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978-1-108-01964-4 - An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity

Charles Christian Hennell

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An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity

Charles Christian Hennell (1809–1850) was a theological writer best known for his association with and influence on George Eliot. First published in 1838, this volume contains Hennell's deconstruction of the Bible to separate the historical character of Jesus from later myths which became incorporated into Christianity. Hennell examines the Gospels and other parts of the New and Old Testaments which are concerned with Jesus, demonstrating that all miraculous events can be explained without reference to supernatural intervention and emphasising the importance of the historical context. Despite Hennell's unorthodox conclusions this volume is not intended as an attack on Christianity, which Hennell praises as the 'purest form of natural religion'. This volume is described as his most important theological work and is one of the Biblical criticisms which inspired George Eliot to question her faith in the 1840's. Hennell's 1839 work *Christian Theism* is also included in this volume.

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AN INQUIRY

CONCERNING THE

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BY

CHARLES C. HENNELL.

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—
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PREFACE.

To those whose interest is already so much awakened upon the subject of the divine origin of Christianity, that they feel the necessity of arriving at some certain conclusion, more than they fear any possible results to which such inquiries may lead, this attempt to contribute to the solution of this difficult question is offered.

The hypothesis, that there is a mixture of truth and fable in the four Gospels, has been admitted, in different degrees, by many critics bearing the Christian name. The same method of free investigation which led Priestley and Belsham to throw doubt upon the truth of the opening chapters of Matthew and Luke, may allow other inquirers to make further excisions from the Gospel history. The reasons given by those eminent critics for proceeding so far may appear more valid than any which can be urged for stopping where they did. The right of private judgment in the separation of truth from fiction being once accorded, the precise limits which ought to be assigned to the credible portion of the miraculous narratives are far from being obvious; and the ascertaining of these limits becomes a matter of interesting research to all who wish to know what they are to believe or disbelieve on the subject of the Christian religion.

The following pages are the result of an investigation undertaken with this view, and pursued for some time with the expectation that, at least, the principal miraculous facts supposed to lie at the foundation of Christianity would be found to be impregnable; but it was continued

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with a gradually increasing conviction that the true account of the life of Jesus Christ, and of the spread of his religion, would be found to contain no deviation from the known laws of nature, nor to require, for their explanation, more than the operation of human motives and feelings, acted upon by the peculiar circumstances of the age and country whence the religion originated.

The analysis of the four Gospels proceeding on the admission that they may contain a mixture of truth and error, is a very complicated but not impracticable task. It is necessary to form an opinion as to the date of each writing, the general character of each author, and his peculiarities as a writer; to institute continual comparisons between the events or discourses which he relates, and the opinions and controversies which arose subsequently to his own time; to weigh the probability in favour of the real occurrence of a fact, considered in reference to the ascertained history of the time, with that in favour of its invention by the author or some intermediate narrator; to consider what greater degree of weight is due to the testimony from the accordance of all, or of several of the writers; and to ascertain whether they wrote independently, or copied from each other. By this laborious method of sifting and examining, it must be admitted that it would be possible to obtain a tolerably correct history from a collection of records acknowledged to be of a very mixed character.

The doctrine of the divine inspiration, or of the unquestionable veracity, of the Gospel writers, has hitherto hindered the full application of this free method of investigation to the New Testament, on the part of believers in

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Christianity ; and unbelievers seem generally to have been more intent upon raising objections and cavils to the narratives as they stand, than in searching out the real truth. Hence it has frequently been observed, that no clear and intelligible account has been given of the life of Jesus Christ on simply natural grounds ; whence it has been argued, that no alternative remains but to regard him as the miraculously endowed personage presented to us in the four Gospels.

The first two chapters of this work give a sketch of conclusions formed in the manner above stated, from the study of the Old and New Testament, and of Josephus. It is admitted that some parts of this sketch cannot claim a higher character than that of plausible conjecture. The authority of the main sources of information being shaken, it is evident that conjecture is, in many cases, all to which the utmost research can attain. The whole is, however, expressed in the historical style, for the sake of simplicity ; consequently, when the reader meets with some assertions not sufficiently supported by the notes, his patience is entreated until he arrives at the chapters which follow.

The field of investigation being of almost interminable extent, the object has been rather to select a few striking points of inquiry than to exhaust the subject ; many interesting points are therefore merely glanced at, and the volume is offered more as a collection of hints than as a complete treatise on the important subject which it approaches.

The greater part of the work having been written before reference was made to the commentators mentioned in the notes, the reader, who may be versed in biblical

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criticism, will have to excuse in some parts an unconsciousness that the same things had already been said by others. This applies especially to the chapters on Isaiah and Daniel, much of which the author has found to be nearly the same in substance as what had been said by Porphyry, Aben Esra, Kimchi, and Grotius. But the whole is suffered to remain, because some suggestions here offered differ much from the explanations of the above, and, it is believed, of all other commentators. The attention of the student of the prophecies is directed especially to the explanation suggested of the seventh chapter of Daniel.

Although the belief in the miraculous origin of Christianity forms at present a prominent feature in the creeds of all sects of professing Christians, it would be an unnecessary and perhaps injudicious limitation to hold that the relinquishment of this belief is equivalent to an entire renunciation of the Christian religion. Whatever be men's conclusions concerning the much-debated question of the nature and powers of Jesus Christ, no conclusions of this kind need obstruct their perception of the general excellence of the moral system which is connected with his name, nor impede their acknowledgment of the beneficial influence which the Scriptures exercise over mankind, nor lead to hostility towards the ancient and useful institutions which the sanction of Christ and his followers has caused almost universally to accompany the admission of his religion. Most of the doctrines of Christianity are admitted to be so much in accordance with the purest dictates of natural reason, that, on recognizing the latter as the supreme guide, no violent disruption of the

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habits and associations of the religious world is necessary. The philosophizing tone adopted by many of the most distinguished modern advocates of religion renders the transition easy from Christianity as a divine revelation to Christianity as the purest form yet existing of natural religion. The contemplation of the Creator may still be indulged, and lessons of morality and wisdom still sought, according to the forms which Christianity has consecrated. The transference of the sanction from a supposed revelation to natural reason will be so little prejudicial to these high exercises of the mind, that, on the contrary, it will extend their interest by allowing them wider scope, and by rendering them more susceptible of all the improvements which experience, circumstances, and growing intelligence, suggest. Christianity will no longer be fettered by the necessity of a continual adaptation to written precept, but will assume a position allowing it to expand freely according to the wants of each successive age, and to advance with the advancement of mankind.

The author of this volume would therefore willingly have it considered as employed in the real service of Christianity, rather than as an attack upon it. Many doctrines, which were once thought to be essential parts of the system, have been successively dismissed into the class of its corruptions; yet, after the wound occasioned by the separation has been healed, Christianity has been found to remain still vigorous, and has even appeared more sightly as relieved from an excrescence. And, now, if the progress of inquiry should lead men to carry the pruning-knife nearer to the root than they had at first contemplated, and to consign even

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the whole of the miraculous relations in the New Testament to the same list as the prodigies of Hindoo or Romish superstition, we may still find enough left in Christianity to maintain its name and power amidst growing knowledge and civilization. And this will be in that purer moral spirit, and those higher views of the nature of man, the progress of which, although naturally coincident with the advancement of the human mind, received so vigorous an impulse from the life of Jesus, that this spirit and these views have come to be indissolubly associated with the idea, and expressed under the name, of Christianity. Christianity, thus regarded as a system of elevated thought and feeling, will not be injured by being freed from those fables, and those views of local or temporary interest, which hung about its origin. It will, on the contrary, be placed on a surer basis; for it need no longer appeal for its support to the uncertain evidence of events which happened nearly two thousand years ago, a species of evidence necessarily attainable only by long and laborious research, impracticable to most men, and unsatisfactory and harassing even to those who have most means of pursuing it; but it will rest its claims on an evidence clearer, simpler, and always at hand,—the thoughts and feelings of the human mind itself. Thus, whatever in it is really true and excellent, will meet with a ready attestation in every breast, and, in the improvement of the human mind, find an ever-increasing evidence.

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ERRATA.

- Page 5, line 23, for “to the family of Herod” read “to *that* of the family,” &c.
— 39, line 27, for “his opponents” read “*its* opponents.”
— 52, line 3, dele 68.
— 58, line 25, for “invisible image” read “*visible* image.”
— 69, line 20, for “imitated” read “*imitates*.”
— 87, note *, for “then should not be saved” read “*there* should not,” &c.
— 101, note *, for “fifty years” read “*forty* years.”
— 142, note, line 2, for “comma” read “*fragment*.”
— 188, line 13, for “relates chiefly to miracles” read “*relates chiefly miracles*.”
— 192, line 25, for “father’s” read “*fathers*.”
— 310, line 24, for “interpolations” read “*interpretations*.”