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THE MYTH OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

A SERMON

BY

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THE MYTH OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS.*

“I call any story a myth which for good reasons is not to be taken historically, and yet is not a wilful fabrication with intent to deceive, but the natural growth of wonder and tradition, or a product of the Spirit uttering itself in a narrative form.”—REV. FREDERIC H. HEDGE, D. D.

AT this beautiful spring season the people of the Christian world very generally unite to celebrate the supposed resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Influenced by association and sympathy, and by the love of a festal occasion, many of our Unitarian congregations, including our own, are wont to mark the period with tokens of gladness and services of rejoicing.

In most cases, I think, our people attempt to make some discriminations as to their motives in participating in the Easter occasion. They seek to give to it the significance of a celebration of the revived life of nature in the spring, or the deeper sentiment of a festival of human immortality.

It is, I fear, difficult to make such discriminations clear; and, as I have reason to think that, at present, belief in the resurrection of Jesus does not widely prevail among you; as I myself unqualifiedly disbelieve in the event; I feel it to be a duty to myself (and perhaps it is such to you) to state, formally, the dissenting view in regard to this crowning miracle of the traditional history of Jesus.

I do not believe that Jesus rose from the dead, except by that spiritual resurrection by which all the children of men, on the dissolution of the body, pass into a new life beyond the grave.

The story of his physical and earthly resurrection is, in my judgment, mythical, not historical.

In this opinion in regard to the narrative I suppose that I am accompanied by the large majority of the clergy of our Church, and equally by the large majority of our

* An Easter Sermon.

laity. Our scholars are, I think, unanimous in the same view. To state the position of liberal scholars in a word, they find it easier to account for the existence of the resurrection-narrative as a myth than to justify so exceptional an occurrence as historical on the evidence on which it rests.

Prominent among such scholars, and one of the latest to discuss the story in detail, is the venerable Rev. James Martineau of England, the most spiritual of our preachers; perhaps the ablest of English metaphysicians, and who has brought his scholarship down to the latest date; who in his "Seat of Authority in Religion," examines this question elaborately, and convincingly exhibits the mythical character of the resurrection-story.

A more recent work by Professor J. Estlin Carpenter, of Oxford, occupies the same position, and clearly exhibits the mode of development of the whole mythical element in the New Testament.

Even among members of the Orthodox Christian communion the beginnings of the same process of thought are plainly seen, which, *by explaining, explains away* the miraculous element in these ancient narratives.

As was said many years ago by an eminent scholar and preacher of our body, the miraculous element is no longer a prop and support of the Christian tradition. It is a weight which Christianity has to carry. Jesus is not believed because he worked the miracles. *The miracles are believed because men are reluctant to detach from his revered personality any elements which have been felt to contribute to its dignity.*

Elsewhere, certainly outside the Bible, the Protestant world of to-day unanimously rejects all miracles.* The

* But in 1748 the denial of the post-apostolic miracles by Middleton, occasioned as profound a shock to religious sensibility as did the publication of Strauss's mythical theory of the gospel miracles in 1835. In the third century a similar treatment, by Origen, of the Old Testament narrative equally offended the religious world. See Rev. Dr. Hedge's admirable discussion of the mythical element in the New Testament, in his "Ways of the Spirit," where the spiritual truth and value which may attach to myths is luminously shown.

Catholic Church professes to believe them of many of her saints of the present as well as of former generations. In this she is more consistent; for the one effective philosophical argument for the miracles of the New Testament—that on which Dr. Furness rested, and which he made so forcible and suggestive—is that which makes them still a part of the order of nature; operations wrought by powerful human wills, in virtue of a high spirituality and of unfamiliar but genuine natural laws. This obviously justifies the expectation of such works by other men of exceptional spiritual and moral force as well as by Jesus and the Apostles.

In this expectation, however, we are disappointed. Protestantism, at least, does not find authentic modern instances of miracle. Even the miracles of the New Testament, other than those of Jesus, are seldom, I think, enlarged upon, if maintained, by our modern scholars; and I doubt if intelligent and educated Romanists believe very heartily in those of to-day which are reported among their communion.

The position upon which I rest in the discussion of the present question is this. The story of the resurrection of Jesus is only a part of the tissue of miracle which a credulous, unscientific age wove instinctively into the tradition of his life and death. It grew out of the same causes, its acceptance and propagation depended on the same conditions, as did the others. While the legend of the miraculous birth, with its attendant angelic phenomena, is more fanciful, it is of exactly the same *kind* of narratives; and, while the Christian consciousness, by a refined and elevated instinct, dismissed the trivial stories preserved to us in the apocryphal New Testament, these are, also, of the same *kind*, originating in the same way, and only differing in their want of dignity and suggestiveness.

I have heretofore, as exhaustively as I was able, discussed with you the origin of the belief in miracles and the particular subject of the miracles of the New Testament. I will not detain you now to traverse the same

ground again. If you share, as I suppose you do, the present wide-spread incredulity on this subject, you are fully justified by the famous *dictum* of an acute philosopher of the past century, whose skeptical vein made him odious, but who in one brief logical statement exhausted the argument. Hume maintained that, in every case of alleged miracle, it is more likely that testimony should err than that a miracle should have occurred.*

The Christian world has struggled with this pregnant aphorism for a hundred and fifty years, but it has not escaped from it. Instinctive recognition of the truth which it pithily expresses has led to a steady decline of belief in the miraculous as science, intelligence, and culture have advanced.

The result is admirably exhibited by Lecky, in his "History of European Morals," where his examination of the subject of miracle is as luminous as it is convincing. In the face of whatever evidence there is, belief in miracle always declines with growing popular intelligence. Lecky's remarkable discussion may also be summed up in a *dictum*. It is not, he shows, that the occurrence of miracles is discredited by argument. It is that, as intelligence advances, miracles cease to occur †

It has not been, indeed, by demonstration of their scientific improbability that the miracles of the New Testament have lost credit with so many persons. It must be admitted that, on sufficient evidence, we must believe *anything*, no matter how unusual or how subversive of what we have hitherto determined. In these days of science we all understand and acknowledge this. We cannot pretend to limit by former experience the scope of the unknown forces of nature or of the mind.

But the ground has simply been taken from beneath

* Hume's exact language is "that no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish. And even in that case there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force which remains after deducting the inferior."

† Lecky's "History of European Morals," vol. i, pp. 368 and following.

the Scripture miracles of either Testament, and others, by our better understanding of the nature of the writings in which their occurrence is recorded, and of the working of men's minds in unscientific periods and in circumstances like those of the early followers of Jesus.

That in the New Testament we have a body of thoroughly innocent writings; documents essentially genuine, and in spirit, purpose and intention, truthful, is a statement which no one would seriously qualify.

Here are invaluable relics of the literature which grew up, as any such literature grows up, in the first century or two of Christianity; but the popular idea of what these writings individually are, how they were composed, what is their authority as testimony, is probably very imperfect, if not incorrect. Putting aside all question of their miraculous inspiration, which I need not consider here, the documents of the New Testament present to the student a problem in many respects very intricate.

The Gospels, with which we are now chiefly concerned, appear to the superficial reader as the artless accounts, by well-informed persons, of the life and preaching of Jesus as they had severally known them. We are accustomed to read these narratives as if they came, in form and directly, from the hands of his companions or near contemporaries. Tradition sanctions this view. But, so stated, it requires careful qualifications. The first three Gospels, in their present form, date, probably, from periods ranging from forty to seventy years after Jesus's death. It is possible that portions of their contents were even written down earlier,—perhaps considerably earlier,—or that they were founded, partly, on earlier narratives. But, in the largest part, at least, the traditions of Jesus's life and words had survived *orally*, and so continued, doubtless, for a generation, perhaps for half a century.* As we possess them, these first three Gospels are not, as they perhaps seem, the accounts by their authors of what they personally knew of Jesus, his life and his death.

* Westcott's "Introduction to the Study of the Gospels," pp. 181 and following; Carpenter's "First Three Gospels," p. 61.

What is true is this. The first three Gospels contain the popular traditions which were current in the Christian community concerning Jesus about half a century after he had passed away. They preserve for us what was then generally believed about him. They include exquisite fragments of his remembered utterances. They contain hints enough of his character to enable us to form a very distinct and trustworthy portrait of him, which is immeasurably precious. But, after all, they are properly described, not as careful biographies by competent, nearly contemporary witnesses, but as anonymous compilations of the traditions of their period.

Thus these writings *reflect* their period. They are in a literary sense, artless. They are beyond cavil, truthful in spirit and purpose; but they preserve the biography of Jesus *as affected by all the prepossessions of such an age, and by the ideas and theories which had begun to grow up about him, including, naturally and inevitably, the element of miracle, the marvellous, the supernatural.*

They could not have come from that age, and not have included this element. It was alive and ubiquitous in the thought of that period. It was expected and looked for in any remarkable career. Of any exceptional man who should present himself as a religious leader, the people were prompt to ask, "What *sign* showest thou that we may believe?" * Miracle being a thing of every-day life in men's belief, its supposed manifestations were described as naturally and artlessly as any other events.

The Fourth Gospel is to be distinguished in some important respects from the other three. It is not merely a compilation of popular traditions and relics of Jesus, such as Luke in his preface expressly describes his own narrative to be, and implies that the others were. The Fourth dates from a much later period,—say A. D. 140,—and is properly a *tract*, written with a purpose, which it candidly avows (chap. xx., 31), to exhibit Jesus in a peculiar character, as the Hebrew Messiah and the Son of

* John vi., 30; also ii., 18. See also Matt. xii., 28; Mark viii., 11; Luke xi., 16, etc.

God. It is the work of a single hand,* and, as such, possesses unity, homogeneousness, and consecutiveness in its literary structure. But the tradition that it is by one of the twelve apostles, stoutly as it is defended, is actually a most slender thread, and is visibly yielding to the strain which modern scholarship is putting upon it. For one, I do not believe this Gospel to be by an apostle. So far as its historical contents are concerned, then, they are still, in substance, like those of the others. They are still no more than the current popular tradition, amplified and developed by the passage of another half-century. The Fourth Gospel adds nothing to the validity of the testimony of the other three. In fact, its comparative literary artificiality, its later date, and the fact that it was written with an avowed dogmatic purpose, characteristic of a developed stage of Christian opinion, *diminish* the value of its historical testimony. It cannot be appealed to with the confidence with which we refer to the others for historical evidence.

To repeat, then, what we have in the Gospels is substantially this,—a compilation of the traditions which were floating in the Christian community forty, fifty, sixty, or a hundred or a hundred and fifty years after Jesus's death, and of the relics preserved of his teachings; these *materials*, originally fragmentary and anonymous, edited and connected together by sympathetic and intelligent hands with such art as they had. They possess, in their *details*, not the authority which belongs to the asseverations of a trustworthy eye witness, but the value which attaches to the popular traditions of a sincere, innocent and adoring, but credulous, unscientific, easily-deluded community of disciples, more than ready to believe miraculous tales.

It is utterly impracticable for the intelligent mind of the present day to be overborne in its judgment of the ways of God by the testimony of such authorities, or would be so but for the influence of custom and of the

* And one much too highly cultivated, I cannot but think, for that of a Galilean fisherman.

long-established veneration which these documents have naturally secured. As containing all that we know of Jesus and his utterances, they are beyond estimate precious. We may be infinitely grateful to have so much. We can but admire their simplicity, their candor, their purity, dignity and grace. But such popular traditions, however charmingly composed, cannot command our belief at points where they would upset all that, in the brightest light of the present age, we seem to know of God and nature. And, fortunately, it is now possible to analyze them, and largely to account for the phenomena which they present.

Compendiously stated, it is the result of recent scholarship to show with much clearness how the more marvelous characteristics attributed to the person and career of Jesus are the *reflection back* upon them of a subsequent period, when the popular faith had highly, but unnaturally, exalted him, and popular imagination had had time to develop the simple facts of his actual career into the remarkable forms which, at certain points, his story has come to wear.

It is impossible now to tell just what Jesus's disciples thought of him while living; for we have no unqualified testimony to this point, all our testimony having been worked over in the popular mind repeatedly before it took its existing forms of statement. But the things of a marvelous nature recorded in the Gospels, if true, must have been known to his actual companions and early disciples,—for example, his miraculous birth and its attendant prodigies, the visit of the wise men, the descent of the Holy Spirit as a dove at his baptism, and the attestation of his peculiar sonship to God; yet *of these things there is no trace in the body of the Gospels, where the life of the apostles with their Master is recorded.* They are never even referred to, much less appealed to, in justification of any claims of a supernatural quality or commission for Jesus. They are obviously *myths*, which grew up in later day, and were *projected back* into the history from the time when Jesus was fully established as a supernatu-

ral character in the faith of his people. This is very generally admitted, *of the events I just specified*, by intelligent persons to-day.

But the same, I would have you see, is essentially true of *all the rest* of the miraculous element in the story of Jesus. If we had the real facts, uncolored by tradition and credulous imagination, we should probably find that Jesus's actual followers neither knew him to work miracles, nor perhaps so believed while he was with them. But they wondered at his great endowments. They began to theorize about him, and to think him some peculiar being. They accepted him as the Messiah of the Jews, and the next age made him the Son of God. *Then* the events of his life took on, by degrees, supernatural quality and form and color. The ardent faith of his followers inevitably, but insensibly, filled out the picture of his life and deeds with details imperceptibly growing, into which the miraculous largely entered. What was natural became supernatural. Incidents wholly mythical attached themselves to the story. *And in this condition we have received it.*

This process, as I intimate, was in no sense intentional or dishonest. It was by the spontaneous action of the mental and moral forces of such a time. It is by no means peculiar to the case of Jesus, but paralleled in many others.* We can even see it, in qualified forms, going on around ourselves in the cases of individuals who become highly idealized in the popular imagination. It is even a little less extensive in its results in Jesus's case than we usually suppose. The purely thaumaturgic miracles ascribed to him, like the turning of water to wine, the blasting of the fig-tree and the stilling of the storm, are quite few. A number of the others are plainly misconceptions or exaggerations of natural facts, as the finding of money in the fish's mouth or his walking on the water. The great bulk of the miracles are those of healing, and may almost all represent a power of influence over the minds of the sick, which in its essence would

* See Carpenter's "First Three Gospels," p. 152, following, and p. 204.

not be uncongenial to so elevated and forcible a character as his, and which is exaggerated rather than perverted in the reports of it which we have received.

But, in the form which they wear, these stories are plainly *mythical growths*, the product chiefly, if not wholly, of the period succeeding the death of Jesus, when faith in him had become intense; when he was fully believed in as a special and supernatural character; when he was eagerly expected to return from heaven, put an end to the existing order of things, and reign with his saints in a glorified state, age-long.

The only wonder is that the miracle-stories of the New Testament are not more extravagant than they are. No doubt there was a large body of others, of a more melodramatic quality, like those preserved in the Apocryphal Gospels, which the Christian consciousness, as I have already said, rejected as trivial and unworthy before the canon of the New Testament was closed. Stories of this inferior sort maintained credit with the less educated of the Christian people, as to-day ignorant Catholics believe many fanciful tales of the Madonna and the saints, which their educated fellow-churchmen deride. The superior minds (as those must have been who addressed themselves to the compilation of Jesus's story in these four standard biographies) naturally rejected almost all of these.*

Here, then, is what I would have you observe. *Our modern consciousness does but reject the whole miraculous element of these and other ancient traditions as that of the early Church rejected the more absurd and undignified stories of the kind which popular belief attached to the history of Jesus.*

* I may say here that the history of myths abundantly shows that the period between the death of Jesus and the publication of the earliest of the Gospels provides more than ample *time* for the forces which produce the mythical elements in such a history to work. Myths are not necessarily a thing of slow growth. Often they spring up, as it were, in a night. The shortest possible allowance of time before the materials embodied in the Gospels took their shape in literature is more than sufficient for the mythical elaboration and coloring to have been effected.

To the modern mind *all* tales of miracles are *trivial*.

It is a tempting but always treacherous task to try to account for the origin and growth of particular mythical stories. It has been well that this task should be essayed as it was, for example, in that monumental work, "The Life of Jesus," by Strauss. But it can never, in any case, be finally convincing. At most, all that one can do in this way is to show how a mythical story *may* have arisen, and thus to make reasonable the contention that it *is* mythical. It is pretty easy to account for the story of the money in the fish's mouth as arising in the fact of Jesus's directing his disciples to *sell* a fish, and so obtain the money; or for that of his walking *on* the sea as a mistake for his walking *by* the sea. But such explanations become uncertain as they become intricate, and we are not to hazard a clear conviction that the mythical tendency is a real one, upon our success in showing how it may have worked in particular instances. At such a distance, to explain how a certain mythical narrative grew up corresponds in form very closely to the impossible logical task of proving a universal negative.*

We may *detect* myth in a thousand cases where we cannot possibly explain its particular mode of growth.

I do not propose, then, to attempt to show in detail how the story of Jesus's resurrection grew up. One who rejects it as mythical is by no means bound so to do. To justify the reasonableness of its rejection as authentic history, it is sufficient to detect beyond question in the New Testament the presence of an extensive mythical element, from which come the narratives of Jesus's miraculous birth, with its attendant angels and their celestial songs, of his various miracles, and of his resurrection and ascension, and to refer each and all of these stories to the one common source.

Yet it is quite obvious to any thoughtful student of the times, and of the circumstances of the immediate followers of Jesus, what *general* causes pressed urgently

* See Lecky's "History of European Morals," vol. i. p. 373; Carpenter's "First Three Gospels," pp. 152, 207.

upon them, and favored the belief, which became so intense and effective among them, that he had risen from the dead. Not difficult for men of that generation to accept and credit, it was, on the other hand, absolutely essential for them to have the support and comfort of such a belief. They would have been utterly desolate and hopeless without it. In this sense, the continuance of the movement depended on it, and stood or fell with it.

The disciples of Jesus had become fully possessed by the conviction that he realized the Messianic hope of the Jews. While Jesus, if he accepted it for himself, highly spiritualized the Messiah-idea, his followers to the very last, as the Gospels plainly exhibit, thought of it in the conventional, mundane sense common to their nation's imagination. It was to be the glorified but earthly reign of the Messiah over his redeemed people.

The arrest and crucifixion of Jesus suddenly blasted this hope, as applied to him, and filled his disciples with consternation. The whole structure of their selfish anticipations was thrown down. Personally, his nearer followers were left most forlorn; alone, without their leader, in a strange city, and in danger from the Jewish hierarchy and the Roman government on the one side and from the populace upon the other.*

But, with a little time for the restoration of their composure amid familiar scenes, their hope, which had been for the moment prostrated, would begin to revive. In the actual immortality of the souls of men, Jews of that period were widely accustomed to believe. At least, they were all familiar with the idea. The large and influential Pharisaic party cherished it ardently, although the other

* Up to Jesus's death, it should be remembered, his avowed disciples, especially the twelve apostles, were almost all Galileans. They had accompanied him to Jerusalem on his last journey, full of hope in his manifestation of himself as the Messiah; and, when the tragical result occurred, they were far from their homes, and, indeed, like sheep without a shepherd. It is not at all wonderful that they were for the moment astounded and dismayed, and forsook him and fled. The traditions intimate pretty clearly that after his death they did what was most natural,—hurried back to Galilee.

great sect, the Sadducees, denied it. The first reassuring thought of the disciples, doubtless, was that Jesus, though dead, was *not* dead, but still in being; that he was in paradise, and that thus, though in ways different from their former expectations, his Messiahship might still be realized and vindicated.

If he was *still in being*, the idea that he should *manifest himself* to some of his followers would have presented no difficulty to men at that time. The spiritual element in men has always, to the ordinary mind, seemed to consist of matter in a state of extreme tenuity, and therefore capable, under some conditions, of becoming tangible to sense.

A very slight cause among persons of that day, and in the circumstances of Jesus's disciples, would have set in motion the belief that he *had* manifested himself to some of them; and once started, such a belief would have spread like wildfire.

It is exactly thus, in response to deep necessities of the heart, that myths arise and propagate themselves.

If, for example, it was the fact that, on visiting his tomb a day or two after his interment, the sepulchre was found empty; if Jesus's body had been removed by its custodians, for which there might be many good reasons; if it could not at once be discovered, and its absence was not explained; the inference might readily, and very likely immediately, have been drawn that their Master had arisen from the dead.

If, as the tradition in all its actual forms describes, the first visitors to the tomb were *women*, their more excitable and imaginative natures might easily have been impressed, by some half-seen object or slightly peculiar experience, with the notion that they had met angels or other heavenly messengers.

That the body of Jesus *disappeared* seems the only essential condition of the legend having birth; and to its disappearance the tradition points quite definitely. Matthew tells us that the Jews declared it to have been removed by some of the disciples,—a very credible state-

ment, though rejected by the evangelist. It is the ingenious hypothesis of some that Joseph of Arimathea, who had allowed it to be laid in his new tomb, removed it, lest its presence there should lead to some commotion and embroil him with the Jews.

It seems probable, at any rate, that its disappearance was, in the excited state of mind of the disciples, the original source of the belief in Jesus's resurrection. This cause may have operated at once, and the idea of his return to life may have been generated in those two or three days. If is, perhaps, more probable that it did not spread so suddenly.*

In the Second Gospel we have the simplest—probably, therefore, the most primitive—account of the event after Jesus's death. That Gospel properly terminates at the middle of the last chapter, as is indicated in the Revised Version. Here, in this earliest form of the story, there is properly *nothing supernatural at all*. How such a tale *grows* is interestingly seen on comparing this primitive form of it with the elaborated accounts in Matthew and Luke, and still more, with the later one of the Fourth Gospel.

At the moment, it might very well be that the disappearance of Jesus's remains should set in train a hundred wondering doubts and hopes and theories. That the agitated women at the tomb saw *something* strange, saw *somebody in white*, saw *Jesus himself*,—steps like these would readily be taken by a body of persons otherwise crushed in their dearest hope, and not in the least fortified by science and mature intelligence against miraculous beliefs.

In fact, what is especially noteworthy about the stories of the resurrection is (as I have remarked about the miracle-stories of the Gospels generally) that they are not more abundant and elaborate than they are † In the

* See Martineau's "Seat of Authority in Religion," p. 372.

† This, to my mind, points to a later rather than an immediate period for their origin.

authentic portion of Mark, Jesus's resurrection is *affirmed*, but no reappearance is *described*. And even the appendix (doubtless a wholly genuine relic of the early Christian literature) adds only the briefest statement, not description, of three appearances, of which the latter, at least, is almost incredible, if only from the light in which Jesus is placed by it and the disregard by the eleven apostles of his solemn injunction.

In such vague and general *assertions of a fact* did this afterward confident and wide-spread belief arise.

Matthew's narrative is actually but little more elaborate or more definite. It is stated that an angel appeared to the women, that Jesus himself appeared and briefly spoke to them, that afterwards he met the eleven in Galilee, though some doubted that it was he; and this is all.

In the Third Gospel, which was written, probably, after the lapse of nearly, or quite, three-quarters of a century after Jesus's death, the account is somewhat further amplified, and its details are a little more definite in form.

But it is not until we come to the Fourth Gospel (which was written, as I have said, under the full prepossession of, and with the avowed purpose to exhibit, the Sonship to God of Jesus, and probably not before A. D. 140) that we have a collection of highly elaborated narratives of the intercourse of the risen Master with his disciples.

I have no hesitation, therefore, in my view of the strictly mythical origin of the story of Jesus's resurrection. An examination of the statements in regard to it made by St. Paul, who is the only nearly contemporary witness whom we are able to identify, only confirms the opinion that it grew essentially out of the primary conviction that *the Messiah could not die*; that Jesus was, therefore, alive after his seeming death; that he appeared, in some ethereal form of manifestation, to his followers. Paul had, of course, no personal knowledge of the facts of Jesus's life. He expressly states how little he cared

for, or examined, the testimony of the original apostles. It is altogether doubtful if he regarded Jesus as having risen in the same body which was laid in the tomb. Paul places the appearance of Jesus to himself on the occasion of his conversion (which certainly, if real, was a visionary manifestation), *fully and exactly* on a plane with his appearances to the other disciples.

Certainly, whatever be true as to the event of Jesus's return to life, he never effectively resumed his place among living men after the event of his death. Whatever reappearances of his person are alleged, they are all of a phantasmal character. He enters through closed doors while men are speaking of him. Men doubt about his identity. He is mistaken for a "spirit." The scenes are all dramatic and unreal. Not one of the alleged Christophanies occurred in the presence of opponents; or in public unless we so class the occasion, barely asserted, but not described, by St. Paul, when Jesus is affirmed to have appeared to "above five hundred at once." On several occasions the *incredulity* of some of the witnesses is a marked feature of the occurrence.

One especial word. We must not be misled by the exceeding simplicity and naturalness and artlessness of the gospel narratives into mistaking these characteristics for the tokens of *historic validity and accuracy*. These qualities in the New Testament literature betray, certainly, as I have said, the truthful spirit of the writers, and their ingenuous confidence in the reality of the events which they narrate. But, as repeatedly intimated, to men of such an era *miraculous events were as likely to occur as any others*; and they therefore describe them with the same naturalness and simplicity as normal ones. And, when men report with truthful spirit what they themselves believe, the embellishments with which they unconsciously and instinctively round out their narratives will, usually, be as natural in form, as artless, as truthful-seeming, as the rest of their narrations.

In a word, as applied to the relations of truthful men,

describing what they themselves receive as fact, *verisimilitude is not a test of historical truth* *

When a man is consciously trying to deceive, his inventions almost inevitably betray him to a critical reader; but when what he tells is true to himself, nature will speak in his unconscious exaggerations as clearly and as simply as in the rest of his story. The legends of the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament are narrated with the same *naïveté* as that which appears and charms us in the narratives of Jesus's miraculous acts. In the passage † where Moses meets Jehovah, to renew the tables of the Law, the narrator (as has been remarked) describes the appearance to a mortal man of the Almighty Creator of the universe, in the same simple terms with which he tells of the man's arising in the morning.

Finally, I would refer to one particular objection very gravely urged by some to bar a doubt of the historical reality of the event of the resurrection of Jesus.

It is said, if this event was not an historical fact, then the faith of the great Christian world, at a most crucial point, rests upon a delusion.

I think that it does so rest.

Nor is there anything remarkable or exceptional in this. For it is abundantly illustrated by the facts of the history of religions that, while the moral influence and spiritual value of any form of faith must always be largely in proportion to the reality and truth of its historical and its spiritual sources, the practical issues of faith in belief and act are powerful, not necessarily in proportion to the

* Professor J. H. Mahaffy, the eminent student of Greek history and literature, commenting on the artlessness of the style of the Iliad and Odyssey, remarks as follows: "I am convinced that all the critics, even Grote and the skeptical Germans, have overrated the accuracy of the pictures of life given in these poems. *They have been persuaded by the intense reality and the natural simplicity which have made these scenes unapproachable in their charm; and they have thought that such qualities could only coexist with a faithful and simple reproduction of the circumstances actually surrounding the poet's life.* But surely this argument, irresistible up to a certain point, has been carried too far." ("Social Life in Greece," p. 11) The italics are mine.

† Exodus, xxxiv.

validity of its foundations, but to its own warmth and vividness. And in the history of religions these qualities have often been exhibited in connection with beliefs the most baseless as to fact and most illogical as to theory. The world-religion which stands next to Christianity in vitality and force, the Mohammedan, certainly rests largely upon illusions. Many of the sects of Christianity have inspired their members to labor unweariedly, to suffer with the utmost fortitude, and to die without flinching, in support of the claims of wholly visionary leaders, and for points of doctrine which to Christians of to-day seem trivial. In Mormonism we have had an instance in our own time, and at our own doors, of fanatic zeal by no means dependent on or proportioned to the authenticity or the reasonableness of the basis of a religious system.

And, if it be true that the mighty arch of orthodox Christianity has rested with one pier upon an event which we now determine to be unhistorical, this only parallels the fact that, with the other, it rests upon pure myth in the story of Adam and Eve and the Fall of Man.