opinion of themselves or their cause, of all marks of wonder, or of desire to excite astonishment at the greatness of the events they record, and of all appearance of design to exalt their Master. On the contrary, there is apparently the most perfect indifference on their part, whether they are believed or not; or rather, the evident consciousness that they are recording events well known to all, in their own country and times, and undoubtedly to be believed, like any other matter of public history, by readers in all other

countries and ages. It is worthy, too, of especial observation, that though the evangelists record unparalleled sufferings and cruel death of their beloved Lord, and this too, by hands and with the consenting voices of those on whom he had conferred the greatest benefits, and their own persecutions and dangers, yet they have bestowed no epithets of harshness or even of just censure on the authors of all this wickedness, but have everywhere left the plain and unencumbered narrative to speak for itself, and the reader to pronounce his own sentence of condemnation; like true witnesses, who have nothing to gain or to lose by the event of the cause, they state the facts, and leave them to their fate. Their simplicity and artlessness, also, should not pass unnoticed, in readily stating even those things most disparaging to themselves. Their want of faith in their master, their dullness of apprehension of his teachings, their strives for preeminence, their inclination to call fire from heaven upon their enemies, their desertion of their Lord in his hour of extreme peril; these and many other incidents tending directly to their own dishonor, are nevertheless set down with all the directness and sincerity of truth, as by men writing under the deepest sense of responsibility to God. Some of the more prominent instances of this class of proofs will be noticed hereafter, in their proper places, in the narratives themselves.

Lastly, the great character they have portrayed is perfect. It is the character of a sinless Being; of one supremely wise and supremely good. It exhibits no error, no sinister intention, no imprudence, no ignorance, no evil passion, no impatience; in a word, no fault; but all is perfect uprightness, innocence, wisdom, goodness and truth. The mind of man has never conceived the idea of such a character, even for his gods; nor has history or poetry shadowed it forth. The doctrines and precepts of Jesus are in strict accordance with the attributes of God, agreeably to the most exalted idea which we can form of them, either from reason or from revelation. They are strikingly adapted to the capacity of mankind, and yet are delivered with a simplicity and majesty wholly divine. He spake as never man spake. He spake with authority; yet addressed himself to the reason and the understanding of men; and he spake with wisdom, which men could neither gainsay nor resist. In his private life, he exhibits a character not merely of strict justice, but of flowing benignity. He is temperate, without austerity; his meekness and humility are signal; his patience is invincible; truth and sincerity illustrate his whole conduct; every one of his virtues is regulated by consummate prudence; and he both wins the love of his friends, and extorts the wonder and admiration of his enemies. He is represented in every variety of situation in life, from the height of worldly grandeur, amid the acclamations of an admiring multitude, to the deepest abyss of human degradation and woe, apparently deserted of God and man. Yet everywhere he is the same; displaying a character of unearthly perfection, symmetrical in all its proportions, and encircled with splendor more than human. Either the men of Galilee were men of superlative wisdom, and extensive knowledge and experience, and of deeper skill in the arts of deception, than any and all others, before or after them, or they have truly stated the astonishing things which they saw and heard.

The narratives of the evangelists are now submitted to the reader's perusal and examination, upon the principles and by the rules already stated. For this purpose, and for the sake of more ready and close comparison, they are arranged in juxtaposition, after the general order of the latest and most approved harmonies. The question is not upon the strict propriety of the arrangement, but upon the veracity of the witnesses and the credibility of their narratives. With the relative merits of modern harmonists, and with points of controversy among theologians the writer has no concern. His business is that of a lawyer examining the testimony of witnesses by the rules of his profession, in order to ascertain whether, if they had thus testified on oath, in a court of justice, they would be entitled to credit and whether their narratives, as we now have them, would be received as ancient documents, coming from the proper

custody. If so, then it is believed that every honest and impartial man will act consistently with that result, by receiving their testimony in all the extent of its import. To write out a full commentary or argument upon the text would be a useless addition to the bulk of the volume; but a few notes have been added for illustration of the narratives, and for the clearing up of apparent discrepancies, as being all that members of the legal profession would desire.