

THE MORAL CHARACTER OF THE BIBLE:

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“How can falsehood be an element of perfect excellence?”¹

I. Introduction:

In his work, *The Way of Life: A Handbook of Christian Belief and Evidence*, Charles Hodge, the 19th century Princeton theologian, makes an interesting and thought-provoking claim:

The only possible way of shaking our confidence in the competent testimony of a man, is to show that he is not a good man. If his goodness is admitted, confidence in his word cannot be withheld, and especially when all he says finds his confirmation in our experience, and commends itself to our conscience and judgment.²

Likewise, the internal evidence of the divine origin consists of the following:

1. Its perfect holiness;
2. The correspondence between all its statements concerning God, humanity, redemption, and eternity;
3. The correspondence between all its statements concerning all our right judgments, reasonable apprehensions, and personal experience.³
4. The Bible demands immediate and implicit faith from those who read it.⁴

The Bible claims to be the Word of God; it speaks its name, it assumes his authority.”⁵

¹ *The Way of Life: A Handbook of Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 17.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

Earlier Hodge claims:

No truth can be properly apprehended unless there is a harmony between it and the mind to which it is presented. Even abstract or speculative truths are not seen to be true, unless the understanding be duly cultivated to apprehend them. With regard to objects of taste, unless there is a power to perceive the correspondence between them and the standard of beauty, there can be no appreciation of their excellence. And still more obviously in regard to moral and religious truth, there must be a state of mind suited to their apprehension. If our moral sense were entirely destroyed by sin, we could have no perception of moral distinctions; if it is vitiated, what is true in itself and true in the view of the pure in heart, will not be true to us. A man, who has no adequate sense of the evil of sin, cannot believe in the justice of God. If you awaken his conscience, he is convinced at once, without the intervention of any process of proof [*Ibid.*, 11-12].

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

In sum, his argument may be summarized in this statement: “If the Bible be the work of God, it must contain the impress of his character, and thereby evince [to show or clearly demonstrate] itself to be divine.”⁶

Hodge elaborates upon the first three claims by stating:

When the mind is enlightened to see this holiness; when it perceives how exactly the rule of duty prescribed in the word of God agrees with that enforced by conscience; how the account which it gives of human nature coincides with human experience; how fully it meets our whole case; when it feels how powerfully the truths there presented operate to purify, console and sustain the soul, the belief of the scriptures is a necessary consequence. The idea that such a book is a lie and a forgery involves a contradiction. The human mind is so constituted that it cannot refuse its assent to evidence, when clearly perceived. We cannot withhold our confidence from a man whose moral excellence is plainly, variously and constantly manifested. We cannot see and feel his goodness, and yet believe him to be an impostor or deceiver. In like manner, we cannot see the excellence of the scriptures, and yet believe them to be one enormous falsehood. The Bible claims to be the word of God; it speaks in his name, it assumes his authority. How can these claims be false and yet the Bible be so holy? How can falsehood be an element of perfect excellence?⁷

Regarding the fourth claim, namely, that the Bible demands immediate and implicit faith from all who read it, Hodge notes:

The moment, however, it [Bible] is opened, in these or any other circumstances, it utters the same calm voice, He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him. If this demand was confined to the educated, we might suppose it rest on evidence which the educated only are able to appreciate; if it was made of those only to whom the scriptures are presented by regularly commissioned ministers, we might suppose it rested on their authority; but it is not thus confined. It is inseparable from the word itself. It is as imperative when the Bible is read by a child to a company of pagans, as when it is proclaimed in a cathedral. But if this demand of faith goes with the word wherever it goes, it must rest upon evidence contained in the word itself. The demand of faith cannot be more extensive, than the exhibition of evidence. Unless, therefore, we restrict the obligation and benefits to those who are capable of appreciating their external evidence of the Bible, we must admit that it contains its own evidence.

⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁷ Ibid., 17.

II. Three-fold Justification:

Dr. Hodge's justification is threefold:

First, the moral character of the Bible is trans-cultural, that is, applicable of everyone who has read it, no matter the background. For the sake of clarification, Hodge is stating not stating that the testimony of others to the truth of Christianity should be the ground of faith. For one, testimony of others is not sufficiently extensive. For example, learned people can give testimony about other religious texts. And second, to require common people to be able to see why Christian testimony should be relied upon while other religious testimony should be rejected, is to require them to a severe task of study.⁸

Second, the **Scriptures do not contain any thing that is contrary to reason.**

Remember, faith is that which one has reason to believe is true and trustworthy whereas reason is the power by which we distinguish truth from falsehood, and right from wrong. Reasoning is the use of logical processes.

And third, **the Scriptures do not contain any thing that is contrary to right moral feelings.**

In sum, the proof for this divine design of Scripture is that it is rational, corresponding to the nature God. As a result, this rational test of correspondence between God and Scripture, serves as an adequate ground for implicit confidence. Hodge elaborates:

Every work bears the impress of its maker. Even among men it is hard for one man successfully to counterfeit the work of another. Is it wonderful then that the works of God should bear the inimitable [matchless] impress of their author? Do not the heavens declare his glory? Does not the mechanism of an insect as clearly evince the workmanship of God? Why then should it be deemed incredible that his word should contain inherent evidence of its divine origin? If the Bible be the work of God, it must contain the impress of his character, and thereby evince itself to be divine.⁹

These three justifications regarding the moral character of Scripture finds a strong correlation with the words and character of Jesus Christ. Consider:

We can well believe that there was such an ineffable manifestation of goodness in the Redeemer's countenance, manner and doctrines, as to conciliate entire confidence. Those who were rightly affected could not fail to

⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁹ Ibid., 14.

believe all he said; that he was the Christ, that he came to seek and save them that are lost, to lay down his life for his sheep and to give himself a ransom for many. Can we doubt that the goodness of the Saviour, the elevation, holiness and power of his instructions, their correspondence with our own nature, experience and wants, would of themselves constitute an adequate ground of faith? All this we have. This every man has, who reads the Bible. There the Saviour stands in the majesty of unapproachable excellence. He utters in every hearing ear the words of eternal life; declares his origin, his mission, the design of his advent and death; offers pardon and eternal to those who come unto God through him. There is the most perfect accordance between his claims and his conduct; between his doctrines and what we know and what we need. To disbelieve him, is to believe to be a deceiver, and to believe this, is to believe this, is to disbelieve our own perceptions; for we know what goodness is, and we know that goodness cannot deceive, that God cannot lie.¹⁰

It makes very little difference as to the force of this kind of evidence, whether we personally saw and heard the Saviour for ourselves, or whether we read the exhibition of his character and the record of his instructions. For the evidence lies in his goodness and in the nature of his doctrines. It is the same to us who read the Bible, as it was to those heard the Saviour. There is therefore the same violence done to reason and duty, in our rejecting it, as was offered by those who believed not because they were not of his sheep, that is, because they were insensible to the constraining influence of the grace and truth which were in Him.¹¹

III. Objections/Questions:

Objection # 1: *We are not competent to judge this internal evidence if internal excellence is intellectual excellence.*

A. Hodge's Response:

1. This evidence is largely, moral. To apprehend evidence of this sort requires no great deal of knowledge or intellectual refinement. Rather, to apprehend this internal evidence requires merely right moral feelings. Hodge explains:

Where these [right moral feelings] exist, the evidence that goodness is goodness is immediate and irresistible. It is not because the Bible is written with more than human skill, and that its discrimination of character or its eloquence is beyond the powers of man, that we believe it to be divine. These are

¹⁰ Ibid., 18.

¹¹ Ibid., 19.

matters of which the mass of men are incompetent judges. The evidence in question is suited to the apprehension of the humblest child of God. It is partly negative and partly positive. It consists, in the first place, in the absence of every thing incompatible with a divine origin. There is nothing inconsistent with reason, and there is nothing inconsistent

Objection # 2: If the Bible contains such clear evidence of its divine origin, why are there so many unbelievers?

A. Hodge notes that two things are necessary in order that evidence produce conviction:

1. Serious attention. Few people give the Scriptures any serious attention.

“That such persons should have no effective faith, is no more a matter of surprise than that they should be ignorant of what they never learned.”¹²

2. Right Apprehension.

a. If the evidence is addressed to the understanding, there must be strength of mind enough to comprehend its nature and bearing.

b. If addressed to the moral faculty, “there must be moral sensibility to appreciate it, or will be like light shining on the eyes of the blind. The internal evidence of the scriptures is in a great measure of this latter kind. It consists in their perfect holiness. In proportion as men are corrupt, they are blind to this kind of evidence. It may exist in all its force, and men be insensible to it.”¹³

B. Another part of this evidence consists in the correlation between the Scriptures and the religions experience of people. Those who have not the experience cannot see this accordance.

C. Still another portion of this evidence is made available by the power of God in subduing sin, in purifying the affections, in diffusing peace and joy through the heart.

¹² Ibid., 20.

¹³ Idem.

Those who never have felt this power cannot appreciate this kind of proof. The fact, therefore, that so large a proportion of mankind have no adequate faith in the Scriptures, affords no presumption against the existence of sufficient evidence. This fact is in exact accordance with what the Bible teaches of the moral state of man.¹⁴

Objection: Don't people assume their religious texts possess a similar kind of moral excellence?

- A. Their texts do not correspond to the infinite-personal God who is the sum-total of His infinite perfections. They lack the character testimony of Jesus Christ who knew no sin.

IV. Conclusion:

Hodge remarks:

If it is asked, where the standard is; what criterion of excellence exists by which I am authorized to decide that what I call goodness is really such; the rule is given in the nature of man. We know that benevolence is better than malice, veracity than deceit, humility than pride, and by the same rule we know that Christianity is better than Hindooism, and the blessed Redeemer than the Arabian impostor. No judgment can more sure than this, no persuasion more intimate, no confidence either more firm or more rational. It is, therefore, no objection against admitting the excellence of the Scriptures to be a proof of their divine origin, that besotted or deluded men have ascribed to folly and wickedness.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., 20-21.

¹⁵ Ibid., 22.