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Nineteenth Century 'Higher Criticism'

Looking at the external evidence test, which forms part of the examination for assessing the reliability of ancient documents: is there any contemporary evidence to confirm the statements made in the literature concerned? In the early part of the nineteenth century, scholars in England and Germany led a popular school of thought which denied the accuracy of the Bible and spawned generations of amateur critics who came to believe that, whatever its religious message, the Bible could not be trusted in matters of historical fact. This idea has become so pervasive that it is common to hear people who have never even read the Bible confidently saying that it is full of mistakes and contradictions. If this is the case, we need not treat the Bible with any more respect than a daily newspaper or the works of Shakespeare - but is it? Of all the witnesses we could call to challenge the liberal scholars who questioned the factual integrity of the Bible, none was more outstanding than Robert Dick Wilson, one-time Professor of Semitic Philology (the language and literature of the Middle East) at Princeton Theological Seminary in the United States. In his student days, he set himself an astonishing forty-five year schedule: fifteen years of language study, fifteen years studying the text of the Old Testament and fifteen years in publishing his findings. In the course of the first fifteen years, studying under some of the leading professors of his day, he became familiar with twenty-six languages and dialects, including the three biblical languages, Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. In the second slot of fifteen years, he collected over 100,000 quotations from these languages and compared them with related statements in the Old Testament. As the result of this massive piece of research Wilson declared, 'I have come to the conclusion that no man knows enough to assail the truthfulness of the Old Testament.' Wilson's work was so outstanding - Brian Edwards says, 'His brilliance was unequalled and we are fully justified in accepting his conclusions' - that it is worth noting. In his book *Is Higher Criticism Scholarly* first published in 1922, Wilson wrote, 'I try to give my students such an intelligent faith in the Old Testament Scriptures that they will never doubt them as long as they live.' He was able to do so from a position of far greater strength than that occupied by the liberal critics, and experts in archaeology, philology, religion and geography are constantly adding to the mass of evidence confounding the critics and supporting the Old Testaments accuracy.

Luke & the New Testament

If Robert Dick Wilson was the nineteenth century's champion in confirming the integrity of Old Testament data, Sir William Ramsay occupied the same position in relation to the New Testament. One of the world's greatest ever archaeologists, Ramsay was Professor of Classical Art and Architecture at Oxford University, Regius Professor of Humanity (the Latin professorship) at Aberdeen University, founder member of the British Academy, holder of nine honorary doctorates from universities in Great Britain, Europe and America, and knighted in 1906 for his distinguished

service to the world of scholarship. Ramsay admitted that in his student years he 'worshipped Wellhausen' (a leading German critic), and his early training led him to believe that the New Testament narratives were largely myths, rather than accurate, contemporary historical records. He was convinced, for example, that the Acts of the Apostles was written not by Luke, as the Bible claims, but by an anonymous author who, about 100 years later, put together highly imaginative stories about people he admired. When he began fieldwork in Western Turkey (part of 'Asia' in New Testament language) Ramsay was quite sure that his discoveries would put the final nails in the New Testament's coffin, but he had hardly started when his theories began to come unstuck. His problems began in 1910, when he made a major discovery about the exact location of the city of Iconium. The Bible records that when persecuted believers were forced to leave Iconium they 'fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country' As it was generally believed that Iconium was the chief city of Lycaonia, to speak of people escaping from there to 'the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe' was rather like saying that people escaped from London to England; it was nonsense, and betrayed basic ignorance of geography. However, and to his great surprise, Ramsay unearthed a mass of evidence to show that in Luke's day Iconium was in the province of Phrygia, not Lycaonia. The critics had never gone back farther than A.D. 372, when the Roman emperor Valens had made boundary changes which took Iconium into Lycaonia and made it the capital city - Luke 1: Sceptics O! The further Ramsay went, the more amazed he became at the way in which the Bible was vindicated; in his own words, 'It was gradually borne in upon me that in various details the narrative showed marvellous truth.' The book in which he wrote those words, *St Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen* first published in 1895, hit the world of biblical criticism like a bombshell, but other explosions were to follow. As he pursued his studies, the evidence Ramsay discovered totally convinced him not only that Luke did in fact write Acts of the Apostles, but that he was no ordinary writer: 'Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy, he is possessed of the true historic sense... in short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.' Bearing his early prejudices in mind, Ramsay would have been perfectly happy if his discoveries had proved Luke wrong, but a lifetime of investigation led him to a very different conclusion: 'Further study... showed that the book [Acts] could bear the most minute scrutiny as an authority for the facts of the Aegean world, and that it was drawn with such judgement, skill, art and perception of truth as to be a model of historical statement.' This assessment was later echoed by E. M. Blaiklock, Professor of Classics at Auckland University, New Zealand, who wrote, 'Luke is a consummate historian, to be ranked in his own right with the great writers of the Greeks.' Attributes of truth Another significant piece of corroboration comes from the classical scholar A. N. Sherwin-White, who says that the legal details mentioned in the several trials reported in the New Testament correspond exactly with what we know of Roman practice during the first half of the first century. As the procedures had changed by the time the reports were written, the narratives clearly show that the writers were in direct touch with the facts. Sherwin-White powerfully argues that as a historically reliable source the New Testament compares favourably with the best in the field of classical studies, and goes on to say that sceptics should know better than to downgrade the historicity of the New Testament sources when there is such strong objective evidence in their favour. Brian Edwards agrees: 'The years of patient and careful research and the thousands of pages that William Ramsay devoted to Luke's Gospel and Acts all show that the customs and language, the synagogues, trials, magicians, in fact everything mentioned, reveal a detailed knowledge that could only be written down by an eyewitness of the events.' To give one specific example of this, it is impressive to notice that references in Acts to the titles of civic officials are uniformly accurate. As has recently been pointed out, 'This was no mean achievement in those days, for they varied from place to place and from time to time in the same place. They were proconsuls in Corinth and Cyprus, asiarchs at Ephesus, politarchs at Thessalonica and protos or "first man" in Malta. Back in Palestine Luke was careful to give Herod Antipas the correct title of tetrarch of Galilee. And so on. The details are precise.' Luke seems able to dash off the correct title in every case, in a way that has been compared to the easy and confident way in which an undergraduate at Oxford University would refer to the heads of colleges by their proper titles - the Provost of Oriel, the Master of Balliol, the Rector of Exeter, the President of Magdalen, and so on. Nobody unfamiliar with Oxford would find this natural, yet Luke never makes a single mistake with his Roman titles. As facts like these would not have been known by later generations, they provide powerful evidence that they were written by someone familiar with the contemporary culture. Sherwin-White has no doubt as to what this tells us: 'For Acts, the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming... Any attempt to reject its basic historicity, even in makers of detail, must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken this for granted.' Widening the lens a little, Peter Kreeft points out the unlikelihood of the New Testament being composed in some other way: 'If the Gospels are not eyewitness accounts, then they are a type of fantasy that has absolutely no parallel in all of literature... Some Galilean

peasants - fishermen and tax collectors - invented not only the world's most gigantic hoax but a totally unique form of literature.' From the same perspective, Simon Greenleaf, Royal Professor of Law at Harvard University, came to the same conclusion and wrote, 'The essential marks of difference between true narrative and fact and works of fiction are unmistakable... the attributes of truth are strikingly apparent throughout the Gospel histories.' An even wider perspective comes from the pen of the German journalist Werner Keller, whose best seller *The Bible As History* was first published in 1956. After years of extensive research in the libraries of many lands, he concluded, 'In view of the overwhelming mass of authentic and well-attested evidence now available, as I thought of the sceptical criticism which from the eighteenth century onward would fain have demolished the Bible altogether, there kept hammering in my brain this one sentence: "The Bible is right after all".

Secular museums around the world contain vast quantities of inscriptions, documents, coins, utensils, weapons and other artefacts pointing to the Bible's meticulous accuracy. This alone would be sufficient to set the Bible apart from all other literature of its time, and is in striking contrast to much more modern religious literature. Dave Hunt gives a telling example: 'No evidence has ever been found to support the Book of Mormon... in spite of decades of the most aggressive archaeological exploration throughout North, Central and South America. This Herculean effort, supported by the vast wealth and determination of the Mormon Church, has left no stone unturned in the search for verification of the Book of Mormon, but has come up empty-handed. Not one piece of evidence has ever been found to support the Book of Mormon - not a trace of the large cities it names, no rings, no coins, no letters or documents or monuments, nothing in writing. Not even one of the rivers or mountains or any of the topography it mentions has ever been identified!' As Hunt goes on to point out, 'The Book of Mormon provides one excellent example of the impossibility of fabricating a make-believe scenario and then trying to convince the world that it really happened.' The contrast with the Bible could not possibly be greater. In 1958, reviewing archaeological excavations in the recent past, William E N Bright, recognized as today's greatest Orientalist, wrote, 'Thanks to modern research we now recognize [the Bible's] substantial historicity. The narratives of the patriarchs, of Moses and the exodus, of the conquest of Canaan, of the judges, the monarchy, exile and restoration, have all been confirmed and illustrated to an extent that I should have thought impossible forty years ago.' At the end of 1974, *TIME* magazine ran an article entitled 'How True Is the Bible?', which discussed the condition of the Bible after two hundred years of critical attack. The article came to this conclusion: 'The breadth, sophistication and diversity of all this biblical investigation are impressive, but it begs a question: Has it made the Bible more credible or less?... Even more than two centuries of facing the heaviest scientific guns that could be brought to bear, the Bible has survived - and is perhaps better for the siege. Even on the critics own terms -The Scriptures seem more acceptable now than they did when the rationalists began the attack.' The external evidence test asks whether there is contemporary material to confirm the Bible's statements. The answer could hardly be more positive or emphatic.

Extract from John Blanchard (Does God Believe in Atheists)