

THE
EVIDENCE AND AUTHORITY
OF THE
CHRISTIAN REVELATION.

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BY THE

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Sixth Edition.

ANDOVER:

PUBLISHED AND SOLD BY MARK NEWMAN.

Flagg & Gould....printers.

1818.

ADVERTISEMENT.

THE contents of this volume form the substance of the article **CHRISTIANITY**, in the **EDINBURGH ENCYCLOPÆDIA**. Its appearance is due to the liberality of the Proprietors of that Work—nor did the Author conceive the purpose of presenting it to the world in another shape, till he was permitted and advised by them to republish it in a separate form. It is chiefly confined to the exposition of the historical argument for the truth of Christianity; and the aim of the Author is fulfilled if he has succeeded in proving the external testimony to be so sufficient, as to leave Infidelity without excuse, even though the remaining important branches of the Christian defence had been less strong and satisfactory than they are. “The works that I do in my Father’s name, they bear witness of me.” “And if I had not done the works among them which none other man did, they had not had sin.”

The Author is far from asserting the study of the historical evidence to be the only channel to a faith in the truth of Christianity. How could he, in the face of the obvious fact, that there are thousands and thousands of Christians, who bear the most undeniable marks of the truth having come home to their understanding “in demonstration of the Spirit and of power?” They have an evidence within themselves, which the world

knoweth not, even the promised manifestations of the Saviour. This evidence is a "sign to them that believe;" but the Bible speaks also of a "sign to them which believe not;" and should it be effectual in reclaiming any of these from their infidelity, a mighty object is gained by the exhibition of it. Should it not be effectual, it will be to them "a savour of death unto death;" and this is one of the very effects ascribed to the proclamation of Christian truth in the first ages. If, even in the face of that kind of evidence, which they have a relish and respect for, they still hold out against the reception of the Gospel, this must aggravate the weight of the threatening which lies upon them; "How shall they escape, if they neglect so great a salvation?"

It will be a great satisfaction to the writer of the following pages, if any shall rise from the perusal of them, with a stronger determination than before to take his Christianity exclusively from his Bible. It is not enough to entitle a man to the name of a Christian, that he professes to believe the Bible to be a genuine communication from God. To be the disciple of any book, he must do something more than satisfy himself that its contents are true—he must read the book—he must obtain a knowledge of the contents. And how many are there in the world, who do not call the truth of the Bible message in question, while they suffer it to lie beside them unopened, unread, and unattended to!

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CHAP. III.

ON THE INTERNAL MARKS OF TRUTH AND HONESTY TO BE FOUND IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.

II. WE shall now look into the New Testament itself, and endeavour to lay before the reader the internal marks of truth and honesty, which are to be found in it.

Under this head, it may be right to insist upon the minute accuracy, which runs through all its allusions to the existing manners and circumstances of the times. To appreciate the force of this argument, it would be right to attend to the peculiar situation of Judea, at the time of our Saviour. It was then under the dominion of the Roman emperors, and comes frequently under the notice of the profane historians of that period. From this source we derive a great variety of information, as to the manner in which the emperors conducted the government of their different provinces; what degree of indulgence was allowed to the religious opinions of the people whom they held in subjection; in how far they were suffered to live under the administration of their own laws; the power which was vested in the presidents of provinces; and a number of other circumstances relative to the criminal and civil jurisprudence of that period. In this way, there is a great number of different points in which the historians of the New Testament can be brought into comparison with the secular historians of the age. The history of Christ and his apostles contains innumerable references

to the state of public affairs. It is not the history of obscure and unnoticed individuals. They had attracted much of the public attention. They had been before the governors of the country. They had passed through the established forms of justice ; and some of them underwent the trial and punishment of the times. It is easy to perceive, then, that the New Testament writers were led to allude to a number of these circumstances in the political history and constitution of the times, which came under the cognizance of ordinary historians. This was delicate ground for an inventor to tread upon ; and particularly, if he lived at an age subsequent to the time of his history. He might in this case have fabricated a tale, by confining himself to the obscure and familiar incidents of private history ; but it is only for a true and a contemporary historian, to sustain a continued accuracy, through his minute and numerous allusions to the public policy and government of the times.

Within the period of the Gospel history, Judea experienced a good many vicissitudes in the state of its government. At one time it formed part of a kingdom under Herod the Great. At another, it formed part of a smaller government under Archelaus. It after this came under the direct administration of a Roman governor ; which form was again interrupted for several years, by the elevation of Herod Agrippa to the sovereign power, as exercised by his grandfather ; and it is at last left in the form of a province at the conclusion of the evangelical history. There were also frequent changes in the political state of the countries adjacent to Judea ; and which are often alluded to in the New Testament. A caprice of the reigning emperor often gave rise to a new form of government, and a new distribution of territory. It will be readily conceived, how much these perpetual fluctuations in the state of public affairs, both in Judea and its neigh-

bourhood, must add to the power and difficulty of that ordeal to which the Gospel history has been subjected.

On this part of the subject, there is no want of witnesses with whom to confront the writers of the New Testament. In addition to the Roman writers who have touched upon the affairs of Judea, we have the benefit of a Jewish historian, who has given us a professed history of his own country. From him, as was to be expected, we have a far greater quantity of copious and detailed narrative, relative to the internal affairs of Judea, to the manners of the people, and those particulars which are connected with their religious belief, and ecclesiastical constitution. With many, it will be supposed to add to the value of his testimony, that he was not a Christian; but that, on the other hand, we have every reason to believe him to have been a most zealous and determined enemy to the cause. It is really a most useful exercise, to pursue the harmony which subsists between the writers of the New Testament, and those Jewish and profane authors, with whom we bring them into comparison. Throughout the whole examination, our attention is confined to forms of justice; successions of governors in different provinces; manners, and political institutions. We are therefore apt to forget the sacredness of the subject; and we appeal to all, who have prosecuted this inquiry, if this circumstance is not favorable to their having a closer and more decided impression of the truth of the Gospel history. By instituting a comparison between the evangelists and contemporary authors, and restricting our attention to those points which come under the cognizance of ordinary history, we put the apostles and evangelists on the footing of ordinary historians; and it is for those, who have actually undergone the labour of this examination, to tell how much this circumstance adds to the impression of their authenticity. The mind gets emancipat-

ed from the peculiar delusion which attaches to the sacredness of the subject, and which has the undoubted effect of restraining the confidence of its inquiries. The argument assumes a secular complexion, and the writers of the New Testament are restored to that credit, with which the reader delivers himself up to any other historian, who has a much less weight and quantity of historical evidence in his favour.

We refer those readers who wish to prosecute this inquiry, to the first volume of Lardner's *Credibility of the Gospels*. We shall restrict ourselves to a few general observations on the nature and precise effect of the argument.

In the first place, the accuracy of the numerous allusions to the circumstances of that period, which the Gospel history embraces, forms a strong corroboration of that antiquity, which we have already assigned to its writers from external testimony. It amounts to a proof, that it is the production of authors who lived antecedent to the destruction of Jerusalem, and consequently about the time that is ascribed to them by all the external testimony which has already been insisted upon. It is that accuracy, which could only be maintained by a contemporary historian. It would be difficult, even for the author of some general speculation, not to betray his time by some occasional allusion to the ephemeral customs and institutions of the period in which he wrote. But the authors of the New Testament run a much greater risk. There are five different pieces of that collection which are purely historical, and where there is a continued reference to the characters, and politics, and passing events of the day. The destruction of Jerusalem swept away the whole fabric of Jewish polity; and it is not to be conceived, that the memory of a future generation could have retained that minute, that varied, that intimate acquaint-

ance with the statistics of a nation no longer in existence, which is evinced in every page of the evangelical writers. We find, in point of fact, that both the Heathen and Christian writers of subsequent ages do often betray their ignorance of the particular customs which obtained in Judea during the time of our Saviour. And it must be esteemed a strong circumstance in favour of the antiquity of the New Testament, that on a subject, in which the chances of detection are so numerous, and where we can scarcely advance a single step in the narrative, without the possibility of betraying our time by some mistaken allusion, it stands distinguished from every later composition, in being able to bear the most minute and intimate comparison with the contemporary historians of that period.

The argument derives great additional strength, from viewing the New Testament, not as one single performance, but as a collection of several performances. It is the work of no less than eight different authors, who wrote without any appearance of concert, who published in different parts of the world, and whose writings possess every evidence, both internal and external, of being independent productions. Had only one author exhibited the same minute accuracy of allusion, it would have been esteemed a very strong evidence of his antiquity. But when we see so many authors exhibiting such a well sustained and almost unexpected accuracy through the whole of their varied and distinct narratives, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion, that they were either the eye-witnesses of their own history, or lived about the period of its accomplishment.

When different historians undertake the affairs of the same period, they either derive their information from one another, or proceed upon distinct and independent infer-

mation of their own. Now, it is not difficult to distinguish the copyist from the original historian. There is something in the very style and manner of an original narrative, which announces its pretensions. It is not possible that any one event, or any series of events, should make such a similar impression upon two witnesses, as to dispose them to relate it in the same language, to describe it in the same order, to form the same estimate as to the circumstances which should be noticed as important, and those other circumstances which should be suppressed as immaterial. Each witness tells the thing in his own way, makes use of his own language, and brings forward circumstances which the other might omit altogether, as not essential to the purpose of his narrative. It is this agreement in the facts, with this variety in the manner of describing them, that never fails to impress upon the inquirer that additional conviction which arises from the concurrence of separate and independent testimonies. Now, this is precisely that kind of coincidence which subsists between the New Testament writers and Josephus, in their allusions to the peculiar customs and institutions of that age. Each party maintains the style of original and independent historians. The one often omits altogether, or makes only a slight and distant allusion to what occupies a prominent part in the composition of the other. There is not the slightest vestige of any thing like a studied coincidence between them. There is variety, but no opposition; and it says much for the authenticity of both histories, that the most scrupulous and attentive criticism can scarcely detect a single example of an apparent contradiction in the testimony of these different authors, which does not admit of a likely, or at least a plausible reconciliation.

When the difference between two historians is carried to the length of a contradiction, it enfeebles the credit of

both their testimonies. When the agreement is carried to the length of a close and scrupulous resemblance in every particular, it destroys the credit of one of the parties as an independent historian. In the case before us, we neither perceive this difference, nor this agreement. Such are the variations, that, at first sight, the reader is alarmed with the appearance of very serious and embarrassing difficulties. And such is the actual coincidence, that the difficulties vanish when we apply to them the labours of a profound and intelligent criticism. Had it been the object of the Gospel writers to trick out a plausible imposition on the credulity of the world, they would have studied a closer resemblance to the existing authorities of that period; nor would they have laid themselves open to the superficial brilliancy of Voltaire, which dazzles every imagination, and reposed their vindication with the Lelands and Lardners of a distant posterity, whose sober erudition is so little attended to, and which so few know how to appreciate.

In the Gospels, we are told that Herod the Tetrarch of Galilee, married his brother Philip's wife. In Josephus we have the same story; only he gives a different name to Philip, and calls him Herod; and what adds to the difficulty, there was a Philip of that family, whom we know not to have been the first husband of Herodias. This is at first sight a little alarming. But, in the progress of our inquiries, we are given to understand from this same Josephus, that there were three Herods in the same family, and therefore no improbability in there being two Philips. We also know, from the histories of that period, that it was quite common for the same individual to have two names; and this is never more necessary, than when employed to distinguish brothers who have one name the same. The Herod who is called Philip, is just as likely a distinction, as the Simon who is

called Peter, or the Saul who is called Paul. The name of the high priest, at the time of our Saviour's crucifixion, was Caiaphas, according to the evangelists. According to Josephus, the name of the high priest at that period was Joseph. This would have been precisely a difficulty of the same kind, had not Josephus happened to mention, that this Joseph was also called Caiaphas. Would it have been dealing fairly with the evangelists, we ask, to have made their credibility depend upon the accidental omission of another historian? Is it consistent with any acknowledged principle of sound criticism, to bring four writers so entirely under the tribunal of Josephus, each of whom stands as firmly supported by all the evidences which can give authority to an historian; and who have greatly the advantage of him in this, that they can add the argument of their concurrence to the argument of each separate and independent testimony? It so happens, however, in the present instance, that even Jewish writers, in their narrative of the same circumstance, give the name of Philip to the first husband of Herodias. We by no means conceive, that any foreign testimony was necessary for the vindication of the evangelists. Still, however, it must go far to dissipate every suspicion of artifice in the construction of their histories. It proves, that in the confidence with which they delivered themselves up to their own information, they neglected appearance, and felt themselves independent of it. This apparent difficulty, like many others of the same kind, lands us in a stronger confirmation of the honesty of the evangelists; and it is delightful to perceive, how truth receives a fuller accession to its splendour, from the attempts which are made to disgrace and to darken it.

On this branch of the argument, the impartial inquirer must be struck with the little indulgence which infidels, and even Christians, have given to the evangelical writ-

ers. In other cases, when we compare the narratives of contemporary historians, it is not expected, that all the circumstances alluded to by one will be taken notice of by the rest; and it often happens, that an event or a custom is admitted upon the faith of a single historian; and the silence of all other writers is not suffered to attach suspicion or discredit to his testimony. It is an allowed principle, that a scrupulous resemblance between two histories is very far from necessary to their being held consistent with one another. And, what is more, it sometimes happens, that with contemporary historians there may be an apparent contradiction, and the credit of both parties remain as entire and unsuspecting as before. Posterity is in these cases disposed to make the most liberal allowances. Instead of calling it a contradiction, they often call it a difficulty. They are sensible, that in many instances, a seeming variety of statement has, upon a more extensive knowledge of ancient history, admitted of a perfect reconciliation. Instead, then, of referring the difficulty in question to the inaccuracy or bad faith of any of the parties, they with more justness and more modesty, refer it to their own ignorance, and to that obscurity which necessarily hangs over the history of every remote age. These principles are suffered to have great influence in every secular investigation; but so soon as, instead of a secular, it becomes a sacred investigation, every ordinary principle is abandoned, and the suspicion annexed to the teachers of religion is carried to the dereliction of all that candour and liberality with which every other document of antiquity is judged of and appreciated. How does it happen, that the authority of Josephus should be acquiesced in as a first principle, while every step, in the narrative of the evangelists, must have foreign testimony to confirm and support it? How comes it that the silence of Josephus should be construed into an impeachment of the

testimony of the evangelists, while it is never admitted for a single moment, that the silence of the evangelists can impart the slightest blemish to the testimony of Josephus? How comes it that the supposition of two Philips in one family should throw a damp of scepticism over the Gospel narrative, while the only circumstance which renders that supposition necessary is the single testimony of Josephus; in which very testimony it is necessarily implied, that there are two Herods in that same family? How comes it, that the evangelists, with as much internal, and a vast deal more of external evidence in their favour, should be made to stand before Josephus, like so many prisoners at the bar of justice? In any other case, we are convinced that this would be looked upon as *rough handling*. But we are not sorry for it. It has given more triumph and confidence to the argument. And it is no small addition to our faith, that its first teachers have survived an examination, which, in point of rigour and severity, we believe to be quite unexampled in the annals of criticism.

It is always looked upon as a favourable presumption, when a story is told circumstantially. The art and the safety of an impostor, is to confine his narrative to generals, and not to commit himself by too minute a specification of time and place, and allusion to the manners or occurrences of the day. The more of circumstance that we introduce into a story, we multiply the chances of detection, if false; and therefore, where a great deal of circumstance is introduced, it proves, that the narrator feels the confidence of truth, and labours under no apprehension for the fate of his narrative. Even though we have it not in our power to verify the truth of a single circumstance, yet the mere property of a story being circumstantial is always felt to carry an evidence in its favour. It imparts a more familiar air of life and reality to the narrative. It is easy to believe, that the groundwork of

a story may be a fabrication ; but it requires a more refined species of imposture than we can well conceive, to construct a harmonious and well-sustained narrative, abounding in minute and circumstantial details which support one another, and where, with all our experience of real life, we can detect nothing misplaced, or inconsistent, or improbable.

To prosecute this argument in all its extent, it would be necessary to present the reader with a complete analysis or examination of the Gospel history. But the most superficial observer cannot fail to perceive, that it maintains, in a very high degree, the character of being a circumstantial narrative. When a miracle is recorded, we have generally the name of the town or neighbourhood where it happened ; the names of the people concerned ; the effect upon the hearts and convictions of the bye-standers ; the arguments and examinations it gave birth to ; and all that minuteness of reference and description which impresses a strong character of reality upon the whole history. If we take along with us the time at which this history made its appearance, the argument becomes much stronger. It does not merely carry a presumption in its favour, from being a circumstantial history : It carries a proof in its favour, because these circumstances were completely within the reach and examination of those to whom it was addressed. Had the evangelists been false historians, 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 favour. As a specimen of the argument, let us confine our observations to the history of our Saviour'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 Saviour 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 the Romans. The account 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 evangelist, 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 resources of information, that this was the con-

stant practice of these 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.

These, and a few more particulars of the same kind, occur within the compass of a single page of the evangelical history. The circumstantial manner of the history affords a presumption in its favour, antecedent to all examination into the truth of the circumstances themselves. But it makes a strong addition to the evidence, when we find, that in all the subordinate parts of the main story, the evangelists maintain so great a consistency with the testimony of other authors, and with all we can collect from other sources of information, as to the manners and institutions of that period. It is difficult to conceive, in the first instance, how the inventor of a fabricated story would hazard such a number of circumstances, each of them supplying a point of comparison with other authors, and giving to the inquirer an additional chance of detecting the imposition. And it is still more difficult to believe, that truth should have been so artfully blended with falsehood in the composition of this narrative, particularly as we perceive nothing like a forced introduction of any one circumstance. There appears to be nothing out of place, nothing thrust in with the view of imparting an air of probability to the history. The circumstance upon which we bring the evangelists into comparison with profane authors, is often not intimated in a direct form, but in the form of a slight or distant allusion. There is not the most remote appearance of its being fetched or sought for. It is brought in accidentally, and flows in the most natural and undesigned manner out of the progress of the narrative.

The circumstance, that none of the Gospel writers are

inconsistent with one another, falls better under a different branch of the argument. It is enough for our present purpose, that there is no single writer inconsistent with himself. It often happens, that falsehood carries its own refutation along with it; and that, through the artful disguises which are employed in the construction of a fabricated story, we can often detect a flaw or a contradiction, which condemns the authority of the whole narrative. Now, every single piece of the New Testament wants this mark or character of falsehood. The different parts are found to sustain, and harmonise, and flow out of each other. Each has at least the merit of being a consistent narrative. For any thing we see upon the face of it, it may be true, and a further hearing must be given before we can be justified in rejecting it as the tale of an impostor.

There is another mark of falsehood which each of the Gospel narratives appears to be exempted from. There is little or no parading about their own integrity. We can collect their pretensions to credit from the history itself, but we see no anxious display of these pretensions. We cannot fail to perceive the force of that argument which is derived from the publicity of the Christian miracles, and the very minute and scrupulous examination which they had to sustain from the rulers and official men of Judea. But this publicity, and these examinations, are simply recorded by the evangelists. There is no boastful reference to these circumstances, and no ostentatious display of the advantage which they give to the Christian argument. They bring their story forward in the shape of a direct and unencumbered narrative, and deliver themselves with that simplicity and unembarrassed confidence, which nothing but their consciousness of truth, and the perfect feeling of their own strength and consistency, can account for. They do not write, as if their

object was to carry a point that was at all doubtful or suspicious. It is simply to transmit to the men of other times, and of other countries, a memorial of the events which led to the establishment of the Christian religion in the world. In the prosecution of their narrative, we challenge the most refined judge of the human character, to point out a single symptom of diffidence in the truth of their own story, or of art to cloak this diffidence from the notice of the most severe and vigilant observers. The manner of the New Testament writers does not carry in it the slightest idea of its being an assumed manner. It is quite natural, quite unguarded, and free of all apprehension, that their story is to meet with any discredit or contradiction from any of those numerous readers, who had it fully in their power to verify or to expose it. We see no expedient made use of to obtain or to conciliate the acquiescence of their readers. They appear to feel as if they did not need it. They deliver what they have to say, in a round and unvarnished manner; nor is it in general accompanied with any of those strong asseverations by which an impostor so often attempts to practise upon the credulity of his victims.

In the simple narrative of the evangelists, they betray no feeling of wonder at the extraordinary nature of the events which they record, and no consciousness that what they are announcing is to excite any wonder among their readers. This appears to us to be a very strong circumstance. Had it been the newly broached tale of an impostor, he would, in all likelihood, have feigned astonishment himself, or at least have laid his account with the doubt and astonishment of those to whom it was addressed. When a person tells a wonderful story to a company who are totally unacquainted with it, he must be sensible, not merely of the surprise which is excited in the minds of the hearers, but of a corresponding sympathy in his own

mind with the feelings of those who listen to him. He lays his account with the wonder, if not the incredulity, of his hearers ; and this distinctly appears in the terms with which he delivers his story, and the manner in which he introduces it. It makes a wide difference, if, on the other hand, he tells the same story to a company, who have long been apprised of the chief circumstances, but who listen to him for the mere purpose of obtaining a more distinct and particular narrative. Now, in as far as we can collect from the manner of the evangelists, they stand in this last predicament. They do not write, as if they were imposing a novelty upon their readers. In the language of Luke, they write for the sake of giving more distinct information ; and that the readers *might know the certainty of those things, wherein they had been instructed*. In the prosecution of this task, they deliver themselves with the most familiar and unembarrassed simplicity. They do not appear to anticipate the surprise of their readers, or to be at all aware, that the marvellous nature of their story is to be any obstacle to its credit or reception in the neighbourhood. At the first performance of our Saviour's miracles, there was a strong and a widely spread sensation over the whole country. *His name went abroad, and all people were amazed*. This is quite natural ; and the circumstance of no surprise being either felt or anticipated by the evangelists, in the writing of their history, can best be accounted for by the truth of the history itself, that the experience of years had blunted the edge of novelty, and rendered miracles familiar, not only to them, but to all the people to whom they addressed themselves.

What appears to us a most striking internal evidence for the truth of the Gospel, is that perfect unity of mind and of purpose which is ascribed to our Saviour. Had he been an impostor, he could not have foreseen all the

fluctuations of his history, and yet no expression of surprise is recorded to have escaped from him. No event appears to have caught him unprepared. We see no shifting of doctrine or sentiment, with a view to accommodate to new or unexpected circumstances. His parables and warnings to his disciples give sufficient intimation, that he laid his account with all those events which appeared to his unenlightened friends to be so untoward and so unpromising. In every explanation of his objects, we see the perfect consistency of a mind, before whose prophetic eye all futurity lay open; and when the events of this futurity came round, he met them, not as chances that were unforeseen, but as certainties which he had provided for. This consistency of his views is supported through all the variations of his history, and it stands finally contrasted in the record of the evangelists, with the misconceptions, the surprises, the disappointments of his followers. The gradual progress of their minds from the splendid anticipations of earthly grandeur, to a full acquiescence in the doctrine of a crucified Saviour, throws a stronger light on the perfect unity of purpose and of conception which animated his, and which can only be accounted for by the inspiration that filled and enlightened it. It may have been possible enough to describe a well-sustained example of this contrast from an actual history before us. It is difficult, however, to conceive, how it could be sustained so well, and in a manner so apparently artless, by means of invention, and particularly when the inventors made their own errors and their own ignorance form part of the fabrication.